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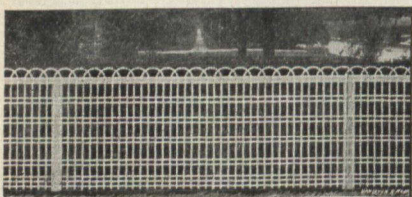
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truth he never expected to hear of them any more.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ALAN FALLS ILL.

After the departure of the messengers a deep melancholy fell upon Alan, who was sure that he had now no further hope of communicating with the outside world. Bitterly did he reproach himself for his folly in having ever journeyed to this hateful place in order to secure—what? About £100,000 worth of gold which, of course, he never would secure, as it would certainly vanish or be stolen on its way to the coast. For this gold he had become involved in a dreadful complication which would cost him much misery and, sooner or later, life itself, since he could not marry that beautiful savage, Asika, and if he refused her she would certainly kill him in her outraged pride and fury.

Day by day she sent for him, and when he came, assumed a new character, that of a woman humbled by a sense of her own ignorance, which she was anxious to amend. So he must play the role of tutor to her, telling her of civilised peoples, their laws, customs, and religions, and instructing her how to write and read. She listened and learned submissively enough, but all the while Alan felt as one might who is called upon to teach tricks to a drugged panther. The drug in this case was her passion for him, which appeared to be very genuine. But when it passed off, or when he was obliged to refuse her, what, he wondered, would happen then?

Anxiety and confinement told on him far more than all the hardships of his journey. His health ran down, he began to fall ill. Then, as bad luck would have it, walking in that damp, unhealthy garden out of which he might not stray, he contracted the germ of some kind of fever which in autumn was very common in this poisonous climate. Three days later he became delirious, and for a week after that hung between life and death. Well was it for him that his medicine chest still remained intact, and that, recognising his own symptoms before his head gave way, he was able to instruct Jeeki what drugs to give him at the different stages of the disease.

For the rest his memories of that dreadful illness always remained very vague. He had visions of Jeeki and of a robed woman whom he knew to be the Asika, bending over him continually. Also it seemed to him that from time to time he was talking with Barbara, which even then he knew must be absurd, for how could they talk across thousands of miles of land and sea?

At length his mind cleared suddenly, and he awoke as from a nightmare to find himself lying in the hall or room where he had always been, feeling quite cool and without pain, but so weak that it was an effort to him to lift his hand. He stared about him, and was astonished to see the white head of Jeeki rolling uneasily to and fro upon the cushions of another bed near by.

"Jeeki," he said, "are you ill, too, Jeeki?"

At the sound of that voice his retainer started up violently.

"What, Major, you awake?" he said. "Then thanks be to all gods, white and black, yes, and yellow, too, for I thought your goose cooked. No, no, Major, I not ill, only Asika say so. You go to bed, so she make me go to bed. You get worse, she treat me cruel; you seem better, she stuff me with food till I burst. All because you tell her that you and I die same day. Oh, Lord! poor Jeeki think his end very near just now, for he know quite well that she not let him breathe ten minutes after you peg out. Jeeki never pray so hard

for anyone before as he pray this week for you, and by Jingo! I think he do the trick, he and that medicine stuff, which make him feel very bad in stomach," and he groaned as under the weight of his many miseries.

Weak as he was, Alan began to laugh, and that laugh seemed to do him more good than anything that he could remember, for after it he was sure that he would recover.

Just then an agonised whisper reached him from Jeeki.

"Look out!" is said, "here come Asika. Go sleep and seem better, Major, please, or I catch it hot."

So Alan almost shut his eyes and lay still. In another moment she was standing over him, and he noticed that her hair was dishevelled and her eyes were red as though with weeping. She scanned him intently for a little while, then passed round to where Jeeki lay and appeared to pinch his ear so hard that he wriggled and uttered a stifled groan.

"How is your lord, dog?" she whispered.

"Better, O Asika, I think that last medicine do us good, though it make me very sick inside. Just now he spoke to me and said that he hoped your heart was not sad because of him, and that all this time in his dreams he had seen and thought of nobody but you, O Asika."

"Did he?" asked that lady, becoming intensely interested. "Then tell me, dog, why is he ever calling upon one Bar-bar-a? Surely that is a woman's name?"

"Yes, O Asika, that is the name of his mother, also of one of his sisters, whom, after you, he loves best of anyone in the whole world. When you are here he talks of them, but when you are not here he talks of no one but you. Although he is so sick, he remembers white man's custom which tells him that it is very wrong to say sweet things to lady's face till he is quite married to her. After that they say them always."

She looked at him suspiciously, and muttering, "Here it is otherwise. For your own sake, man, I trust that you do not lie," left him, and drawing a stool up beside Alan's bed, sat herself down and examined him carefully, touching his face and hands with her long, thin fingers. Then noting how white and wasted he was, of a sudden she began to weep, saying between her sobs:

"Oh! if you should die, Vernoon, I will die also, and be born again, not as Asika, as I have been for so many generations, but as a white woman, that I may be with you. Only first," she added, setting her teeth, "I will sacrifice every wizard in this land, for they have brought the sickness upon you by their magic, and I will burn Bonsa-Town and cast its gods to melt in the flames, and the Mungana with them. And then amid their ashes I will let out my life," and again she began to weep very piteously and to call him by endearing names and pray him that he would not die.

Now Alan thought it time to wake up. He opened his eyes, stared at her vacantly, and asked if it were raining, which indeed it might have been, for her big tears were falling on his face. She uttered a gasp of joy. "No, no," she answered, "the weather is very fine. It is I—I who have rained, because I thought you die." She wiped his forehead with the soft linen of her robe, then went on, "But you will not die; say that you will live, say that you will live for me, Vernoon."

"I hope that I shall live," he answered. "I am hungry, please give me some food."

Next instant there was a tumult near by, and when Alan looked up again it was to see Jeeki, very lightly clad, flying through the door.

(To be continued.)



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