

ALLAN'S WIFE

CHAPTER I *EARLY DAYS*

It may be remembered that in the last pages of his diary, written just before his death, Allan Quatermain makes allusion to his long dead wife, stating that he has written of her fully elsewhere.

When his death was known, his papers were handed to myself as his literary executor. Among them I found two manuscripts, of which the following is one. The other is simply a record of events wherein Mr. Quatermain was not personally concerned — a Zulu novel, the story of which was told to him by the hero many years after the tragedy had occurred. But with this we have nothing to do at present.

I have often thought (Mr. Quatermain's manuscript begins) that I would set down on paper the events connected with my marriage, and the loss of my most dear wife. Many years have now passed since that event, and to some extent time has softened the old grief, though Heaven knows it is still keen enough. On two or three occasions I have even begun the record. Once I gave it up because the writing of it depressed me beyond bearing, once because I was suddenly called away upon a journey, and the third time because a Kaffir boy found my manuscript convenient for lighting the kitchen fire.

But now that I am at leisure here in England, I will make a fourth attempt. If I succeed, the story may serve to interest some one in after years when I am dead and gone; before that I should not wish it to be published. It is a wild tale enough, and suggests some curious reflections.

I am the son of a missionary. My father was originally curate in charge of a small parish in Oxfordshire. He had already been some years married to my dear mother when he went there, and he had four children, of whom I was the youngest. I remember faintly the place where we lived. It was an ancient long grey house, facing the road. There was a very large tree of some sort in the garden. It was hollow, and we children used to play about inside of it, and knock knots of wood from the rough bark. We all slept in a kind of attic, and my mother always came and kissed us when we were in bed. I used to wake up and see her bending over me, a candle in her hand. There was a curious kind of pole projecting from the wall over my bed. Once I was dreadfully frightened because my eldest brother made me hang to it by my hands. That is all I remember about our old home. It has been pulled down long ago, or I would journey there to see it.

A little further down the road was a large house with big iron gates to it, and on the top of the gate pillars sat two stone lions, which were so hideous that I was afraid of them. Perhaps this sentiment was prophetic. One could see the house by peeping through the bars of the gates. It was a gloomy-looking place, with a tall yew hedge round it; but in the summer-time some flowers grew about the sun-dial in the grass plat. This house was called the Hall, and Squire Carson lived there. One Christmas — it must have been the Christmas before my father emigrated, or I should not remember it — we children went to a Christmas-tree festivity at the Hall. There was a great party there, and footmen wearing red waistcoats stood at the door. In the dining-room, which was panelled with black oak, was the Christmas-tree. Squire Carson stood in front of it. He was a tall, dark man, very quiet in his manners, and he wore a bunch of seals on his waistcoat. We used to think him old, but as a matter of fact he was then not more than forty. He had been, as I afterwards learned, a great traveller in his youth, and some six or seven years before this date he married a lady who was half a Spaniard — a papist, my father called her. I can remember her well. She was small and very pretty, with a rounded figure, large black eyes, and glittering teeth. She spoke English with a

curious accent. I suppose that I must have been a funny child to look at, and I know that my hair stood up on my head then as it does now, for I still have a sketch of myself that my mother made of me, in which this peculiarity is strongly marked. On this occasion of the Christmas-tree I remember that Mrs. Carson turned to a tall, foreign-looking gentleman who stood beside her, and, tapping him affectionately on the shoulder with her gold eye-glasses, said —

"Look, cousin — look at that droll little boy with the big brown eyes; his hair is like a — what you call him? — scrubbing-brush. Oh, what a droll little boy!"

The tall gentleman pulled at his moustache, and, taking Mrs. Carson's hand in his, began to smooth my hair down with it till I heard her whisper —

"Leave go my hand, cousin. Thomas is looking like — like the thunderstorm."

Thomas was the name of Mr. Carson, her husband.

After that I hid myself as well as I could behind a chair, for I was shy, and watched little Stella Carson, who was the squire's only child, giving the children presents off the tree. She was dressed as Father Christmas, with some soft white stuff round her lovely little face, and she had large dark eyes, which I thought more beautiful than anything I had ever seen. At last it came to my turn to receive a present — oddly enough, considered in the light of future events, it was a large monkey. Stella reached it down from one of the lower boughs of the tree and handed it to me, saying —

"Dat is my Christmas present to you, little Allan Quatermain."

As she did so her sleeve, which was covered with cotton wool, spangled over with something that shone, touched one of the tapers and caught fire — how I do not know — and the flame ran up her arm towards her throat. She stood quite still. I suppose that she was paralysed with fear; and the ladies who were near screamed very loud, but did nothing. Then some impulse seized me — perhaps instinct would be a better word to

use, considering my age. I threw myself upon the child, and, beating at the fire with my hands, mercifully succeeded in extinguishing it before it really got hold. My wrists were so badly scorched that they had to be wrapped up in wool for a long time afterwards, but with the exception of a single burn upon her throat, little Stella Carson was not much hurt.

This is all that I remember about the Christmas-tree at the Hall. What happened afterwards is lost to me, but to this day in my sleep I sometimes see little Stella's sweet face and the stare of terror in her dark eyes as the fire ran up her arm. This, however, is not wonderful, for I had, humanly speaking, saved the life of her who was destined to be my wife.

The next event which I can recall dearly is that my mother and three brothers all fell ill of fever, owing, as I afterwards learned, to the poisoning of our well by some evil-minded person, who threw a dead sheep into it.

It must have been while they were ill that Squire Carson came one day to the vicarage. The weather was still cold, for there was a fire in the study, and I sat before the fire writing letters on a piece of paper with a pencil, while my father walked up and down the room talking to himself. Afterwards I knew that he was praying for the lives of his wife and children. Presently a servant came to the door and said that some one wanted to see him.

"It is the squire, sir," said the maid, "and he says he particularly wishes to see you."

"Very well," answered my father, wearily, and presently Squire Carson came in. His face was white and haggard, and his eyes shone so fiercely that I was afraid of him.

"Forgive me for intruding on you at such a time, Quatermain," he said, in a hoarse voice, "but to-morrow I leave this place for ever, and I wish to speak to you before I go — indeed, I must speak to you."

"Shall I send Allan away?" said my father, pointing to me.

"No; let him bide. He will not understand." Nor, indeed, did I at the time, but I remembered every word, and in after years their meaning grew on me.

"First tell me," he went on, "how are they?" and he pointed upwards with his thumb.

"My wife and two of the boys are beyond hope," my father answered, with a groan. "I do not know how it will go with the third. The Lord's will be done!"

"The Lord's will be done," the squire echoed, solemnly. "And now, Quatermain, listen — my wife's gone."

"Gone!" my father answered. "Who with?"

"With that foreign cousin of hers. It seems from a letter she left that she always cared for him, not for me. She married me because she thought me a rich English milord. Now she has run through my property, or most of it, and gone. I don't know where. Luckily, she did not care to encumber her new career with the child; Stella is left to me."

"That is what comes of marrying a papist, Carson," said my father. That was his fault; he was as good and charitable a man as ever lived, but he was bigoted. "What are you going to do — follow her?"

He laughed bitterly in answer.

"Follow her!" he said; "why should I follow her? If I met her I might kill her or him, or both of them, because of the disgrace they have brought upon my child's name. No, I never want to look upon her face again. I trusted her, I tell you, and she has betrayed me. Let her go and find her fate. But I am going too. I am weary of my life."

"Surely, Carson, surely," said my father, "you do not mean —"

"No, no; not that. Death comes soon enough. But I will leave this civilized world which is a lie. We will go right away into the wilds, I and my child, and hide our shame. Where? I