



I

“KIFO!” murmured Bobolobo, the Kikuyu.
Lyn Strong breathed hard and deep.
He knew that it was death.

There was no mercy in the Mau-Mau. The black faces that surrounded them were grinning, with a gleaming of white teeth, a glittering of rolling dark eyes. But there was no pity, no relenting, in the grinning faces. The boy hunter of Masumpwe and the Kikuyu gun-bearer were doomed.

They lay on the summit, almost on the verge, of a high bluff overlooking the Popolaki river of Kenya. Sixty feet below, the river rolled deep and fast, splashing in foam on the rocky precipice, which rose steeply as the wall of a house. From that height Lyn could glimpse, far in the distance, across the tree-tops of the forest, the town of Masumpwe—he could even have made out

the roof of his father's house and the shamba he was never to tread again. Within a bird's-eye view of his home, he was to die at the hands of the Mau-Mau.

There were more than a score of them. They had taken the boy hunter and his Kikuyu comrade by surprise. Lyn and Bobo, standing on the summit of the precipice over the river, had been looking across the forest at Masumpwe, when the rush came from the bush.

They had had no time to use a weapon. Bobolobo, magnificent in his war-array of black-and-white monkey-skins, with his three spears and his rhinoceros-hide shield, Lyn Strong with his rifle, had gone down under the rush, grasped by innumerable hands, without a blow or a shot. Now they lay on the high rock, bound hand and foot with knotted kamba, the fibre-cord almost cutting into their flesh—with the Mau-Mau grinning round them.

It was death—not long to be delayed—whether the Mau-Mau gang finished them with thrusting spears, or hacking axes, or flung them from the precipice to drown in the rushing river far below. But they seemed in no hurry, as they grinned and gloated over their helpless prisoners.

“Bwana, it is death!” said Bobolobo, in a low steady voice, “and yet I do not understand, Bwana. For when we crossed the river at sunrise, did I not place three stones on the bank in honour of Ngai who dwells in the clouds on Mount Kenya and is it not known to all the Kikuyu tribes in this land, that Ngai watches over those that honour him?”

Lyn smiled faintly.

Honoured or not by Kikuyu custom, Ngai, the great god dwelling on the soaring summit of Mount Kenya, was of little avail now. There, according to the Kikuyu's simple belief, dwelt Ngai, hidden by clouds, looking down on all that passed in forest and jungle swamp. But if Ngai was looking down, it seemed that his eyes did not see Bobolobo, in spite of the three stones reverently piled at the ford of the Popolaki. For Bobolobo lay bound, at the mercy of the Mau-Mau: and there was no more mercy in the Mau-Mau than in the hungry jaws of Simba, or Tui the leopard leaping on his prey.

One of the grinning blacks stepped towards the prisoners at length. It was Mzumo, the leader of the gang. His spear was in his hand, and the broad blade gleamed in the sun as he circled it before their faces. Lyn Strong resisted an impulse to close his eyes. He would not let the black man believe that he feared to look on death. Bobolobo stared at the grinning black with eyes as steady as those of Tai the eagle.

But Mzumo did not thrust with the spear.

“O Bobolobo,” he said, speaking in the musical Swaheli tongue, “in every mji of the Kikuyu it is known that you are brave in battle, and a great warrior: but now you lie under my spear.”

“O Mzumo, it is true!” answered Bobolobo, “Ngai has closed his eyes to me, and soon I shall be with the ghosts. But Kifo when he comes will not make me tremble.”

"For the white lord there is death!" said Mzumo. "For every white skin in this land there is death without mercy. But there is mercy for our own people who join us against the Mzungu. Give me faithful words to follow me, Bobolobo, in the war against the Mzungu, and you shall live and not die."

"Scoundrel!" muttered Lyn.

Mzumo did not heed him. His eyes were fixed on the face of Bobolobo. The rest of the gang looked on and listened. All eyes were on Bobo. Lyn Strong glanced at him.

He expected to hear only an indignant refusal from the brave Kikuyu. Bobo was offered life and liberty if he joined the Mau-Mau. For the boy with the white skin, there was only pitiless death: but for the Kikuyu there was mercy, if he threw in his lot with the terror-gangs of Kenya. Mzumo and his gang would have been glad to welcome so redoubtable a recruit to their ranks. A warrior like Bobolobo was worth many common men, in the struggle to drive the white settlers from the land. But even in the shadow of death, with Kifo's cold hand stretched out for him, Lyn could not believe that the Kikuyu would listen to such an offer.

But there came no indignant refusal from Bobo. His dark face was thoughtful, as if he pondered over Mzumo's words.

He spoke at last.

"These are good words that you speak, O Mzumo!" he said, slowly. "For life is sweet, even to one who does not fear death: and it is better to hear the birds sing in the branches of the muhugu, than to walk with the ghosts."

"Bobo!" breathed Lyn.

He could hardly believe his ears. The Kikuyu's eyes turned on him gravely.

"O Bwana," he said, "I have served you faithfully, and faithfully I have served the Bwana m'kubwa, your father. But death ends all things. And if Mzumo gives me life, why should I not follow him?"

"It is well said!" said Mzumo.

Lyn's eyes flashed.

"Bobo! You will join these jackals of the jungle—you who have eaten the mahindi in my father's house—you who carried me on your shoulders as a child in my father's shamba? Shame!"

The Kikuyu did not flinch under the bitter words.

"O Bwana," he said, "life is sweet, and my ears do not hear you. My ears hear only the good words spoken by Mzumo."

"You speak well, O Bobolobo," said Mzumo, "and you shall live and not die."

Lynn caught, for a moment, a glitter in Bobolobo's dark eyes. And it came into his mind that perhaps the Kikuyu was speaking cunning words, to delude the Mau-Mau leader.

But if that was so, there was no indication of it in Bobo's dark face. His look was grave, as if he had weighed the matter in the balance and decided. And Lyn said no more.

"You shall live and not die, O Bobolobo," repeated Mzumo, "and when you have proved your faith, you shall walk a free man, spear in hand. But my ears are closed to cunning words that mean nothing. It is in my thoughts that when you walk free of the kamba, you may seek to escape to the white man's dwellings. For what are words but wind?"

"Let the Mau-Mau oath be given!" said Bobolobo.

Mzumo grinned.

"Have I not said that words are but wind?" he repeated. "There are those who have taken the oath, and yet walked with the Mzungu and the askaris. But with blood on your hands, you will not seek the nyumba of the Mzungu, for they would hang you with a rope, and that to a warrior would be seven times worse than death by a warrior's spear. You shall prove your faith, O Bobolobo, by slaying the young Bwana before our eyes, and then you shall walk with us a trusted comrade."

There was a cackle of ferocious merriment from the blacks staring on the scene. Lyn Strong felt his heart miss a beat. His eyes were on Bobolobo, and he could not believe that Bobo would accept that terrible test of his faith to his new master. But Bobo's dark face expressed only indifference.

"You speak wise words, O Mzumo!" he said, "for it is true that words are but wind, and oaths may be broken, but with the blood of a Mzungu on my hands, I am pledged to the Mau-Mau for life or death, and the white masters would hunt me like Tui, the leopard, or Simba, the lion, or Fisi, the hyena. And even as you have said, so it shall be done, when you free my limbs of the kamba."

"Bobo!" muttered Lyn.

The Kikuyu looked at him.

"O little Bwana," he said, "for you there is no mercy, and you must die, and is death more bitter from one hand than from another?"

Lyn turned his face away.

Mzumo, with the cutting edge of his spear, severed the kamba that bound the powerful limbs of the Kikuyu. The fibre cord fell away, and Bobolobo rose to his feet a free man.

II

BOBOLOBO of the Kikuyu stood erect, a giant figure in his monkey-skin war-garb, breathing hard and deep. Lyn, helpless in his bonds, lay and looked up at him. It lingered in his mind that perhaps the Kikuyu was deluding the Mau-Mau: in a last desperate hope of saving himself, and perhaps of saving his white master. Yet what could he hope? He stood free, but unarmed: and round him thronged the rebel blacks, with knife and axe and spear, ready to hew him down at a sign. Ready to welcome him as a comrade, if he gave the

fearful proof of faith that their leader demanded: a proof that would cut him off for ever from the Mzungu, and make his life as forfeit as the lives of the ruffians round him: to be hunted, like them, in the mountains and the jungles and the forests. But if he failed to make his words good, he was a dead man: a single step to attempt to escape, would have been the signal for his death under raining blows and stabs. They were all round him, watching him like cats.

Bobolobo stretched out a sinewy hand.

"Give me my spear, O Mzumo, and you shall see blood!" he said, quietly.

Mzumo grinned, but did not hand him a spear. He was prepared to trust his new recruit, after, but not before, his desperate proof of fidelity. Unarmed, the giant Kikuyu, with all his strength, was powerless in the mob of Mau-Mau: but with a spear in his hand, he did not fear even such numbers. Many of the Mau-Mau would have gone down under his spear-blade, before he was slain—even if so brave and powerful a fighting-man had not put the whole gang to flight. It was not in Mzumo's thoughts to trust him with a weapon until he was sure of him.

"O Bobolobo, you are not speaking to a child," said the Mau-Mau leader. "Am I an infant to be deluded with words? When you have slain the Bwana, under our eyes, you shall walk with us a free man, with spear and shield, and fight with us in the forests against the whites and their askaris and eat with us the mahindi and the borohoa in our camps. But until you have slain the Bwana, O Bobolobo, we know not whether your words are more than idle breath."

Bobolobo dropped his hand.

Mzumo lifted his spear, and pointed with his blade to the edge of the precipice, only a few yards distant. Beyond that edge, was yawning space, sixty feet down to the river that rushed and roared on the rocks below. Bobo followed the pointed direction with his eyes, and then glanced at the Mau-Mau leader.

"Take up the boy!" continued Mzumo. "Take him in your strong hands, O Bobolobo, and fling him from the rock, to drown in the deep waters of the Popolaki with his hands and feet bound with the kamba. Under our eyes shall you do this, and all will witness that you have slain a Mzungu."

Bobolobo stood very still.

If he had dreamed of tricking the cunning Mau-Mau, of a last desperate fight with a weapon in his hand, it was an empty dream. Weaponless, he had to carry out that savage order. And Lyn, watching his face, was sure—or almost sure—that he had hoped to trick the Mau-Mau—and had failed.

In the boy's own heart there was no hope. Whether Bobo was true, or whether he was false, his own fate was sealed—whether Bobo's hands, or another's flung him from the height into the torrent. Even free of his bonds, he could not have swum the Popolaki where it raged and roared round the base of the precipice. And his hands, and his feet, were tied fast. A wild rush through the air, a plunge into deep running waters, and it was the end.

Bobolobo stood silent.

The grin faded from Mzumo's face, and his eyes glinted, and he took a harder grasp on his spear. From the other blacks came a murmur, and a movement of knives and axes.

"O Bobolobo," said Mzumo, in a low fierce voice of menace, "have you talked with a false tongue, or do you not hear with your ears?"

"My ears hear you, O Mzumo!" answered the Kikuyu, stolidly, "and as you say it shall be done."

He stepped towards Lyn Strong. Stooping his tall head, he grasped the boy in his arms: and, sturdy as Lyn was, swung him up from the earth as if he weighed no more than a palm-leaf. With the boy hunter of Masumpwe in his grasp, he stepped towards the edge of the precipice.

The Mau-Mau were grinning again, and pressing nearer to watch. High over the dizzy edge of the precipice, Lyn Strong swung in the powerful arms of the Kikuyu. His head swam at the yawning space, and from his cheeks the colour had drained. It was death—death at the hands of Bobolobo, under the ferocious stare of the Mau-Mau gang.

But Bobolobo, on the brink of the high rock, looked back at the Mau-Mau, and his eyes flashed at Mzumo.

"O dog, son and grandson of five hundred dogs," he said, "it was with a false tongue that I spoke, that my hands might be free to wield a spear, in defence of my master. And if a spear had been placed in my hand, I would have driven your whole pack before me, like jackals, for I, Bobolobo of the Kikuyu, am a great warrior, and have slain in battle even the brave fighting-men of the Masai tribes. But if I cannot save the Bwana, O Mzumo, I shall die with him. But it may be that Ngai, in whose honour I placed three stones on the bank of the river, may look upon me and remember."

And with that, the Kikuyu, with the boy in his arms, leaped from the precipice, and vanished from the staring eyes of the Mau-Mau. With startled howls, the blacks pressed forward, to the very verge of the high rock, to stare down after him. They saw the Kikuyu, the boy still in his grasp, strike the water, and plunge under: and they watched for a dark head to reappear—but they saw only the whirling, foaming water, that had swept away the Kikuyu and his Bwana in its wild rush.

III

LYN STRONG opened his eyes. He came back from unconsciousness, like one coming back from death. He stared wildly round him. He remembered the crash into the river: he had known nothing more. Now he was lying on a swampy bank, under the shade of a muhugu's mighty branches: the river flowing by, a dark anxious face bending over him. Bobo, his monkey-skins drenched and dripping, was at his side. Lyn, staring at him, could not believe that he was still alive.

"Bobo," he breathed, faintly.

He stirred. His limbs were free of their bonds—the kamba lay loose beside him. He passed his hand over his brow, and stared at Bobolobo again.

"Bobo!" he whispered.

"O Bwana, it was not written that we should perish in the deep waters," said Bobolobo.



The Kikuyu . . . leaped from the precipice.

Lyn sat up, dizzily. He stared at the flowing river—flowing between swampy banks: far—very far—from the precipice where Bobolobo had leaped, under the eyes of the Mau-Mau. It was hard to believe that they had come through alive. But the Kikuyu had saved him. He had been a helpless burden, bound as he was, on Bobo's hands, in the deep rushing waters: but somehow—he could hardly imagine how—the Kikuyu had won through, and saved him, and dragged him ashore: far from the murderous Mau-Mau.

"Bobo! You've saved me—brave Bobo! O Bobo, forget what I said when I believed that you would have joined the Mau-Mau to save your life—" muttered Lyn. "I—I believed—"

"If you had not believed, Bwana, Mzumo would not have believed," said Bobolobo. "I spoke with a crooked tongue, Bwana, to delude the dogs and sons of dogs, that I might be free to wield a spear: and with a spear, Bwana, I would have driven the whole pack before me, like antelopes fleeing from Simba, the lion: for I, Bobolobo, am the bravest and most powerful warrior in all the tribes of the Kikuyu. But Mzumo was too cunning: and it was left to me only to die with the Bwana. Yet even when I leaped into the waters, it was in my thoughts that I and the Bwana would live and not die."

"It was death," breathed Lyn, "and how we have escaped death I do not know, only that you have saved me, brave Bobo."

The Kikuyu looked at him gravely.

"Did I not place the three stones on the bank, when we crossed the river at sunrise, O Bwana," he said, "and is it not known to all people of the earth that Ngai watches over those that honour him? And I remembered this when I leaped, Bwana, and it has proved even so."

Lyn nodded and smiled.

THE END