

CHAPTER XVI

WHAT THE ASIKA SHOWED ALAN

It seemed to Alan that he went to sleep and dreamed.

He dreamed that it was late autumn in England. Leaves drifted down from the trees beneath the breath of a strong, damp wind, and ran or floated along the road till they vanished into a ditch, or caught against a pile of stones that had been laid ready for its repair. He knew the road well enough; he even knew the elm tree beneath which he seemed to stand on the crest of a hill. It was that which ran from Mr. Champers-Haswell's splendid house, The Court, to the church; he could see them both, the house to the right, the church to the left, and his eyesight seemed to have improved, since he was able to observe that at either place there was bustle and preparation as though for some big ceremony.

Now the big gates of The Court opened and through them came a funeral. It advanced toward him with unnatural swiftness, as though it floated upon air, the whole melancholy procession of it. In a few seconds it had come and gone and yet during those seconds he suffered agony, for there arose in his mind a horrible terror that this was Barbara's burying. He could not have endured it for another moment; he would have cried out or died, only now the mourners passed him following the coffin, and in the first carriage he saw Barbara seated, looking sad and somewhat troubled, but well. A little further down the line came another carriage, and in

it was Sir Robert Aylward, staring before him with cold, impassive face.

In his dream Alan thought to himself that he must have borrowed this carriage, which would not be strange, as he generally used motors, for there was a peer's coronet upon the panels and the silver-mounted harness.

The funeral passed and suddenly vanished into the churchyard gates, leaving Alan wondering why his cousin Haswell was not seated at Barbara's side. Then it occurred to him that it might be because he was in the coffin, and at that moment in his dream he heard the Asika asking Jeekie what he saw; heard Jeekie answering also, "A burying in the country called England."

"Of whom, Jeekie?" Then after some hesitation, the answer:

"Of a lady whom my lord loves very much. They bury her."

"What was her name, Jeekie?"

"Her name was Barbara."

"Bar-bara, why that you told me was the name of his mother and his sister. Which of them is buried?"

"Neither, O Asika. It was another lady who loved him very much and

wanted to marry him, and that was why he ran away to Africa. But now she is dead and buried."

"Are all women in England called Barbara, Jeekie?"

"Yes, O Asika, Barbara means woman."

"If your lord loved this Barbara, why then did he run away from her? Well, it matters not since she is dead and buried, for whatever their spirits may feel, no man cares for a woman that is dead until she clothes herself in flesh again. That was a good vision and I will reward you for it."

"I have earned nothing, O Asika," answered Jeekie modestly, "who only tell you what I see as I must. Yet, O Asika," he added with a note of anxiety in his voice, "why do you not read these magic writings for yourself?"

"Because I dare not, or rather because I can not," she answered fiercely. "Be silent, slave, for now the power of the good broods upon my soul."

The dream went on. A great forest appeared, such a forest as they had passed before they met the cannibals, and set beneath one of the trees, a tent and in that tent Barbara, Barbara weeping. Someone began to lift the flap of the tent. She sprang up, snatching at a pistol that lay

beside her, turning its muzzle towards her breast. A man entered the tent. Alan saw his face, it was his own. Barbara let fall the pistol and fell backwards as though a bullet from it had pierced her heart. He leapt towards her, but before he came to where she lay everything had vanished and he heard Jeekie droning out his lies to the Asika, telling her that the vision he had seen was one of her and his master seated with their arms about each other in a chamber of the Golden House.

A third time the dream descended on Alan like a cloud. It seemed to him that he was borne beyond the flaming borders of the world. Everything around was new and unfamiliar, vast, changing, lovely, terrible. He stood alone upon a pearly plain and the sky above him was lit with red moons, many and many of them that hung there like lamps. Spirits began to pass him. He could catch something of their splendour as they sped by with incredible swiftness; he could hear the music of their laughter. One rose up at his side. It was the Asika, only a thousand times more splendid; clothed in all the glory of hell. Majestically she bent towards him, her glowing eyes held his, the deadly perfume of her breath beat upon his brow and made him drunken.

She spoke to him and her voice sounded like distant bells.

"Through many a life, through many a life," she said, "bought with much blood, paid for with a million tears, but mine at last, the soul that I have won to comfort my soul in the eternal day. Come to the place I have made ready for you, the hell that shall turn to heaven at your step,

come, you by whom I am redeemed, and drive away those gods that torture me because I was their servant that I might win you."

So she spoke, and though all his soul revolted, yet the fearful strength that was in her seemed to draw him onward whither she would go. Then a light shone and that light was the face of Barbara and with a suddenness that was almost awful, the wild dream came to an end.

Alan was in his own room again, though how he got there he did not recollect.

"Jeekie," he said, "what has happened? I seem to have had a very curious dream, there in the Treasure-place, and to have heard you telling the Asika a string of incredible falsehoods."

"Oh! no, Major, Jeekie can't lie, too good Christian; he tell her what he see, or what he think she see if she look, 'cause though p'raps he see nothing, she never believe that. And," he added with a burst of confidence, "what the dickens it matter what he tell her, so long as she swallow same and keep quiet? Nasty things always make women like Asika quite outrageous. Give them sweet to suck, say Jeekie, and if they ill afterwards, that no fault of his. They had sweet."

"Quite so, Jeekie, quite so, only I should advise you not to play too

many tricks upon the Asika, lest she should happen to find you out. How did I get back here?"

"Like man that walk in his sleep, Major. She go first, you follow, just as little lamb after Mary in hymn."

"Jeekie, did you really see anything at all?"

"No, Major, nothing partic'lar, except ghost of Mrs. Jeekie and of your reverend uncle, both of them very angry. That magic all stuff, Major. Asika put something in your grub make you drunk, so that you think her very wise. Don't think of it no more, Major, or you go off your chump. If Jeekie see nothing, depend on it there nothing to see."

"Perhaps so, Jeekie, but I wish I could be sure you had seen nothing. Listen to me; we must get out of this place somehow, or as you say, I shall go off my chump. It's haunted, Jeekie, its haunted, and I think that Asika is a devil, not a woman."

"That what priests say, Major, very old devil--part of Bonsa," he answered, looking at his master anxiously. "Well, don't you fret, Jeekie not afraid of devils, Jeekie get you out in good time. Go to bed and leave it all to Jeekie."

Fifteen more days had gone by, and it was the eve of the night of the second full moon when Alan was destined to become the husband of the Asika. She had sent for him that morning and he found her radiant with happiness. Whether or no she believed Jeekie's interpretation of the visions she had called up, it seemed quite certain that her mind was void of fears and doubts. She was sure that Alan was about to become her husband, and had summoned all the people of the Asiki to be present at the ceremony of their marriage, and incidentally of the death of the Mungana who, poor wretch, was to be forced to kill himself upon that occasion.

Before they parted she had spoken to Alan sweetly enough.

"Vernoon," she said, "I know that you do not love me as I love you, but the love will come, since for your sake I will change myself. I will grow gentle; I will shed no more blood; that of the Mungana shall be the last, and even him I would spare if I could, only while he lives I may not marry you; it is the one law that is stronger than I am, and if I broke it I and you would die at once. You shall even teach me your faith, if you will, for what is good to you is henceforth good to me. Ask what you wish of me, and as an earnest I will do it if I can."

Now Alan looked at her. There was one thing that he wished above all others--that she would let him go. But this he did not dare to ask; moreover, it would have been utterly useless. After all, if the Asika's love was terrible, what would be the appearance of her outraged hate?

What could he ask? More gold? He hated the very name of the stuff, for it had brought him here. He remembered the old cannibal chief, Fahni, who, like himself, languished a prisoner, daily expecting death. Only that morning he had implored him to obtain his liberty.

"I thank you, Asika," he said. "Now, if your words are true, set Fahni free and let him return to his own country, for if he stays here he will die."

"Surely, Vernoon, that is a small thing," she answered, smiling, "though it is true that when he gets there he will probably make war upon us. Well, let him, let him." Then she clapped her hands and summoned priests, whom she bade go at once and conduct Fahni out of Bonsa-Town. Also she bade them loose certain slaves who were of the Ogula tribe, that they might accompany him laden with provisions, and send on orders to the outposts that Fahni and his party should pass unmolested from the land.

This done, she began to talk to Alan about many matters, however little he might answer her. Indeed it seemed almost as though she feared to let him leave her side; as though some presentiment of loss oppressed her.

At length, to Alan's great relief, the time came when they must part, since it was necessary for her to attend a secret ceremony of preparation or purification that was called "Putting-off-the-Past." Although she had been thrice summoned, still she would not let him go.

"They call you, Asika," said Alan.

"Yes, yes, they call me," she replied, springing up. "Leave me, Vernoon, till we meet to-morrow to part no more. Oh! why is my heart so heavy in me? That black dog of yours read the visions that I summoned but might not look on, and they were good visions. They showed that the woman who loved you is dead; they showed us wedded, and other deeper things. Surely he would not dare to lie to me, knowing that if he did I would flay him living and throw him to the vultures. Why, then, is my heart so heavy in me? Would you escape me, Vernoon? Nay, you are not so cruel, nor could you do it except by death. Moreover, man, know that even in death you cannot escape me, for there be sure I shall follow you and claim you, to whose side my spirit has toiled for ages, and what is there so strong that it can snatch you from my hand?"

She looked at him a moment, and seizing his hand burst into a flood of tears, and seizing his hand threw herself upon her knees and kissed it again and again.

"Go now," she said, "go, and let my love go with you, through lives and deaths, and all the dreams beyond, oh! let my love go with you, as it shall, Vernoon."

So he went, leaving her weeping on her knees.

During the dark hours that followed Alan and madness were not far apart. What could he do? Escape was utterly impossible. For weeks he and Jeekie had considered it in vain. Even if they could win out of the Gold House fortress, what hope had they of making their way through the crowded, tortuous town where, after the African fashion, peopled walked about all night, every one of whom would recognize the white man, whether he were masked or no? Besides, beyond the town were the river and the guarded walls and gates and beyond them open country where they would be cut off or run down. No, to attempt escape was suicide. Suicide! That gave him an idea, why should he not kill himself? It would be easy enough, for he still had his revolver and a few cartridges, and surely it was better than to enter on such a life as awaited him as the plaything of a priestess of a tribe of fetish-worshipping savages.

But if he killed himself, how about Barbara and how about poor old Jeekie, who would certainly be killed also? Besides, it was not the right thing to do, and while there is life there is always hope.

Alan paused in his walk up and down the room and looked at Jeekie, who sat upon the floor with his back resting against the stone altar, reflectively pulling down his thick under-lip and letting it fly back, negro-fashion.

"Jeekie," he said, "time's up. What am I to do?"

"Do, Major?" he replied with affected cheerfulness. "Oh! that quite simple. Jeekie arrange everything. You marry Asika and by and by, when you master here and tired of her, you give her slip. Very interesting experience; no white man ever have such luck before. Asika not half bad, if she fond of you; she like little girl in song, when she good, she very, very good. At any rate, nothing else to do. Marry Asika or spiflicate, which mean, Major, that Jeekie spiflicate too, and," he added, shaking his white head sadly, "he no like that. One or two little things on his mind that no get time to square up yet. Daren't pray like Christian here, 'cause afraid of Bonsas, and Bonsas come even with him by and by, 'cause he been Christian, so poor Jeekie fall down bump between two stools. 'Postles kick him out of heaven and Bonsas kick him out of hell, and where Jeekie go to then?"

"Don't know, I am sure," answered Alan, smiling a little in spite of his sorrow, "but I think the Bonsas might find a corner for you somewhere. Look here, Jeekie, you old scamp, I am sorry for you, for you have been a good friend to me and we are fond of each other. But just understand this, I am not going to marry that woman if I can help it. It's against my principles. So I shall wait till to-morrow and then I shall walk out of this place. If the guards try to stop me I shall shoot them while I have any cartridges. Then I shall go on until they kill me."

"Oh! But Major, they not kill you--never; they chuck blanket over your head and take you back to Asika. It Jeekie they kill, skin him alive-o,

and all the rest of it."

"Hope not, Jeekie, because they think we shall die the same day. But if so, I can't help it. To-morrow morning I shall walk out, and now that's settled. I am tired and going to sleep," and he threw himself down upon the bed and, being worn out with weariness and anxiety, soon fell fast asleep.

But Jeekie did not sleep, although he too lay down upon his bed. On the contrary, he remained wide awake and reflected, more deeply perhaps than he had ever done before, being sure the superstition as to the dependence of Alan's life upon his own was now worn very thin, and that his hour was at hand. He thought of making Alan's wild attempt to depart impossible by the simple method of warning the Asika, but, notwithstanding his native selfishness, was too loyal to let that idea take root in his mind. No, there was nothing to be done; if the Major wished to start, the Major must start, and he, Jeekie, must pay the price. Well, he deserved it, who had been fool enough to listen to the secret promptings of Little Bonsa and conduct him to Asiki-land.

Thus he passed several hours, for the most part in melancholy speculations as to the exact fashion of his end, until at length weariness overcame him also and, shutting his eyes, Jeekie began to doze. Suddenly he grew aware of the presence of some other person in the room, but thinking that it was only the Asika prowling about in her uncanny fashion, or perhaps her spirit, for how her body entered the

place he could not guess, he did not stir, but lay breathing heavily and watching out of the corner of his eye.

Presently a figure emerged from the shadows into the faint light thrown by the single lamp that burned above, and though it was wrapped in a dark cloak, Jeekie knew at once that it was not the Asika. Very stealthily the figure crept towards him, as a leopard might creep, and bent down to examine him. The movement caused the cloak to slip a little, and for an instant Jeekie caught sight of the wasted, half-crazed face of the Mungana, and of a long, curved knife that glittered in his hand. Paralyzed with fear, he lay quite still, knowing that should he show the slightest sign of consciousness that knife would pierce his heart.

The Mungana watched him a while, then satisfied that he slept, turned round and, bending himself almost double, glided with infinite precautions towards Alan's bed, which stood some twelve or fourteen feet away. Silently as a snake that uncoils itself, Jeekie slipped from between his blankets and crept after him, his naked feet making no noise upon the mat-strewn floor. So intent was the Mungana upon the deed which he had come to do that he never looked back, and thus it happened that the two of them reached the bed one immediately behind the other.

Alan was lying on his back with his throat exposed, a very easy victim. For a moment the Mungana stared. Then he erected himself like a snake about to strike, and lifted the great curved knife, taking aim at Alan's

naked breast. Jeekie erected himself also, and even as the knife began to fall, with one hand he caught the arm that drove it and with the other the murderer's throat. The Mungana fought like a wild-cat, but Jeekie was too strong for him. His fingers held the man's windpipe like a vise. He choked and weakened; the knife fell from his hand. He sank to the ground and lay there helpless, whereon Jeekie knelt upon his chest and, possessing himself of the knife, held it within an inch of his heart.

It was at this juncture that Alan woke up and asked sleepily what was the matter.

"Nothing, Major," answered Jeekie in low and cheerful tones. "Snake just going to bite you and I catch him, that all," and he gave an extra squeeze to the Mungana's throat, who turned black in the face and rolled his eyes.

"Be careful, Jeekie, or you will kill the man," exclaimed Alan, recognizing the Mungana and taking in the situation.

"Why not, Major? He want kill you, and me too afterwards. Good riddance of bad rubbish, as Book say."

"I am not so sure, Jeekie. Give him air and let me think. Tell him that if he makes any noise, he dies."

Jeekie obeyed, and the Mungana's darkening eyes grew bright again as he drew his breath in great sobs.

"Now, friend," said Alan in Asiki, "why did you wish to stab me?"

"Because I hate you," answered the man, "who to-morrow will take my place and the wife I love."

"As a year or two ago you took someone else's place, eh? Well, suppose now that I don't want either your place or your wife."

"What would that matter even it if were true, white man, since she wants you?"

"I am thinking, friend, that there is someone else she will want when she hears of this. How do you suppose that you will die to-morrow? Not so easily as you hope, perhaps."

The Mungana's eyes seemed to sink into his head, and his face to sicken with terror. That shaft had gone home.

"Suppose I make a bargain with you," went on Alan slowly. "Supposing I say: 'Mungana, show me the way out of this place, as you can, now at once. Or if you prefer it, refuse and be given up to the Asika?' Come, you are not too mad to understand. Answer--and quickly."

"Would you kill me afterwards?" he asked.

"Not I. Why should I wish to kill you? You can come with us and go where you will. Or you can stay here and die as the Asika directs."

"I cannot believe you, white man. It is not possible that you should wish to run away from so much love and glory, or to spare one who would have slain you. Also it would be difficult to get you out of Bonsa-town."

"Jeekie," said Alan, "this fellow is mad after all, I think you had better go to the door and shout for the priests."

"No, no, lord," begged the wretched creature, "I will trust you; I will try, though it is you who must be mad."

"Very good. Stand over him, Jeekie, while I put on my things and, yes, give me that mask. If he stirs, kill him at once."

So Alan made himself ready. Then he mounted guard over the Mungana, as did Jeekie, although he shook his head over their prospect of escape.

"No go," he muttered, "no go! If we get past priests, Asika catch us with her magic. When I bolt with your reverend uncle last time, Little Bonsa arrange business because she go abroad fetch you. Now likely as not she bowl you out, and then good-bye Jeekie."

Alan sternly bade him be quiet and stop behind if he did not wish to come.

"No, no, Major," he answered, "I come all right. Asika very prejudiced beggar, and if she find me here alone--oh my! Better die double after all, Two's company, Major. Now, all ready, March!" and he gave the unfortunate Mungana a fearful kick as a hint to proceed.

So utterly crushed was the poor wretch that even this insult did not stir him to resentment.

"Follow me, white man," he said, "and if you desire to live, be silent. Throw your cloaks about your heads."

They did so, and holding their revolvers in their right hands, glided after the Mungana. In the corner of the big room they came to a little stair. How it opened in that place where no stair had been, they could not see or even guess, for it was too dark, only now they knew the means by which the Asika had been able to visit them at night.

The Mungana went first down the stair. Jeekie followed, grasping him by the arm with one hand, while in the other he kept his own knife ready to stab him at the first sign of treachery. Alan brought up the rear, keeping hold of Jeekie's cloak. They passed down twelve steps of stair, then turned to the right along a tunnel, then to the left, then to the

right again. In the pitch darkness it was an awful journey, since they knew not whither they were being led, and expected that every moment would be their last. At length, quite of a sudden, they emerged into moonlight.

Alan looked about him and knew the place. It was where the feast had been held two months before, when the priests were poisoned and the Bonsas chose the victims for sacrifice. Already it was prepared for the great festival of to-morrow, when the Mungana should drown himself and Alan be married to the Asika. There on the dais were the gold chairs in which they were to sit, and green branches of trees mixed with curious flags decked the vast amphitheatre beyond. Moreover, there was the broad canal, and floating in the midst of it the hideous gold fetish, Big Bonga. The moon shone on its glaring, deathly eyes, its fish-like snout and its huge, pale teeth. Alan looked at it and shivered, for the thing was horrid and uncanny, and the utter loneliness in which it lay staring up at the moon, seemed to accentuate the horror.

The Mungana noticed his fear and whispered:

"We must swim the water. If you have a god, white man, pray him to protect you from Bonga."

"Lead on," answered Alan, "I do not dread a foul fetish, only the look of it. But is there no way round?"

The Mungana shook his head and began to enter the canal. Jeekie, whose teeth were chattering, hung back, but Alan pushed him from behind, so sharply that he stumbled and made a splash. Then Alan followed, and as the cold, black water rose to his chest, looked again at Big Bonga.

It seemed to him that the thing had turned round and was staring at them. Surely a few seconds ago its snout pointed the other way. No, that must be fancy. He was swimming now, they were all swimming, Alan and Jeekie holding their pistols and little stock of cartridges above their heads to keep them dry. The gold head of Big Bonga appeared to be lifting itself up in the water, as a reptile might, in order to get a better view of these proceedings, but doubtless it was the ripples that they caused which gave it this appearance. Only why did the ripples make it come towards them, quite gently, like an investigating fish?

It was about ten yards off and they were in the middle of the canal. The Mungana had passed it. It was in a line with Alan's head. Oh Heavens! a sudden smother of foam, a rush like that of a torpedo, and set low down between two curving waves, a flash of gold. Then a gurgling, inhuman laugh and a weight upon his back. Down went Alan, down and down!