

CHAPTER IX

"LET US GO IN, ALLAN!"

It is very difficult for me to describe the period of time which elapsed between my arrival at Babyan's Peak and my marriage with Stella. When I look back on it, it seems sweet as with the odour of flowers, and dim as with the happy dusk of summer eves, while through the sweetness comes the sound of Stella's voice, and through the gloom shines the starlight of her eyes. I think that we loved each other from the first, though for a while we said no word of love. Day by day I went about the place with her, accompanied by little Tota and Hendrika only, while she attended to the thousand and one matters which her father's ever-growing weakness had laid upon her; or rather, as time drew on, I attended to the business, and she accompanied me. All day through we were together. Then after supper, when the night had fallen, we would walk together in the garden and come at length to hear her father read aloud sometimes from the works of a poet, sometimes from history. Or, if he did not feel well, Stella would read, and when this was done, Mr. Carson would celebrate a short form of prayer, and we would separate till the morning once more brought our happy hour of meeting.

So the weeks went by, and with every week I grew to know my darling better. Often, I wonder now, if my fond fancy deceives me, or if indeed there are women as sweet and dear as she. Was it solitude that had given such depth and gentleness to her? Was it the long years of communing

with Nature that had endowed her with such peculiar grace, the grace we find in opening flowers and budding trees? Had she caught that murmuring voice from the sound of the streams which fall continually about her rocky home? was it the tenderness of the evening sky beneath which she loved to walk, that lay like a shadow on her face, and the light of the evening stars that shone in her quiet eyes? At the least to me she was the realization of that dream which haunts the sleep of sin-stained men; so my memory paints her, so I hope to find her when at last the sleep has rolled away and the fevered dreams are done.

At last there came a day--the most blessed of my life, when we told our love. We had been together all the morning, but after dinner Mr. Carson was so unwell that Stella stopped in with him. At supper we met again, and after supper, when she had put little Tota, to whom she had grown much attached, to bed, we went out, leaving Mr. Carson dozing on the couch.

The night was warm and lovely, and without speaking we walked up the garden to the orange grove and sat down upon a rock. There was a little breeze which shook the petals of the orange blooms over us in showers, and bore their delicate fragrance far and wide. Silence reigned around, broken only by the sound of the falling waterfalls that now died to a faint murmur, and now, as the wavering breeze turned, boomed loudly in our ears. The moon was not yet visible, but already the dark clouds which floated through the sky above us--for there had been rain--showed a glow of silver, telling us that she shone brightly behind the peak.

Stella began to talk in her low, gentle voice, speaking to me of her life in the wilderness, how she had grown to love it, how her mind had gone on from idea to idea, and how she pictured the great rushing world that she had never seen as it was reflected to her from the books which she had read. It was a curious vision of life that she had: things were out of proportion to it; it was more like a dream than a reality--a mirage than the actual face of things. The idea of great cities, and especially of London, had a kind of fascination for her: she could scarcely realize the rush, the roar and hurry, the hard crowds of men and women, strangers to each other, feverishly seeking for wealth and pleasure beneath a murky sky, and treading one another down in the fury of their competition.

"What is it all for?" she asked earnestly. "What do they seek? Having so few years to live, why do they waste them thus?"

I told her that in the majority of instances it was actual hard necessity that drove them on, but she could barely understand me. Living as she had done, in the midst of the teeming plenty of a fruitful earth, she did not seem to be able to grasp the fact that there were millions who from day to day know not how to stay their hunger.

"I never want to go there," she went on; "I should be bewildered and frightened to death. It is not natural to live like that. God put Adam and Eve in a garden, and that is how he meant their children to live--in peace, and looking always on beautiful things. This is my idea of

perfect life. I want no other."

"I thought you once told me that you found it lonely," I said.

"So I did," she answered, innocently, "but that was before you came. Now I am not lonely any more, and it is perfect--perfect as the night."

Just then the full moon rose above the elbow of the peak, and her rays stole far and wide down the misty valley, gleaming on the water, brooding on the plain, searching out the hidden places of the rocks, wrapping the fair form of nature as in a silver bridal veil through which her beauty shone mysteriously.

Stella looked down the terraced valley; she turned and looked up at the scarred face of the golden moon, and then she looked at me. The beauty of the night was about her face, the scent of the night was on her hair, the mystery of the night shone in her shadowed eyes. She looked at me, I looked on her, and all our hearts' love blossomed within us. We spoke no word--we had no words to speak, but slowly we drew near, till lips were pressed to lips as we kissed our eternal troth.

It was she who broke that holy silence, speaking in a changed voice, in soft deep notes that thrilled me like the lowest chords of a smitten harp.

"Ah, now I understand," she said, "now I know why we are lonely, and how

we can lose our loneliness. Now I know what it is that stirs us in the beauty of the sky, in the sound of water and in the scent of flowers. It is Love who speaks in everything, though till we hear his voice we understand nothing. But when we hear, then the riddle is answered and the gates of our heart are opened, and, Allan, we see the way that wends through death to heaven, and is lost in the glory of which our love is but a shadow.

"Let us go in, Allan. Let us go before the spell breaks, so that whatever overtakes us, sorrow, death, or separation, we may always have this perfect memory to save us. Come, dearest, let us go!"

I rose like a man in a dream, still holding her by the hand. But as I rose my eye fell upon something that gleamed white among the foliage of the orange bush at my side. I said nothing, but looked. The breeze stirred the orange leaves, the moonlight struck for a moment full upon the white object.

It was the face of Hendrika, the Babyan-woman, as Indaba-zimbi had called her, and on it was a glare of hate that made me shudder.

I said nothing; the face vanished, and just then I heard a baboon bark in the rocks behind.

Then we went down the garden, and Stella passed into the centre hut. I saw Hendrika standing in the shadow near the door, and went up to her.

"Hendrika," I said, "why were you watching Miss Stella and myself in the garden?"

She drew her lips up till her teeth gleamed in the moonlight.

"Have I not watched her these many years, Macumazahn? Shall I cease to watch because a wandering white man comes to steal her? Why were you kissing her in the garden, Macumazahn? How dare you kiss her who is a star?"

"I kissed her because I love her, and because she loves me," I answered.

"What has that to do with you, Hendrika?"

"Because you love her," she hissed in answer; "and do I not love her also, who saved me from the babyans? I am a woman as she is, and you are a man, and they say in the kraals that men love women better than women love women. But it is a lie, though this is true, that if a woman loves a man she forgets all other love. Have I not seen it? I gather her flowers--beautiful flowers; I climb the rocks where you would never dare to go to find them; you pluck a piece of orange bloom in the garden and give it to her. What does she do?--she takes the orange bloom, she puts it in her breast, and lets my flowers die. I call to her--she does not hear me--she is thinking. You whisper to some one far away, and she hears and smiles. She used to kiss me sometimes; now she kisses that white brat you brought, because you brought it. Oh, I see it all--all; I

have seen it from the first; you are stealing her from us, stealing her to yourself, and those who loved her before you came are forgotten. Be careful, Macumazahn, be careful, lest I am revenged upon you. You, you hate me; you think me half a monkey; that servant of yours calls me Baboon-woman. Well, I have lived with baboons, and they are clever--yes, they can play tricks and know things that you don't, and I am cleverer than they, for I have learnt the wisdom of white people also, and I say to you, Walk softly, Macumazahn, or you will fall into a pit," and with one more look of malice she was gone.

I stood for a moment reflecting. I was afraid of this strange creature who seemed to combine the cunning of the great apes that had reared her with the passions and skill of human kind. I foreboded evil at her hands. And yet there was something almost touching in the fierceness of her jealousy. It is generally supposed that this passion only exists in strength when the object loved is of another sex from the lover, but I confess that, both in this instance and in some others which I have met with, this has not been my experience. I have known men, and especially uncivilized men, who were as jealous of the affection of their friend or master as any lover could be of that of his mistress; and who has not seen cases of the same thing where parents and their children are concerned? But the lower one gets in the scale of humanity, the more readily this passion thrives; indeed, it may be said to come to its intensest perfection in brutes. Women are more jealous than men, small-hearted men are more jealous than those of larger mind and wider sympathy, and animals are the most jealous of all. Now Hendrika was in

some ways not far removed from animal, which may perhaps account for the ferocity of her jealousy of her mistress's affection.

Shaking off my presentiments of evil, I entered the centre hut. Mr. Carson was resting on the sofa, and by him knelt Stella holding his hand, and her head resting on his breast. I saw at once that she had been telling him of what had come about between us; nor was I sorry, for it is a task that a would-be son-in-law is generally glad to do by deputy.

"Come here, Allan Quatermain," he said, almost sternly, and my heart gave a jump, for I feared lest he might be about to require me to go about my business. But I came.

"Stella tells me," he went on, "that you two have entered into a marriage engagement. She tells me also that she loves you, and that you say that you love her."

"I do indeed, sir," I broke in; "I love her truly; if ever a woman was loved in this world, I love her."

"I thank Heaven for it," said the old man. "Listen, my children. Many years ago a great shame and sorrow fell upon me, so great a sorrow that, as I sometimes think, it affected my brain. At any rate, I determined to do what most men would have considered the act of a madman, to go far away into the wilderness with my only child, there to live remote from

civilization and its evils. I did so; I found this place, and here we have lived for many years, happily enough, and perhaps not without doing good in our generation, but still in a way unnatural to our race and status. At first I thought I would let my daughter grow up in a state of complete ignorance, that she should be Nature's child. But as time went on, I saw the folly and the wickedness of my plan. I had no right to degrade her to the level of the savages around me, for if the fruit of the tree of knowledge is a bitter fruit, still it teaches good from evil. So I educated her as well as I was able, till in the end I knew that in mind, as in body, she was in no way inferior to her sisters, the children of the civilized world. She grew up and entered into womanhood, and then it came into my mind that I was doing her a bitter wrong, that I was separating her from her kind and keeping her in a wilderness where she could find neither mate nor companion. But though I knew this, I could not yet make up my mind to return to active life; I had grown to love this place. I dreaded to return into the world I had abjured. Again and again I put my resolutions aside. Then at the commencement of this year I fell ill. For a while I waited, hoping that I might get better, but at last I realized that I should never get better, that the hand of Death was upon me."

"Ah, no, father, not that!" Stella said, with a cry.

"Yes, love, that, and it is true. Now you will be able to forget our separation in the happiness of a new meeting," and he glanced at me and smiled. "Well, when this knowledge came home to me, I determined to

abandon this place and trek for the coast, though I well knew that the journey would kill me. I should never live to reach it. But Stella would, and it would be better than leaving her here alone with savages in the wilderness. On the very day that I had made up my mind to take this step Stella found you dying in the Bad Lands, Allan Quatermain, and brought you here. She brought you, of all men in the world, you, whose father had been my dear friend, and who once with your baby hands had saved her life from fire, that she might live to save yours from thirst. At the time I said little, but I saw the hand of Providence in this, and I determined to wait and see what came about between you. At the worst, if nothing came about, I soon learned that I could trust you to see her safely to the coast after I was gone. But many days ago I knew how it stood between you, and now things are determined as I prayed they might be. God bless you both, my children; may you be happy in your love; may it endure till death and beyond it. God bless you both!" and he stretched out his hand towards me.

I took it, and Stella kissed him.

Presently he spoke again--

"It is my intention," he said, "if you two consent, to marry you next Sunday. I wish to do so soon, for I do not know how much longer will be allowed to me. I believe that such a ceremony, solemnly celebrated and entered into before witnesses, will, under the circumstances, be perfectly legal; but of course you will repeat it with every formality

the first moment it lies in your power so to do. And now, there is one more thing: when I left England my fortunes were in a shattered condition; in the course of years they have recovered themselves, the accumulated rents, as I heard but recently, when the waggons last returned from Port Natal, have sufficed to pay off all charges, and there is a considerable balance over. Consequently you will not marry on nothing, for of course you, Stella, are my heiress, and I wish to make a stipulation. It is this. That so soon as my death occurs you should leave this place and take the first opportunity of returning to England. I do not ask you to live there always; it might prove too much for people reared in the wilds, as both of you have been; but I do ask you to make it your permanent home. Do you consent and promise this?"

"I do," I answered.

"And so do I," said Stella.

"Very well," he answered; "and now I am tired out. Again God bless you both, and good-night."