

by swamps, mountains, and savages to which, so far as he knew, only one white man had ever penetrated.

Ah! that priestess! Somehow he shivered a little when he thought of her; it was as though her influence were over him already. Next moment he forgot her for a while, for they had come to the river brink and the litter was being carried on to a barge or ferry about which were gathered many armed men. Evidently the Gold House was well defended both by Nature and otherwise. The ferry was pulled or rowed across the river, he could not see which, and they passed through a gateway into the town and up a broad street where hundreds of people watched his advent.

Presently they were through the town and a wooden gate in an inner wall which surrounded the park where the cedars grew. At this spot Alan noted that everybody left them except the bearers and a few men whom he took to be priests. On they stole like ghosts beneath the mighty trees from whose limbs hung long festoons of moss. It was very dark there, only in places where a bough was broken the moonlight lay in gules upon the ground. Another wall and another gate, and suddenly the litter was set down. Its curtains opened, torches flashed, women appeared clad in white robes, veiled and mysterious, who bowed before him, then half led and half lifted him from his litter. He could feel their eyes on him through their veils, but he could not see their faces. He could see nothing except their naked, copper-coloured arms and long, thin hands stretched out to assist him.

Alan descended from the litter as slowly as he could, for somehow he shrank from the quaint, carved portal which he saw before him. He did not wish to pass it; its aspect filled him with reluctance. The women drew him on, their hands pulled at his arms, their shoulders pressed him from behind. Still he hung back, looking about him, till to his delight he saw the other litter arrive, and out of it emerge Jeeki, still wearing his sun helmet with its fringe of tattered mosquito curtain.

"Here we are, Major," he said in his cheerful voice, "turned up all right like bad ha'penny, but in odd situation."

"Very odd," echoed Alan. "Could you persuade these ladies to let go of me?"

"Don't know," answered Jeeki, "'spect they your wives; 'spect you have lots of wives here; don't get white man every day so make most of him. Best thing you do, kick out and teach them place. Rub nose in dirt at once to make them good—that first-class plan with female. I no like interfere in such delicate matter."

Terrified by this information Alan put out his strength and shook the women off him, whereon, without seeming to take any offence, they drew back to a little distance and began to bow, like automata. Then Jeeki addressed them in their own language, asking them what they meant by defiling this mighty lord, born of the Heavens, with the touch of their hands, whereat they went on bowing more humbly than before. Next he threw aside the cushions of the litter and finding the tin box containing Little Bonsa, held it before him in both hands and bade the women lead on.

The march began, a bewildering march. It was like a nightmare. Veiled women with torches before and behind, Jeeki stalking ahead carrying the battered tin box, long passages lined with gold, a vision of black water edged with a wide promenade and finally a large lamp-lit room whereof the roof was supported by gilded columns, and in the room couches of cushions, wooden stools inlaid with ivory, vessels of water, great basins made of some black, hard wood, and in the centre a block of stone that looked like an altar.

Jeeki set down the tin box upon the altar-like stone, then he turned to the crowd of women and said, "Bring food." Instantly they departed, closing the door of the room behind them.

"Now for a wash," said Alan, "unlace this confounded mask, Jeeki."

"Mustn't, Major, mustn't, Priests tell me that if those girls see you without mask, perhaps they kill them. Wait till they gone after supper, then take it off. No one allowed to see you without mask except Asika herself."

Alan stepped to one of the wooden bowls full of water which stood under a lamp, and gazed at his own reflection. The mask was gilded; the sham lips were painted red and round, the eye-holes were black lines.

"Why, it is horrible," he exclaimed, starting back. "I look like a devil crossed with Guy Fawkes. Do you mean to tell me that I have got to live in this thing?"

"Afraid so Major, upon all public occasion. At least they say that. You holy, not lawful see your sacred face."

Alan sat down on a stool and groaned at the appalling prospect suggested by this information.

"Cheer up, Major," said Jeeki sympathetically. "Perhaps manage hook it somehow, and meanwhile make best of bad business and have high old time. You see you want to come Asiki-land, though I tell you it rum place, and," he added with certitude and a circular sweep of his hand, "By Jingo! you here now, and I daresay they give you all the gold you want."

"What's the use of gold unless one can get away with it? What's the good of anything if we are prisoners among these devils?"

"Perhaps time show, Major. Hush! here comes dinner. You sit on stool and look holy."

The door opened and through it appeared four of the women bearing dishes, and cups full of drink, fashioned of gold like that which had been given to Alan in the litter. He noticed at once that they had removed their veils and outer garments, if indeed they were the same women, and now, like many other Africans, were but lightly clad in linen capes open in front that hung over their shoulders, short petticoats or skirts about their middles, and sandals. Such was their attire, which scanty as it might be was yet becoming enough and extremely rich.

Advancing to Alan, two of them knelt before him, holding out the trays upon which was the food. So they remained while he ate, like bronze statues, nor would they consent to change their posture even when he told them in their own language to be pleased to go away. On hearing themselves addressed in the Asiki tongue, they seemed a little, surprised, for their faces changed a little, but go they would not. The result was that Alan grew extremely nervous and ate and drank so rapidly that he scarcely noted what he was putting into his mouth. Then before Jeeki, to whom the women did not kneel, had half finished his dinner, Alan rose and walked away, whereon two of the women gathered up everything, including the dishes that had been given to Jeeki, and in spite of his remonstrances carried them out of the room.

"I say Major," said Jeeki, "if you gobble chop so fast you go ill inside. Poor nigger like me can't keep up with you, and sleep hungry to-night."

"I am sorry, Jeeki," said Alan with a little laugh, "but I can't eat off living tables, especially when they stare at one like that. You tell them to-morrow we will breakfast alone."

"Oh! yes, I will tell them, Major, but I don't know if they listen. They mean it great compliment and only think you not like those girls and send others."

Never has a city clerk dressed up for a fancy ball in the armour of a Norman knight been more glad to get rid of his costume than was Alan of that hateful head-dress. At length it was gone with his other garments and the much-needed wash accomplished, after which he clothed himself in a kind of linen gown which apparently had been provided for him, and lay down on one of the couches, placing his revolver by his side.

"Will those lamps burn all night, Jeeki?" he asked.

"Hope so, Major, as we haven't got no match. Not fond of dark in Gold House," answered Jeeki sleepily. Then he began to snore.

Alan slept soundly until the morning, when he awoke to find the light of the sun pouring into the room through the high-set latticed window-places.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ASIKA.

Alan rose and stretched himself and hearing him, Jeeki, who had a dog's faculty of instantly awaking from what seemed to be the deepest sleep sat up also.

"You rest well, Major? No dream, eh?" he asked curiously.

"Not very," answered Alan, "and I had a dream of a woman who stood over me and vanished away, as dreams do."

"Ah!" said Jeeki. "But where you find that new ring on finger, Major?"

Alan stared at his hand and started, for there, set on it, above that of Barbara's was the little circlet formed of twisted snakes which he had seen in his sleep.

Then it must have been true," he said in a low and rather frightened voice. "But how did she come and go?"

"Funny place, Gold House. I tell you that yesterday, Major. People come up through hole, like rats. Never quite sure you alone in Gold House."

Scarcely had Alan finished his toilet, and donned the Arab-looking linen robe over his own fragmentary flannels, and above it the hateful mask which Jeeki insisted he must wear, when there came a knocking on the door. Motioning to Alan to take his

seat upon the stool, Jeeki undid the bars, and as before, women appeared with food, and waited while they ate, which this time, having overcome his nervousness, Alan did more than leisurely. Their meal done, one of the women asked Jeeki, for, to his master they did not seem to dare to speak, whether the white lord did not wish to walk in the garden. Without waiting for an answer, she led him to the end of the large room, and unbarring another door, that they had not noticed, revealed a passage, beyond which appeared trees and flowers. Then she and her companions went away with the fragments of the meal.

"Come on," said Alan, taking up the box containing Little Bonsa, which he did not dare to leave behind, "and let us get into the air."

When they returned to the room, which had been swept and garnished in their absence, no sooner had they entered it than the door opened and through it came long lines of Asiki priests, each of whom staggered beneath the weight of a hide bag that he bore upon his shoulder, which bags they piled up about the stone altar. Then, as though at some signal, each priest opened the mouth of his bag, and Alan saw that they were filled with gold, gold in dust, gold in nuggets, gold in vessels perfect or broken; more gold than Alan had ever seen before.

"Why do they bring all this stuff here?" he asked and Jeeki translated his question.

"It is an offering to the lord of Little Bonsa," answered the head priest, bowing, "a gift from the Asika. The heaven-born white man sent a word by his Ogula messengers that he desired gold. Here is the gold that he desired."

Alan stared at the treasure which, after all, was what he had come to seek. If only he had it safe in England, he would be a rich man and his troubles ended. But how could he get it to England? Here it was worthless as mud.

"I thank the Asika," he said. "I ask for porters to bear her gift back to my own country, since it is too heavy for me and my servant to carry alone."

At these words the priests smiled a little, then said that the Asika desired to see the white lord and to receive from him Little Bonsa in return for the gold, and that he could proffer his request to her.

"Good," replied Alan, "lead me to the Asika."

Then they started, Alan bearing the box containing Little Bonsa, and Jeeki following after him. They went down passages and through sundry doors till at length they came to a long and narrow hall that seemed to be lined with plates of gold. At the end of this hall was a large chair of black wood and ivory placed upon a dais, and sitting in this chair, with the light pouring on her from some opening above, was the woman of Alan's dream, beautiful to look on in her crown and glittering garments. Upon a stool at the foot of the dais, sat a man, a handsome and melancholy man. His hair was tied behind his head in a pigtail and gilded; his face was painted red, white and yellow; he wore ropes of bright-coloured stones about his neck, middle, arms and ankles, and held a kind of sceptre in his hand.

"Who is that creature?" asked Alan over his shoulder to Jeeki; "the Court fool?"

"That husband of Asika, Major. He not fool, very big gun, but look a little low now because his time soon up. Come on, Major. Asika beckon us. Get on stomach and crawl; that custom here," he added, going down on to his hands and knees, as did all the priests who followed them.

"I'll see her hanged first," answered Alan in English.

Then, accompanied by the creeping Jeeki and the train of prostrate priests, he marched up the long hall to the edge of the dais and there stood still and bowed to the woman in the chair.

"Greeting, White Man," she said in a low voice when she had studied him for a little while. "Do you understand my tongue?"

"A little," he answered in Asiki, "moreover, my servant here knows it well and can translate."

"I am glad," she said. "Tell me then, in your country do not people go on to their knee before their queen, and if not, how do they greet her?"

"No," answered Alan, with the help of Jeeki. "They greet her by raising their head-dress, or kissing her hand."

"Ah!" she said. "Well, you have no head-dress, so kiss my hand," and she stretched it out towards him, at the same time prodding the man whom Jeeki had said was her husband, in the back with her foot, apparently to make him get out of the way.

Not knowing what else to do, Alan stepped on to the dais, the man scowling at him as he passed. Then he halted and said:

"How can I kiss your hand through this mask, Asika?"

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