

CHAPTER XVI

THE GODS

With a roar the Pongo soldiers leapt on us. I think that Mavovo managed to get his spear up and kill a man, for I saw one of them fall backwards and lie still. But they were too quick for the rest of us. In half a minute we were seized, the spears were wrenched from our hands and we were thrown headlong into the canoe, all six of us, or rather seven including the Kalubi. A number of the soldiers, including Komba, who acted as steersman, also sprang into the canoe that was instantly pushed out from beneath the bridge or platform on which the Motombo sat and down the little creek into the still water of the canal or estuary, or whatever it may be, that separates the wall of rock which the cave pierces from the base of the mountain.

As we floated out of the mouth of the cave the toad-like Motombo, who had wheeled round upon his stool, shouted an order to Komba.

"O Kalubi," he said, "set the Kalubi-who-was and the three white men and their three servants on the borders of the forest that is named House-of-the-god and leave them there. Then return and depart, for here I would watch alone. When all is finished I will summon you."

Komba bowed his handsome head and at a sign two of the men got out paddles, for more were not needed, and with slow and gentle strokes

rowed us across the water. The first thing I noted about this water at the time was that its blackness was inky, owing, I suppose, to its depth and the shadows of the towering cliff on one side and of the tall trees on the other. Also I observed--for in this emergency, or perhaps because of it, I managed to keep my wits about me--that its banks on either side were the home of great numbers of crocodiles which lay there like logs. I saw, further, that a little lower down where the water seemed to narrow, jagged boughs projected from its surface as though great trees had fallen, or been thrown into it. I recalled in a numb sort of way that old Babemba had told us that when he was a boy he had escaped in a canoe down this estuary, and reflected that it would not be possible for him to do so now because of those snags. Unless, indeed, he had floated over them in a time of great flood.

A couple of minutes or so of paddling brought us to the further shore which, as I think I have said, was only about two hundred yards from the mouth of the cave. The bow of the canoe grated on the bank, disturbing a huge crocodile that vanished into the depths with an angry plunge.

"Land, white lords, land," said Komba with the utmost politeness, "and go, visit the god who doubtless is waiting for you. And now, as we shall meet no more--farewell. You are wise and I am foolish, yet hearken to my counsel. If ever you should return to the Earth again, be advised by me. Cling to your own god if you have one, and do not meddle with those of other peoples. Again farewell."

The advice was excellent, but at that moment I felt a hate for Komba which was really superhuman. To me even the Motombo seemed an angel of light as compared with him. If wishes could have killed, our farewell would indeed have been complete.

Then, admonished by the spear points of the Pongo, we landed in the slimy mud. Brother John went first with a smile upon his handsome countenance that I thought idiotic under the circumstances, though doubtless he knew best when he ought to smile, and the wretched Kalubi came last. Indeed, so great was his shrinking from that ominous shore, that I believe he was ultimately propelled from the boat by his successor in power, Komba. Once he had trodden it, however, a spark of spirit returned to him, for he wheeled round and said to Komba,

"Remember, O Kalubi, that my fate to-day will be yours also in a day to come. The god wearies of his priests. This year, next year, or the year after; he always wearies of his priests."

"Then, O Kalubi-that-was," answered Komba in a mocking voice as the canoe was pushed off, "pray to the god for me, that it may be the year after; pray it as your bones break in his embrace."

While we watched that craft depart there came into my mind the memory of a picture in an old Latin book of my father's, which represented the souls of the dead being paddled by a person named Charon across a river called the Styx. The scene before us bore a great resemblance to that

picture. There was Charon's boat floating on the dreadful Styx. Yonder glowed the lights of the world, here was the gloomy, unknown shore. And we, we were the souls of the dead awaiting the last destruction at the teeth and claws of some unknown monster, such as that which haunts the recesses of the Egyptian hell. Oh! the parallel was painfully exact. And yet, what do you think was the remark of that irrepressible young man Stephen?

"Here we are at last, Allan, my boy," he said, "and after all without any trouble on our own part. I call it downright providential. Oh! isn't it jolly! Hip, hip, hooray!"

Yes, he danced about in that filthy mud, threw up his cap and cheered!

I withered, or rather tried to wither him with a look, muttering the single word: "Lunatic."

Providential! Jolly! Well, it's fortunate that some people's madness takes a cheerful turn. Then I asked the Kalubi where the god was.

"Everywhere," he replied, waving his trembling hand at the illimitable forest. "Perhaps behind this tree, perhaps behind that, perhaps a long way off. Before morning we shall know."

"What are you going to do?" I inquired savagely.

"Die," he answered.

"Look here, fool," I exclaimed, shaking him, "you can die if you like, but we don't mean to. Take us to some place where we shall be safe from this god."

"One is never safe from the god, lord, especially in his own House," and he shook his silly head and went on, "How can we be safe when there is nowhere to go and even the trees are too big to climb?"

I looked at them, it was true. They were huge and ran up for fifty or sixty feet without a bough. Moreover, it was probable that the god climbed better than we could. The Kalubi began to move inland in an indeterminate fashion, and I asked him where he was going.

"To the burying-place," he answered. "There are spears yonder with the bones."

I pricked up my ears at this--for when one has nothing but some clasp knives, spears are not to be despised--and ordered him to lead on. In another minute we were walking uphill through the awful wood where the gloom at this hour of approaching night was that of an English fog.

Three or four hundred paces brought us to a kind of clearing, where I suppose some of the monster trees had fallen down in past years and never been allowed to grow up again. Here, placed upon the ground, were

a number of boxes made of imperishable ironwood, and on the top of each box sat, or rather lay, a mouldering and broken skull.

"Kalubi-that-were!" murmured our guide in explanation. "Look, Komba has made my box ready," and he pointed to a new case with the lid off.

"How thoughtful of him!" I said. "But show us the spears before it gets quite dark." He went to one of the newer coffins and intimated that we should lift off the lid as he was afraid to do so.

I shoved it aside. There within lay the bones, each of them separate and wrapped up in something, except of course the skull. With these were some pots filled apparently with gold dust, and alongside of the pots two good spears that, being made of copper, had not rusted much. We went on to other coffins and extracted from them more of these weapons that were laid there for the dead man to use upon his journey through the Shades, until we had enough. The shafts of most of them were somewhat rotten from the damp, but luckily they were furnished with copper sockets from two and a half to three feet long, into which the wood of the shaft fitted, so that they were still serviceable.

"Poor things these to fight a devil with," I said.

"Yes, Baas," said Hans in a cheerful voice, "very poor. It is lucky that I have got a better."

I stared at him; we all stared at him.

"What do you mean, Spotted Snake?" asked Mavovo.

"What do you mean, child of a hundred idiots? Is this a time to jest? Is not one joker enough among us?" I asked, and looked at Stephen.

"Mean, Baas? Don't you know that I have the little rifle with me, that which is called Intombi, that with which you shot the vultures at Dingaans kraal? I never told you because I was sure you knew; also because if you didn't know it was better that you should not know, for if you had known, those Pongo skellums (that is, vicious ones) might have come to know also. And if they had known----"

"Mad!" interrupted Brother John, tapping his forehead, "quite mad, poor fellow! Well, in these depressing circumstances it is not wonderful."

I inspected Hans again, for I agreed with John. Yet he did not look mad, only rather more cunning than usual.

"Hans," I said, "tell us where this rifle is, or I will knock you down and Mavovo shall flog you."

"Where, Baas! Why, cannot you see it when it is before your eyes?"

"You are right, John," I said, "he's off it"; but Stephen sprang at Hans

and began to shake him.

"Leave go, Baas," he said, "or you may hurt the rifle."

Stephen obeyed in sheer astonishment. Then, oh! then Hans did something to the end of his great bamboo stick, turned it gently upside down and out of it slid the barrel of a rifle neatly tied round with greased cloth and stoppered at the muzzle with a piece of tow!

I could have kissed him. Yes, such was my joy that I could have kissed that hideous, smelly old Hottentot.

"The stock?" I panted. "The barrel isn't any use without the stock, Hans."

"Oh! Baas," he answered, grinning, "do you think that I have shot with you all these years without knowing that a rifle must have a stock to hold it by?"

Then he slipped off the bundle from his back, undid the lashings of the blanket, revealing the great yellow head of tobacco that had excited my own and Komba's interest on the shores of the lake. This head he tore apart and produced the stock of the rifle nicely cleaned, a cap set ready on the nipple, on to which the hammer was let down, with a little piece of wad between to prevent the cap from being fired by any sudden jar.

"Hans," I exclaimed, "Hans, you are a hero and worth your weight in gold!"

"Yes, Baas, though you never told me so before. Oh! I made up my mind that I wouldn't go to sleep in the face of the Old Man (death). Oh! which of you ought to sleep now upon that bed that Bausi sent me?" he asked as he put the gun together. "You, I think, you great stupid Mavovo. You never brought a gun. If you were a wizard worth the name you would have sent the rifles on and had them ready to meet us here. Oh! will you laugh at me any more, you thick-head of a Zulu?"

"No," answered Mavovo candidly. "I will give you sibonga. Yes, I will make for you Titles of Praise, O clever Spotted Snake."

"And yet," went on Hans, "I am not all a hero; I am worth but half my weight in gold. For, Baas, although I have plenty of powder and bullets in my pocket, I lost the caps out of a hole in my waistcoat. You remember, Baas, I told you it was charms I lost. But three remain; no, four, for there is one on the nipple. There, Baas, there is Intombi all ready and loaded. And now when the white devil comes you can shoot him in the eye, as you how to do up to a hundred yards, and send him to the other devils down in hell. Oh! won't your holy father the Predikant be glad to see him there."

Then with a self-satisfied smirk he half-cocked the rifle and handed it

to me ready for action.

"I thank God!" said Brother John solemnly, "who has taught this poor Hottentot how to save us."

"No, Baas John, God never taught me, I taught myself. But, see, it grows dark. Had we not better light a fire," and forgetting the rifle he began to look about for wood.

"Hans," called Stephen after him, "if ever we get out of this, I will give you £500, or at least my father will, which is the same thing."

"Thank you, Baas, thank you, though just now I'd rather have a drop of brandy and--I don't see any wood."

He was right. Outside of the graveyard clearing lay, it is true, some huge fallen boughs. But these were too big for us to move or cut. Moreover, they were so soaked with damp, like everything in this forest, that it would be impossible to fire them.

The darkness closed in. It was not absolute blackness, because presently the moon rose, but the sky was rainy and obscured it; moreover, the huge trees all about seemed to suck up whatever light there was. We crouched ourselves upon the ground back to back as near as possible to the centre of the place, unrolled such blankets as we had to protect us from the damp and cold, and ate some biltong or dried game flesh and parched

corn, of which fortunately the boy Jerry carried a bagful that had remained upon his shoulders when he was thrown into the canoe. Luckily I had thought of bringing this food with us; also a flask of spirits.

Then it was that the first thing happened. Far away in the forest resounded a most awful roar, followed by a drumming noise, such a roar as none of us had ever heard before, for it was quite unlike that of a lion or any other beast.

"What is that?" I asked.

"The god," groaned the Kalubi, "the god praying to the moon with which he always rises."

I said nothing, for I was reflecting that four shots, which was all we had, was not many, and that nothing should tempt me to waste one of them. Oh! why had Hans put on that rotten old waistcoat instead of the new one I gave him in Durban?

Since we heard no more roars Brother John began to question the Kalubi as to where the Mother of the Flower lived.

"Lord," answered the man in a distracted way, "there, towards the East. You walk for a quarter of the sun's journey up the hill, following a path that is marked by notches cut upon the trees, till beyond the garden of the god at the top of the mountain more water is found

surrounding an island. There on the banks of the water a canoe is hidden in the bushes, by which the water may be crossed to the island, where dwells the Mother of the Holy Flower."

Brother John did not seem to be quite satisfied with the information, and remarked that he, the Kalubi, would be able to show us the road on the morrow.

"I do not think that I shall ever show you the road," groaned the shivering wretch.

At that moment the god roared again much nearer. Now the Kalubi's nerve gave out altogether, and quickened by some presentiment, he began to question Brother John, whom he had learned was a priest of an unknown sort, as to the possibility of another life after death.

Brother John, who, be it remembered, was a very earnest missionary by calling, proceeded to administer some compressed religious consolations, when, quite near to us, the god began to beat upon some kind of very large and deep drum. He didn't roar this time, he only worked away at a massed-band military drum. At least that is what it sounded like, and very unpleasant it was to hear in that awful forest with skulls arranged on boxes all round us, I can assure you, my reader.

The drumming ceased, and pulling himself together, Brother John continued his pious demonstrations. Also just at that time a thick

rain-cloud quite obscured the moon, so that the darkness grew dense. I heard John explaining to the Kalubi that he was not really a Kalubi, but an immortal soul (I wonder whether he understood him). Then I became aware of a horrible shadow--I cannot describe it in any other way--that was blacker than the blackness, which advanced towards us at extraordinary speed from the edge of the clearing.

Next second there was a kind of scuffle a few feet from me, followed by a stifled yell, and I saw the shadow retreating in the direction from which it had come.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Strike a match," answered Brother John; "I think something has happened."

I struck a match, which burnt up very well, for the air was quite still. In the light of it I saw first the anxious faces of our party--how ghastly they looked!--and next the Kalubi who had risen and was waving his right arm in the air, a right arm that was bloody and lacked the hand.

"The god has visited me and taken away my hand!" he moaned in a wailing voice.

I don't think anybody spoke; the thing was beyond words, but we tried to

bind the poor fellow's arm up by the light of matches. Then we sat down again and watched.

The darkness grew still denser as the thick of the cloud passed over the moon, and for a while the silence, that utter silence of the tropical forest at night, was broken only by the sound of our breathing, the buzz of a few mosquitoes, the distant splash of a plunging crocodile and the stifled groans of the mutilated man.

Again I saw, or thought I saw--this may have been half an hour later--that black shadow dart towards us, as a pike darts at a fish in a pond. There was another scuffle, just to my left--Hans sat between me and the Kalubi--followed by a single prolonged wail.

"The king-man has gone," whispered Hans. "I felt him go as though a wind had blown him away. Where he was there is nothing but a hole."

Of a sudden the moon shone out from behind the clouds. In its sickly light about half-way between us and the edge of the clearing, say thirty yards off, I saw--oh! what did I see! The devil destroying a lost soul. At least, that is what it looked like. A huge, grey-black creature, grotesquely human in its shape, had the thin Kalubi in its grip. The Kalubi's head had vanished in its maw and its vast black arms seemed to be employed in breaking him to pieces.

Apparently he was already dead, though his feet, that were lifted off

the ground, still moved feebly.

I sprang up and covered the beast with the rifle which was cocked, getting full on to its head which showed the clearest, though this was rather guesswork, since I could not see distinctly the fore-sight. I pulled, but either the cap or the powder had got a little damp on the journey and hung fire for the fraction of a second. In that infinitesimal time the devil--it is the best name I can give the thing--saw me, or perhaps it only saw the light gleaming on the barrel. At any rate it dropped the Kalubi, and as though some intelligence warned it what to expect, threw up its massive right arm--I remember how extraordinarily long the limb seemed and that it looked thick as a man's thigh--in such a fashion as to cover its head.

Then the rifle exploded and I heard the bullet strike. By the light of the flash I saw the great arm tumble down in a dead, helpless kind of way, and next instant the whole forest began to echo with peal upon peal of those awful roarings that I have described, each of which ended with a dog-like yowp of pain.

"You have hit him, Baas," said Hans, "and he isn't a ghost, for he doesn't like it. But he's still very lively."

"Close up," I answered, "and hold out the spears while I reload."

My fear was that the brute would rush on us. But it did not. For all

that dreadful night we saw or heard it no more. Indeed, I began to hope that after all the bullet had reached some mortal part and that the great ape was dead.

At length, it seemed to be weeks afterwards, the dawn broke and revealed us sitting white and shivering in the grey mist; that is, all except Stephen, who had gone comfortably to sleep with his head resting on Mavovo's shoulder. He is a man so equably minded and so devoid of nerves, that I feel sure he will be one of the last to be disturbed by the trump of the archangel. At least, so I told him indignantly when at length we roused him from his indecent slumbers.

"You should judge things by results, Allan," he said with a yawn. "I'm as fresh as a pippin while you all look as though you had been to a ball with twelve extras. Have you retrieved the Kalubi yet?"

Shortly afterwards, when the mist lifted a little, we went out in a line to "retrieve the Kalubi," and found--well, I won't describe what we found. He was a cruel wretch, as the incident of the herd-boy had told us, but I felt sorry for him. Still, his terrors were over, or at least I hope so.

We deposited him in the box that Komba had kindly provided in preparation for this inevitable event, and Brother John said a prayer over his miscellaneous remains. Then, after consultation and in the very worst of spirits, we set out to seek the way to the home of the Mother

of the Flower. The start was easy enough, for a distinct, though very faint path led from the clearing up the slope of the hill. Afterwards it became more difficult for the denser forest began. Fortunately very few creepers grew in this forest, but the flat tops of the huge trees meeting high above entirely shut out the sky, so that the gloom was great, in places almost that of night.

Oh! it was a melancholy journey as, filled with fears, we stole, a pallid throng, from trunk to trunk, searching them for the notches that indicated our road, and speaking only in whispers, lest the sound of our voices should attract the notice of the dreadful god. After a mile or two of this we became aware that its notice was attracted despite our precautions, for at times we caught glimpses of some huge grey thing slipping along parallel to us between the boles of the trees. Hans wanted me to try a shot, but I would not, knowing that the chances of hitting it were small indeed. With only three charges, or rather three caps left, it was necessary to be saving.

We halted and held a consultation, as a result of which we decided that there was no more danger in going on than in standing still or attempting to return. So we went on, keeping close together. To me, as I was the only one with a rifle, was accorded what I did not at all appreciate, the honour of heading the procession.

Another half-mile and again we heard that strange rolling sound which was produced, I believe, by the great brute beating upon its breast, but

noted that it was not so continuous as on the previous night.

"Ha!" said Hans, "he can only strike his drum with one stick now. Your bullet broke the other, Baas."

A little farther and the god roared quite close, so loudly that the air seemed to tremble.

"The drum is all right, whatever may have happened to the sticks," I said.

A hundred yards or so more and the catastrophe occurred. We had reached a spot in the forest where one of the great trees had fallen down, letting in a little light. I can see it to this hour. There lay the enormous tree, its bark covered with grey mosses and clumps of a giant species of maidenhair fern. On our side of it was the open space which may have measured forty feet across, where the light fell in a perpendicular ray, as it does through the smoke-hole of a hut. Looking at this prostrate trunk, I saw first two lurid and fiery eyes that glowed red in the shadow; and then, almost in the same instant, made out what looked like the head of a fiend enclosed in a wreath of the delicate green ferns. I can't describe it, I can only repeat that it looked like the head of a very large fiend with a pallid face, huge overhanging eyebrows and great yellow tushes on either side of the mouth.

Before I had even time to get the rifle up, with one terrific roar the brute was on us. I saw its enormous grey shape on the top of the trunk, I saw it pass me like a flash, running upright as a man does, but with the head held forward, and noted that the arm nearest to me was swinging as though broken. Then as I turned I heard a scream of terror and perceived that it had gripped the poor Mazitu, Jerry, who walked last but one of our line which was ended by Mavovo. Yes, it had gripped him and was carrying him off, clasped to its breast with its sound arm. When I say that Jerry, although a full-grown man and rather inclined to stoutness, looked like a child in that fell embrace, it will give some idea of the creature's size.

Mavovo, who had the courage of a buffalo, charged at it and drove the copper spear he carried into its side. They all charged like berserkers, except myself, for even then, thank Heaven! I knew a trick worth two of that. In three seconds there was a struggling mass in the centre of the clearing. Brother John, Stephen, Mavovo and Hans were all stabbing at the enormous gorilla, for it was a gorilla, although their blows seemed to do it no more harm than pinpricks. Fortunately for them, for its part, the beast would not let go of Jerry, and having only one sound arm, could but snap at its assailants, for if it had lifted a foot to rend them, its top-heavy bulk would have caused it to tumble over.

At length it seemed to realise this, and hurled Jerry away, knocking down Brother John and Hans with his body. Then it leapt on Mavovo, who, seeing it come, placed the copper socket of the spear against his own

breast, with the result that when the gorilla tried to crush him, the point of the spear was driven into its carcase. Feeling the pain, it unwound its arm from about Mavovo, knocking Stephen over with the backward sweep. Then it raised its great hand to crush Mavovo with a blow, as I believe gorillas are wont to do.

This was the chance for which I was waiting. Up till that moment I had not dared to fire, fearing lest I should kill one of my companions. Now for an instant it was clear of them all, and steadying myself, I aimed at the huge head and let drive. The smoke thinned, and through it I saw the gigantic ape standing quite still, like a creature lost in meditation.

Then it threw up its sound arm, turned its fierce eyes to the sky, and uttering one pitiful and hideous howl, sank down dead. The bullet had entered just behind the ear and buried itself in the brain.

The great silence of the forest flowed in over us, as it were; for quite a while no one did or said anything. Then from somewhere down amidst the mosses I heard a thin voice, the sound of which reminded me of air being squeezed out of an indiarubber cushion.

"Very good shot, Baas," it piped up, "as good as that which killed the king-vulture at Dingaan's kraal, and more difficult. But if the Baas could pull the god off me I should say--Thank you."

The "thank you" was almost inaudible, and no wonder, for poor Hans had fainted. There he lay under the huge bulk of the gorilla, just his nose and mouth appearing between the brute's body and its arm. Had it not been for the soft cushion of wet moss in which he reclined, I think that he would have been crushed flat.

We rolled the creature off him somehow and poured a little brandy down his throat, which had a wonderful effect, for in less than a minute he sat up, grasping like a dying fish, and asked for more.

Leaving Brother John to examine Hans to see if he was really injured, I bethought me of poor Jerry and went to look at him. One glance was enough. He was quite dead. Indeed, he seemed to be crushed out of shape like a buck that has been enveloped in the coils of a boa-constrictor. Brother John told me afterwards that both his arms and nearly all his ribs had been broken in that terrible embrace. Even his spine was dislocated.

I have often wondered why the gorilla ran down the line without touching me or the others, to vent his rage upon Jerry. I can only suggest that it was because the unlucky Mazitu had sat next to the Kalubi on the previous night, which may have caused the brute to identify him by smell with the priest whom he had learned to hate and killed. It is true that Hans had sat on the other side of the Kalubi, but perhaps the odour of the Pongo had not clung to him so much, or perhaps it meant to deal with him after it had done with Jerry.

When we knew that the Mazitu was past human help and had discovered to our joy that, save for a few bruises, no one else was really hurt, although Stephen's clothes were half-torn off him, we made an examination of the dead god. Truly it was a fearful creature.

What its exact weight or size may have been we had no means of ascertaining, but I never saw or heard of such an enormous ape, if a gorilla is really an ape. It needed the united strength of the five of us to lift the carcass with a great effort off the fainting Hans and even to roll it from side to side when subsequently we removed the skin. I would never have believed that so ancient an animal of its stature, which could not have been more than seven feet when it stood erect, could have been so heavy. For ancient undoubtedly it was. The long, yellow, canine tusks were worn half-away with use; the eyes were sunken far into the skull; the hair of the head, which I am told is generally red or brown, was quite white, and even the bare breast, which should be black, was grey in hue. Of course, it was impossible to say, but one might easily have imagined that this creature was two hundred years or more old, as the Motombo had declared it to be.

Stephen suggested that it should be skinned, and although I saw little prospect of our being able to carry away the hide, I assented and helped in the operation on the mere chance of saving so great a curiosity. Also, although Brother John was restless and murmured something about wasting time, I thought it necessary that we should have a rest after

our fearful anxieties and still more fearful encounter with this consecrated monster. So we set to work, and as a result of more than an hour's toil, dragged off the hide, which was so tough and thick that, as we found, the copper spears had scarcely penetrated to the flesh. The bullet that I had put into it on the previous night struck, we discovered, upon the bone of the upper arm, which it shattered sufficiently to render that limb useless, if it did not break it altogether. This, indeed, was fortunate for us, for had the creature retained both its arms uninjured, it would certainly have killed more of us in its attack. We were saved only by the fact that when it was hugging Jerry it had no limb left with which it could strike, and luckily did not succeed in its attempts to get hold with its tremendous jaws that had nipped off the Kalubi's hand as easily as a pair of scissors severs the stalk of a flower.

When the skin was removed, except that of the hands, which we did not attempt to touch, we pegged it out, raw side uppermost, to dry in the centre of the open place where the sun struck. Then, having buried poor Jerry in the hollow trunk of the great fallen tree, we washed ourselves with the wet mosses and ate some of the food that remained to us.

After this we started forward again in much better spirits. Jerry, it was true, was dead, but so was the god, leaving us happily still alive and practically untouched. Never more would the Kalubis of Pongo-land shiver out their lives at the feet of this dreadful divinity who soon or late must become their executioner, for I believe, with the exception of

two who committed suicide through fear, that no Kalubi was ever known to have died except by the hand--or teeth--of the god.

What would I not give to know that brute's history? Could it possibly, as the Motombo said, have accompanied the Pongo people from their home in Western or Central Africa, or perhaps have been brought here by them in a state of captivity? I am unable to answer the question, but it should be noted that none of the Mazitu or other natives had ever heard of the existence of more true gorillas in this part of Africa. The creature, if it had its origin in the locality, must either have been solitary in its habits or driven away from its fellows, as sometimes happens to old elephants, which then, like this gorilla, become fearfully ferocious.

That is all I can say about the brute, though of course the Pongo had their own story. According to them it was an evil spirit in the shape of an ape, which evil spirit had once inhabited the body of an early Kalubi, and had been annexed by the ape when it killed the said Kalubi. Also they declared that the reason the creature put all the Kalubis to death, as well as a number of other people who were offered up to it, was that it needed "to refresh itself with the spirits of men," by which means it was enabled to avoid the effects of age. It will be remembered that the Motombo referred to this belief, of which afterwards I heard in more detail from Babemba. But if this god had anything supernatural about it, at least its magic was no shield against a bullet from a Purdey rifle.

Only a little way from the fallen tree we came suddenly upon a large clearing, which we guessed at once must be that "Garden of the god" where twice a year the unfortunate Kalubis were doomed to scatter the "sacred seed." It was a large garden, several acres of it, lying on a shelf, as it were, of the mountain and watered by a stream. Maize grew in it, also other sorts of corn, while all round was a thick belt of plantain trees. Of course these crops had formed the food of the god who, whenever it was hungry, came to this place and helped itself, as we could see by many signs. The garden was well kept and comparatively free from weeds. At first we wondered how this could be, till I remembered that the Kalubi, or someone, had told me that it was tended by the servants of the Mother of the Flower, who were generally albinos or mutes.

We crossed it and pushed on rapidly up the mountain, once more following an easy and well-beaten path, for now we saw that we were approaching what we thought must be the edge of a crater. Indeed, our excitement was so extreme that we did not speak, only scrambled forward, Brother John, notwithstanding his lame leg, leading at a greater pace than we could equal. He was the first to reach our goal, closely followed by Stephen. Watching, I saw him sink down as though in a swoon. Stephen also appeared astonished, for he threw up his hands.

I rushed to them, and this was what I saw. Beneath us was a steep slope quite bare of forest, which ceased at its crest. This slope stretched

downwards for half a mile or more to the lip of a beautiful lake, of which the area was perhaps two hundred acres. Set in the centre of the deep blue water of this lake, which we discovered afterwards to be unfathomable, was an island not more than five and twenty or thirty acres in extent, that seemed to be cultivated, for on it we could see fields, palms and other fruit-bearing trees. In the middle of the island stood a small, neat house thatched after the fashion of the country, but civilized in its appearance, for it was oblong, not round, and encircled by a verandah and a reed fence. At a distance from this house were a number of native huts, and in front of it a small enclosure surrounded by a high wall, on the top of which mats were fixed on poles as though to screen something from wind or sun.

"The Holy Flower lives there, you bet," gasped Stephen excitedly--he could think of nothing but that confounded orchid. "Look, the mats are up on the sunny side to prevent its scorching, and those palms are planted round to give it shade."

"The Mother of the Flower lives there," whispered Brother John, pointing to the house. "Who is she? Who is she? Suppose I should be mistaken after all. God, let me not be mistaken, for it would be more than I can bear."

"We had better try to find out," I remarked practically, though I am sure I sympathised with his suspense, and started down the slope at a run.

In five minutes or less we reached the foot of it, and, breathless and perspiring though we were, began to search amongst the reeds and bushes growing at the edge of the lake for the canoe of which we had been told by the Kalubi. What if there were none? How could we cross that wide stretch of deep water? Presently Hans, who, following certain indications which caught his practised eye, had cast away to the left, held up his hand and whistled. We ran to him.

"Here it is, Baas," he said, and pointed to something in a tiny bush-fringed inlet, that at first sight looked like a heap of dead reeds. We tore away at the reeds, and there, sure enough, was a canoe of sufficient size to hold twelve or fourteen people, and in it a number of paddles.

Another two minutes and we were rowing across that lake.

We came safely to the other side, where we found a little landing-stage made of poles sunk into the lake. We tied up the canoe, or rather I did, for nobody else remembered to take that precaution, and presently were on a path which led through the cultivated fields to the house. Here I insisted upon going first with the rifle, in case we should be suddenly attacked. The silence and the absence of any human beings suggested to me that this might very well happen, since it would be strange if we had not been seen crossing the lake.

Afterwards I discovered why the place seemed so deserted. It was owing to two reasons. First, it was now noontime, an hour at which these poor slaves retired to their huts to eat and sleep through the heat of the day. Secondly, although the "Watcher," as she was called, had seen the canoe on the water, she concluded that the Kalubi was visiting the Mother of the Flower and, according to practice on these occasions, withdrew herself and everybody else, since the rare meetings of the Kalubi and the Mother of the Flower partook of the nature of a religious ceremony and must be held in private.

First we came to the little enclosure that was planted about with palms and, as I have described, screened with mats. Stephen ran at it and, scrambling up the wall, peeped over the top.

Next instant he was sitting on the ground, having descended from the wall with the rapidity of one shot through the head.

"Oh! by Jingo!" he ejaculated, "oh! by Jingo!" and that was all I could get out of him, though it is true I did not try very hard at the time.

Not five paces from this enclosure stood a tall reed fence that surrounded the house. It had a gate also of reeds, which was a little ajar. Creeping up to it very cautiously, for I thought I heard a voice within, I peeped through the half-opened gate. Four or five feet away was the verandah from which a doorway led into one of the rooms of the house where stood a table on which was food.

Kneeling on mats upon this verandah were--two white women--clothed in garments of the purest white adorned with a purple fringe, and wearing bracelets and other ornaments of red native gold. One of these appeared to be about forty years of age. She was rather stout, fair in colouring, with blue eyes and golden hair that hung down her back. The other might have been about twenty. She also was fair, but her eyes were grey and her long hair was of a chestnut hue. I saw at once that she was tall and very beautiful. The elder woman was praying, while the other, who knelt by her side, listened and looked up vacantly at the sky.

"O God," prayed the woman, "for Christ's sake look in pity upon us two poor captives, and if it be possible, send us deliverance from this savage land. We thank Thee Who hast protected us unharmed and in health for so many years, and we put our trust in Thy mercy, for Thou alone canst help us. Grant, O God, that our dear husband and father may still live, and that in Thy good time we may be reunited to him. Or if he be dead and there is no hope for us upon the earth, grant that we, too, may die and find him in Thy Heaven."

Thus she prayed in a clear, deliberate voice, and I noticed that as she did so the tears ran down her cheeks. "Amen," she said at last, and the girl by her side, speaking with a strange little accent, echoed the "Amen."

I looked round at Brother John. He had heard something and was utterly

overcome. Fortunately enough he could not move or even speak.

"Hold him," I whispered to Stephen and Mavovo, "while I go in and talk to these ladies."

Then, handing the rifle to Hans, I took off my hat, pushed the gate a little wider open, slipped through it and called attention to my presence by coughing.

The two women, who had risen from their knees, stared at me as though they saw a ghost.

"Ladies," I said, bowing, "pray do not be alarmed. You see God Almighty sometimes answers prayers. In short, I am one of--a party--of white people who, with some trouble, have succeeded in getting to this place and--and--would you allow us to call on you?"

Still they stared. At length the elder woman opened her lips.

"Here I am called the Mother of the Holy Flower, and for a stranger to speak with the Mother is death. Also if you are a man, how did you reach us alive?"

"That's a long story," I answered cheerfully. "May we come in? We will take the risks, we are accustomed to them and hope to be able to do you a service. I should explain that three of us are white men, two English

and one--American."

"American!" she gasped, "American! What is he like, and how is he named?"

"Oh!" I replied, for my nerve was giving out and I grew confused, "he is oldish, with a white beard, rather like Father Christmas in short, and his Christian name (I didn't dare to give it all at once) is--er--John, Brother John, we call him. Now I think of it," I added, "he has some resemblance to your companion there."

I thought that the lady was going to die, and cursed myself for my awkwardness. She flung her arm about the girl to save herself from falling--a poor prop, for she, too, looked as though she were going to die, having understood some, if not all, of my talk. It must be remembered that this poor young thing had never even seen a white man before.

"Madam, madam," I expostulated, "I pray you to bear up. After living through so much sorrow it would be foolish to debase of--joy. May I call in Brother John? He is a clergyman and might be able to say something appropriate, which I, who am only a hunter, cannot do."

She gathered herself together, opened her eyes and whispered:

"Send him here."

I pushed open the gate behind which the others were clustered. Catching Brother John, who by now had recovered somewhat, by the arm, I dragged him forward. The two stood staring at each other, and the young lady also looked with wide eyes and open mouth.

"Elizabeth!" said John.

She uttered a faint scream, then with a cry of "Husband!" flung herself upon his breast.

I slipped through the gate and shut it fast.

"I say, Allan," said Stephen, when we had retreated to a little distance, "did you see her?"

"Her? Who? Which?" I asked.

"The young lady in the white clothes. She is lovely."

"Hold your tongue, you donkey!" I answered. "Is this a time to talk of female looks?"

Then I went away behind the wall and literally wept for joy. It was one

of the happiest moments of my life, for how seldom things happen as they should!

Also I wanted to put up a little prayer of my own, a prayer of thankfulness and for strength and wit to overcome the many dangers that yet awaited us.