

CHAPTER XIII

RICA TOWN

As a matter of fact we did not leave Beza Town till twenty-four hours later than had been arranged, since it took some time for old Babemba, who was to be in charge of it, to collect and provision our escort of five hundred men.

Here, I may mention, that when we got back to our huts we found the two Mazitu bearers, Tom and Jerry, eating a hearty meal, but looking rather tired. It appeared that in order to get rid of their favourable evidence, the ceased witch-doctor, Imbozwi, who for some reason or other had feared to kill them, caused them to be marched off to a distant part of the land where they were imprisoned. On the arrival of the news of the fall and death of Imbozwi and his subordinates, they were set at liberty, and at once returned to us at Beza Town.

Of course it became necessary to explain to our servants what we were about to do. When they understood the nature of our proposed expedition they shook their heads, and when they learned that we had promised to leave our guns behind us, they were speechless with amazement.

"Kransick! Kransick!" which means "ill in the skull," or "mad,"

exclaimed Hans to the others as he tapped his forehead significantly.

"They have caught it from Dogeetah, one who lives on insects which he

entangles in a net, and carries no gun to kill game. Well, I knew they would."

The hunters nodded in assent, and Sammy lifted his arms to Heaven as though in prayer. Only Mavovo seemed indifferent. Then came the question of which of them was to accompany us.

"So far as I am concerned that is soon settled," said Mavovo. "I go with my father, Macumazana, seeing that even without a gun I am still strong and can fight as my male ancestors fought with a spear."

"And I, too, go with the Baas Quatermain," grunted Hans, "seeing that even without a gun I am cunning, as my female ancestors were before me."

"Except when you take medicine, Spotted Snake, and lose yourself in the mist of sleep," mocked one of the Zulus. "Does that fine bedstead which the king sent you go with you?"

"No, son of a fool!" answered Hans. "I'll lend it to you who do not understand that there is more wisdom within me when I am asleep than there is in you when you are awake."

It remained to be decided who the third man should be. As neither of Brother John's two servants, who had accompanied him on his cross-country journey, was suitable, one being ill and the other afraid,

Stephen suggested Sammy as the man, chiefly because he could cook.

"No, Mr. Somers, no," said Sammy, with earnestness. "At this proposal I draw the thick rope. To ask one who can cook to visit a land where he will be cooked, is to seethe the offspring in its parent's milk."

So we gave him up, and after some discussion fixed upon Jerry, a smart and plucky fellow, who was quite willing to accompany us. The rest of that day we spent in making our preparations which, if simple, required a good deal of thought. To my annoyance, at the time I wanted to find Hans to help me, he was not forthcoming. When at length he appeared I asked him where he had been. He answered, to cut himself a stick in the forest, as he understood we should have to walk a long way. Also he showed me the stick, a long, thick staff of a hard and beautiful kind of bamboo which grows in Mazitu-land.

"What do you want that clumsy thing for," I said, "when there are plenty of sticks about?"

"New journey, new stick! Baas. Also this kind of wood is full of air and might help me to float if we are upset into the water."

"What an idea!" I exclaimed, and dismissed the matter from my mind.

At dawn, on the following day, we started, Stephen and I riding on the two donkeys, which were now fat and lusty, and Brother John upon his

white ox, a most docile beast that was quite attached to him. All the hunters, fully armed, came with us to the borders of the Mazitu country, where they were to await our return in company with the Mazitu regiment. The king himself went with us to the west gate of the town, where he bade us all, and especially Brother John, an affectionate farewell. Moreover, he sent for Komba and his attendants, and again swore to him that if any harm happened to us, he would not rest till he had found a way to destroy the Pongo, root and branch.

"Have no fear," answered the cold Komba, "in our holy town of Rica we do not tie innocent guests to stakes to be shot to death with arrows."

The repartee, which was undoubtedly neat, irritated Bausi, who was not fond of allusions to this subject.

"If the white men are so safe, why do you not let them take their guns with them?" he asked, somewhat illogically.

"If we meant evil, King, would their guns help them, they being but few among so many. For instance, could we not steal them, as you did when you plotted the murder of these white lords. It is a law among the Pongo that no such magic weapon shall be allowed to enter their land."

"Why?" I asked, to change the conversation, for I saw that Bausi was growing very wrath and feared complications.

"Because, my lord Macumazana, there is a prophecy among us that when a gun is fired in Pongo-land, its gods will desert us, and the Motombo, who is their priest, will die. That saying is very old, but until a little while ago none knew what it meant, since it spoke of 'a hollow spear that smoked,' and such a weapon was not known to us."

"Indeed," I said, mourning within myself that we should not be in a position to bring about the fulfilment of that prophecy, which, as Hans said, shaking his head sadly, "was a great pity, a very great pity!"

Three days' march over country that gradually sloped downwards from the high tableland on which stood Beza Town, brought us to the lake called Kirua, a word which, I believe, means The Place of the Island. Of the lake itself we could see nothing, because of the dense brake of tall reeds which grew out into the shallow water for quite a mile from the shore and was only pierced here and there with paths made by the hippopotami when they came to the mainland at night to feed. From a high mound which looked exactly like a tumulus and, for aught I know, may have been one, however, the blue waters beyond were visible, and in the far distance what, looked at through glasses, appeared to be a tree-clad mountain top. I asked Komba what it might be, and he answered that it was the Home of the gods in Pongo-land.

"What gods?" I asked again, whereon he replied like a black Herodotus, that of these it was not lawful to speak.

I have rarely met anyone more difficult to pump than that frigid and un-African Komba.

On the top of this mound we planted the Union Jack, fixed to the tallest pole that we could find. Komba asked suspiciously why we did so, and as I was determined to show this unsympathetic person that there were others as unpumpable as himself, I replied that it was the god of our tribe, which we set up there to be worshipped, and that anyone who tried to insult or injure it, would certainly die, as the witch-doctor, Imbozwi, and his children had found out. For once Komba seemed a little impressed, and even bowed to the bunting as he passed by.

What I did not inform him was that we had set the flag there to be a sign and a beacon to us in case we should ever be forced to find our way back to this place unguided and in a hurry. As a matter of fact, this piece of forethought, which oddly enough originated with the most reckless of our party, Stephen, proved our salvation, as I shall tell later on. At the foot of the mound we set our camp for the night, the Mazitu soldiers under Babemba, who did not mind mosquitoes, making theirs nearer to the lake, just opposite to where a wide hippopotamus lane pierced the reeds, leaving a little canal of clear water.

I asked Komba when and how we were to cross the lake. He said that we must start at dawn on the following morning when, at this time of the year, the wind generally blew off shore, and that if the weather were favourable, we should reach the Pongo town of Rica by nightfall. As to

how we were to do this, he would show me if I cared to follow him. I nodded, and he led me four or five hundred yards along the edge of the reeds in a southerly direction.

As we went, two things happened. The first of these was that a very large, black rhinoceros, which was sleeping in some bushes, suddenly got our wind and, after the fashion of these beasts, charged down on us from about fifty yards away. Now I was carrying a heavy, single-barrelled rifle, for as yet we and our weapons were not parted. On came the rhinoceros, and Komba, small blame to him for he only had a spear, started to run. I cocked the rifle and waited my chance.

When it was not more than fifteen paces away the rhinoceros threw up its head, at which, of course, it was useless to fire because of the horn, and I let drive at the throat. The bullet hit it fair, and I suppose penetrated to the heart. At any rate, it rolled over and over like a shot rabbit, and with a single stretch of its limbs, expired almost at my feet.

Komba was much impressed. He returned; he stared at the dead rhinoceros and at the hole in its throat; he stared at me; he stared at the still smoking rifle.

"The great beast of the plains killed with a noise!" he muttered.

"Killed in an instant by this little monkey of a white man" (I thanked him for that and made a note of it) "and his magic. Oh! the Motombo was

wise when he commanded----" and with an effort he stopped.

"Well, friend, what is the matter?" I asked. "You see there was no need for you to run. If you had stepped behind me you would have been as safe as you are now--after running."

"It is so, lord Macumazana, but the thing is strange to me. Forgive me if I do not understand."

"Oh! I forgive you, my lord Kalubi--that is--to be. It is clear that you have a good deal to learn in Pongo-land."

"Yes, my lord Macumazana, and so perhaps have you," he replied dryly, having by this time recovered his nerve and sarcastic powers.

Then after telling Mavovo, who appeared mysteriously at the sound of the shot--I think he was stalking us in case of accidents--to fetch men to cut up the rhinoceros, Komba and I proceeded on our walk.

A little further on, just by the edge of the reeds, I caught sight of a narrow, oblong trench dug in a patch of stony soil, and of a rusted mustard tin half-hidden by some scanty vegetation.

"What is that?" I asked, in seeming astonishment, though I knew well what it must be.

"Oh!" replied Komba, who evidently was not yet quite himself, "that is where the white lord Dogeetah, Bausi's blood-brother, set his little canvas house when he was here over twelve moons ago."

"Really!" I exclaimed, "he never told me he was here." (This was a lie, but somehow I was not afraid of lying to Komba.) "How do you know that he was here?"

"One of our people who was fishing in the reeds saw him."

"Oh! that explains it, Komba. But what an odd place for him to fish in; so far from home; and I wonder what he was fishing for. When you have time, Komba, you must explain to me what it is that you catch amidst the roots of thick reeds in such shallow water."

Komba replied that he would do so with pleasure--when he had time. Then, as though to avoid further conversation he ran forward, and thrusting the reeds apart, showed me a great canoe, big enough to hold thirty or forty men, which with infinite labour had been hollowed out of the trunk of a single, huge tree. This canoe differed from the majority of those that personally I have seen used on African lakes and rivers, in that it was fitted for a mast, now unshipped. I looked at it and said it was a fine boat, whereon Komba replied that there were a hundred such at Rica Town, though not all of them were so large.

Ah! thought I to myself as we walked back to the camp. Then, allowing an

average of twenty to a canoe, the Pongo tribe number about two thousand males old enough to paddle, an estimate which turned out to be singularly correct.

Next morning at dawn we started, with some difficulty. To begin with, in the middle of the night old Babemba came to the canvas shelter under which I was sleeping, woke me up and in a long speech implored me not to go. He said he was convinced that the Pongo intended foul play of some sort and that all this talk of peace was a mere trick to entrap us white men into the country, probably in order to sacrifice us to its gods for a religious reason.

I answered that I quite agreed with him, but that as my companions insisted upon making this journey, I could not desert them. All that I could do was to beg him to keep a sharp look-out so that he might be able to help us in case we got into trouble.

"Here I will stay and watch for you, lord Macumazana," he answered, "but if you fall into a snare, am I able to swim through the water like a fish, or to fly through the air like a bird to free you?"

After he had gone one of the Zulu hunters arrived, a man named Ganza, a sort of lieutenant to Mavovo, and sang the same song. He said that it was not right that I should go without guns to die among devils and leave him and his companions wandering alone in a strange land.

I answered that I was much of the same opinion, but that Dogeetah insisted upon going and that I had no choice.

"Then let us kill Dogeetah, or at any rate tie him up, so that he can do no more mischief in his madness," Ganza suggested blandly, whereon I turned him out.

Lastly Sammy arrived and said:

"Mr. Quatermain, before you plunge into this deep well of foolishness, I beg that you will consider your responsibilities to God and man, and especially to us, your household, who are now but lost sheep far from home, and further, that you will remember that if anything disagreeable should overtake you, you are indebted to me to the extent of two months' wages which will probably prove unrecoverable."

I produced a little leather bag from a tin box and counted out to Sammy the wages due to him, also those for three months in advance.

To my astonishment he began to weep. "Sir," he said, "I do not seek filthy lucre. What I mean is that I am afraid you will be killed by these Pongo, and, alas! although I love you, sir, I am too great a coward to come and be killed with you, for God made me like that. I pray you not to go, Mr. Quatermain, because I repeat, I love you, sir."

"I believe you do, my good fellow," I answered, "and I also am afraid of

being killed, who only seem to be brave because I must. However, I hope we shall come through all right. Meanwhile, I am going to give this box and all the gold in it, of which there is a great deal, into your charge, Sammy, trusting to you, if anything happens to us, to get it safe back to Durban if you can."

"Oh! Mr. Quatermain," he exclaimed, "I am indeed honoured, especially as you know that once I was in jail for--embezzlement--with extenuating circumstances, Mr. Quatermain. I tell you that although I am a coward, I will die before anyone gets his fingers into that box."

"I am sure that you will, Sammy my boy," I said. "But I hope, although things look queer, that none of us will be called upon to die just yet."

The morning came at last, and the six of us marched down to the canoe which had been brought round to the open waterway. Here we had to undergo a kind of customs-house examination at the hands of Komba and his companions, who seemed terrified lest we should be smuggling firearms.

"You know what rifles are like," I said indignantly. "Can you see any in our hands? Moreover, I give you my word that we have none."

Komba bowed politely, but suggested that perhaps some "little guns," by

which he meant pistols, remained in our baggage--by accident. Komba was a most suspicious person.

"Undo all the loads," I said to Hans, who obeyed with an enthusiasm which I confess struck me as suspicious.

Knowing his secretive and tortuous nature, this sudden zeal for openness seemed almost unnatural. He began by unrolling his own blanket, inside of which appeared a miscellaneous collection of articles. I remember among them a spare pair of very dirty trousers, a battered tin cup, a wooden spoon such as Kaffirs use to eat their scoff with, a bottle full of some doubtful compound, sundry roots and other native medicines, an old pipe I had given him, and last but not least, a huge head of yellow tobacco in the leaf, of a kind that the Mazitu, like the Pongos, cultivate to some extent.

"What on earth do you want so much tobacco for, Hans?" I asked.

"For us three black people to smoke, Baas, or to take as snuff, or to chew. Perhaps where we are going we may find little to eat, and then tobacco is a food on which one can live for days. Also it brings sleep at nights."

"Oh! that will do," I said, fearing lest Hans, like a second Walter Raleigh, was about to deliver a long lecture upon the virtue of tobacco.

"There is no need for the yellow man to take this weed to our land," interrupted Komba, "for there we have plenty. Why does he cumber himself with the stuff?" and he stretched out his hand idly as though to take hold of and examine it closely.

At this moment, however, Mavovo called attention to his bundle which he had undone, whether on purpose or by accident, I do not know, and forgetting the tobacco, Komba turned to attend to him. With a marvellous celerity Hans rolled up his blanket again. In less than a minute the lashings were fast and it was hanging on his back. Again suspicion took me, but an argument which had sprung up between Brother John and Komba about the former's butterfly net, which Komba suspected of being a new kind of gun or at least a magical instrument of a dangerous sort, attracted my notice. After this dispute, another arose over a common garden trowel that Stephen had thought fit to bring with him. Komba asked what it was for. Stephen replied through Brother John that it was to dig up flowers.

"Flowers!" said Komba. "One of our gods is a flower. Does the white lord wish to dig up our god?"

Of course this was exactly what Stephen did desire to do, but not unnaturally he kept the fact to himself. The squabble grew so hot that finally I announced that if our little belongings were treated with so much suspicion, it might be better that we should give up the journey altogether.

"We have passed our word that we have no firearms," I said in the most dignified manner that I could command, "and that should be enough for you, O Komba."

Then Komba, after consultation with his companions, gave way. Evidently he was anxious that we should visit Pongo-land.

So at last we started. We three white men and our servants seated ourselves in the stern of the canoe on grass cushions that had been provided. Komba went to the bows and his people, taking the broad paddles, rowed and pushed the boat along the water-way made by the hippopotami through the tall and matted reeds, from which ducks and other fowl rose in multitudes with a sound like thunder. A quarter of an hour or so of paddling through these weed-encumbered shallows brought us to the deep and open lake. Here, on the edge of the reeds a tall pole that served as a mast was shipped, and a square sail, made of closely-woven mats, run up. It filled with the morning off-land breeze and presently we were bowling along at a rate of quite eight miles the hour. The shore grew dim behind us, but for a long while above the clinging mists I could see the flag that we had planted on the mound. By degrees it dwindled till it became a mere speck and vanished. As it grew smaller my spirits sank, and when it was quite gone, I felt very low indeed.

Another of your fool's errands, Allan my boy, I said to myself. I wonder

how many more you are destined to survive.

The others, too, did not seem in the best of spirits. Brother John stared at the horizon, his lips moving as though he were engaged in prayer, and even Stephen was temporarily depressed. Jerry had fallen asleep, as a native generally does when it is warm and he has nothing to do. Mavovo looked very thoughtful. I wondered whether he had been consulting his Snake again, but did not ask him. Since the episode of our escape from execution by bow and arrow I had grown somewhat afraid of that unholy reptile. Next time it might foretell our immediate doom, and if it did I knew that I should believe.

As for Hans, he looked much disturbed, and was engaged in wildly hunting for something in the flap pockets of an antique corduroy waistcoat which, from its general appearance, must, I imagine, years ago have adorned the person of a British game-keeper.

"Three," I heard him mutter. "By my great grandfather's spirit! only three left."

"Three what?" I asked in Dutch.

"Three charms, Baas, and there ought to have been quite twenty-four. The rest have fallen out through a hole that the devil himself made in this rotten stuff. Now we shall not die of hunger, and we shall not be shot, and we shall not be drowned, at least none of those things will happen

to me. But there are twenty-one other things that may finish us, as I have lost the charms to ward them off. Thus----"

"Oh! stop your rubbish," I said, and fell again into the depths of my uncomfortable reflections. After this I, too, went to sleep. When I woke it was past midday and the wind was falling. However, it held while we ate some food we had brought with us, after which it died away altogether, and the Pongo people took to their paddles. At my suggestion we offered to help them, for it occurred to me that we might just as well learn how to manage these paddles. So six were given to us, and Komba, who now I noted was beginning to speak in a somewhat imperious tone, instructed us in their use. At first we made but a poor hand at the business, but three or four hours' steady practice taught us a good deal. Indeed, before our journey's end, I felt that we should be quite capable of managing a canoe, if ever it became necessary for us to do so.

By three in the afternoon the shores of the island we were approaching--if it really was an island, a point that I never cleared up--were well in sight, the mountain top that stood some miles inland having been visible for hours. In fact, through my glasses, I had been able to make out its configuration almost from the beginning of the voyage. About five we entered the mouth of a deep bay fringed on either side with forests, in which were cultivated clearings with small villages of the ordinary African stamp. I observed from the smaller size of the trees adjacent to these clearings, that much more land had once

been under cultivation here, probably within the last century, and asked Komba why this was so.

He answered in an enigmatic sentence which impressed me so much that I find I entered it verbatim in my notebook.

"When man dies, corn dies. Man is corn, and corn is man."

Under this entry I see that I wrote "Compare the saying, 'Bread is the staff of life.'"

I could not get any more out of him. Evidently he referred, however, to a condition of shrinking in the population, a circumstance which he did not care to discuss.

After the first few miles the bay narrowed sharply, and at its end came to a point where a stream of no great breadth fell into it. On either side of this stream that was roughly bridged in many places stood the town of Rica. It consisted of a great number of large huts roofed with palm leaves and constructed apparently of whitewashed clay, or rather, as we discovered afterwards, of lake mud mixed with chopped straw or grass.

Reaching a kind of wharf which was protected from erosion by piles formed of small trees driven into the mud, to which were tied a fleet of canoes, we landed just as the sun was beginning to sink. Our approach

had doubtless been observed, for as we drew near the wharf a horn was blown by someone on the shore, whereon a considerable number of men appeared. I suppose out of the huts, and assisted to make the canoe fast. I noted that these all resembled Komba and his companions in build and features; they were so like each other that, except for the difference of their ages, it was difficult to tell them apart. They might all have been members of one family; indeed, this was practically the case, owing to constant intermarriage carried on for generations.

There was something in the appearance of these tall, cold, sharp-featured, white-robed men that chilled my blood, something unnatural and almost inhuman. Here was nothing of the usual African jollity. No one shouted, no one laughed or chattered. No one crowded on us, trying to handle our persons or clothes. No one appeared afraid or even astonished. Except for a word or two they were silent, merely contemplating us in a chilling and distant fashion, as though the arrival of three white men in a country where before no white man had ever set foot were an everyday occurrence.

Moreover, our personal appearance did not seem to impress them, for they smiled faintly at Brother John's long beard and at my stubbly hair, pointing these out to each other with their slender fingers or with the handles of their big spears. I remarked that they never used the blade of the spear for this purpose, perhaps because they thought that we might take this for a hostile or even a warlike demonstration. It is humiliating to have to add that the only one of our company who seemed

to move them to wonder or interest was Hans. His extremely ugly and wrinkled countenance, it was clear, did appeal to them to some extent, perhaps because they had never seen anything in the least like it before, or perhaps for another reason which the reader may guess in due course.

At any rate, I heard one of them, pointing to Hans, ask Komba whether the ape-man was our god or only our captain. The compliment seemed to please Hans, who hitherto had never been looked on either as a god or a captain. But the rest of us were not flattered; indeed, Mavovo was indignant, and told Hans outright that if he heard any more such talk he would beat him before these people, to show them that he was neither a captain nor a god.

"Wait till I claim to be either, O butcher of a Zulu, before you threaten to treat me thus!" ejaculated Hans, indignantly. Then he added, with his peculiar Hottentot snigger, "Still, it is true that before all the meat is eaten (i.e. before all is done) you may think me both," a dark saying which at the time we did not understand.

When we had landed and collected our belongings, Komba told us to follow him, and led us up a wide street that was very tidily kept and bordered on either side by the large huts whereof I have spoken. Each of these huts stood in a fenced garden of its own, a thing I have rarely seen elsewhere in Africa. The result of this arrangement was that although as a matter of fact it had but a comparatively small population, the area

covered by Rica was very great. The town, by the way, was not surrounded with any wall or other fortification, which showed that the inhabitants feared no attack. The waters of the lake were their defence.

For the rest, the chief characteristic of this place was the silence that brooded there. Apparently they kept no dogs, for none barked, and no poultry, for I never heard a cock crow in Pongo-land. Cattle and native sheep they had in abundance, but as they did not fear any enemy, these were pastured outside the town, their milk and meat being brought in as required. A considerable number of people were gathered to observe us, not in a crowd, but in little family groups which collected separately at the gates of the gardens.

For the most part these consisted of a man and one or more wives, finely formed and handsome women. Sometimes they had children with them, but these were very few; the most I saw with any one family was three, and many seemed to possess none at all. Both the women and the children, like the men, were decently clothed in long, white garments, another peculiarity which showed that these natives were no ordinary African savages.

Oh! I can see Rica Town now after all these many years: the wide street swept and garnished, the brown-roofed, white-walled huts in their fertile, irrigated gardens, the tall, silent folk, the smoke from the cooking fires rising straight as a line in the still air, the graceful palms and other tropical trees, and at the head of the street, far away

to the north, the rounded, towering shape of the forest-clad mountain that was called House of the Gods. Often that vision comes back to me in my sleep, or at times in my waking hours when some heavy odour reminds me of the overpowering scent of the great trumpet-like blooms which hung in profusion upon broad-leaved bushes that were planted in almost every garden.

On we marched till at last we reached a tall, live fence that was covered with brilliant scarlet flowers, arriving at its gate just as the last red glow of day faded from the sky and night began to fall. Komba pushed open the gate, revealing a scene that none of us are likely to forget. The fence enclosed about an acre of ground of which the back part was occupied by two large huts standing in the usual gardens.

In front of these, not more than fifteen paces from the gate, stood another building of a totally different character. It was about fifty feet in length by thirty broad and consisted only of a roof supported upon carved pillars of wood, the spaces between the pillars being filled with grass mats or blinds. Most of these blinds were pulled down, but four exactly opposite the gate were open. Inside the shed forty or fifty men, who wore white robes and peculiar caps and who were engaged in chanting a dreadful, melancholy song, were gathered on three sides of a huge fire that burned in a pit in the ground. On the fourth side, that facing the gate, a man stood alone with his arms outstretched and his back towards us.

Of a sudden he heard our footsteps and turned round, springing to the left, so that the light might fall on us. Now we saw by the glow of the great fire, that over it was an iron grid not unlike a small bedstead, and that on this grid lay some fearful object. Stephen, who was a little ahead, stared, then exclaimed in a horrified voice:

"My God! it is a woman!"

In another second the blinds fell down, hiding everything, and the singing ceased.