

CHAPTER XX

THE ASIKA'S MESSAGE

Dawn began to break in the forest and Alan woke in his shelter and stretched himself. He had slept soundly all the night, so soundly that the innocent Jeekie wondered much whether by any chance he also had taken a tot out of that particular whisky bottle, as indeed he had recommended him to do. People who drink whisky after long abstinence from spirits are apt to sleep long, he reflected.

Alan crept out of the shelter and gazed affectionately at the tent in which Barbara slumbered. Thank Heaven she was safe so far, as for some unknown reason, evidently the Asiki had postponed their attack. Just then a clamour arose in the air, and he perceived Jeekie striding towards him waving one arm in an excited fashion, while with the other he dragged along the captain of the porters, who appeared to be praying for mercy.

"Here pretty go, Major," he shouted, "devil and all to pay! That my Lord, he gone and bolted. This silly fool say that three hours ago he hear something break through fence and think it only hyæna what come to steal, so take no notice. Well, that hyæna, you guess who he is. You come look, Major, you come look, and then we tie this fellow up and flog him."

Alan ran to Aylward's tent to find it empty.

"Look," said Jeekie, who had followed, "see how he do business, that jolly clever hyæna," and he pointed to a broken whisky bottle and some severed cords. "You see he manage break bottle and rub rope against cut glass till it come in two. Then he do hyæna dodge and hook it."

Alan inspected the articles, nor did any shadow of doubt enter his mind.

"Certainly he managed very well," he said, "especially for a London-bred man, but, Jeekie, what can have been his object?"

"Oh! who know, Major? Mind of man very strange and various thing; p'raps he no bear to see you and Miss Barbara together; p'raps he bolt coast, get ear of local magistrate before you; p'raps he sit up tree to shoot you; p'raps nasty temper make him mad. But he gone any way, and I hope he no meet Asiki, poor fellow, 'cause if so, who know? P'raps they knock him on head, or if they think him you, they make him prisoner and keep him quite long while before they let him go again."

"Well," said Alan, "he has gone of his own free will, so we have no responsibility in the matter, and I can't pretend that I am sorry to see the last of him, at any rate for the present. Let that poor beggar loose, there seems to have been enough flogging in this place, and after all he isn't much to blame."

Jeekie obeyed, apparently with much reluctance, and just then they saw one of their own people running towards the camp.

"Fraid he going to tell us Asiki come attack," said Jeekie, shaking his head. "Hope they give us time breakfast first."

"No doubt," answered Alan nervously, for he feared the result of that attack.

Then the man arrived breathless and began to gasp out his news, which filled Alan with delight and caused a look of utter amazement to appear upon the broad face of Jeekie. It was to the effect that he had climbed a high tree as he had been bidden to do, and from the top of that tree by the light of the first rays of the rising sun, miles away on the plain beyond the forest, he had seen the Asiki army in full retreat.

"Thank God!" exclaimed Alan.

"Yes, Major, but that very rum story. Jeekie can't swallow it all at once. Must send out see none of them left behind. P'raps they play trick, but if they really gone, 'spose it 'cause guns frightens them so much. Always think powder very great 'vention, especially when enemy hain't got none, and quite sure of it now. Jeekie very, very seldom wrong. Soon believe," he added with a burst of confidence, "that Jeekie never wrong at all. He look for truth so long that at last he find it always."

Something more than a month had gone by and Major and Mrs. Vernon, the latter fully restored to health and the most sweet and beautiful of brides, stood upon the steamship Benin, and as the sun sank, looked their last upon the coast of Western Africa.

"Yes, dear," Alan was saying to his wife, "from first to last it has been a very queer story, but I really think that our getting that Asiki gold after all was one of the queerest parts of it; also uncommonly convenient, as things have turned out."

"Namely that you have got a little pauper for a wife instead of a great heiress, Alan. But tell me again about the gold. I have had so much to think of during the last few days," and she blushed, "that I never quite took it all in."

"Well, love, there isn't much to tell. When that forwarding agent, Mr. Aston, knew that we were in the town, he came to me and said that he had about fifty cases full of something heavy, as he supposed samples of ore, addressed to me to your care in England which he was proposing to ship on by the Benin. I answered 'Yes, that was all right,' and did not undeceive him about their contents. Then I asked how they had arrived, and if he had not received a letter with them. He replied that one morning before the warehouse was open, some natives had brought them

down in a canoe, and dumped them at the door, telling the watchman that they had been paid to deliver them there by some other natives whom they met a long way up the river. Then they went away without leaving any letter or message. Well, I thanked Aston and paid his charges and there's an end of the matter. Those fifty-three cases are now in the hold invoiced as ore samples and, as I inspected them myself and am sure that they have not been tampered with, besides the value of the necklace the Asika gave me we've got £100,000 to begin our married life upon with something over for old Jeekie, and I daresay we shall do very well on that."

"Yes, Alan, very well indeed." Then she reflected a while, for the mention of Jeekie's name seemed to have made her thoughtful, and added, "Alan, what do you think became of Lord Aylward?"

"I am sure I don't know. Jeekie and I and some of the porters went to see the Old Calabar officials and made affidavits as to the circumstances of his disappearance. We couldn't do any more, could we?"

"No, Alan. But do you think that Jeekie quite understands the meaning of an oath? I mean it seems so strange that we should never have found the slightest trace of him, and, Alan, I don't know if you noticed it, but why did Jeekie appear that morning wearing Lord Aylward's socks and boots?"

"He ought to know all about oaths, he has heard enough of them in

Magistrates' Courts, but as regards the boots, I am sure I can't say, dear," answered Alan uneasily. "Here he comes, we will ask him," and he did.

"Sock and boot," replied Jeekie, with a surprised air, "why, Mrs. Major, if that good lord go mad and cut off into forest leaving them behind, of course I put them on, as they no more use to him, and I just burn my dirty old Asiki dress and sandal and got nothing to keep jigger out of toe. Don't you sit up here in this damp, cold, Mrs. Major, else you get more fever. You go down and dress dinner, which at half-past six to-night. I just come tell you that."

So Barbara went, leaving the other two talking about various matters, for they were alone together on the deck, all the passengers, of whom there were but few, having gone below.

The short African twilight had come, a kind of soft blue haze that made the ship look mysterious and unnatural. By degrees their conversation died away. They lapsed into a silence, which Alan was the first to break.

"What are you thinking of, Jeekie?" he asked nervously.

"Thinking of Asika, Major," he answered in a scared whisper. "Seem to me that she about somewhere, just as she use pop up in room in Gold House; seem to me I feel her all down my back, likewise in head wool, which

stand up."

"It's very odd, Jeekie," replied Alan, "but so do I."

"Well, Major, 'spect she thinking of us, specially of you, and just throw what she think at us, like boy throw stones at bird what fly away out of cage. Asika do all that, you know, she not quite human, full of plenty Bona devil, from gen'ration to gen'rations, amen! P'raps she just find out something what make her mad."

"What could she find out after all this time, Jeekie?"

"Oh, don't know. How I know? Jeekie can't guess. Find out you marry Miss Barbara, p'raps. Very sick that she lose you for this time, p'raps. Kill herself that she keep near you, p'raps, while she wait till you come round again, p'raps. Asika can do all these things if she like, Major."

"Stuff and rubbish," answered Alan uneasily, for Jeekie's suggestions were most uncomfortable, "I believe in none of your West Coast superstitions."

"Quite right, Major, nor don't I. Only you 'member, Major, what she show us there in Treasure-place--Mr. Haswell being buried, eh? Miss Barbara in tent, eh? t'other job what hasn't come off yet, eh? Oh! my golly! Major, just you look behind you and say you see nothing, please," and the eyes of Jeekie grew large as Maltese oranges, while with chattering

teeth he pointed over the bulwark of the vessel.

Alan turned and saw.

This was what he saw or seemed to see: The figure of the Asika in her robes and breastplate of gold, standing upon the air, just beyond the ship, as though on it she might set no foot. Her waving black hair hung about her shoulders, but the sharp wind did not seem to stir it nor did her white dress flutter, and on her beautiful face was stamped a look of awful rage and agony, the rage of betrayal, the agony of loss. In her right hand she held a knife, and from a wound in her breast the red blood ran down her golden corselet. She pointed to Jeekie with the knife, she opened her arms to Alan as though in unutterable longing, then slowly raised them upwards towards the fading glory of the sky above--and was gone.

Jeekie sat down upon the deck, mopping his brow with a red handkerchief, while Alan, who felt faint, clung to the bulwarks.

"Tell you, Major, that Asika can do all that kind of thing. Never know where you find her next. 'Spect she come to live with us in England and just call in now and again when it dark. Tell you, she very awkward customer, think p'raps you done better stop there and marry her. Well, she gone now, thank Heaven! seem to drop in sea and hope she stay

there."

"Jeekie," said Alan, recovering himself, "listen to me; this is all infernal nonsense; we have gone through a great deal and the nerves of both of us are overstrained. We think we saw what we did not see, and if you dare to say a single word of it to your mistress, I'll break your neck. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Major, think so. All 'fernal nonsense, nerves strained, didn't see what we see, and say nothing of what did see to Mrs. Major, if either do say anything, t'other one break his neck. That all right, quite understand. Anything else, Major?"

"Yes, Jeekie. We have had some wonderful adventures, but they are past and done with and the less we talk or even think about them the better, for there is a lot that would be rather difficult to explain, and that if explained would scarcely be believed."

"Yes, Major, for instance, very difficult explain Mrs. Barbara how Asika so fond of you if you only tell her, 'Go away, go away!' all the time, like old saint-gentleman to pretty girl in picture. P'raps she smell rat."

"Stop your ribald talk," said Alan in a stern voice. "It would be better if instead of making jokes you gave thanks to Providence for bringing both of us alive and well out of very dreadful dangers. Now I am going

to dress for dinner," and with an anxious glance seaward into the gathering darkness, he turned and went.

Jeekie stood alone upon the empty deck, wagging his great white head to and fro and soliloquizing thus:

"Wonder if Major see what under lady Asika's feet when she stand out there over nasty deep. Think not or he say something. That noble lord not look nice. No, private view for Jeekie only, free ticket and nothing to pay and me hope it no come back when I go to bed. Major know nothing about it, so he not see, but Jeekie know a lot. Hope that Aylward not write any letters home, or if he write, hope no one post them. Ghost bad enough, but murder, oh my!"

He paused a while, then went on:

"Jeekie do big sacrifice to Bonga when he reach Yarleys, get lamb in back kitchen at night, or if ghost come any more, calf in wood outside. Not steal it, pay for it himself. Then think Jeekie turn Cath'lic; confess his sins, they say them priest chaps not split, and after they got his sins, they tackle Asika and Bongsas too," and he uttered a series of penitent groans, turning slowly round and round to be sure that nothing was behind him.

Just then the full moon appeared out of a bank of clouds, and as it rose higher, flooding the world with light, Jeekie's spirits rose also.

"Asika never come in moonshine," he said, "that not the game, against rule, and after all, what Jeekie done bad? He very good fellow really. Aylward great villain, serve him jolly well right if Asika spiflicate him, that not Jeekie's fault. What Jeekie do, he do to save master and missus who he love. Care nothing for his self, ready to die any day. Keep it dark to save them too, 'cause they no like the story. If once they know, it always leave taste in mouth, same as bad oyster. Also Jeekie manage very well, take Major safe Asiki-land ('cause Little Bonsa make him), give him very interesting time there, get him plenty gold, nurse him when he sick, nobble Mungana, bring him out again, find Miss Barbara, catch hated rival and bamboozle all Asiki army, bring happy pair to coast and marry them, arrange first-class honeymoon on ship--Jeekie do all these things, and lots more he could tell, if he vain and not poor humble nigger."

Once more he paused a while, lost in the contemplation of his own modesty and virtues, then continued:

"This very ungrateful world. Major there, he not say, 'Thank you, Jeekie, Jeekie, you great, wonderful man. Brave Jeekie, artful Jeekie. Jeekie smart as paint who make all world believe just what he like, and one too many for Asika herself.' No, no, he say nothing like that. He say 'thank Prov'dence,' not 'Jeekie,' as though Prov'dence do all them

things. White folk think they clever, but great fools, really,
don't know nothing. Prov'dence all very well in his way--p'raps, but
Prov'dence not a patch on Jeekie.

"Hullo! moon get behind cloud and there second bell; think Jeekie go
down and wait dinner; lonely up here and sure Asika never stand 'lectric
light."