

CHAPTER VII

THE BABOON-WOMAN

Hendrika obeyed, leading the horses to the side of the tree.

"Now, Mr. Allan," said Stella, "you must ride on my horse, and the old black man must ride on the other. I will walk, and Hendrika will carry the child. Oh, do not be afraid, she is very strong, she could carry you or me."

Hendrika grunted assent. I am sorry that I cannot express her method of speech by any more polite term. Sometimes she grunted like a monkey, sometimes she clicked like a Bushman, and sometimes she did both together, when she became quite unintelligible.

I expostulated against this proposed arrangement, saying that we could walk, which was a fib, for I do not think that I could have done a mile; but Stella would not listen, she would not even let me carry my elephant gun, but took it herself. So we mounted with some difficulty, and Hendrika took up the sleeping Tota in her long, sinewy arms.

"See that the 'Baboon-woman' does not run away into the mountains with the little white one," said Indaba-zimbi to me in Kaffir, as he climbed slowly on to the horse.

Unfortunately Hendrika understood his speech. Her face twisted and grew livid with fury. She put down Tota and literally sprang at Indaba-zimbi as a monkey springs. But weary and worn as he was, the old gentleman was too quick for her. With an exclamation of genuine fright he threw himself from the horse on the further side, with the somewhat ludicrous result that all in a moment Hendrika was occupying the seat which he had vacated. Just then Stella realized the position.

"Come down, you savage, come down!" she said, stamping her foot.

The extraordinary creature flung herself from the horse and literally grovelled on the ground before her mistress and burst into tears.

"Pardon, Miss Stella," she clicked and grunted in villainous English, "but he called me 'Babyan-frau' (Baboon-woman)."

"Tell your servant that he must not use such words to Hendrika, Mr. Allan," Stella said to me. "If he does," she added, in a whisper, "Hendrika will certainly kill him."

I explained this to Indaba-zimbi, who, being considerably frightened, deigned to apologize. But from that hour there was hate and war between these two.

Harmony having been thus restored, we started, the dogs following us. A small strip of desert intervened between us and the slope of the

peak--perhaps it was two miles wide. We crossed it and reached rich grass lands, for here a considerable stream gathered from the hills; but it did not flow across the barren lands, it passed to the east along the foot of the hills. This stream we had to cross by a ford. Hendrika walked boldly through it, holding Tota in her arms. Stella leapt across from stone to stone like a roebuck; I thought to myself that she was the most graceful creature that I had ever seen. After this the track passed around a pleasantly-wooded shoulder of the peak, which was, I found, known as Babyan Kap, or Baboon Head. Of course we could only go at a foot pace, so our progress was slow. Stella walked for some way in silence, then she spoke.

"Tell me, Mr. Allan," she said, "how it was that I came to find you dying in the desert?"

So I began and told her all. It took an hour or more to do so, and she listened intently, now and again asking a question.

"It is all very wonderful," she said when I had done, "very wonderful indeed. Do you know I went out this morning with Hendrika and the dogs for a ride, meaning to get back home by mid-day, for my father is ill, and I do not like to leave him for long. But just as I was going to turn, when we were about where we are now--yes, that was the very bush--an oribé got up, and the dogs chased it. I followed them for the gallop, and when we came to the river, instead of turning to the left as bucks generally do, the oribé swam the stream and took to the Bad Lands

beyond. I followed it, and within a hundred yards of the big tree the dogs killed it. Hendrika wanted to turn back at once, but I said that we would rest under the shade of the tree, for I knew that there was a spring of water near. Well, we went; and there I saw you all lying like dead; but Hendrika, who is very clever in some ways, said no--and you know the rest. Yes, it is very wonderful."

"It is indeed," I said. "Now tell me, Miss Stella, who is Hendrika?"

She looked round before answering to see that the woman was not near.

"Hers is a strange story, Mr. Allan. I will tell you. You must know that all these mountains and the country beyond are full of baboons. When I was a girl of about ten I used to wander a great deal alone in the hills and valleys, and watch the baboons as they played among the rocks. There was one family of baboons that I watched especially--they used to live in a kloof about a mile from the house. The old man baboon was very large, and one of the females had a grey face. But the reason why I watched them so much was because I saw that they had with them a creature that looked like a girl, for her skin was quite white, and, what was more, that she was protected from the weather when it happened to be cold by a fur belt of some sort, which was tied round her throat. The old baboons seemed to be especially fond of her, and would sit with their arms round her neck. For nearly a whole summer I watched this particular white-skinned baboon till at last my curiosity quite overmastered me. I noticed that, though she climbed about the cliffs

with the other monkeys, at a certain hour a little before sundown they used to put her with one or two other much smaller ones into a little cave, while the family went off somewhere to get food, to the mealie fields, I suppose. Then I got an idea that I would catch this white baboon and bring it home. But of course I could not do this by myself, so I took a Hottentot--a very clever man when he was not drunk--who lived on the stead, into my confidence. He was called Hendrik, and was very fond of me; but for a long while he would not listen to my plan, because he said that the babyans would kill us. At last I bribed him with a knife that had four blades, and one afternoon we started, Hendrik carrying a stout sack made of hide, with a rope running through it so that the mouth could be drawn tight.

"Well, we got to the place, and, hiding ourselves carefully in the trees at the foot of the kloof, watched the baboons playing about and grunting to each other, till at length, according to custom, they took the white one and three other little babies and put them in the cave. Then the old man came out, looked carefully round, called to his family, and went off with them over the brow of the kloof. Now very slowly and cautiously we crept up over the rocks till we came to the mouth of the cave and looked in. All the four little baboons were fast asleep, with their backs towards us, and their arms round each other's necks, the white one being in the middle. Nothing could have been better for our plans. Hendrik, who by this time had quite entered into the spirit of the thing, crept along the cave like a snake, and suddenly dropped the mouth of the hide bag over the head of the white baboon. The poor little thing woke up and

gave a violent jump which caused it to vanish right into the bag. Then Hendrik pulled the string tight, and together we knotted it so that it was impossible for our captive to escape. Meanwhile the other baby baboons had rushed from the cave screaming, and when we got outside they were nowhere to be seen.

"Come on, Missie," said Hendrik; "the babyans will soon be back." He had shouldered the sack, inside of which the white baboon was kicking violently, and screaming like a child. It was dreadful to hear its shrieks.

"We scrambled down the sides of the kloof and ran for home as fast as we could manage. When we were near the waterfall, and within about three hundred yards of the garden wall, we heard a voice behind us, and there, leaping from rock to rock, and running over the grass, was the whole family of baboons headed by the old man.

"Run, Missie, run!" gasped Hendrik, and I did, like the wind, leaving him far behind. I dashed into the garden, where some Kaffirs were working, crying, "The babyans! the babyans!" Luckily the men had their sticks and spears by them and ran out just in time to save Hendrik, who was almost overtaken. The baboons made a good fight for it, however, and it was not till the old man was killed with an assegai that they ran away.

"Well, there is a stone hut in the kraal at the stead where my father

sometimes shuts up natives who have misbehaved. It is very strong, and has a barred window. To this hut Hendrik carried the sack, and, having untied the mouth, put it down on the floor, and ran from the place, shutting the door behind him. In another moment the poor little thing was out and dashing round the stone hut as though it were mad. It sprung at the bars of the window, clung there, and beat its head against them till the blood came. Then it fell to the floor, and sat upon it crying like a child, and rocking itself backwards and forwards. It was so sad to see it that I began to cry too.

"Just then my father came in and asked what all the fuss was about. I told him that we had caught a young white baboon, and he was angry, and said that it must be let go. But when he looked at it through the bars of the window he nearly fell down with astonishment.

"'Why!' he said, 'this is not a baboon, it is a white child that the baboons have stolen and brought up!'

"Now, Mr. Allan, whether my father is right or wrong, you can judge for yourself. You see Hendrika--we named her that after Hendrik, who caught her--she is a woman, not a monkey, and yet she has many of the ways of monkeys, and looks like one too. You saw how she can climb, for instance, and you hear how she talks. Also she is very savage, and when she is angry or jealous she seems to go mad, though she is as clever as anybody. I think that she must have been stolen by the baboons when she was quite tiny and nurtured by them, and that is why she is so like

them.

"But to go on. My father said that it was our duty to keep Hendrika at any cost. The worst of it was, that for three days she would eat nothing, and I thought that she would die, for all the while she sat and wailed. On the third day, however, I went to the bars of the window place, and held out a cup of milk and some fruit to her. She looked at it for a long while, then crept up moaning, took the milk from my hand, drank it greedily, and afterwards ate the fruit. From that time forward she took food readily enough, but only if I would feed her.

"But I must tell you of the dreadful end of Hendrik. From the day that we captured Hendrika the whole place began to swarm with baboons which were evidently employed in watching the kraals. One day Hendrik went out towards the hills alone to gather some medicine. He did not come back again, so the next day search was made. By a big rock which I can show you, they found his scattered and broken bones, the fragments of his assegai, and four dead baboons. They had set upon him and torn him to pieces.

"My father was very much frightened at this, but still he would not let Hendrika go, because he said that she was human, and that it was our duty to reclaim her. And so we did--to a certain extent, at least. After the murder of Hendrik, the baboons vanished from the neighbourhood, and have only returned quite recently, so at length we ventured to let Hendrika out. By this time she had grown very fond of me; still, on the

first opportunity she ran away. But in the evening she returned again. She had been seeking the baboons, and could not find them. Shortly afterwards she began to speak--I taught her--and from that time she has loved me so that she will not leave me. I think it would kill her if I went away from her. She watches me all day, and at night sleeps on the floor of my hut. Once, too, she saved my life when I was swept down the river in flood; but she is jealous, and hates everybody else. Look, how she is glaring at you now because I am talking to you!"

I looked. Hendrika was tramping along with the child in her arms and staring at me in a most sinister fashion out of the corners of her eyes.

While I was reflecting on the Baboon-woman's strange story, and thinking that she was an exceedingly awkward customer, the path took a sudden turn.

"Look!" said Stella, "there is our home. Is it not beautiful?"

It was beautiful indeed. Here on the western side of the great peak a bay had been formed in the mountain, which might have measured eight hundred or a thousand yards across by three-quarters of a mile in depth. At the back of this indentation the sheer cliff rose to the height of several hundred feet, and behind it and above it the great Babyan Peak towered up towards the heavens. The space of ground, embraced thus in the arms of the mountain, as it were, was laid out, as though by the cunning hand of man, in three terraces that rose one above the other. To

the right and left of the topmost terrace were chasms in the cliff, and down each chasm fell a waterfall, from no great height, indeed, but of considerable volume. These two streams flowed away on either side of the enclosed space, one towards the north, and the other, the course of which we had been following, round the base of the mountain. At each terrace they made a cascade, so that the traveller approaching had a view of eight waterfalls at once. Along the edge of the stream to our left were placed Kaffir kraals, built in orderly groups with verandahs, after the Basutu fashion, and a very large part of the entire space of land was under cultivation. All of this I noted at once, as well as the extraordinary richness and depth of the soil, which for many ages past had been washed down from the mountain heights. Then following the line of an excellent waggon road, on which we now found ourselves, that wound up from terrace to terrace, my eye lit upon the crowning wonder of the scene. For in the centre of the topmost platform or terrace, which may have enclosed eight or ten acres of ground, and almost surrounded by groves of orange trees, gleamed buildings of which I had never seen the like. There were three groups of them, one in the middle, and one on either side, and a little to the rear, but, as I afterwards discovered, the plan of all was the same. In the centre was an edifice constructed like an ordinary Zulu hut--that is to say, in the shape of a beehive, only it was five times the size of any hut I ever saw, and built of blocks of hewn white marble, fitted together with extraordinary knowledge of the principles and properties of arch building, and with so much accuracy and finish that it was often difficult to find the joints of the massive blocks. From this centre hut ran three covered passages,

leading to other buildings of an exactly similar character, only smaller, and each whole block was enclosed by a marble wall about four feet in height.

Of course we were as yet too far off to see all these details, but the general outline I saw at once, and it astonished me considerably. Even old Indaba-zimbi, whom the Baboon-woman had been unable to move, deigned to show wonder.

"Ou!" he said; "this is a place of marvels. Who ever saw kraals built of white stone?"

Stella watched our faces with an expression of intense amusement, but said nothing.

"Did your father build those kraals?" I gasped, at length.

"My father! no, of course not," she answered. "How would it have been possible for one white man to do so, or to have made this road? He found them as you see."

"Who built them, then?" I said again.

"I do not know. My father thinks that they are very ancient, for the people who live here now do not know how to lay one stone upon another, and these huts are so wonderfully constructed that, though they must

have stood for ages, not a stone of them had fallen. But I can show you the quarry where the marble was cut; it is close by and behind it is the entrance to an ancient mine, which my father thinks was a silver mine. Perhaps the people who worked the mine built the marble huts. The world is old, and no doubt plenty of people have lived in it and been forgotten."[*]

[*] Kraals of a somewhat similar nature to those described by Mr. Quatermain have been discovered in the Marico district of the Transvaal, and an illustration of them is to be found in Mr. Anderson's "Twenty-five Years in a Waggon," vol. ii. p. 55. Mr. Anderson says, "In this district are the ancient stone kraals mentioned in an early chapter; but it requires a fuller description to show that these extensive kraals must have been erected by a white race who understood building in stone and at right angles, with door-posts, lintels, and sills, and it required more than Kaffir skill to erect the stone huts, with stone circular roofs, beautifully formed and most substantially erected; strong enough, if not disturbed, to last a thousand years."
--Editor.

Then we rode on in silence. I have seen many beautiful sights in Africa, and in such matters, as in others, comparisons are odious and worthless, but I do not think that I ever saw a lovelier scene. It was no one thing--it was the combination of the mighty peak looking forth on to the

everlasting plains, the great cliffs, the waterfalls that sparkled in rainbow hues, the rivers girdling the rich cultivated lands, the gold-specked green of the orange trees, the flashing domes of the marble huts, and a thousand other things. Then over all brooded the peace of evening, and the infinite glory of the sunset that filled heaven with changing hues of splendour, that wrapped the mountain and cliffs in cloaks of purple and of gold, and lay upon the quiet face of the water like the smile of a god.

Perhaps also the contrast, and the memory of those three awful days and nights in the hopeless desert, enhanced the charm, and perhaps the beauty of the girl who walked beside me completed it. For of this I am sure, that of all sweet and lovely things that I looked on then, she was the sweetest and the loveliest.

Ah, it did not take me long to find my fate. How long will it be before I find her once again?