

CHAPTER XIX

THE LAST OF THE ASIKI

Barbara had recovered. She sat upon her bed in the tent and by her sat Alan, holding her hand, while before them stood Aylward like a prisoner in the dock, and behind him the armed Jeekie.

"Tell me the story, Barbara," said Alan, "and tell it briefly, for I cannot bear much more of this."

She looked at him and began in a slow, even voice:

"After you had gone, dear, things went on as usual for a month or two. Then came the great Sahara Company trouble. First there were rumours and the shares began to go down. My uncle bought them in by tens and hundreds of thousands, to hold up the market, because he was being threatened, but of course he did not know then that Lord Aylward--for I forgot to tell you, he had become a lord somehow--was secretly one of the principal sellers, let him deny it if he can. At last the Ottoman Government, through the English ambassador, published its repudiation of the concession, which it seems was a forgery, actually executed or obtained in Constantinople by my uncle. Well, there was a fearful smash. Writs were taken out against my uncle, but before they could be served, he died suddenly of heart disease. I was with him at the time and he kept saying he saw that gold mask which Jeekie calls Bonsa, the thing

you took back to Africa. He had a fine funeral, for what he had done was not publicly known, and when his will was opened I found that he had left me his fortune, but made Lord Aylward there my trustee until I came to the full age of twenty-five under my father's will. Alan, don't force me to tell you what sort of a guardian he was to me; also there was no fortune, it had all gone; also I had very, very little left, for almost all my own money had gone too. In his despair he had forged papers to get it in order to support those Sahara Syndicate shares. Still I managed to borrow about £2000 from that little lawyer out of the £5000 that remain to me, an independent sum which he was unable to touch, and, Alan, with it I came to find you.

"Alan, Lord Aylward followed me; although everybody else was ruined, he remained rich, very very rich, they say, and his fancy was to marry me, also I think it was not comfortable for him in England. It is a long tale, but I got up here with about five-and-twenty servants, and Snell, my maid, whom you remember. Then we were both taken ill with some dreadful fever and had it not been for those good black people, I should have died, for I have been very sick, Alan. But they nursed me and I recovered; it was poor Snell who died, they buried her a few days ago. I thought that she would live, but she had a relapse. Next Lord Aylward appeared with twelve soldiers and some porters who, I believe, have run away now,--oh! you can guess, you can guess. He wanted my people to carry me away somewhere, to the coast, I suppose, but they were faithful to me and would not. Then he set his soldiers on to maltreat them. They shot several of them and flogged them on every opportunity; they were

flogging one of them just now, I heard them. Well, the poor men made me understand that they could bear it no longer and must do what he told them.

"And so, Alan, as I was quite hopeless and helpless, I made up my mind to kill myself, hoping that God would forgive me and that I should find you somewhere, perhaps after sleeping a while, for it was better to die than to be given into the power--of that man. I thought that he was coming for me just now and I was about to do it, but it was you instead, Alan, you, and only just in time. That is all the story, and I hope you will not think that I have acted very foolishly, but I did it for the best. If you only knew what I have suffered, Alan, what I have gone through in one way and another, I am sure that you would not judge me harshly; also I kept dreaming that you were in trouble and wanted me to come to you, and of course I knew where you were gone and had that map. Send him away, Alan, for I am still so weak and I cannot bear the sight of his face. If you knew everything, you would understand."

Alan turned on Aylward and in a cold, quiet voice asked him what he had to say to this story.

"I have to say, Major Vernon, that it is a clever mixture of truth and falsehood. It is true that your cousin, Champers-Haswell, has been proved guilty of some very shameful conduct. For instance it appears that he did forge, or rather cause to be forged that Firman from the Sultan, although I knew nothing of this until it was publicly

repudiated. It is also true that fearing exposure he entirely lost his head and spent not only his own great fortune but that of Miss Champers also, in trying to support Sahara shares. I admit also that I sold many hundreds of thousands of those shares in the ordinary way, having made up my mind to retire from business when I was raised to the peerage. I admit further, what you knew before, that I was attached to Miss Champers and wished to marry her. Why should I not, especially as I had a good deal to offer to a lady who has been proved to be almost without fortune?

"For the rest she set out secretly on this mad journey to Africa, whither both my duty as her trustee and my affection prompted me to follow her. I found her here recovering from an illness, and since she has dwelt upon the point, in self-defence I must tell you that whatever has taken place between us, has been with her full consent and encouragement. Of course I allude only to those affectionate amenities which are common between people who purpose to marry as soon as opportunity may offer."

At this declaration poor Barbara gasped and leaned back against her pillow. Alan stood silent, though his lips turned white, while Jeekie thrust his big head through the tent opening and stared upwards.

"What are you looking at, Jeekie?" asked Alan irritably.

"Seem to want air, Major, also look to see if clouds tumble. Believe

partickler big lie do that sometimes. Please go on, O good Lord, for Jeekie want his breakfast."

"As regards the execution of two of Miss Champers' bearers and the flogging of some others, these punishments were inflicted for mutiny," went on Aylward. "It was obviously necessary that she should be moved back to the coast, but I found out that they were trying to desert her in a body and to tamper with my own servants, and so was obliged to take strong measures."

"Sure those clouds come down now," soliloquized Jeekie, "or least something rummy happen."

"I have only to add, Major Vernon, that unless you make away with me first, as I daresay you will, as soon as we reach civilization again I shall proceed against you and this fellow for the cold-blooded murder of my men, in punishment of which I hope yet to live to see you hanged. Meanwhile, I have much pleasure in releasing Miss Champers from her engagement to me which, whatever she may have said to you in England, she was glad enough to enter on here in Africa, a country of which I have been told the climate frequently deteriorates the moral character."

"Hear, hear!" ejaculated Jeekie, "he say something true at last; by accident, I think, like pig what find pearl in muck-heap."

"Hold your tongue, Jeekie," said Alan. "I do not intend to kill you,

Lord Aylward, or to do you any harm----"

"Nor I neither," broke in Jeekie, "all I do to my Lord just for my Lord's good; who Jeekie that he wish to hurt noble British 'ristocrat?"

"But I do intend that it shall be impossible that Miss Champers should be forced to listen to more of your insults," went on Alan, "and to make sure that your gun does not go off again as it did this morning. So, Lord Aylward, until we have settled what we are going to do, I must keep you under arrest. Take him to his tent, Jeekie, and put a guard over him."

"Yes, Major, certainly, Major. Right turn, march! my Lord, and quick, please, since poor, common Jeekie not want dirty his black finger touching you."

Aylward obeyed, but at the door of the tent swung round and favoured Alan with a very evil look.

"Luck is with you for the moment, Major Vernon," he said, "but if you are wise you will remember that you never have been and never will be my match. It will turn again, I have no doubt, and then you may look to yourself, for I warn you I am a bad enemy."

Alan did not answer, but for the first time Barbara sprang to her feet and spoke.

"You mean that you are a bad man, Lord Aylward, and a coward too, or otherwise you would not have tortured me as you have done. Well, when it seemed impossible that I should escape from you except in one way, I was saved by another way of which I never dreamed. Now I tell you that I do not fear you any more. But I think," she added slowly, "that you would do well to fear for yourself. I don't know why, but it comes into my mind that though neither Alan nor I shall lift a finger against you, you have a great deal of which to be afraid. Remember what I said to you months ago when you were angry because I would not marry you. I believe it is all coming true, Lord Aylward."

Then Barbara turned her back upon him, and that was the last time that either she or Alan ever saw his face.

He was gone, and Barbara, her head upon her lover's shoulder and her sweet eyes filled with tears of joy and gratitude, was beginning to tell him everything that had befallen her when suddenly they heard a loud cough outside the tent.

"It's that confounded Jeekie," said Alan, and he called to him to come in.

"What's the matter now?" he asked crossly.

"Breakfast, Major. His lordship got plenty good stores, borrow some from

him and give him chit. Coming in one minute--hot coffee, kipper herring, rasher bacon, also butter (best Danish), and Bath Oliver biscuit."

"Very well," said Alan, but Jeekie did not move.

"Very well," repeated Alan.

"No, Major, not very well, very ill. Thought those lies bring down clouds."

"What do you mean, Jeekie?"

"Mean, Major, that Asiki smelling about this camp. Porter-man what go to fetch water see them. Also believe they catch rest of those soldier chaps and polish them, for porter-man hear the row."

Alan sprang up with an exclamation; in his new-found joy he had forgotten all about the Asiki.

"Keep hair on, Major," said Jeekie cheerfully; "don't think they attack yet, plenty of time for breakfast first. When they come we make it very hot for them, lots of rifle and cartridge now."

"Can't we run away?" asked Barbara.

"No, Missy, can't run; must stop here and do best. Camp well built, open

all round, don't think they take it. You leave everything to Jeekie, he see you through, but p'raps you like come breakfast outside, where you know all that go on."

Barbara did like, but as it happened they were allowed to consume their meal in peace, since no Asiki appeared. As soon as it was swallowed she returned to her tent, while Alan and Jeekie set to work to strengthen the defences of the little camp as well as they were able, and to make ready and serve out the arms and ammunition.

About midday a man whom they had posted in a tree that grew inside the camp announced that he saw the enemy, and next moment a company of them rushed towards them across the open and were greeted by a volley which killed and wounded several men. At this exhibition of miraculous power, for none of these soldiers had ever heard the report of firearms or seen their effect, they retreated rapidly, uttering shouts of dismay and carrying their dead and wounded with them.

"Do you suppose they have gone, Jeekie?" asked Alan anxiously.

He shook his head.

"Think not, Major, think they frightened, by big bullet magic, and go consult priest. Also only a few of them here, rest of army come later and try rush us to-morrow morning before dawn. That Asiki custom."

"Then what shall we do, Jeekie? Run for it or stop here?"

"Think must stop here, Major. If we bolt, carrying Miss Barbara, who can't walk much, they follow on spoor and catch us. Best stick inside this fence and see what happen. Also once outside p'raps porters desert and leave us."

So as there was nothing else to do they stayed, labouring all day at the strengthening of their fortifications till at length the boma or fence of boughs, supported by earth, was so high and thick that while any were left to fire through the loopholes, it would be very difficult to storm by men armed with spears.

It was a dreadful and arduous day for Alan, who now had Barbara's safety to think of, Barbara with whom as yet he had scarcely found time to exchange a word. By sunset indeed he was so worn out with toil and anxiety that he could scarcely stand upon his feet. Jeekie, who all that afternoon had been strangely quiet and reflective, surveyed him critically, then said:

"You have good drink and go sleep a bit, Major. Very good little shelter there by Miss Barbara's tent, and you hold her hand if you like underneath the canvas, which comforting and all correct. Jeekie never get tired, he keep good lookout and let you know if anything happen, and then you jump up quite fresh and fight like tom-cat in corner."

At first Alan refused to listen, but when Barbara added her entreaties to those of Jeekie he gave way, and ten minutes later was as soundly asleep as he had ever been in his life.

"Keep eye on him, Miss Barbara, and call me if he wake. Now I go give noble lord his supper and see that he quite comfortable. Jeekie seem very busy to-night, just like when Major have dinner-party at Yarleys and old cook get drunk in kitchen."

If Barbara could have followed Jeekie's movements for the next few hours, she would probably have agreed that he was busy. First he went to Aylward's tent, and as he had said he would, gave him his supper, and with it half a bottle of whisky from the stores which he had been carrying about with him for some time, as he said, to prevent the porters from getting at it. Aylward would drink little, though as his arms were tied to the tent-pole, Jeekie sat beside him and fed him like a baby, conversing pleasantly with him all the while, informing him amongst other things that he had better say "big prayer," because the Asiki would probably cut his throat before morning.

Aylward, who was in a state of sullen fury, scarcely replied to this talk, except to say that if so, there was one comfort, they would cut his and his master's also.

"Yes, my Lord," answered Jeekie, "that quite true, so drink to next meeting, though I think you go different place to me, and when you got

tail and I wing, you horn and I crown of glory, of course we not talk much together," and he held a mug of whisky and water--a great deal of whisky and a very little water--to his prisoner's mouth.

Aylward drained it, feeling a need for stimulant.

"There," said Jeekie, holding it upside down, "you drink every drop and not offer one to poor old Jeekie. Well, he turned teetotaller, so no matter. Good-night, my Lord, I call you if Asiki come."

"Who are the Asiki?" asked Aylward drowsily.

"Oh! you want to know? I tell you," and he began a long, rambling story.

Before he ever came to the end of it Aylward had fallen on his side and was fast asleep.

"Dear me!" said Jeekie, contemplating him, "that whisky very strong, though bottle say same as they drink in House of Common. That whisky so strong I think I pour away rest of it," and he did to the last drop, even taking the trouble to wash out the bottle with water. "Now you no tempt anyone," he said, addressing the said bottle with a very peculiar smile, "or if you tempt, at least do no harm--like kiss down telephone!" Then he laid down the bottle on its side and left the tent.

Outside of it three of the head porters, who appeared to be friends

of his, were waiting for him, and with these men he engaged in low and earnest conversation. Next, after they had arrived at some agreement, which they seemed to ratify by a curious oath that involved their crossing and clasping hands in an odd fashion, and other symbols known to West African secret societies, Jeekie went the round of the camp to see that everyone was at his post. Then he did what most people would have thought a very curious and strange thing, namely climbed the fence and vanished into the forest, where presently a sound was heard as of an owl hooting.

A little while later and another owl began to hoot in the distance, whereat the three head porters nudged each other. Perhaps they had heard such owls hoot before at night, and perhaps they knew that Jeekie, who had "passed Bansa," could only be harmed by the direct command of Bansa speaking through the mouth of the Asika herself. Still they might have been interested in the nocturnal conversation of those two owls, which, as is common with such magical fowl in West Africa, had transformed themselves into human shapes, the shape of Jeekie and the shape of an Asiki priest, who was, as it happened, a blood relation of Jeekie.

"Very good, Brother," said Owl No. 1; "all you want is this white man whom the Asika desires for a husband. Well, I have done my best for him, but I must think of myself and others, and he goes to great happiness. I have given him something to make him sleep; do you come presently with eight men, no more, or we shall kill you, to the fence of the camp, and we will hand over the white man, Vernoon, to you to take back to the

Asika, who will give you a wonderful reward, such a reward as you have never imagined. Now let me hear your word."

Then Owl No. 2 answered:

"Brother, I make the bargain on behalf of the army, and swear to it by the double Swimming Head of Bonsa. We will come and take the white man, Vernoon, who is to be Mungana, and carry him away. In return we promise not to follow or molest you, or any others in your camp. Indeed, why should we, who do not desire to be killed by the dreadful magic that you have, a magic that makes a noise and pierces through our bodies from afar? What were the words of the Asika? 'Bring back Vernoon, or perish. I care for nothing else, bring back Vernoon to be my husband.'"

"Good," said Owl No. 1, "within the half of an hour Vernoon shall be ready for you."

"Good," answered Owl No. 2, "within half an hour eight of us will be without the east face of your camp to receive him."

"Silently?"

"Silently, my brother in Bonsa. If he cries out we will gag him. Fear not, none shall know your part in this matter."

"Good, my brother in Bonsa. By the way, how is Big Bonsa? I fear that

the white man, Vernoon, hurt him very much, and that is why I give him up--because of his sacrilege."

"When I left the god was very sick and all the people mourned, but doubtless he is immortal."

"Doubtless he is immortal, my brother, a little hard magic in his stomach--if he has one--cannot hurt him. Farewell, dear brother in Bonsa, I wish that I were you to get the great reward that the Asika will give to you. Farewell, farewell."

Then the two owls flitted apart again, hooting as they went, till they came to their respective camps.

Jeekie was in the tent performing a strange toilet upon the sleeping Aylward by the light of a single candle. From his pouch he produced the mask of linen painted with gold that Alan used to be forced to wear, and tied it securely over Aylward's face, murmuring:

"You always love gold, my Lord Aylward, and Jeekie promise you see plenty of it now."

Then he proceeded to remove his coat, his waistcoat, his socks, and his boots and to replace these articles of European attire by his own worn

Asiki sandals and his own dirty Asiki robe.

"There," he said, "think that do," and he studied him by the light of the candle. "Same height, same colour hair, same dirty clothes, and as Asiki never see Major's face because he always wear mask in public, like as two peas on shovel. Oh my! Jeekie clever chap, Jeekie devilish clever chap. But when Asika pull off that mask to give him true lover kiss, OH MY! wonder that happen then? Think whole of Bonsa-Town bust up; think big waterfall run backwards; think she not quite pleased; think my good Lord find himself in false position; think Jeekie glad to be on coast; think he not go back to Bonsa-Town no more. Oh my aunt! no, he stop in England and go church twice on Sunday," and pressing his big hands on the pit of his stomach he rocked and rolled in fierce, silent laughter.

Then an owl hooted again immediately beneath the fence and Jeekie, blowing out the candle, opened the flap of the tent and tapped the head porter, who stood outside, on the shoulder. He crept in and between them they lifted the senseless Aylward and bore him to the V-shaped entrance of the boma which was immediately opposite to the tent and, oddly enough, half open. Here the two other porters with whom Jeekie had performed some ceremony, chanced to be on guard, the rest of their company being stationed at a distance. Jeekie and the head porter went through the gap like men carrying a corpse to midnight burial, and presently in the darkness without two owls began to hoot.

Now Aylward was laid upon a litter that had been prepared, and

eight white-robed Asiki bearers stared at his gold mask in the faint starlight.

"I suppose he is not dead, brother," said Owl No. 2 doubtfully.

"Nay, brother," said Owl No. 1, "feel his heart and his pulse. Not dead, only drunk. He will wake up by daylight, by which time you should be far upon your way. Be good and gentle to the white man Vernoon, who has been my master. Be careful, too, that he does not escape you, brother, for as you know he is very strong and cunning. Say to the Asika that Jeekie her servant makes his reverence to her, and hopes that she will have many, many happy years with the husband that he sends her; also that she will remember him whom she called 'Black Dog,' in her prayers to the gods and spirits of our people."

"It shall be done, brother, but why do you not return with us?"

"Because, brother, I have ties across the Black Water--dear children, almost white--whom I love so much that I cannot leave them. Farewell, brethren, the blessings of the Bonsas be on you, and may you grow fat and prosper in the love and favour of our lady the Asika."

"Farewell," they murmured in answer. "Good fortune be your bedfellow."

Another minute and they had lifted up the litter and vanished at a swinging trot into the shadow of the trees. Jeekie returned to the camp

and ordered the three men to re-stop the gateway with thorns, muttering in their ears:

"Remember, brethren, one word of this and you die, all of you, as those die who break the oath."

"Have we not sworn?" they whispered, as they went back to their posts.

Jeekie stood a while in front of the empty tent and if any had been there to note him, they might have seen a shadow as of compunction creep over his powerful black face.

"When he wake up he won't know where he are," he reflected, "and when he get to Bonsa-Town he'll wonder where he is, and when he meet Asika! Well, he very big blackguard; try to murder Major, whom Jeekie nurse as baby, the only thing that Jeekie care for--except--Jeekie; try to make love to Miss Barbara against will when he catch her alone in forest, which not playing game. Jeekie self not such big blackguard as that dirt-born noble Lord; Jeekie never murder no one--not quite; Jeekie never make love to girl what not want him--no need, so many what do that he have to shove them off, like good Christian man. Mrs. Jeekie see to that while she live. Also better that mean white man go call on Bonsas than Major and Missy Barbara and all porters, and Jeekie--specially Jeekie--get throat cut. No, no, Jeekie nothing to be ashamed of, Jeekie do good day's work, though Jeekie keep it tight as wax since white folk such silly people, and when Major in a rage, he very nasty customer and

see everything upside down. Now, Jeekie quite tired, so say his prayers and have nap. No, think not in tent, though very comfortable. Major might wake up, poke his nose in there, and if he see black face instead of white one, ask ugly question, which if Jeekie half asleep he no able to answer nice and neat. Still he just arrange things a little so they look all right."