

despatched, and the others, throwing down their guns, had fled wounded into the forest.

Now shouting in jubilation, certain of the men began to drag away the dead bodies, while others collected the rifles, and the remainder, headed by Jeeki, 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 Jeeki, saying:

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

"No, no, my lord," answered Jeeki 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 and see Miss Barbara now. You come too, my Lord Bart, but perhaps 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 Jeeki some of the natives sprang on Aylward and tied his hands behind his back.

"Is Miss Barbara alive?" said Alan to Jeeki in an agonised 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 Jeeki. "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 advanced to the second, whereof Jeeki 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, Jeeki 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.

CHAPTER XXV.

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 Jeeki.

"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 Jeeki 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 was 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 shares. Still, I managed to borrow about £2,000 from that little lawyer out of the £5,000 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 awhile, 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 very 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, Changers-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 Changers 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 Changers 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 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 Jeeki thrust his big head through the tent opening and stared upwards.

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

"Seem to want air, Major, also look to see if clouds tumble. Believe particular big lie do that sometimes. Please go on, O good Lord, for Jeeki want his breakfast."

"As regards the execution of two of Miss Changers' 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 Jeeki, "or at 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 civilisation 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 Changers 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 Jeeki, "he say something true at last, by accident, I think, like pig what find pearl in muck-heap."

"Hold your tongue, Jeeki," said Alan. "I do not intend to kill you, Lord Aylward, or to do you any harm—"

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

"But I do intend that it shall be impossible that Miss Changers 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, Jeeki, and put a guard over him."

"Yes, Major, certainly, Major. Right turn, march, my lord! and quick, please, since poor, common Jeeki 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 slandered 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 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 Jeeki," 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 Jeeki did not move.

"Very well," repeated Alan.

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

"What do you mean, Jeeki?"

"Mean, Major, that Asikis 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 Jeeki 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 Jeeki, 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 Jeeki 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

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