

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE END OF THE MUNGANA

The moonlight above vanished. Alan was alone in the depths with this devil, or whatever it might be. He could feel hands and feet gripping and treading on him, but they did not seem to be human, for there were too many of them. Also they were very cold. He gave himself up for dead and thought of Barbara.

Then something flashed into his mind. In his hand he still held the revolver. He pressed it upwards against the thing that was smothering him, and pulled the trigger. Again he pulled it, and again, for it was a self-cocking weapon, and even there deep down in the water he heard the thud of the explosion of the damp-proof copper cartridges. His lungs were bursting, his senses reeled, only enough of them remained to tell him that he was free of that strangling grip and floating upwards. His head rose above the surface, and through the mouth of his mask he drew in the sweet air with quick gasps. Down below him in the clear water he saw the yellow head of Big Bonsa rocking and quivering like a great reflected moon, saw too that it was beginning to rise. Yet he could not swim away from it, the fetish seemed to have hypnotized him. He heard Jeekie calling to him from the shallow water near the further bank, but still he floated there like a log and stared down at Big Bonsa wallowing beneath.

Jeekie plunged back into the canal and with a few strong strokes reached him, gripped him by the arm and began to tow him to the shore. Before they came there Big Bansa rose like a huge fish and tried to follow them, but could not, or so it seemed. At any rate it only whirled round and round upon the surface, while from it poured a white fluid that turned the black water to the hue of milk. Then it began to scream, making a thin and dreadful sound more like that of an infant in pain than anything they had ever heard, a very sickening sound that Alan never could forget. He staggered to the bank and stood staring at it where it bled, rolled and shrieked, but because of the milky foam could make nothing out in that light.

"What is it, Jeekie?" he said with an idiotic laugh. "What is it?"

"Oh! don't know. Devil and all, perhaps. Come on, Major, before it catch us."

"I don't think it will catch anyone just at present. Devil or not hollow-nosed bullets don't agree with it. Shall I give it another, Jeekie?" and he lifted the pistol.

"No, no, Major, don't play tomfool," and Jeekie grabbed him by the arm and dragged him away.

A few paces further on stood the Mungana like a man transfixed, and even then Alan noticed that he regarded him with something akin to awe.

"Stronger than the god," he muttered, "stronger than the god," and bounded forward.

Following the path that ran beside the canal, they plunged into a tunnel, holding each other as before. In a few minutes they were through it and in a place full of cedar trees outside the wall of the Gold House, under which evidently the tunnel passed, for there it rose behind them. Beneath these cedar trees they flitted like ghosts, now in the moonlight and now in the shadow.

The great fall to the back of the town was on their left, and in front of them lay one of the arms of the river, at this spot a raging torrent not much more than a hundred feet in width, spanned by a narrow suspension bridge which seemed to be supported by two fibre ropes. On the hither side of this bridge stood a guard hut, and to their dismay out of this hut ran three men armed with spears, evidently to cut them off. One of these men sped across the bridge and took his stand at the further end, while the other two posted themselves in their path at the entrance to it.

The Mungana slacked his speed and said one word--"Finished!" and Jeekie also hesitated, then turned and pointed behind them.

Alan looked back and flitting in and out between the cedar trees, saw the white robes of the priests of Bonsa. Then despair seized them all,

and they rushed at the bridge. Jeekie reached it first and dodging beneath the spears of the two guards, plunged his knife into the breast of one of them, and butted the other with his great head, so that he fell over the side of the bridge on to the rocks below.

"Cut, Major, cut!" he said to Alan, who pushed past him. "All right now."

They were on the narrow swaying bridge--it was but a single plank--Alan first, then the Mungana, then Jeekie. When they were half way across Alan looked before him and saw a sight he could never forget.

The third guard at the further side was sawing through one of the fibre ropes with his spear. There they were on the middle of the bridge with the torrent raving fifty feet beneath them, and the man had nearly severed the rope! To get over before it parted was impossible; behind were the priests; beneath the roaring river. All three of them stopped as though paralyzed, for all three had seen. Something struck against Alan's leg, it was his pistol that still remained fastened to his wrist by its leather thong. He cocked and lifted it, took aim and fired.

The shot missed, which was not wonderful considering the light and the platform on which the shooter stood. It missed, but the man, astonished, for he had never seen or heard such a thing before, stopped his sawing for a moment, and stared at them. Then as he began again Alan fired once more, and this time by good fortune the bullet struck the man somewhere in the body. He fell, and as he fell grasped the nearly separated rope

and hung to it.

"Get hold of the other rope and come on," yelled Alan, and once more they bounded forward.

"My God! it's going," he yelled again. "Hold fast, Jeekie, hold fast!"

Next instant the rope parted and the man vanished. The bridge tipped over, and supported by the remaining rope, hung edgeways up. To this rope the three of them clung desperately, resting their feet upon the edge of the swaying plank. For a few seconds they remained thus, afraid to stir, then Jeekie called out:

"Climb on, Major, climb on like one monkey. Look bad, but quite safe really."

As there was nothing else to be done Alan began to climb, shifting his feet along the plank edge and his hands along the rope, which creaked and stretched beneath their threefold weight.

It was a horrible journey, and in his imagination took at least an hour. Yet they accomplished it, for at last they found themselves huddled together but safe upon the further bank. The sweat pouring down from his head almost blinded Alan; a deadly nausea worked within him, sickly tremors shot up and down his spine; his brain swam. Yet he could hear Jeekie, in whom excitement always took the form of speech, saying

loudly:

"Think that man no liar what say our great papas was monkeys. Never look down on monkey no more. Wake up, Major, those priests monkey-men too, for we all brothers, you know. Wait a bit, I stop their little game," and springing up with three or four cuts of the big curved knife, he severed the remaining rope just as their pursuers reached the further side of the chasm.

They shouted with rage as the long bridge swung back against the rock, the cut end of it falling into the torrent, and waved their spears threateningly. To this demonstration Jeekie replied with gestures of contempt such as are known to street Arabs. Then he looked at the Mungana, who lay upon the ground a melancholy and dilapidated spectacle, for the perspiration had washed lines of paint off his face and patches of dye from his hair, also his gorgeous robes were water-stained and his gem necklaces broken. Having studied him a while Jeekie kicked him meditatively till he got up, then asked him to set out the exact situation. The Mungana answered that they were safe for a while, since that torrent could only be crossed by the broken bridge and was too rapid to swim. The Asiki, he added, must go a long journey round through the city in order to come at them, though doubtless they would hunt them down in time.

Here Jeekie cut him short, since he knew all that country well and only wished to learn whether any more bridges had been built across the

torrent since he was a boy.

"Now, Major," he said, "you get up and follow me, for I know every inch of ground, also by and by good short cut over mountains. You see Jeekie very clever boy, and when he herd sheep and goat he made note of everything and never forget nothing. He pull you out of this hole, never fear."

"Glad to hear it, I am sure," answered Alan as he rose. "But what's to become of the Mungana?"

"Don't know and don't care," said Jeekie; "no more good to us. Can go and see how Big Bonsa feel, if he like," and stretching out his big hand as though in a moment of abstraction, he removed the costly necklaces from their guide's neck and thrust them into the pouch he wore. Also he picked up the gilded linen mask which Alan had removed from his head and placed it in the same receptacle, remarking, that he "always taught that it wicked to waste anything when so many poor in the world."

Then they started, the Mungana following them. Jeekie paused and waved him off, but the poor wretch still came on, whereon Jeekie produced the big, crooked knife, Mungana's own knife.

"What are you going to do," said Alan, awaking to the situation.

"Cut off head of that cocktail man, Major, and so save him lot of

trouble. Also we got no grub, and if we find any he want eat a lot. Chop what do for two p'raps, make very short commons for three. Also he might play dirty trick, so much best dead."

"Nonsense," said Alan sternly; "let the poor devil come along if he likes. One good turn deserves another."

"Just so, Major; that hello-swello want cut our throats, so I want cut his--one good turn deserve another, as wise king say in Book, when he give half baby to woman what wouldn't have it. Well, so be, Major, specially as it no matter, for he not stop with us long."

"You mean that he will run away, Jeekie?"

"Oh! no, he not run away, he in too blue funk for that. But something run away with him, because he ought die to-morrow night. Oh! yes, you see, you see, and Jeekie hope that something not run away with you too, Major, because you ought be married at same time."

"Hope not, I am sure," answered Alan, and bethinking him of Big Bonga wallowing and screaming on the water and bleeding out white blood, he shivered a little.

By this time, advancing at a trot, the Mungana running after them like a dog, they had entered the bush pierced with a few wandering paths. Along these paths they sped for hour after hour, Jeekie leading them without



a moment's hesitation. They met no man and heard nothing, except occasional weird sounds which Alan put down to wild beasts, but Jeekie and the Mungana said were produced by ghosts. Indeed it appeared that all this jungle was supposed to be haunted, and no Asiki would enter it at night, or unless he were very bold and protected by many charms, by day either. Therefore it was an excellent place for fugitives who sorely needed a good start.

At length the day began to dawn just as they reached the main road where it crossed the hills, whence on his journey thither Alan had his first view of Bonsa Town. Peering from the edge of the bush, they perceived a fire burning near the road and round it five or six men, who seemed to be asleep. Their first thought was to avoid them, but the Mungana, creeping up to Alan, for Jeekie he would not approach, whispered:

"Not Asiki, Ogula chief and slaves who left Bonsa Town yesterday."

They crept nearer the fire and saw that this was so. Then rejoicing exceedingly, they awoke the old chief, Fahni, who at first thought they must be spirits. But when he recognized Alan, he flung himself on his knees and kissed his hand, because to him he owed his liberty.

"No time for all that, Fahni," said Alan. "Give us food."

Now of this as it chanced there was plenty, since by the Asika's orders the slaves had been laden with as much as they could carry. They ate of

it ravenously, and while they ate, told Fahni something of the story of their escape. The old chief listened amazed, but like Jeekie asked Alan why he had not killed the Mungana, who would have killed him.

Alan, who was in no mood for long explanations, answered that he had kept him with them because he might be useful.

"Yes, yes, friend, I see," exclaimed the old cannibal, "although he is so thin he will always make a meal or two at a pinch. Truly white men are wise and provident. Like the ants, you take thought for the morrow."

As soon as they had swallowed their food they started all together, for although Alan pointed out to Fahni that he might be safer apart, the old chief who had a real affection for him, would not be persuaded to leave him.

"Let us live or die together," he said.

Now Jeekie, abandoning the main road, led them up a stream, walking in the water so that their footsteps might leave no trace, and thus away into the barren mountains which rose between them and the great swamp. On the crest of these mountains Alan turned and looked back towards Bonsa Town. There far across the fertile valley was the hateful, river-encircled place. There fell the great cataract in the roar of which he had lived for so many weeks. There were the black cedars and there gleamed the roofs of the Gold House, his prison where dwelt the

Asika and the dreadful fetishes of which she was the priestess. To him it was like the vision of a nightmare, he could scarcely think it real. And yet by this time doubtless they sought him far and wide. What mood, he wondered, would the Asika be in when she learned of his escape and the fashion of it, and how would she greet him if he were recaptured and taken back to her? Well, he would not be recaptured. He had still some cartridges and he would fight till they killed him, or failing that, save the last of them for himself. Never, never could he endure to be dragged back to Bonsa Town there to live and die.

They went on across the mountains, till in the afternoon once more they saw the road running beneath them like a ribbon, and at the end of it the lagoon. Now they rested a while and held a consultation while they ate. Across that lagoon they could not escape without a canoe.

"Lord," said the Mungana presently, "yesterday when these cannibals were let go a swift runner was sent forward commanding that a good boat should be provisioned and made ready for them, and by now doubtless this has been done. Let them descend to the road, walk on to the bay and ask for the boat. Look, yonder, far away a tongue of land covered with trees juts out into the lake. We will make our way thither and after nightfall this chief can row back to it and take us into the canoe."

Alan said that the plan was good, but Jeekie shook his head, asking what would happen if Fahni, finding himself safe upon the water, thought it wisest not to come to fetch them.

Alan translated his words to the old chief, whereon Fahni wanted to fight Jeekie because of the slur that he had cast upon his honour. This challenge Jeekie resolutely declined, saying that already there were plenty of ways to die in Asiki-land without adding another to them. Then Fahni swore by his tribal god and by the spirit of every man he had ever eaten, that he would come to that promontory after dark, if he were still alive.

So they separated, Fahni and his men slipping down to the road, which they did without being seen by anyone, while Alan, Jeekie and the Mungana bore away to the right towards the promontory. The road was long and rough and, though by good fortune they met no one, since the few who dwelt in these wild parts had gone up to Bonsa Town to be present at the great feast, the sun was sinking before ever they reached the place. Moreover, this promontory proved to be covered with dense thorn scrub, through which they must force a way in the gathering darkness, not without hurt and difficulty. Still they accomplished it and at length, quite exhausted, crept to the very point, where they hid themselves between some stones at the water's edge.

Here they waited for three long hours, but no boat came.

"All up a gum-tree now, Major," said Jeekie. "Old blackguard, Fanny, bolt and leave us here, and to-morrow morning Asika nobble us. Better have gone down to bay, steal his boat and leave him behind, because

Asika no want him."

Alan made no answer. He was too tired, and although he trusted Fahni, it seemed likely enough that Jeekie was right, or perhaps the cannibals had not been able to get the boat. Well, he had done his best, and if Fate overtook them it was no fault of his. He began to doze, for even their imminent peril could not keep his eyes open, then presently awoke with a start, for in his sleep he thought he heard the sounds of paddles beating the quiet water. Yes, there dimly seen through the mist, was a canoe, and seated in the stern of it Fahni. So that danger had gone by also.

He woke his companions, who slept at his side, and very silently they rose, stepping from rock to rock till they reached the canoe and entered it. It was not a large craft, barely big enough to hold them all indeed, but they found room, and then at a sign from Fahni the oarsmen gave way so heartily that within half an hour they had lost sight of the accursed shores of Asiki-land, although presently its mountains showed up clearly beneath the moon.

Meanwhile Fahni had told his tale. It appeared that when he reached the bay he found the Asiki headman who dwelt there, and those under him, in a state of considerable excitement.

Rumours had reached them that someone had escaped from Bonsa Town; they thought it was the Mungana. Fahni asked who had brought the rumour,

whereon the headman answered that it came "in a dream," and would say no more. Then he demanded the canoe which had been promised to him and his people, and the headman admitted that it was ready in accordance with orders received from the Asika, but demurred to letting him have it. A long argument followed, in the midst of which Fahni and his men got into the canoe, the headman apparently not daring to use force to prevent him. Just as they were pushing off a messenger arrived from Bonsa Town, reeling with exhaustion and his tongue hanging from his jaws, who called out that it was the white man who had escaped with his servant and the Mungana, and that although they were believed to be still hidden in the holy woods near Bonsa Town, none were to be allowed to leave the bay. So the headman shouted to Fahni to return, but he pretended not to hear and rowed away, nor did anyone attempt to follow him. Still it was only after nightfall that he dared to put the boat about and return to the headland to pick up Alan and the others as he had promised. That was all he had to say.

Alan thanked him heartily for his faithfulness and they paddled on steadily, putting mile after mile of water between them and Asiki-land. He wondered whether he had seen the last of that country and its inhabitants. Something within him answered No. He was sure that the Asika would not allow him to depart in peace without making some desperate effort to recapture him. Far as he was away, it seemed to him that he could feel her fury hanging over him like a cloud, a cloud that would burst in a rain of blood. Doubtless it would have burst already had it not been for the accident that he and his companions were still

supposed to be hiding in the woods. But that error must be discovered, and then would come the pursuit.

He looked at the full moon shining upon him and reflected that at this very hour he should have been seated upon the chair of state, wedding, or rather being wedded by the Asika in the presence of Big and Little Bonsa and all the people. His eye fell upon the Mungana, who had also been destined to play a prominent part in that ceremony. At once he saw that there was something wrong with the man. A curious change had come over his emaciated face. It was working like that of a maniac. Foam appeared upon his dyed lips, his haunted eyes rolled, his thin hands gripped the side of the canoe and he began to sing, or rather howl like a dog baying at the stars. Jeekie hit him on the head and bade him be silent, but he took no notice, even when he hit him again more heavily. Presently came the climax. The man sprang up in the canoe, causing it to rock from side to side. He pointed to the full moon above and howled more loudly than before; he pointed to something that he seemed to see in the air near by and gibbered as though in terror. Then his eyes fixed themselves upon the water at which he stared.

Harder and harder he stared, his head sinking lower every moment, till at length without another sound, very quietly and unexpectedly he went over the side of the boat. For a few seconds they saw his bright-coloured garments sinking to the depths, then he vanished.

They waited a while, expecting that he would rise again. But he never

rose. A shot-weighted corpse could not have disappeared more finally and completely. The thing was very awful, and for a while there was silence, which as usual was broken by Jeekie.

"That gay dog gone," he said in a reflective voice. "All those old ghosts come to fetch him at proper time. No good run away from ghosts; they travel too quick; one jump, and pop up where you no expect. Well, more place for Jeekie now," and he spread himself out comfortably in the empty seat, adding, "like hello-swello's room much better than company, he go in scent-bath every day and stink too much, all that water never wash him clean."

Thus died the Mungana, and such was the poor wretch's requiem. With a shiver Alan reflected that had it not been for him and his insane jealousy, he too might have been expected to go into that same scent-bath and have his face painted like a chorus girl. Only would he escape the spell that had destroyed his predecessor in the affections of the priestess of the Bonsas? Or would some dim power such as had drawn Mungana to the death drag him back to the arms of the Asika or to the torture pit of "Great Swimming Head." He remembered his dream in the Treasure Hall and shuddered at the very thought of it, for all he had undergone and seen made him superstitious; then bade the men paddle faster, ever faster.

All that night they rowed on, taking turns to rest, except Alan and Jeekie, who slept a good deal and as a consequence awoke at dawn much



refreshed. When the sun rose they found themselves across the lagoon, over thirty miles from the borders of Asiki-land, almost at the spot where the river up which they had travelled some months before, flowed out of the lake. Whether by chance or skill Fahni had steered a wonderfully straight course. Now, however, they were face to face with a new trouble, for scarcely had they begun to descend the river when they discovered that at this dry season of the year it was in many places too shallow to allow the canoe to pass over the sand and mud banks. Evidently there was but one thing to be done--abandon it and walk.

So they landed, ate from their store of food and began a terrible and toilsome journey. On either side of the river lay dessicated swamp covered with dead reeds ten or twelve feet high. Doubtless beyond the swamp there was high land, but in order to reach this, if it existed, they would be obliged to force a path through miles of reeds. Therefore they thought it safer to follow the river bank. Their progress was very slow, since continually they must make detours to avoid a quicksand or a creek, also the stones and scrubby growth delayed them so that fifteen or at most twenty miles was a good day's march.

Still they went on steadily, seeing no man, and when their food was exhausted, living on the fish which they caught in plenty in the shallows, and on young flapper ducks that haunted the reeds. So at length they came to the main river into which this tributary flowed, and camped there thankfully, believing that if any pursuit of them had been undertaken, it was abandoned. At least Alan and the rest believed this,

but Jeekie did not.

On the following morning, shortly after dawn, Jeekie awoke his master.

"Come here, Major," he said in a solemn voice, "I got something pretty show you," and he led him to the foot of an old willow tree, adding, "now up you go, Major, and look."

So Alan went up and from the topmost fork of that tree saw a sight at which his blood turned cold. For there, not five miles behind them, on either side of the river bank, the light gleaming on their spears, marched two endless columns of men, who from their head-dresses he took to be Asiki. For a minute he looked, then descended the tree and approaching the others, asked what was to be done.

"Hook, scoot, bolt, leg it!" exclaimed Jeekie emphatically; then he licked his finger, held it up to the wind and added, "but first fire reeds and make it hot for Bonsa crowd."

This was a good suggestion and one on which they acted without delay. Taking red embers, they blew them into a flame and lit torches, which they applied to the reeds over a width of several hundred yards. The strong northward wind soon did the rest; indeed with a quarter of an hour a vast sheet of flame twenty or thirty feet in height was rushing towards the Asiki columns. Then they began their advance along the river bank, running at a steady trot, for here the ground was open.

All that day they ran, pausing at intervals to get their breath, and at night rested because they must. When the light came upon the following morning they looked back from a little hill and saw the outposts of the Asiki advancing not a mile behind. Doubtless some of the army had been burned, but the rest, guessing their route, had forced a way through the reeds and cut across country. So they began to run again harder than before, and kept their lead during the morning. But when afternoon came the Asika gained on them. Now they were breasting a long rise, the river running in the cleft beneath, and Jeekie, who seemed to be absolutely untiring, held Alan by the hand, Fahni following close behind. Two of their men had fallen down and been abandoned, and the rest straggled.

"No go, Jeekie," gasped Alan, "they will catch us at the top of the hill."

"Never say die, Major, never say die," puffed Jeekie, "they get blown too and who know what other side of hill?"

Somehow they struggled to the crest and behold! there beneath them was a great army of men.

"Ogula!" yelled Jeekie, "Ogula! Just what I tell you, Major, who know what other side of any hill."