CHAPTER XVII

THE HOME OF THE HOLY FLOWER

Half an hour or so passed, during which I was engaged alternately in thinking over our position and in listening to Stephen's rhapsodies. First he dilated on the loveliness of the Holy Flower that he had caught a glimpse of when he climbed the wall, and secondly, on the beauty of the eyes of the young lady in white. Only by telling him that he might offend her did I persuade him not to attempt to break into the sacred enclosure where the orchid grew. As we were discussing the point, the gate opened and she appeared.

"Sirs," she said, with a reverential bow, speaking slowly and in the drollest halting English, "the mother and the father--yes, the father--ask, will you feed?"

We intimated that we would "feed" with much pleasure, and she led the way to the house, saying:

"Be not astonished at them, for they are very happy too, and please forgive our unleavened bread."

Then in the politest way possible she took me by the hand, and followed by Stephen, we entered the house, leaving Mavovo and Hans to watch outside.

It consisted of but two rooms, one for living and one for sleeping. In the former we found Brother John and his wife seated on a kind of couch gazing at each other in a rapt way. I noted that they both looked as though they had been crying--with happiness, I suppose.

"Elizabeth," said John as we entered, "this is Mr. Allan Quatermain, through whose resource and courage we have come together again, and this young gentleman is his companion, Mr. Stephen Somers."

She bowed, for she seemed unable to speak, and held out her hand, which we shook.

"What be 'resource and courage'?" I heard her daughter whisper to Stephen, "and why have you none, O Stephen Somers?"

"It would take a long time to explain," he said with his jolly laugh, after which I listened to no more of their nonsense.

Then we sat down to the meal, which consisted of vegetables and a large bowl of hard-boiled ducks' eggs, of which eatables an ample supply was carried out to Hans and Mavovo by Stephen and Hope. This, it seemed, was the name that her mother had given to the girl when she was born in the hour of her black despair.

It was an extraordinary story that Mrs. Eversley had to tell, and yet a

short one.

She had escaped from Hassan-ben-Mohammed and the slave-traders, as the rescued slave told her husband at Zanzibar before he died, and, after days of wandering, been captured by some of the Pongo who were scouring the country upon dark business of their own, probably in search of captives. They brought her across the lake to Pongo-land and, the former Mother of the Flower, an albino, having died at a great age, installed her in the office on this island, which from that day she had never left. Hither she was led by the Kalubi of the time and some others who had "passed the god." This brute, however, she had never seen, although once she heard him roar, for it did not molest them or even appear upon their journey.

Shortly after her arrival on the island her daughter was born, on which occasion some of the women "servants of the Flower" nursed her. From that moment both she and the child were treated with the utmost care and veneration, since the Mother of the Flower and the Flower itself being in some strange way looked upon as embodiments of the natural forces of fertility, this birth was held to be the best of omens for the dwindling Pongo race. Also it was hoped that in due course the "Child of the Flower" would succeed the Mother in her office. So here they dwelt absolutely helpless and alone, occupying themselves with superintending the agriculture of the island. Most fortunately also when she was captured, Mrs. Eversley had a small Bible in her possession which she had never lost. From this she was able to teach her child to read and

all that is to be learned in the pages of Holy Writ.

Often I have thought that if I were doomed to solitary confinement for life and allowed but one book, I would choose the Bible, since, in addition to all its history and the splendour of its language, it contains the record of the hope of man, and therefore should be sufficient for him. So at least it had proved to be in this case.

Oddly enough, as she told us, like her husband, Mrs. Eversley during all those endless years had never lost some kind of belief that she would one day be saved otherwise than by death.

"I always thought that you still lived and that we should meet again, John," I heard her say to him.

Also her own and her daughter's spirits were mysteriously supported, for after the first shock and disturbance of our arrival we found them cheerful people; indeed, Miss Hope was quite a merry soul. But then she had never known any other life, and human nature is very adaptable. Further, if I may say so, she had grown up a lady in the true sense of the word. After all, why should she not, seeing that her mother, the Bible and Nature had been her only associates and sources of information, if we except the poor slaves who waited on them, most of whom were mutes.

When Mrs. Eversley's story was done, we told ours, in a compressed form.

It was strange to see the wonder with which these two ladies listened to its outlines, but on that I need not dwell. When it was finished I heard Miss Hope say:

"So it would seem, O Stephen Somers, that it is you who are saviour to us."

"Certainly," answered Stephen, "but why?"

"Because you see the dry Holy Flower far away in England, and you say, 'I must be Holy Father to that Flower.' Then you pay down shekels (here her Bible reading came in) for the cost of journey and hire brave hunter to kill devil-god and bring my old white-head parent with you. Oh yes, you are saviour," and she nodded her head at him very prettily.

"Of course," replied Stephen with enthusiasm; "that is, not exactly, but it is all the same thing, as I will explain later. But, Miss Hope, meanwhile could you show us the Flower?"

"Oh! Holy Mother must do that. If you look thereon without her, you die."

"Really!" said Stephen, without alluding to his little feat of wall climbing.

Well, the end of it was that after a good deal of hesitation, the Holy

Mother obliged, saying that as the god was dead she supposed nothing else mattered. First, however, she went to the back of the house and clapped her hands, whereon an old woman, a mute and a very perfect specimen of an albino native, appeared and stared at us wonderingly. To her Mrs. Eversley talked upon her fingers, so rapidly that I could scarcely follow her movements. The woman bowed till her forehead nearly touched the ground, then rose and ran towards the water.

"I have sent her to fetch the paddles from the canoe," said Mrs. Eversley, "and to put my mark upon it. Now none will dare to use it to cross the lake."

"That is very wise," I replied, "as we don't want news of our whereabouts to get to the Motombo."

Next we went to the enclosure, where Mrs. Eversley with a native knife cut a string of palm fibres that was sealed with clay on to the door and one of its uprights in such a fashion that none could enter without breaking the string. The impression was made with a rude seal that she wore round her neck as a badge of office. It was a very curious object fashioned of gold and having deeply cut upon its face a rough image of an ape holding a flower in its right paw. As it was also ancient, this seemed to show that the monkey god and the orchid had been from the beginning jointly worshipped by the Pongo.

When she had opened the door, there appeared, growing in the centre of

the enclosure, the most lovely plant, I should imagine, that man ever saw. It measured some eight feet across, and the leaves were dark green, long and narrow. From its various crowns rose the scapes of bloom. And oh! those blooms, of which there were about twelve, expanded now in the flowering season. The measurements made from the dried specimen I have given already, so I need not repeat them. I may say here, however, that the Pongo augured the fertility or otherwise of each succeeding year from the number of the blooms on the Holy Flower. If these were many the season would prove very fruitful; if few, less so; while if, as sometimes happened, the plant failed to flower, draught and famine were always said to follow. Truly those were glorious blossoms, standing as high as a man, with their back sheaths of vivid white barred with black, their great pouches of burnished gold and their wide wings also of gold. Then in the centre of each pouch appeared the ink-mark that did indeed exactly resemble the head of a monkey. But if this orchid astonished me, its effect upon Stephen, with whom this class of flower was a mania, may be imagined. Really he went almost mad. For a long while he glared at the plant, and finally flung himself upon his knees, causing Miss Hope to exclaim:

"What, O Stephen Somers! do you also make sacrifice to the Holy Flower?"

"Rather," he answered; "I'd--I'd--die for it!"

"You are likely to before all is done," I remarked with energy, for I hate to see a grown man make a fool of himself. There's only one thing

in the world which justifies that, and it isn't a flower.

Mavovo and Hans had followed us into the enclosure, and I overheard a conversation between them which amused me. The gist of it was that Hans explained to Mavovo that the white people admired this weed--he called it a weed--because it was like gold, which was the god they really worshipped, although that god was known among them by many names. Mavovo, who was not at all interested in the affair, replied with a shrug that it might be so, though for his part he believed the true reason to be that the plant produced some medicine which gave courage or strength. Zulus, I may say, do not care for flowers unless they bear a fruit that is good to eat.

When I had satisfied myself with the splendour of these magnificent blooms, I asked Mrs. Eversley what certain little mounds might be that were dotted about the enclosure, beyond the circle of cultivated peaty soil which surrounded the orchid's roots.

"They are the graves of the Mothers of the Holy Flower," she answered. "There are twelve of them, and here is the spot chosen for the thirteenth, which was to have been mine."

To change the subject I asked another question, namely: If there were more such orchids growing in the country?

"No," she replied, "or at least I never heard of any. Indeed, I have

always been told that this one was brought from far away generations ago. Also, under an ancient law, it is never allowed to increase. Any shoots it sends up beyond this ring must be cut off by me and destroyed with certain ceremonies. You see that seed-pod which has been left to grow on the stalk of one of last year's blooms. It is now ripe, and on the night of the next new moon, when the Kalubi comes to visit me, I must with much ritual burn it in his presence, unless it has burst before he arrives, in which case I must burn any seedlings that may spring up with almost the same ritual."

"I don't think the Kalubi will come any more; at least, not while you are here. Indeed, I am sure of it," I said.

As we were leaving the place, acting on my general principle of making sure of anything of value when I get the chance, I broke off that ripe seed-pod, which was of the size of an orange. No one was looking at the time, and as it went straight into my pocket, no one missed it.

Then, leaving Stephen and the young lady to admire this Cypripedium--or each other--in the enclosure, we three elders returned to the house to discuss matters.

"John and Mrs. Eversley," I said, "by Heaven's mercy you are reunited after a terrible separation of over twenty years. But what is to be done now? The god, it is true, is dead, and therefore the passage of the forest will be easy. But beyond it is the water which we have no means

of crossing and beyond the water that old wizard, the Motombo, sits in the mouth of his cave watching like a spider in its web. And beyond the Motombo and his cave are Komba, the new Kalubi and his tribe of cannibals----"

"Cannibals!" interrupted Mrs. Eversley, "I never knew that they were cannibals. Indeed, I know little about the Pongo, whom I scarcely ever see."

"Then, madam, you must take my word for it that they are; also, as I believe, that they have every expectation of eating us. Now, as I presume that you do not wish to spend the rest of your lives, which would probably be short, upon this island, I want to ask how you propose to escape safely out of the Pongo country?"

They shook their heads, which were evidently empty of ideas. Only John stroked his white beard, and inquired mildly:

"What have you arranged, Allan? My dear wife and I are quite willing to leave the matter to you, who are so resourceful."

"Arranged!" I stuttered. "Really, John, under any other circumstances----" Then after a moment's reflection I called to Hans and Mavovo, who came and squatted down upon the verandah.

"Now," I said, after I had put the case to them, "what have you

arranged?" Being devoid of any feasible suggestions, I wished to pass on that intolerable responsibility.

"My father makes a mock of us," said Mavovo solemnly. "Can a rat in a pit arrange how it is to get out with the dog that is waiting at the top? So far we have come in safety, as the rat does into the pit. Now I see nothing but death."

"That's cheerful," I said. "Your turn, Hans."

"Oh! Baas," replied the Hottentot, "for a while I grew clever again when I thought of putting the gun Intombi into the bamboo. But now my head is like a rotten egg, and when I try to shake wisdom out of it my brain melts and washes from side to side like the stuff in the rotten egg. Yet, yet, I have a thought--let us ask the Missie. Her brain is young and not tired, it may hit on something: to ask the Baas Stephen is no good, for already he is lost in other things," and Hans grinned feebly.

More to give myself time than for any other reason I called to Miss Hope, who had just emerged from the sacred enclosure with Stephen, and put the riddle to her, speaking very slowly and clearly, so that she might understand me. To my surprise she answered at once.

"What is a god, O Mr. Allen? Is it not more than man? Can a god be bound in a pit for a thousand years, like Satan in Bible? If a god want to move, see new country and so on, who can say no?"

"I don't quite understand," I said, to draw her out further, although, in fact, I had more than a glimmering of what she meant.

"O Allan, Holy Flower there a god, and my mother priestess. If Holy Flower tired of this land, and want to grow somewhere else, why priestess not carry it and go too?"

"Capital idea," I said, "but you see, Miss Hope, there are, or were, two gods, one of which cannot travel."

"Oh! that very easy, too. Put skin of god of the woods on to this man," and she pointed to Hans, "and who know difference? They like as two brothers already, only he smaller."

"She's got it! By Jingo, she's got it!" exclaimed Stephen in admiration.

"What Missie say?" asked Hans, suspiciously.

I told him.

"Oh! Baas," exclaimed Hans, "think of the smell inside of that god's skin when the sun shines on it. Also the god was a very big god, and I am small."

Then he turned and made a proposal to Mavovo, explaining that his

stature was much better suited to the job.

"First will I die," answered the great Zulu. "Am I, who have high blood in my veins and who am a warrior, to defile myself by wrapping the skin of a dead brute about me and appear as an ape before men? Propose it to me again, Spotted Snake, and we shall quarrel."

"See here, Hans," I said. "Mavovo is right. He is a soldier and very strong in battle. You also are very strong in your wits, and by doing this you will make fools of all the Pongo. Also, Hans, it is better that you should wear the skin of a gorilla for a few hours than that I, your master, and all these should be killed."

"Yes, Baas, it is true, Baas; though for myself I almost think that, like Mavovo, I would rather die. Yet it would be sweet to deceive those Pongo once again, and, Baas, I won't see you killed just to save myself another bad smell or two. So, if you wish it, I will become a god."

Thus through the self-sacrifice of that good fellow, Hans, who is the real hero of this history, that matter was settled, if anything could be looked on as settled in our circumstances. Then we arranged that we would start upon our desperate adventure at dawn on the following morning.

Meanwhile, much remained to be done. First, Mrs. Eversley summoned her attendants, who, to the number of twelve, soon appeared in front of

the verandah. It was very sad to see these poor women, all of whom were albinos and unpleasant to look on, while quite half appeared to be deaf and dumb. To these, speaking as a priestess, she explained that the god who dwelt in the woods was dead, and that therefore she must take the Holy Flower, which was called "Wife of the god" and make report to the Motombo of this dreadful catastrophe. Meanwhile, they must remain on the island and continue to cultivate the fields.

This order threw the poor creatures, who were evidently much attached to their mistress and her daughter, into a great state of consternation. The eldest of them all, a tall, thin old lady with white wool and pink eyes who looked, as Stephen said, like an Angora rabbit, prostrated herself and kissing the Mother's foot, asked when she would return, since she and the "Daughter of the Flower" were all they had to love, and without them they would die of grief.

Suppressing her evident emotion as best she could, the Mother replied that she did not know; it depended on the will of Heaven and the Motombo. Then to prevent further argument she bade them bring their picks with which they worked the land; also poles, mats, and palmstring, and help to dig up the Holy Flower. This was done under the superintendence of Stephen, who here was thoroughly in his element, although the job proved far from easy. Also it was sad, for all these women wept as they worked, while some of them who were not dumb, wailed aloud.

Even Miss Hope cried, and I could see that her mother was affected with a kind of awe. For twenty years she had been guardian of this plant, which I think she had at last not unnaturally come to look upon with some of the same veneration that was felt for it by the whole Pongo people.

"I fear," she said, "lest this sacrilege should bring misfortune upon us."

But Brother John, who held very definite views upon African superstitions, quoted the second commandment to her, and she became silent.

We got the thing up at last, or most of it, with a sufficiency of earth to keep it alive, injuring the roots as little as possible in the process. Underneath it, at a depth of about three feet, we found several things. One of these was an ancient stone fetish that was rudely shaped to the likeness of a monkey and wore a gold crown. This object, which was small, I still have. Another was a bed of charcoal, and amongst the charcoal were some partially burnt bones, including a skull that was very little injured. This may have belonged to a woman of a low type, perhaps the first Mother of the Flower, but its general appearance reminded me of that of a gorilla. I regret that there was neither time nor light to enable me to make a proper examination of these remains, which we found it impossible to bring away.

Mrs. Eversley told me afterwards, however, that the Kalubis had a tradition that the god once possessed a wife which died before the Pongo migrated to their present home. If so, these may have been the bones of that wife. When it was finally clear of the ground on which it had grown for so many generations, the great plant was lifted on to a large mat, and after it had been packed with wet moss by Stephen in a most skilful way, for he was a perfect artist at this kind of work, the mat was bound round the roots in such a fashion that none of the contents could escape. Also each flower scape was lashed to a thin bamboo so as to prevent it from breaking on the journey. Then the whole bundle was lifted on to a kind of bamboo stretcher that we made and firmly secured to it with palm-fibre ropes.

By this time it was growing dark and all of us were tired.

"Baas," said Hans to me, as we were returning to the house, "would it not be well that Mavovo and I should take some food and go sleep in the canoe? These women will not hurt us there, but if we do not, I, who have been watching them, fear lest in the night they should make paddles of sticks and row across the lake to warn the Pongo."

Although I did not like separating our small party, I thought the idea so good that I consented to it, and presently Hans and Mavovo, armed with spears and carrying an ample supply of food, departed to the lake side.

One more incident has impressed itself upon my memory in connection with that night. It was the formal baptism of Hope by her father. I never saw a more touching ceremony, but it is one that I need not describe.

Stephen and I slept in the enclosure by the packed flower, which he would not leave out of his sight. It was as well that we did so, since about twelve o'clock by the light of the moon I saw the door in the wall open gently and the heads of some of the albino women appear through the aperture. Doubtless, they had come to steal away the holy plant they worshipped. I sat up, coughed, and lifted the rifle, whereon they fled and returned no more.

Long before dawn Brother John, his wife and daughter were up and making preparations for the march, packing a supply of food and so forth. Indeed, we breakfasted by moonlight, and at the first break of day, after Brother John had first offered up a prayer for protection, departed on our journey.

It was a strange out-setting, and I noted that both Mrs. Eversley and her daughter seemed sad at bidding good-bye to the spot where they had dwelt in utter solitude and peace for so many years; where one of them, indeed, had been born and grown up to womanhood. However, I kept on talking to distract their thoughts, and at last we were off.

I arranged that, although it was heavy for them, the two ladies, whose white robes were covered with curious cloaks made of soft prepared bark,

should carry the plant as far as the canoe, thinking it was better that the Holy Flower should appear to depart in charge of its consecrated guardians. I went ahead with the rifle, then came the stretcher and the flower, while Brother John and Stephen, carrying the paddles, brought up the rear. We reached the canoe without accident, and to our great relief found Mavovo and Hans awaiting us. I learned, however, that it was fortunate they had slept in the boat, since during the night the albino women arrived with the evident object of possessing themselves of it, and only ran away when they saw that it was guarded. As we were making ready the canoe those unhappy slaves appeared in a body and throwing themselves upon their faces with piteous words, or those of them who could not speak, by signs, implored the Mother not to desert them, till both she and Hope began to cry. But there was no help for it, so we pushed off as quickly as we could, leaving the albinos weeping and wailing upon the bank.

I confess that I, too, felt compunction at abandoning them thus, but what could we do? I only trust that no harm came to them, but of course we never heard anything as to their fate.

On the further side of the lake we hid away the canoe in the bushes where we had found it, and began our march. Stephen and Mavovo, being the two strongest among us, now carried the plant, and although Stephen never murmured at its weight, how the Zulu did swear after the first few hours! I could fill a page with his objurgations at what he considered an act of insanity, and if I had space, should like to do so, for really

some of them were most amusing. Had it not been for his friendship for Stephen I think that he would have thrown it down.

We crossed the Garden of the god, where Mrs. Eversley told me the Kalubi must scatter the sacred seed twice a year, thus confirming the story that we had heard. It seems that it was then, as he made his long journey through the forest, that the treacherous and horrid brute which we had killed, would attack the priest of whom it had grown weary. But, and this shows the animal's cunning, the onslaught always took place after he had sown the seed which would in due season produce the food it ate. Our Kalubi, it is true, was killed before we had reached the Garden, which seems an exception to the rule. Perhaps, however, the gorilla knew that his object in visiting it was not to provide for its needs. Or perhaps our presence excited it to immediate action.

Who can analyse the motives of a gorilla?

These attacks were generally spread over a year and a half. On the first occasion the god which always accompanied the priest to the garden and back again, would show animosity by roaring at him. On the second he would seize his hand and bite off one of the fingers, as happened to our Kalubi, a wound that generally caused death from blood poisoning. If, however, the priest survived, on the third visit it killed him, for the most part by crushing his head in its mighty jaws. When making these visits the Kalubi was accompanied by certain dedicated youths, some of whom the god always put to death. Those who had made the journey six

times without molestation were selected for further special trials, until at last only two remained who were declared to have "passed" or "been accepted by" the god. These youths were treated with great honour, as in the instance of Komba and on the destruction of the Kalubi, one of them took his office, which he generally filled without much accident, for a minimum of ten years, and perhaps much longer.

Mrs. Eversley knew nothing of the sacramental eating of the remains of the Kalubi, or of the final burial of his bones in the wooden coffins that we had seen, for such things, although they undoubtedly happened, were kept from her. She added, that each of the three Kalubis whom she had known, ultimately went almost mad through terror at his approaching end, especially after the preliminary roarings and the biting off of the finger. In truth uneasy lay the head that wore a crown in Pongo-land, a crown that, mind you, might not be refused upon pain of death by torture. Personally, I can imagine nothing more terrible than the haunted existence of these poor kings whose pomp and power must terminate in such a fashion.

I asked her whether the Motombo ever visited the god. She answered, Yes, once in every five years. Then after many mystic ceremonies he spent a week in the forest at a time of full moon. One of the Kalubis had told her that on this occasion he had seen the Motombo and the god sitting together under a tree, each with his arm round the other's neck and apparently talking "like brothers." With the exception of certain tales of its almost supernatural cunning, this was all that I could learn

about the god of the Pongos which I have sometimes been tempted to believe was really a devil hid in the body of a huge and ancient ape.

No, there was one more thing which I quote because it bears out Babemba's story. It seems that captives from other tribes were sometimes turned into the forest that the god might amuse itself by killing them. This, indeed, was the fate to which we ourselves had been doomed in accordance with the hateful Pongo custom.

Certainly, thought I to myself when she had done, I did a good deed in sending that monster to whatever dim region it was destined to inhabit, where I sincerely trust it found all the dead Kalubis and its other victims ready to give it an appropriate welcome.

After crossing the god's garden, we came to the clearing of the Fallen Tree, and found the brute's skin pegged out as we had left it, though shrunken in size. Only it had evidently been visited by a horde of the forest ants which, fortunately for Hans, had eaten away every particle of flesh, while leaving the hide itself absolutely untouched, I suppose because it was too tough for them. I never saw a neater job. Moreover, these industrious little creatures had devoured the beast itself. Nothing remained of it except the clean, white bones lying in the exact position in which we had left the carcase. Atom by atom that marching myriad army had eaten all and departed on its way into the depths of the

forest, leaving this sign of their passage.

How I wished that we could carry off the huge skeleton to add to my collection of trophies, but this was impossible. As Brother John said, any museum would have been glad to purchase it for hundreds of pounds, for I do not suppose that its like exists in the world. But it was too heavy; all I could do was to impress its peculiarities upon my mind by a close study of the mighty bones. Also I picked out of the upper right arm, and kept the bullet I had fired when it carried off the Kalubi. This I found had sunk into and shattered the bone, but without absolutely breaking it.

On we went again bearing with us the god's skin, having first stuffed the head, hands and feet (these, I mean the hands and feet, had been cleaned out by the ants) with wet moss in order to preserve their shape. It was no light burden, at least so declared Brother John and Hans, who bore it between them upon a dead bough from the fallen tree.

Of the rest of our journey to the water's edge there is nothing to tell, except that notwithstanding our loads, we found it easier to walk down that steep mountain side than it had been to ascend the same. Still our progress was but slow, and when at length we reached the burying-place only about an hour remained to sunset. There we sat down to rest and eat, also to discuss the situation.

What was to be done? The arm of stagnant water lay near to us, but we

had no boat with which to cross to the further shore. And what was that shore? A cave where a creature who seemed to be but half-human, sat watching like a spider in its web. Do not let it be supposed that this question of escape had been absent from our minds. On the contrary, we had even thought of trying to drag the canoe in which we crossed to and from the island of the Flower through the forest. The idea was abandoned, however, because we found that being hollowed from a single log with a bottom four or five inches thick, it was impossible for us to carry it so much as fifty yards. What then could we do without a boat? Swimming seemed to be out of the question because of the crocodiles. Also on inquiry I discovered that of the whole party Stephen and I alone could swim. Further there was no wood of which to make a raft.

I called to Hans and leaving the rest in the graveyard where we knew that they were safe, we went down to the edge of the water to study the situation, being careful to keep ourselves hidden behind the reeds and bushes of the mangrove tribe with which it was fringed. Not that there was much fear of our being seen, for the day, which had been very hot, was closing in and a great storm, heralded by black and bellying clouds, was gathering fast, conditions which must render us practically invisible at a distance.

We looked at the dark, slimy water--also at the crocodiles which sat upon its edge in dozens waiting, eternally waiting, for what, I wondered. We looked at the sheer opposing cliff, but save where a black hole marked the cave mouth, far as the eye could see, the water came

up against it, as that of a moat does against the wall of a castle. Obviously, therefore, the only line of escape ran through this cave, for, as I have explained, the channel by which I presume Babemba reached the open lake, was now impracticable. Lastly, we searched to see if there was any fallen log upon which we could possibly propel ourselves to the other side, and found--nothing that could be made to serve, no, nor, as I have said, any dry reeds or brushwood out of which we might fashion a raft.

"Unless we can get a boat, here we must stay," I remarked to Hans, who was seated with me behind a screen of rushes at the water's edge.

He made no answer, and as I thought, in a sort of subconscious way, I engaged myself in watching a certain tragedy of the insect world. Between two stout reeds a forest spider of the very largest sort had spun a web as big as a lady's open parasol. There in the midst of this web of which the bottom strands almost touched the water, sat the spider waiting for its prey, as the crocodiles were waiting on the banks, as the great ape had waited for the Kalubis, as Death waits for Life, as the Motombo was waiting for God knows what.

It rather resembled the Motombo in his cave, did that huge, black spider with just a little patch of white upon its head, or so I thought fancifully enough. Then came the tragedy. A great, white moth of the Hawk species began to dart to and fro between the reeds, and presently struck the web on its lower side some three inches above the water. Like

a flash that spider was upon it. It embraced the victim with its long legs to still its tremendous battlings. Next, descending below, it began to make the body fast, when something happened. From the still surface of the water beneath poked up the mouth of a very large fish which quite quietly closed upon the spider and sank again into the depths, taking with it a portion of the web and thereby setting the big moth free. With a struggle it loosed itself, fell on to a piece of wood and floated away, apparently little the worse for the encounter.

"Did you see that, Baas?" said Hans, pointing to the broken and empty web. "While you were thinking, I was praying to your reverend father the Predikant, who taught me how to do it, and he has sent us a sign from the Place of Fire."

Even then I could not help laughing to myself as I pictured what my dear father's face would be like if he were able to hear his convert's remarks. An analysis of Hans's religious views would be really interesting, and I only regret that I never made one. But sticking to business I merely asked:

"What sign?"

"Baas, this sign: That web is the Motombo's cave. The big spider is the Motombo. The white moth is us, Baas, who are caught in the web and going to be eaten."

"Very pretty, Hans," I said, "but what is the fish that came up and swallowed the spider so that the moth fell on the wood and floated away?"

"Baas, you are the fish, who come up softly, softly out of the water in the dark, and shoot the Motombo with the little rifle, and then the rest of us, who are the moth, fall into the canoe and float away. There is a storm about to break, Baas, and who will see you swim the stream in the storm and the night?"

"The crocodiles," I suggested.

"Baas, I didn't see a crocodile eat the fish. I think the fish is laughing down there with the fat spider in its stomach. Also when there is a storm crocodiles go to bed because they are afraid lest the lightning should kill them for their sins."

Now I remembered that I had often heard, and indeed to some extent noted, that these great reptiles do vanish in disturbed weather, probably because their food hides away. However that might be, in an instant I made up my mind.

As soon as it was quite dark I would swim the water, holding the little rifle, Intombi, above my head, and try to steal the canoe. If the old wizard was watching, which I hoped might not be the case, well, I must deal with him as best I could. I knew the desperate nature of the

expedient, but there was no other way. If we could not get a boat we must remain in that foodless forest until we starved. Or if we returned to the island of the Flower, there ere long we should certainly be attacked and destroyed by Komba and the Pongos when they came to look for our bodies.

"I'll try it, Hans," I said.

"Yes, Baas, I thought you would. I'd come, too, only I can't swim and when I was drowning I might make a noise, because one forgets oneself then, Baas. But it will be all right, for if it were otherwise I am sure that your reverend father would have shown us so in the sign. The moth floated off quite comfortably on the wood, and just now I saw it spread its wings and fly away. And the fish, ah! how he laughs with that fat old spider in his stomach!"