

CHAPTER XVIII

FATE STABS

We went back to the others whom we found crouched on the ground among the coffins, looking distinctly depressed. No wonder; night was closing in, the thunder was beginning to growl and echo through the forest and rain to fall in big drops. In short, although Stephen remarked that every cloud has a silver lining, a proverb which, as I told him, I seemed to have heard before, in no sense could the outlook be considered bright.

"Well, Allan, what have you arranged?" asked Brother John, with a faint attempt at cheerfulness as he let go of his wife's hand. In those days he always seemed to be holding his wife's hand.

"Oh!" I answered, "I am going to get the canoe so that we can all row over comfortably."

They stared at me, and Miss Hope, who was seated by Stephen, asked in her usual Biblical language:

"Have you the wings of a dove that you can fly, O Mr. Allan?"

"No," I answered, "but I have the fins of a fish, or something like them, and I can swim."

Now there arose a chorus of expostulation.

"You shan't risk it," said Stephen, "I can swim as well as you and I'm younger. I'll go, I want a bath."

"That you will have, O Stephen," interrupted Miss Hope, as I thought in some alarm. "The latter rain from heaven will make you clean." (By now it was pouring.)

"Yes, Stephen, you can swim," I said, "but you will forgive me for saying that you are not particularly deadly with a rifle, and clean shooting may be the essence of this business. Now listen to me, all of you. I am going. I hope that I shall succeed, but if I fail it does not so very much matter, for you will be no worse off than you were before. There are three pairs of you. John and his wife; Stephen and Miss Hope; Mavovo and Hans. If the odd man of the party comes to grief, you will have to choose a new captain, that is all, but while I lead I mean to be obeyed."

Then Mavovo, to whom Hans had been talking, spoke.

"My father Macumazana is a brave man. If he lives he will have done his duty. If he dies he will have done his duty still better, and, on the earth or in the under-world among the spirits of our fathers, his name shall be great for ever; yes, his name shall be a song."

When Brother John had translated these words, which I thought fine, there was silence.

"Now," I said, "come with me to the water's edge, all of you. You will be in less danger from the lightning there, where are no tall trees. And while I am gone, do you ladies dress up Hans in that gorilla-skin as best you can, lacing it on to him with some of that palm-fibre string which we brought with us, and filling out the hollows and the head with leaves or reeds. I want him to be ready when I come back with the canoe.

Hans groaned audibly, but made no objection and we started with our impedimenta down to the edge of the estuary where we hid behind a clump of mangrove bushes and tall, feathery reeds. Then I took off some of my clothes, stripping in fact to my flannel shirt and the cotton pants I wore, both of which were grey in colour and therefore almost invisible at night.

Now I was ready and Hans handed me the little rifle.

"It is at full cock, Baas, with the catch on," he said, "and carefully loaded. Also I have wrapped the lining of my hat, which is very full of grease, for the hair makes grease especially in hot weather, Baas, round the lock to keep away the wet from the cap and powder. It is not tied, Baas, only twisted. Give the rifle a shake and it will fall off."

"I understand," I said, and gripped the gun with my left hand by the tongue just forward of the hammer, in such a fashion that the horrid greased rag from Hans's hat was held tight over the lock and cap. Then I shook hands with the others and when I came to Miss Hope I am proud to add that she spontaneously and of her own accord imprinted a kiss upon my mediaeval brow. I felt inclined to return it, but did not.

"It is the kiss of peace, O Allan," she said. "May you go and return in peace."

"Thank you," I said, "but get on with dressing Hans in his new clothes."

Stephen muttered something about feeling ashamed of himself. Brother John put up a vigorous and well-directed prayer. Mavovo saluted with the copper assegai and began to give me sibonga or Zulu titles of praise beneath his breath, and Mrs. Eversley said:

"Oh! I thank God that I have lived to see a brave English gentleman again," which I thought a great compliment to my nation and myself, though when I afterwards discovered that she herself was English by birth, it took off some of the polish.

Next, just after a vivid flash of lightning, for the storm had broken in earnest now, I ran swiftly to the water's edge, accompanied by Hans, who was determined to see the last of me.

"Get back, Hans, before the lightning shows you," I said, as I slid gently from a mangrove-root into that filthy stream, "and tell them to keep my coat and trousers dry if they can."

"Good-bye, Baas," he murmured, and I heard that he was sobbing. "Keep a good heart, O Baas of Baases. After all, this is nothing to the vultures of the Hill of Slaughter. Intombi pulled us through then, and so she will again, for she knows who can hold her straight!"

That was the last I heard of Hans, for if he said any more, the hiss of the torrential rain smothered his words.

Oh! I had tried to "keep a good heart" before the others, but it is beyond my powers to describe the deadly fright I felt, perhaps the worst of all my life, which is saying a great deal. Here I was starting on one of the maddest ventures that was ever undertaken by man. I needn't put its points again, but that which appealed to me most at the moment was the crocodiles. I have always hated crocodiles since--well, never mind--and the place was as full of them as the ponds at Ascension are of turtles.

Still I swam on. The estuary was perhaps two hundred yards wide, not more, no great distance for a good swimmer as I was in those days. But then I had to hold the rifle above the water with my left hand at all cost, for if once it went beneath it would be useless. Also I was desperately afraid of being seen in the lightning flashes, although to

minimise this risk I had kept my dark-coloured cloth hat upon my head. Lastly there was the lightning itself to fear, for it was fearful and continuous and seemed to be striking along the water. It was a fact that a fire-ball or something of the sort hit the surface within a few yards of me, as though it had aimed at the rifle-barrel and just missed. Or so I thought, though it may have been a crocodile rising at the moment.

In one way, or rather, in two, however, I was lucky. The first was the complete absence of wind which must have raised waves that might have swamped me and would at any rate have wetted the rifle. The second was that there was no fear of my losing my path for in the mouth of the cave I could see the glow of the fires which burned on either side of the Motombo's seat. They served the same purpose to me as did the lamp of the lady called Hero to her lover Leander when he swam the Hellespont to pay her clandestine visits at night. But he had something pleasant to look forward to, whereas I---! Still, there was another point in common between us. Hero, if I remember right, was a priestess of the Greek goddess of love, whereas the party who waited me was also in a religious line of business. Only, as I firmly believe, he was a priest of the devil.

I suppose that swim took me about a quarter-of-an-hour, for I went slowly to save my strength, although the crocodiles suggested haste. But thank Heaven they never appeared to complicate matters. Now I was quite near the cave, and now I was beneath the overhanging roof and in the shallow water of the little bay that formed a harbour for the canoe. I

stood upon my feet on the rock bottom, the water coming up to my breast, and peered about me, while I rested and worked my left arm, stiff with the up-holding of the gun, to and fro. The fires had burnt somewhat low and until my eyes were freed from the raindrops and grew accustomed to the light of the place I could not see clearly.

I took the rag from round the lock of the rifle, wiped the wet off the barrel with it and let it fall. Then I loosed the catch and by touching a certain mechanism, made the rifle hair-triggered. Now I looked again and began to make out things. There was the platform and there, alas! on it sat the toad-like Motombo. But his back was to me; he was gazing not towards the water, but down the cave. I hesitated for one fateful moment. Perhaps the priest was asleep, perhaps I could get the canoe away without shooting. I did not like the job; moreover, his head was held forward and invisible, and how was I to make certain of killing him with a shot in the back? Lastly, if possible, I wished to avoid firing because of the report.

At that instant the Motombo wheeled round. Some instinct must have warned him of my presence, for the silence was gravelike save for the soft splash of the rain without. As he turned the lightning blazed and he saw me.

"It is the white man," he muttered to himself in his hissing whisper, while I waited through the following darkness with the rifle at my shoulder, "the white man who shot me long, long ago, and again he has a

gun! Oh! Fate stabs, doubtless the god is dead and I too must die!"

Then as if some doubt struck him he lifted the horn to summon help.

Again the lightning flashed and was accompanied by a fearful crack of thunder. With a prayer for skill, I covered his head and fired by the glare of it just as the trumpet touched his lips. It fell from his hand. He seemed to shrink together, and moved no more.

Oh! thank God, thank God! in this supreme moment of trial the art of which I am a master had not failed me. If my hand had shaken ever so little, if my nerves, strained to breaking point, had played me false in the least degree, if the rag from Hans's hat had not sufficed to keep away the damp from the cap and powder! Well, this history would never have been written and there would have been some more bones in the graveyard of the Kalubis, that is all!

For a moment I waited, expecting to see the women attendants dart from the doorways in the sides of the cave, and to hear them sound a shrill alarm. None appeared, and I guessed that the rattle of the thunder had swallowed up the crack of the rifle, a noise, be it remembered, that none of them had ever heard. For an unknown number of years this ancient creature, I suppose, had squatted day and night upon that platform, whence, I daresay, it was difficult for him to move. So after they had wrapped his furs round him at sunset and made up the fires to keep him warm, why should his women come to disturb him unless he called them

with his horn? Probably it was not even lawful that they should do so.

Somewhat reassured I waded forward a few paces and loosed the canoe which was tied by the prow. Then I scrambled into it, and laying down the rifle, took one of the paddles and began to push out of the creek. Just then the lightning flared once more, and by it I caught sight of the Motombo's face that was now within a few feet of my own. It seemed to be resting almost on his knees, and its appearance was dreadful. In the centre of the forehead was a blue mark where the bullet had entered, for I had made no mistake in that matter. The deep-set round eyes were open and, all their fire gone, seemed to stare at me from beneath the overhanging brows. The massive jaw had fallen and the red tongue hung out upon the pendulous lip. The leather-like skin of the bloated cheeks had assumed an ashen hue still streaked and mottled with brown.

Oh! the thing was horrible, and sometimes when I am out of sorts, it haunts me to this day. Yet that creature's blood does not lie heavy on my mind, of it my conscience is not afraid. His end was necessary to save the innocent and I am sure that it was well deserved. For he was a devil, akin to the great god ape I had slain in the forest, to whom, by the way, he bore a most remarkable resemblance in death. Indeed if their heads had been laid side by side at a little distance, it would not have been too easy to tell them apart with their projecting brows, beardless, retreating chins and yellow tushes at the corners of the mouth.

Presently I was clear of the cave. Still for a while I lay to at one

side of it against the towering cliff, both to listen in case what I had done should be discovered, and for fear lest the lightning which was still bright, although the storm centre was rapidly passing away, should reveal me to any watchers.

For quite ten minutes I hid thus, and then, determining to risk it, paddled softly towards the opposite bank keeping, however, a little to the west of the cave and taking my line by a certain very tall tree which, as I had noted, towered up against the sky at the back of the graveyard.

As it happened my calculations were accurate and in the end I directed the bow of the canoe into the rushes behind which I had left my companions. Just then the moon began to struggle out through the thinning rain-clouds, and by its light they saw me, and I saw what for a moment I took to be the gorilla-god himself waddling forward to seize the boat. There was the dreadful brute exactly as he had appeared in the forest, except that it seemed a little smaller.

Then I remembered and laughed and that laugh did me a world of good.

"Is that you, Baas?" said a muffled voice, speaking apparently from the middle of the gorilla. "Are you safe, Baas?"

"Of course," I answered, "or how should I be here?" adding cheerfully, "Are you comfortable in that nice warm skin on this wet night, Hans?"

"Oh! Baas," answered the voice, "tell me what happened. Even in this stink I burn to know."

"Death happened to the Motombo, Hans. Here, Stephen, give me your hand and my clothes, and, Mavovo, hold the rifle and the canoe while I put them on."

Then I landed and stepping into the reeds, pulled off my wet shirt and pants, which I stuffed away into the big pockets of my shooting coat, for I did not want to lose them, and put on the dry things that, although scratchy, were quite good enough clothing in that warm climate. After this I treated myself to a good sup of brandy from the flask, and ate some food which I seemed to require. Then I told them the story, and cutting short their demonstrations of wonder and admiration, bade them place the Holy Flower in the canoe and get in themselves. Next with the help of Hans who poked out his fingers through the skin of the gorilla's arms, I carefully re-loaded the rifle, setting the last cap on the nipple. This done, I joined them in the canoe, taking my seat in the prow and bidding Brother John and Stephen paddle.

Making a circuit to avoid observation as before, in a very short time we reached the mouth of the cave. I leant forward and peeped round the western wall of rock. Nobody seemed to be stirring. There the fires burned dimly, there the huddled shape of the Motombo still crouched upon the platform. Silently, silently we disembarked, and I formed our

procession while the others looked askance at the horrible face of the dead Motombo.

I headed it, then came the Mother of the Flower, followed by Hans, playing his part of the god of the forest; then Brother John and Stephen carrying the Holy Flower. After it walked Hope, while Mavovo brought up the rear. Near to one of the fires, as I had noted on our first passage of the cave, lay a pile of the torches which I have already mentioned. We lit some of them, and at a sign from me, Mavovo dragged the canoe back into its little dock and tied the cord to its post. Its appearance there, apparently undisturbed, might, I thought, make our crossing of the water seem even more mysterious. All this while I watched the doors in the sides of the cave, expecting every moment to see the women rush out. But none came. Perhaps they slept, or perhaps they were absent; I do not know to this day.

We started, and in solemn silence threaded our way down the windings of the cave, extinguishing our torches as soon as we saw light at its inland outlet. At a few paces from its mouth stood a sentry. His back was towards the cave, and in the uncertain gleams of the moon, struggling with the clouds, for a thin rain still fell, he never noted us till we were right on to him. Then he turned and saw, and at the awful sight of this procession of the gods of his land, threw up his arms, and without a word fell senseless. Although I never asked, I think that Mavovo took measures to prevent his awakening. At any rate when I looked back later on, I observed that he was carrying a big Pongo spear

with a long shaft, instead of the copper weapon which he had taken from one of the coffins.

On we marched towards Rica Town, following the easy path by which we had come. As I have said, the country was very deserted and the inhabitants of such huts as we passed were evidently fast asleep. Also there were no dogs in this land to awake them with their barking. Between the cave and Rica we were not, I think, seen by a single soul.

Through that long night we pushed on as fast as we could travel, only stopping now and again for a few minutes to rest the bearers of the Holy Flower. Indeed at times Mrs. Eversley relieved her husband at this task, but Stephen, being very strong, carried his end of the stretcher throughout the whole journey.

Hans, of course, was much oppressed by the great weight of the gorilla skin, which, although it had shrunk a good deal, remained as heavy as ever. But he was a tough old fellow, and on the whole got on better than might have been expected, though by the time we reached the town he was sometimes obliged to follow the example of the god itself and help himself forward with his hands, going on all fours, as a gorilla generally does.

We reached the broad, long street of Rica about half an hour before dawn, and proceeded down it till we were past the Feast-house still quite unobserved, for as yet none were stirring on that wet morning.

Indeed it was not until we were within a hundred yards of the harbour that a woman possessed of the virtue, or vice, of early rising, who had come from a hut to work in her garden, saw us and raised an awful, piercing scream.

"The gods!" she screamed. "The gods are leaving the land and taking the white men with them."

Instantly there arose a hubbub in the houses. Heads were thrust out of the doors and people ran into the gardens, every one of whom began to yell till one might have thought that a massacre was in progress. But as yet no one came near us, for they were afraid.

"Push on," I cried, "or all is lost."

They answered nobly. Hans struggled forward on all fours, for he was nearly done and his hideous garment was choking him, while Stephen and Brother John, exhausted though they were with the weight of the great plant, actually broke into a feeble trot. We came to the harbour and there, tied to the wharf, was the same canoe in which we had crossed to Pongo-land. We sprang into it and cut the fastenings with my knife, having no time to untie them, and pushed off from the wharf.

By now hundreds of people, among them many soldiers were hard upon and indeed around us, but still they seemed too frightened to do anything. So far the inspiration of Hans' disguise had saved us. In the midst of

them, by the light of the rising sun, I recognised Komba, who ran up, a great spear in his hand, and for a moment halted amazed.

Then it was that the catastrophe happened which nearly cost us all our lives.

Hans, who was in the stern of the canoe, began to faint from exhaustion, and in his efforts to obtain air, for the heat and stench of the skin were overpowering him, thrust his head out through the lacings of the hide beneath the reed-stuffed mask of the gorilla, which fell over languidly upon his shoulder. Komba saw his ugly little face and knew it again.

"It is a trick!" he roared. "These white devils have killed the god and stolen the Holy Flower and its priestess. The yellow man is wrapped in the skin of the god. To the boats! To the boats!"

"Paddle," I shouted to Brother John and Stephen, "paddle for your lives! Mavovo, help me get up the sail."

As it chanced on that stormy morning the wind was blowing strongly towards the mainland.

We laboured at the mast, shipped it and hauled up the mat sail, but slowly for we were awkward at the business. By the time that it began to draw the paddles had propelled us about four hundred yards from the

wharf, whence many canoes, with their sails already set, were starting in pursuit. Standing in the prow of the first of these, and roaring curses and vengeance at us, was Komba, the new Kalubi, who shook a great spear above his head.

An idea occurred to me, who knew that unless something were done we must be overtaken and killed by these skilled boatmen. Leaving Mavovo to attend to the sail, I scrambled aft, and thrusting aside the fainting Hans, knelt down in the stern of the canoe. There was still one charge, or rather one cap, left, and I meant to use it. I put up the largest flapsight, lifted the little rifle and covered Komba, aiming at the point of his chin. Intombi was not sighted for or meant to use at this great distance, and only by this means of allowing for the drop of the bullet, could I hope to hit the man in the body.

The sail was drawing well now and steadied the boat, also, being still under the shelter of the land, the water was smooth as that of a pond, so really I had a very good firing platform. Moreover, weary though I was, my vital forces rose to the emergency and I felt myself grow rigid as a statue. Lastly, the light was good, for the sun rose behind me, its level rays shining full on to my mark. I held my breath and touched the trigger. The charge exploded sweetly and almost at the instant; as the smoke drifted to one side, I saw Komba throw up his arms and fall backwards into the canoe. Then, quite a long while afterwards, or so it seemed, the breeze brought the faint sound of the thud of that fateful bullet to our ears.

Though perhaps I ought not to say so, it was really a wonderful shot in all the circumstances, for, as I learned afterwards, the ball struck just where I hoped that it might, in the centre of the breast, piercing the heart. Indeed, taking everything into consideration, I think that those four shots which I fired in Pongo-land are the real record of my career as a marksman. The first at night broke the arm of the gorilla god and would have killed him had not the charge hung fire and given him time to protect his head. The second did kill him in the midst of a great scrimmage when everything was moving. The third, fired by the glare of lightning after a long swim, slew the Motombo, and the fourth, loosed at this great distance from a moving boat, was the bane of that cold-blooded and treacherous man, Komba, who thought that he had trapped us to Pongo-land to be murdered and eaten as a sacrifice. Lastly there was always the consciousness that no mistake must be made, since with but four percussion caps it could not be retrieved.

I am sure that I could not have done so well with any other rifle, however modern and accurate it might be. But to this little Purdey weapon I had been accustomed from my youth, and that, as any marksman will know, means a great deal. I seemed to know it and it seemed to know me. It hangs on my wall to this day, although of course I never use it now in our breech-loading era. Unfortunately, however, a local gunsmith to whom I sent it to have the lock cleaned, re-browned it and scraped and varnished the stock, etc., without authority, making it look almost new again. I preferred it in its worn and scratched condition.

To return: the sound of the shot, like that of John Peel's horn, aroused Hans from his sleep. He thrust his head between my legs and saw Komba fall.

"Oh! beautiful, Baas, beautiful!" he said faintly. "I am sure that the ghost of your reverend father cannot kill his enemies more nicely down there among the Fires. Beautiful!" and the silly old fellow fell to kissing my boots, or what remained of them, after which I gave him the last of the brandy.

This quite brought him to himself again, especially when he was free from that filthy skin and had washed his head and hands.

The effect of the death of Komba upon the Pongos was very strange. All the other canoes clustered round that in which he lay. Then, after a hurried consultation, they hauled down their sails and paddled back to the wharf. Why they did this I cannot tell. Perhaps they thought that he was bewitched, or only wounded and required the attentions of a medicine-man. Perhaps it was not lawful for them to proceed except under the guidance of some reserve Kalubi who had "passed the god" and who was on shore. Perhaps it was necessary, according to their rites, that the body of their chief should be landed with certain ceremonies. I do not know. It is impossible to be sure as to the mysterious motives that actuate many of these remote African tribes.

At any rate the result was that it gave us a great start and a chance of life, who must otherwise have died upon the spot. Outside the bay the breeze blew merrily, taking us across the lake at a spanking pace, until about midday when it began to fall. Fortunately, however, it did not altogether drop till three o'clock by which time the coast of Mazitu-land was comparatively near; we could even distinguish a speck against the skyline which we knew was the Union Jack that Stephen had set upon the crest of a little hill.

During those hours of peace we ate the food that remained to us, washed ourselves as thoroughly as we could and rested. Well was it, in view of what followed, that we had this time of repose. For just as the breeze was failing I looked aft and there, coming up behind us, still holding the wind, was the whole fleet of Pongo canoes, thirty or forty of them perhaps, each carrying an average of about twenty men. We sailed on for as long as we could, for though our progress was but slow, it was quicker than what we could have made by paddling. Also it was necessary that we should save our strength for the last trial.

I remember that hour very well, for in the nervous excitement of it every little thing impressed itself upon my mind. I remember even the shape of the clouds that floated over us, remnants of the storm of the previous night. One was like a castle with a broken-down turret showing a staircase within; another had a fantastic resemblance to a wrecked ship with a hole in her starboard bow, two of her masts broken and one standing with some fragments of sails flapping from it, and so forth.

Then there was the general aspect of the great lake, especially at a spot where two currents met, causing little waves which seemed to fight with each other and fall backwards in curious curves. Also there were shoals of small fish, something like chub in shape, with round mouths and very white stomachs, which suddenly appeared upon the surface, jumping at invisible flies. These attracted a number of birds that resembled gulls of a light build. They had coal-black heads, white backs, greyish wings, and slightly webbed feet, pink as coral, with which they seized the small fish, uttering as they did so, a peculiar and plaintive cry that ended in a long-drawn e-e-é. The father of the flock, whose head seemed to be white like his back, perhaps from age, hung above them, not troubling to fish himself, but from time to time forcing one of the company to drop what he had caught, which he retrieved before it reached the water. Such are some of the small things that come back to me, though there were others too numerous and trivial to mention.

When the breeze failed us at last we were perhaps something over three miles from the shore, or rather from the great bed of reeds which at this spot grow in the shallows off the Mazitu coast to a breadth of seven or eight hundred yards, where the water becomes too deep for them. The Pongos were then about a mile and a half behind. But as the wind favoured them for a few minutes more and, having plenty of hands, they could help themselves on by paddling, when at last it died to a complete calm, the distance between us was not more than one mile. This meant

that they must cover four miles of water, while we covered three.

Letting down our now useless sail and throwing it and the mast overboard to lighten the canoe, since the sky showed us that there was no more hope of wind, we began to paddle as hard as we could. Fortunately the two ladies were able to take their share in this exercise, since they had learned it upon the Lake of the Flower, where it seemed they kept a private canoe upon the other side of the island which was used for fishing. Hans, who was still weak, we set to steer with a paddle aft, which he did in a somewhat erratic fashion.

A stern chase is proverbially a long chase, but still the enemy with their skilled rowers came up fast. When we were a mile from the reeds they were within half a mile of us, and as we tired the proportion of distance lessened. When we were two hundred yards from the reeds they were not more than fifty or sixty yards behind, and then the real struggle began.

It was short but terrible. We threw everything we could overboard, including the ballast stones at the bottom of the canoe and the heavy hide of the gorilla. This, as it proved, was fortunate, since the thing sank but slowly and the foremost Pongo boats halted a minute to recover so precious a relic, checking the others behind them, a circumstance that helped us by twenty or thirty yards.

"Over with the plant!" I said.

But Stephen, looking quite old from exhaustion and with the sweat streaming from him as he laboured at his unaccustomed paddle, gasped:

"For Heaven's sake, no, after all we have gone through to get it."

So I didn't insist; indeed there was neither time nor breath for argument.

Now we were in the reeds, for thanks to the flag which guided us, we had struck the big hippopotamus lane exactly, and the Pongos, paddling like demons, were about thirty yards behind. Thankful was I that those interesting people had never learned the use of bows and arrows, and that their spears were too heavy to throw. By now, or rather some time before, old Babemba and the Mazitu had seen us, as had our Zulu hunters. Crowds of them were wading through the shallows towards us, yelling encouragements as they came. The Zulus, too, opened a rather wild fire, with the result that one of the bullets struck our canoe and another touched the brim of my hat. A third, however, killed a Pongo, which caused some confusion in the ranks of Tusculum.

But we were done and they came on remorselessly. When their leading boat was not more than ten yards from us and we were perhaps two hundred from the shore, I drove my paddle downwards and finding that the water was less than four feet deep, shouted:

"Overboard, all, and wade. It's our last chance!"

We scrambled out of that canoe the prow of which, as I left it the last, I pushed round across the water-lane to obstruct those of the Pongo. Now I think all would have gone well had it not been for Stephen, who after he had floundered forward a few paces in the mud, bethought him of his beloved orchid. Not only did he return to try to rescue it, he also actually persuaded his friend Mavovo to accompany him. They got back to the boat and began to lift the plant out when the Pongo fell upon them, striking at them with their spears over the width of our canoe. Mavovo struck back with the weapon he had taken from the Pongo sentry at the cave mouth, and killed or wounded one of them. Then some one hurled a ballast stone at him which caught him on the side of the head and knocked him down into the water, whence he rose and reeled back, almost senseless, till some of our people got hold of him and dragged him to the shore.

So Stephen was left alone, dragging at the great orchid, till a Pongo reaching over the canoe drove a spear through his shoulder. He let go of the orchid because he must and tried to retreat. Too late! Half a dozen or more of the Pongo pushed themselves between the stern or bow of our canoe and the reeds, and waded forward to kill him. I could not help, for to tell the truth at the moment I was stuck in a mud-hole made by the hoof of a hippopotamus, while the Zulu hunters and the Mazitu were as yet too far off. Surely he must have died had it not been for the courage of the girl Hope, who, while wading shorewards a little in front

of me, had turned and seen his plight. Back she came, literally bounding through the water like a leopard whose cubs are in danger.

Reaching Stephen before the Pongo she thrust herself between him and them and proceeded to address them with the utmost vigour in their own language, which of course she had learned from those of the albinos who were not mutes.

What she said I could not exactly catch because of the shouts of the advancing Mazitu. I gathered, however, that she was anathematizing them in the words of some old and potent curse that was only used by the guardians of the Holy Flower, which consigned them, body and spirit, to a dreadful doom. The effect of this malediction, which by the way neither the young lady nor her mother would repeat to me afterwards, was certainly remarkable. Those men who heard it, among them the would-be slayers of Stephen, stayed their hands and even inclined their heads towards the young priestess, as though in reverence or deprecation, and thus remained for sufficient time for her to lead the wounded Stephen out of danger. This she did wading backwards by his side and keeping her eyes fixed full upon the Pongo. It was perhaps the most curious rescue that I ever saw.

The Holy Flower, I should add, they recaptured and carried off, for I saw it departing in one of their canoes. That was the end of my orchid hunt and of the money which I hoped to make by the sale of this floral treasure. I wonder what became of it. I have good reason to believe that

it was never replanted on the Island of the Flower, so perhaps it was borne back to the dim and unknown land in the depths of Africa whence the Pongo are supposed to have brought it when they migrated.

After this incident of the wounding and the rescue of Stephen by the intrepid Miss Hope, whose interest in him was already strong enough to induce her to risk her life upon his behalf, all we fugitives were dragged ashore somehow by our friends. Here, Hans, I and the ladies collapsed exhausted, though Brother John still found sufficient strength to do what he could for the injured Stephen and Mavovo.

Then the Battle of the Reeds began, and a fierce fray it was. The Pongos who were about equal in numbers to our people, came on furiously, for they were mad at the death of their god with his priest, the Motombo, of which I think news had reached them and at the carrying off of the Mother of the Flower. Springing from their canoes because the waterway was too narrow for more than one of these to travel at a time, they plunged into the reeds with the intention of wading ashore. Here their hereditary enemies, the Mazitu, attacked them under the command of old Babemba. The struggle that ensued partook more of the nature of a series of hand-to-hand fights than of a set battle. It was extraordinary to see the heads of the combatants moving among the reeds as they stabbed at each other with the great spears, till one went down. There were few wounded in that fray, for those who fell sank in the mud and water and were drowned.

On the whole the Pongo, who were operating in what was almost their native element, were getting the best of it, and driving the Mazitu back. But what decided the day against them were the guns of our Zulu hunters. Although I could not lift a rifle myself I managed to collect these men round me and to direct their fire, which proved so terrifying to the Pongos that after ten or a dozen of them had been knocked over, they began to give back sullenly and were helped into their canoes by those men who were left in charge of them.

Then at length at a signal they got out their paddles, and, still shouting curses and defiance at us, rowed away till they became but specks upon the bosom of the great lake and vanished.

Two of the canoes we captured, however, and with them six or seven Pongos. These the Mazitu wished to put to death, but at the bidding of Brother John, whose orders, it will be remembered, had the same authority in Mazitu-land as those of the king, they bound their arms and made them prisoners instead.

In about half an hour it was all over, but of the rest of that day I cannot write, as I think I fainted from utter exhaustion, which was not, perhaps, wonderful, considering all that we had undergone in the four and a half days that had elapsed since we first embarked upon the Great Lake. For constant strain, physical and mental, I recall no such four days during the whole of my adventurous life. It was indeed wonderful that we came through them alive.

The last thing I remember was the appearance of Sammy, looking very smart, in his blue cotton smock, who, now that the fighting was over, emerged like a butterfly when the sun shines after rain.

"Oh! Mr. Quatermain," he said, "I welcome you home again after arduous exertions and looking into the eyes of bloody war. All the days of absence, and a good part of the nights, too, while the mosquitoes hunted slumber, I prayed for your safety like one o'clock, and perhaps, Mr. Quatermain, that helped to do the trick, for what says poet? Those who serve and wait are almost as good as those who cook dinner."

Such were the words which reached and, oddly enough, impressed themselves upon my darkening brain. Or rather they were part of the words, excerpts from a long speech that there is no doubt Sammy had carefully prepared during our absence.