

CHAPTER XVIII

A MEETING IN THE FOREST

In five minutes more Alan and Jeekie were among the Ogula, who, having recognized their chief while he was yet some way off, greeted him with rapturous cheers and the clapping of hands. Then as there was no time for explanation, they retreated across a little stream which ran down the valley, four thousand or more of them, and prepared for battle. That evening, however, there was no fighting, for when the first of the Asiki reached the top of the rise and saw that the fugitives had escaped to the enemy, who were in strength, they halted and finally retired.

Now Alan, and Fahni also, hoped that the pursuit was abandoned, but again Jeekie shook his big head, saying:

"Not at all, Major, I know Asiki and their little ways. While one of them alive, not dare go back to Asika without you, Major."

"Perhaps she is with them herself," suggested Alan, "and we might treat with her."

"No, Major, Asika never leave Bonsa Town, that against law, and if she do so, priests make another Asika and kill her when they catch her."

After this a council of war was held, and it was decided to camp there

that night, since the position was good to meet an attack if one should be made, and the Ogula were afraid of being caught on the march with their backs towards the enemy. Alan was glad enough to hear this decision, for he was quite worn out and ready to take any risk for a few hours' rest. At this council he learned also that the Asiki bearers carrying his gold with their Ogula guides had arrived safely among the Ogula, who had mustered in answer to their chief's call and were advancing towards Asiki-land, though the business was one that did not please them. As for these Asiki bearers, it seemed that they had gone on into the forest with the gold, and nothing more had been heard of them.

As they were leaving the council Alan asked Jeekie if he had any tidings of his mother, who had been their first messenger.

"No, Major," he answered gloomily, "can't learn nothing of my ma, don't know where she is. Ogula camp no place for old girl if they short of chop and hungry. But p'raps she never get there; I nose round and find out."

Apparently Jeekie did "nose round" to some purpose, for just as Alan was dropping off to sleep in his bough shelter a most fearful din arose without, through which he recognized the vociferations of Jeekie. Running out of the shelter he discovered his retainer and a great Ogula whom he knew again as the headman who had been imprisoned with him and freed by the Asika to guide the bearers, rolling over and over on the ground, watched by a curious crowd. Just as he arrived Jeekie, who

notwithstanding his years was a man of enormous strength, got the better of the Ogula and kneeling on his stomach, was proceeding to throttle him. Rushing at him, Alan dragged him off and asked what was the matter.

"Matter, Major!" yelled the indignant Jeekie. "My ma inside this black villain, that the matter. Dirty cannibal got digestion of one ostrich and eat her up with all his mates, all except one who not like her taste and tell me. They catch poor old lady asleep by road so stop and lunch at once when Asiki bearers not looking. Let me get at him, Major, let me get at him. If I can't bury my ma, as all good son ought to do, I bury him, which next best thing."

"Jeekie, Jeekie," said Alan, "exercise a Christian spirit and let bygones be bygones. If you don't, you will make a quarrel between us and the Ogula, and they will give us up to the Asiki. Perhaps the man did not eat your mother; I understand that he denies it, and when you remember what she was like, it seems incredible. At any rate he has a right to a trial, and I will speak to Fahni about it to-morrow."

So they were separated, but as it chanced that case never came on, for next morning this Ogula was killed in the fighting together with two of his companions, while the others involved in the charge kept themselves out of sight. Whether Jeekie's "ma" was or was not eaten by the Ogula no one ever learned for certain. At least she was never heard of any more.

Alan was sleeping heavily when a sound of rushing feet and of strange,

thrilling battle-cries awoke him. He sprang up, snatching at a spear and shield which Jeekie had provided for him, and ran out to find from the position of the moon that dawn was near.

"Come on, Major," said Jeekie, "Asiki make night attack; they always like do everything at night who love darkness, because their eye evil. Come on quick, Major," and he began to drag him off toward the rear.

"But that's the wrong way," said Alan presently. "They are attacking over there."

"Do you think Jeekie fool, Major, that he don't know that? He take you where they not attacking. Plenty Ogula to be killed, but not many white men like you, and in all world only one Jeekie!"

"You cold-blooded old scoundrel!" ejaculated Alan as he turned and bolted back towards the noise of fighting, followed by his reluctant servant.

By the time that he reached the first ranks, which were some way off, the worst of the attack was over. It had been short and sharp, for the Asiki had hoped to find the Ogula unprepared and to take their camp with a rush. But the Ogula, who knew their habits, were waiting for them, so that presently they withdrew, carrying off their wounded and leaving about fifty dead upon the ground. As soon as he was quite sure that the enemy were all gone, Jeekie, armed with a large battle-axe, went off to

inspect these fallen soldiers. Alan, who was helping the Ogula wounded, wondered why he took so much interest in them. Half an hour later his curiosity was satisfied, for Jeekie returned with over twenty heavy gold rings, torques, and bracelets slung over his shoulder.

"Where did you get those, Jeekie?" he asked.

"Off poor chaps that peg out just now, Major. Remember Asiki soldiers nearly always wear these things and that they no more use to them. But if ever he get out of this Jeekie want spend his old age in respectable peace. So he fetch them. Hard work, though, for rings all in one bit and Asiki very tough to chop. Don't look cross, Major; you remember what 'postle say, that he who no provide for his own self worse than cannibal."

Just then Fahni came up and announced that the Asiki general had sent a messenger into the camp proposing terms of peace.

"What terms?" asked Alan.

"These, white man: that we should surrender you and your servant and go our way unharmed."

"Indeed, Fahni, and what did you answer?"

"White man, I refused; but I tell you," he added warningly, "that my

captains wished to accept. They said that I had come back to them safe and that they fear the Asiki, who are devils, not men, and who will bring the curse of Bonsa on us if we go on fighting with them. Still I refused, saying that if they gave you up I would go with you, who saved my life from the lion and afterwards from the priests of Bonsa. So the messenger went back and, white man, we march at once, and I pray you always to keep close to me that I may watch over you."

Then began that long tramp down the river, which Alan always thought afterwards tried him more than any of the terrible events of his escape. For although there was but little fighting, only rearguard actions indeed, every day the Asiki sent messengers renewing their offers of peace on the sole condition of the surrender of himself and Jeekie. At last one evening they came to that place where Alan first met the Ogula, and once more he camped upon the island on which he had shot the lion. At nightfall, after he had eaten, Fahni visited him here and Alan boded evil from his face.

"White man," he said, "I can protect you no longer. The Asiki messengers have been with us again and they say that unless we give you up to-morrow at the dawn, their army will push on ahead of us and destroy my town, which is two days' march down the river, and all the women and children in it, and that afterwards they will fight a great battle with us. Therefore my people say that I must give you up, or that if I do not they will elect another chief and do so themselves."

"Then you will give up a dead man, Fahni."

"Friend," said the old chief in a low voice, "the night is dark and the forest not so far away. Moreover, I have set no guards on that side of the river, and Jeekie here does not forget a road that he has travelled. Lastly, I have heard it said that there are some other white people with soldiers camped in the edge of the forest. Now, if you were not here in the morning, how could I give you up?"

"I understand, Fahni. You have done your best for me, and now, good-night. Jeekie and I are going to take a walk. Sometimes you will think of the months we spent together in Bonsa-Town, will you not?"

"Yes, and of you also, white man, for so long as I shall live. Walk fast and far, for the Asiki are clever at following a spoor. Good-night, Friend, and to you, Jeekie the cunning, good-night also. I go to tell my captains that I will surrender you at dawn," and without more words he vanished out of their sight and out of their lives.

Meanwhile Jeekie, foreseeing the issue of this talk, was already engaged in doing up their few belongings, including the gold rings, some food, and a native cooking pot, in a bundle surrounded by a couple of bark blankets.

"Come on, Major," he said, handing Alan one spear and taking another himself. "Old cannibal quite right, very nice night for a walk. Come on,

Major, river shallow just here. I think this happen and try it before dark. You just follow Jeekie, that all you got to do."

So leaving the fire burning in front of their bough shelter, they waded the stream and started up the opposing slope, meeting no man. Dark as it was, Jeekie seemed to have no difficulty in finding the way, for as Fahni said, a native does not forget the path he has once travelled. All night long they walked rapidly, and when dawn broke found themselves at the edge of the forest.

"Jeekie," said Alan, "what did Fahni mean by that tale about white people?"

"Don't know, Major, think perhaps he lie to let you down easy. My golly! what that?"

As he spoke a distant echo reached their ears, the echo of a rifle shot.

"Think Fanny not lie after all," went on Jeekie; "that white man's gun, sharp crack, smokeless powder, but wonder how he come in this place. Well, we soon find out. Come on, Major."

Tired as they were they broke into a run; the prospect of seeing a white face again was too much for them. Half a mile or so further on they caught sight of a figure evidently engaged in stalking game among the trees, or so they judged from his cautious movements.

"White man!" said Jeekie, and Alan nodded.

They crept forward silently and with care, for who knew what this white man might be after, keeping a great tree between them and the man, till at length, passing round its bole, they found themselves face to face with him and not five yards away. Notwithstanding his unaccustomed tropical dress and his face burnt copper colour by the sun, Alan knew the man at once.

"Aylward!" he gasped; "Aylward! You here?"

He started. He stared at Alan. Then his countenance changed. Its habitual calm broke up as it was wont to do in moments of deep emotion. It became very evil, as though some demon of hate and jealousy were at work behind it. The thin lips quivered, the eyes glared, and without spoken word or warning, he lifted the rifle and fired straight at Alan. The bullet missed him, for the aim was high. Passing over Alan's head, it cut a neat groove through the hair of the taller Jeekie who was immediately behind him.

Next instant, with a spring like that of a tiger Jeekie was on Aylward. The weight of his charge knocked him backwards to the ground, and there he lay, pinned fast.

"What for you do that?" exclaimed the indignant Jeekie. "What for you shoot through wool of respectable nigger, Sir Robert Aylward, Bart.? Now

I throttle you, you dirty hog-swine. No Magistrates' Court here in Dwarf Forest," and he began to suit the action to the word.

"Let him go, Jeekie. Take his rifle and let him go," exclaimed Alan, who all this while had stood amazed. "There must be some mistake, he cannot have meant to murder me."

"Don't know what he mean, but know his bullet go through my hair, Major, and give me new parting," grumbled Jeekie as he obeyed.

"Of course it was a mistake, Vernon, for I suppose it is Vernon," said Aylward, as he rose. "I do not wonder that your servant is angry, but the truth is that your sudden appearance frightened me out of my wits and I fired automatically. We have been living in some danger here and my nerves are not as strong as they used to be."

"Indeed," answered Alan. "No, Jeekie will carry the rifle for you; yes, and I think that pistol also, every ounce makes a difference walking in a hot climate, and I remember that you always were dangerous with firearms. There, you will be more comfortable so. And now, who do you mean by 'we'?"

"I mean Barbara and myself," he answered slowly.

Alan's jaw dropped, he shook upon his feet.

"Barbara and yourself!" he said. "Do I understand----"

"Don't you understand nothing, Major," broke in Jeekie. "Don't you believe one word what this pig dog say. If Miss Barbara marry him he no want shoot you; he ask you to tea to see the Missus and how much she love him, ducky! We just go on and call on Miss Barbara and hear the news. Walk up, Sir Robert Aylward, Bart., and show us which way."

"I do not choose to receive you and your impertinent servant at my camp," said Aylward, grinding his teeth.

"We quite understand that, Sir Robert Aylward----"

"Lord Aylward, if you please, Major Vernon."

"I beg your pardon--Lord Aylward. I was aware of the contemplated purchase of that title, I did not know that it had been completed. I was about to add that all the same we mean to go to that camp, and that if any violence towards us is attempted as we approach it, you will remember that you are in our hands."

"Yes, my Lord," added Jeekie, bowing, "and that monkeys don't tell no tales, my Lord, and that here there ain't no twelve Good-Trues to sit on noble corpse unhappily deceased, my Lord, and to bring in Crowner's verdict of done to death lawful or unlawful, according as evidence may show when got, my Lord. So march on, for we no breakfast yet. No, not

that way, round here to left, where I think I hear kettle sing."

So having no choice, Aylward came, marching between the other two and saying nothing. When they had gone a couple of hundred yards Alan also heard something, and to him it sounded like a man crying out in pain. Then suddenly they passed round some great trees and reached a glade in the forest where there was a spring of water which Alan remembered. In this glade the camp had been built, surrounded by a "boma" or palisade of rough wood, within which stood two tents and some native shelters made of tall grass and boughs. Outside of this camp a curious and unpleasant scene was in progress.

To a small tree that grew there was tied a man, whom from the fashion of his hair Alan knew to belong to the Coast negroes, while two great fellows, evidently of another tribe, flogged him unmercifully with hide whips.

"Ah!" exclaimed Jeekie, "that the kettle I hear sing. Think you better taken him off the fire, my Lord, or he boil over. Also his brothers no seem to like that music," and he pointed to a number of other men who were standing round watching the scene with sullen dissatisfaction.

"A matter of camp discipline," muttered Aylward. "This man has disobeyed orders."

By now Jeekie was shouting something to the natives in an unknown

tongue, which they seemed to understand well enough. At any rate the flogging ceased, the two fellows who were inflicting it slunk away, and the other men ran towards them, shouting back as they came.

"All right, Major. You please stop here one minute with my Lord, late Bart. of Bloody Hand. Some of these chaps friends of mine, I meet them Old Calabar while we get ready to march last rains. Now I have little talk with them and find out thing or two."

Aylward began to bluster about interference with his servants and so forth. Jeekie turned on him with a very ugly grin, and showing his white teeth, as was his fashion when he grew fierce.

"Beg pardon, Right Honourable Lord," he said, or rather snarled, "you do what I tell you just to please Jeekie. Jeekie no one in England, but Jeekie damn big Lord too out here, great medicine man, pal of Little Bonsa. You remember Little Bonsa, eh! These chaps think it great honour to meet Jeekie, so, Major, if he stir, please shoot him through head; Jeekie 'sponsible, not you. Or if you not like do it, I come back and see to job myself and don't think those fellows cry very much."

There was something about Jeekie's manner that frightened Aylward, who understood for the first time that beneath all the negro's grotesque talk lay some dreadful, iron purpose, as courage lay under his affected cowardice and under his veneer of selfishness, fidelity. At any rate he halted with Alan, who stood beside him, the revolver of which Aylward

had been relieved by Jeekie, in his hand. Meanwhile Jeekie, who held the rifle which he had reloaded, went on and met the natives about twenty yards away.

"We always disliked each other, Vernon, but I must say that I never thought a day would come when you proposed to murder me in my own camp," said Aylward.

"Odd thing," answered Alan, "but a very similar idea was in my mind. I never thought, Lord Aylward, that however unscrupulous you might be--financially--a day would come when you would attempt to shoot down an unarmed man in an African forest. Oh! don't waste breath in lying; I saw you recognize me, aim, and fire, after which Jeekie would have had the other barrel, and who then would have remained to tell the story, Lord Aylward?"

Aylward made no answer, but Alan felt that if wishes could kill him he would not live long. His eye fell upon a long, unmistakable mound of fresh earth, beneath a tree. He calculated its length, and with a thrill of terror noticed that it was too small for a negro.

"Who is buried there?" he asked.

"Find out for yourself," was the sneering answer.

"Don't be afraid, Lord Aylward; I shall find out everything in time."

The conversation between Jeekie and the natives proceeded, their heads were close together; it grew animated. They seemed to be coming to some decision. Presently one of them ran and cut the lashings of the man who had been bound to the tree, and he staggered towards them and joined in the talk, pointing to his wounds. Then the two fellows who had been engaged in flogging him, accompanied by eight companions of the same type--they appeared to be soldiers, for they carried guns--swaggered towards the group who were being addressed by Jeekie, of whom Alan counted twenty-three. As they approached Jeekie made some suggestion which, after one hesitating moment, the others seemed to accept, for they nodded their heads and separated out a little.

Jeekie stepped forward and asked a question of the guards, to which they replied with a derisive shout. Then without a word of warning he lifted Aylward's express rifle which he carried, and fired first one barrel and then the other, shooting the two leading soldiers dead. Their companions halted amazed, but before they could lift their guns, Jeekie and those with him rushed at them and began stabbing them with spears and striking them with sticks. In three minutes it was over without another shot being fired. Most of them were despatched, and the others, throwing down their guns, had fled wounded into the forest.

Now, shouting in jubilation, some of the men began to drag away the dead bodies, while others collected the rifles and the remainder, headed by Jeekie, advanced towards Alan and Aylward, waving their red spears. Alan

stood staring, for he did not in the least understand the meaning of what had happened, but Aylward, who had turned very pale, addressed Jeekie, saying:

"I suppose that you have come to murder me also, you black villain."

"No, no, my Lord," answered Jeekie politely, "not at present. Also that wrong word, execute, not murder, just what you do to some of these poor devils," and he pointed to the mob of porters. "Besides, mustn't kill holy white man, poor black chap don't matter, plenty more where he come from. Think we all go see Miss Barbara now. You come too, my Lord Bart., but p'raps best tie your hands behind you first; if you want scratch head, I do it for you. That only fair, you scratch mine this morning."

Then at a word from Jeekie some of the natives sprang on Aylward and tied his hands behind his back.

"Is Miss Barbara alive?" said Alan to Jeekie in an agonized whisper, at the same time nodding towards the grave that was so ominously short.

"Hope so, think so, these cards say so, but God He know alone," answered Jeekie. "Go and look, that best way to find out."

So they advanced into the camp through a narrow gateway made of a V-shaped piece of wood, to where the two tents were placed in its inner division. Of these tents, the first, was open, whereas the second was

closed. As the open tent was obviously empty, they went to the second, whereof Jeekie began to loosen the lashings of the flap. It was a long business, for they seemed to have been carefully knotted inside; indeed at last, growing impatient, Jeekie cut the cord, using the curved knife with which the Mungana had tried to kill Alan.

Meanwhile Alan was suffering torments, being convinced that Barbara was dead and buried in that new-made grave beneath the trees. He could not speak, he could scarcely stand, and yet a picture began to form in his numb mind. He saw himself seated in the dark in the Treasure-house at Bonsa-Town; he saw a vision in the air before him.

Lo! the tent door opened and that vision reappeared.

There was the pale Barbara seated, weeping. There again, as he entered she sprang up and snatching the pistol that lay beside her, turned it to her breast. Then she perceived him and the pistol sank downwards till from her relaxed hand it dropped to the ground. She threw up her arms and without a sound fell backwards, or would have fallen, had he not caught her.