

wind, and added, "But first fire reeds and make it hot for Bonsa crowd."

This was a good suggestion, and one on which they acted without delay. Taking red embers, they blew them to a flame and lit torches, which they applied to the reeds over a width of several hundred yards. The strong northward wind soon did the rest; indeed within a quarter of an hour a vast sheet of flame twenty or thirty feet in height was rushing towards the Asiki columns. Then they began their advance along the river bank, running at a steady trot, for here the ground was open.

All that day they ran, pausing at intervals to get their breath, and at night rested, because they must. When the light came upon the following morning they looked back from a little hill and saw the outposts of the Asiki advancing not a mile behind. Doubtless some of the army had been burned, but the rest, guessing their route, had forced a way through the reeds and cut across country. So they began to run again harder than before, and kept their lead during the morning; but when afternoon came the Asiki gained on them. Now they were breasting a long rise, the river running in the cleft beneath, and Jeeki, who seemed to be absolutely untiring, held Alan by the hand, Fahni following close behind. Two of their men had fallen down and been abandoned, and the rest straggled.

"No go, Jeeki," gasped Alan, "they will catch us at the top of the hill."

"Never say die, Major, never say die," puffed Jeeki, "they get blown too, and who know what other side of hill?"

Somehow they struggled to the crest, and behold! there beneath them was a great army of men.

"Ogula!" yelled Jeeki, "Ogula! Just what I tell you, Major, who know what other side of any hill?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A MEETING IN THE FOREST.

In five minutes more they were among the Ogula, who, having recognised 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.

Now Alan, and Fahni also, hoped that the pursuit was abandoned, but again Jeeki 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 Asika 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 Asika-land, though the business was one that did not please them. These Asika bearers, it seemed, 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 Jeeki if he had any tidings of his mother, who had been their first messenger.

"No, Major," he answered, gloomily, "can't learn anything of my Ma, don't know where she is. Ogula camp no place for old girl if they short of chop. But p'raps she never get there; I nose round and find out."

Apparently Jeeki 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 recognised the vociferations of Jeeki. 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 Jeeki, 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 Jeeki. "My Ma inside that black villain, that all. Dirty cannibal got digestion of one ostrich and eat her up with his mates, all except one who not like her taste

and tell me. They catch poor old lady asleep by the road and stop and lunch at once when Asika 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."

"Jeeki, Jeeki," 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 Ma; 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 tomorrow."

So they were separated, but, as it chanced, that case never came on, for next morning this Ogula was killed in the fighting with two of his companions, while the others involved in the charge kept themselves out of sight. Whether Jeeki'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 Jeeki had provided for him, and ran out to find from the position of the moon that dawn was near.

"Come on, Major," said Jeeki; "the 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 Jeeki 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 the world only *one* Jeeki!"

"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 Asika 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, Jeeki went off to inspect these fallen soldiers, armed with a large battle-axe. 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 Jeeki returned with over twenty heavy gold rings, torques and bracelets, slung over his shoulder.

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

"Off poor chaps that peg out just now, Major. Remember Asika soldiers nearly always wear these things and that they no more use to them now. But if ever he get out of this Jeeki 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 them if they 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 rear-guard actions indeed, every day the Asiki sent messengers renewing their offers of peace on the sole condition of the surrender of himself and Jeeki. At last one evening they came to that very 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 tomorrow 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 must 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 Jeeki 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 on 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. Jeeki 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, Jeeki 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 Jeeki, 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 walk. Come on, Major, river shallow just here. I think this happen and try it before dark. You just follow Jeeki, 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 Jeeki 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.

"Jeeki," 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 Fahni not lie after all," went on Jeeki; "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 farther on they caught sight of a figure engaged in stalking a buck among the trees, or so they judged from his cautious movements.

"White man!" said Jeeki, 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-coloured 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 Jeeki, who was immediately behind him.

Next instant, with a spring like that of a tiger, Jeeki 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 Jeeki. "What for you shoot through wool of respectable nigger, Sir Robert Aylward, Bart.? Now I throttle you, you dirty pig-swine. No magistrates' court here in Dwarf Forest," and he began to suit the action to the word.

"Let him go, Jeeki. 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 Jeeki as he obeyed.

(Continued on page 22)