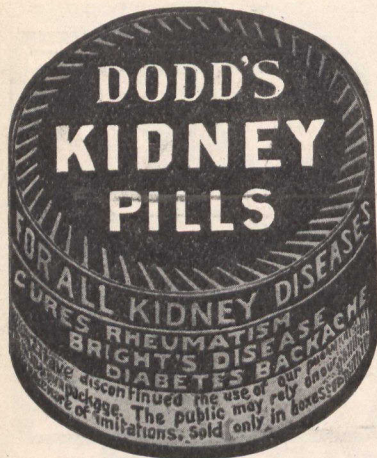




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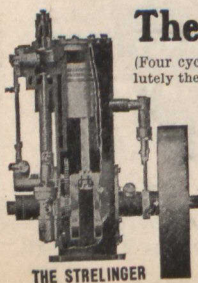
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Asika? 'Bring back Vernoon, or perish. I care for nothing else, bring back Vernoon to be my husband.'

"Good," said Owl No. 1, "within the half of an hour Vernoon shall be ready for you."

"Good," answered Owl No. 2, "within half an hour eight of us will be without the east face of your camp to receive him."

"Silently?"

"Silently, my brother in Bonsa. If he cries out we will gag him. Fear not, none shall know your part in this matter."

"Good, my brother in Bonsa. By the way, how is Big Bonsa? I fear that the white man, Vernoon, hurt him very much, and that is really why I give him up—because of his sacrilege."

"When I left the god was very sick and all the people mourned, but doubtless he is immortal."

"Doubtless he is immortal, my brother, a little hard magic in his stomach—if he has one—cannot hurt him. Farewell, dear brother in Bonsa. I wish that I were you to get the great reward that the Asika will give to you. Farewell, farewell."

Then the two owls flitted apart again, hooting as they went, till they came to their respective camps.

Jeeki was in the tent performing a strange toilet upon the sleeping Aylward by the light of a single candle. From his pouch he produced the mask of linen painted with gold that Alan used to be forced to wear, and tied it securely over Aylward's face, murmuring:

"You always love gold, my Lord Aylward, and Jeeki promise you see plenty of it now."

Then he proceeded to remove his coat, his waistcoat, his socks, and his boots, and to replace these articles of European attire by his own worn Asiki sandals and his own dirty Asiki robe.

"There," he said, "think that do," and he studied him by the light of the candle. "Same height, same colour hair, same dirty old clothes, and as Asiki never see Major's face because he always wear mask in public, like as two peas on shovel. Oh, my! Jeeki clever chap, Jeeki devilish clever chap! But when Asika pull off that mask to give him true lover kiss, oh my! Wonder what happen then? Think whole of Bonsa-Town bust up; think big waterfall run backwards; think she not quite pleased; think my good lord find himself in false position; think Jeeki glad to be on coast; think he no go back to Bonsa-Town no more. Oh my aunt! no, he stop in England and go church twice on Sunday," and pressing his big hands on the pit of his stomach he rocked and rolled in silent laughter.

Then an owl hooted again immediately beneath the fence, and Jeeki, blowing out the candle, opened the flap of the tent and tapped the head porter, who stood outside, on the shoulder. He crept in, and between them they lifted the senseless Aylward and bore him to the V-shaped entrance of the Boma, which was immediately opposite to the tent, and oddly enough, half open. Here the two other porters, with whom Jeeki had performed some ceremony, chanced to be on guard, the rest of their company being stationed at a distance. Jeeki and the head porter went through the gap like men carrying a corpse to midnight burial, and presently in the darkness without two owls began to hoot.

Now Aylward was laid upon a litter that had been prepared, and eight white-robed Asiki bearers stared at his gold mask in the faint starlight.

"I suppose he is not dead, brother," said No. 2 owl doubtfully.

"Nay, brother," said No. 1 owl, "feel his heart and his pulse. Not dead, only drunk. He will wake up by

daylight, by which time you should be far upon your way. Be careful that he does not escape you, brother, for as you know, he is very strong and cunning; and say to the Asika that Jeeki, her servant, makes his reverence to her, and hopes that she will have many, many happy years with the husband that he sends her; also that she will remember him whom she called 'Black Dog,' in her prayers to the gods and spirits of our people."

"It shall be done, brother, but why do you not return with us?"

"Because, brother, I have ties across the Black Water, dear children, one almost black, one almost white, and one white spotted with black, whom I love so much that I cannot leave them. Farewell, brethren, the blessings of the Bonsas be on you and may you grow fat and prosper in the love and favour of our lady, the Asika."

"Farewell," they murmured in answer. "Good fortune be your bed-fellow."

Another minute and they had lifted up the litter and vanished at a swinging trot into the shadow of the trees. Jeeki returned to the camp and ordered the three men to restop the gateway with thorns, muttering in their ears:

"Remember, brethren, one word of this and you die, all of you, as those die who break the oath."

"Have we not sworn?" they whispered as they went back to their posts.

Jeeki stood a while in front of the empty tent, and if any had been there to note him, they might have seen a shadow as of compunction, creep over his powerful black face.

"When he wake up he won't know where he are," he reflected, "and when he get to Bonsa-Town he'll wonder where he is, and when he meet Asika—! Well, he very big blackguard; try to murder Major whom Jeeki nurse as baby, the only thing that Jeeki care for—except Jeeki; try to make love to Miss Barbara against her will when he catch her alone in forest, which not playing game. Jeeki self not such big blackguard as that dirt-born noble lord; Jeeki never murder no one—not quite; Jeeki never make love to girl what not want him—no need; so many what do that he have to shove them off, like good Christian man. Mrs. Jeeki see to that while she live. Also better that white man go call on Asika than Major and Missy Barbara and all porters and Jeeki, specially Jeeki—get throat cut. No, no, Jeeki nothing to be ashamed of, Jeeki do good day's work, though Jeeki keep it tight as wax since white folk such silly people, and when Major in a rage he very nasty customer and see everything upside down. Now Jeeki quite tired, go say his prayers and have nap. No, think not in tent, though very comfortable, and Major might wake up, poke his nose in there and if he see black face instead of white one, ask ugly questions, which, if Jeeki half asleep he no able to answer. Still he just arrange things a little so they look all right."

(To be continued.)

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