

WOMAN INTO LEOPARD

BY

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In the old days when such things were S'raba, daughter of N'kumba the canoe maker and wife of Itaga the huntsman who had bought her for three bars of salt, a rod long skein of copper wire and fifteen fine fat cooking dogs, gave birth to a man-child, and on the fourteenth day thereafter the young Bomongo matron went to the river with her water-pot upon her head and the child

straddled on her hip.

Now it happened that "the fish that walk" were more numerous and more than usually pestiferous that season, so when she bent above the sluggish water to rinse out her jar and pour the customary Libation to the river god before she helped herself to his fluid, a hungry crocodile seized her, and that was the end of S'raba, daughter of N'kumba

and wife of Itaga the huntsman.

When S'raba failed to return Itaga was annoyed, for husbands in British West Central Africa, like husbands in Brighton, Brooklyn and Birmingham, dislike to be kept waiting for their dinner, and so he chose a likely-looking stick, fit for corrective purposes, and went looking for her.

He did not find her, but reclining in a viscid mud-puddle he found his first-born dabbling little fingers in the ooze and laughing as if he had not a care in all the world. Two long scores, deep as tire tracks, in the murk that edged the stream, told how S'raba had lost her tug-of-war with the crocodile. Itaga was a huntsman by profession, and could read the signs. He was also a philosopher, and wasted no time in futile mourning. Instead he threw his stick away for he would now have no use for it, set the child upon his shoulder and retraced his steps toward the village.

It was evening and the slippery shadows of dusk were creeping stealthily across the narrow trail; then suddenly the sun went down like a stone dropped into a pool and darkness seemed to gulp up everything. A shadow only one degree darker than the surrounding shadows dropped from the limb of a copal tree, claws scored Itaga's back, fangs closed upon his spine just where it joined his skull, and Itaga's first-born son was doubly orphaned, all within the space of three hours.

The people of the Upper Mendi read signs and portents in these happenings. A child who had been spared miraculously from crocodile and leopard twice in a single day must surely be the favorite of M'fini the God-Lizard to see whom in the embers of a dying fire is a sure sign of death. So the families of his village vied with one another to adopt the

child who, with a host of volunteer wet nurses and later with full rations of boiled dog and succulent baked banio root, grew and waxed fat.

Indeed, he grew to almost Falstaffian proportions, and because he was called M'sifi-M'longa, which is to say the fortunate son of unfortunate parents, he was pampered, indulged and deferred to till he was a thoroughly spoiled brat.

Then in his tenth - or perhaps his eleventh - year he revealed a gift that stamped him indelibly as the favored one of M'fini.

IN THE village lived one Lebili who, because of his skill as a husbandman, had much honor. His melons were the sweetest, his corn the highest, his peas the most prolific. Into the melon patch of Lebili came M'sifi to regale himself with fruit, which he did by simply taking up the melons, smashing them upon the ground and scooping out their softly-sweet insides, a very wasteful process.

When Lebili caught the little thief red-handed he did what might have been expected, and when M'sifi ceased his outcries he stood rubbing his well-spanked posterior and looking straight into the outraged gardener's face, predicted in a voice that had an oddly droning quality, "O man, this night tree shall fall on you and you shall cease to be."

Sure enough, that night almost an hour after moonset when Lebili rushed from his hut because he thought he heard dogs in his garden a rotted tree crashed suddenly and for no apparent reason, dropped full athwart him and crushed him like a toad stepped on by an elephant.

A little later the boy had an altercation with M'loni, wife of N'gali, who had recently taken a lover, having grown a little tired of connubial rectitude, and M'loni, as is frequently the way of elders in such cases, boxed his ears roundly. "I see you, M'loni, wife of N'gali," said M'sifi in the same odd singsong he had used to prophecy Lebili's misfortune, "but the time draws nigh when no man shall see you, neither you nor T'bili your lover."

Two days later at the rising of the sun the village folk found M'loni and her lover lying face down in a little patch of grass, and when they sought to turn them over they had difficulty, for each was pinned to the ground by a broad-bladed elephant spear the haft of which was broken off flush with the backbone. N'gali, the wronged husband, had vanished.

Such powers of divination would have caused talk in more civilized communities, in the bush country gossip spread like wildfire, nor did the tales shrink in their repetition. It was inevitable that the story of M'sifi's gifts should reach the ears of Sanlulu who because he ruled a loosely-knit community of three villages and had a battered plug hat to wear on state occasions called himself a king and assumed regal qualities to which he was not lawfully entitled. "Dwell in the shadow of my house," said Sanlulu to M'sifi, "and prophesy great, pleasant things for me."

However great and pleasant the young prophet's prophecies might have been for Sanlulu, they certainly were not pleasant for his long-suffering subjects. In close association with the chief priest of the local deities and the witch-doctor, who combined the offices of chancellor and archbishop, he "smelt out" those

accused of witchcraft and traffic with the dark powers, those who plotted treason against the king, especially the latter. So many men died the death, and their property - for, curiously, they were always men of substance - was declared forfeit to the Throne, less, of course, a generous cumshaw to prophet, priest and witch-doctor.

So things went on until the time arrived for Sarubi the daughter of T'elei to be initiated into womanhood. Sarubi had just turned her twelfth year and would be of marriageable age in a short time. She was a tall girl, not lean and gangling, but harmoniously built, and her walk had all the gracefulness of jungle women. Even as an infant she had danced, not formally, but naturally as sunlight dappling on swift running water, so that they said that at her dancing all the little monkey in the trees stopped chattering. Her father was the headman of his village and rich as riches count in the jungle, having quantities of salt and cloth and copper wire - even a brass cooking pot the like of which was not to be found among the treasure of King Sanlulu.

The fetish-women had convoyed their charges to the stockade of the maidens where no man save the *feticheur* high priest alone might enter, and whence, after certain esoteric rites, the girls would emerge as full-fledged women. All went well for three nights, then things began to happen. Unpleasant things. In the dead of night a girl was heard to scream once, and no more. When her companions rushed into her, they found her rather horribly mangled, as if she had been mauled by a leopard.

The roll was straightway called, the girls paraded past the chief wise-woman, and - Sarubi's eyes were sleep-

heavy, but on her lips was a smear of blood, and blood was on her fingers.

The chief wise-woman ground her knuckles against her lips, which was a sign of consternation, and sent the girls back to their dormitories. Next day Sarubi was shunned by her companions and the next day, and on the third night another visitation from the leopard and another girl was found dead. Dead and hideously mangled.

Now leopards, like the other wild things of the jungle, kill only when they are hungry and seldom trespass on the confines of a village. The leopard which had done these things made no attempt to eat or carry off its prey; it had attacked the sleeping girls in the midst of a walled village, and none had seen it come – or go. But there were tell-tale bloodstains on Sarubi's lips and hands each time. *Que voulez-vous?*

They held a formal trial, of course. The prophet, priest and witch-doctor sat as combined prosecutor, court and jury. The priest recited magic formulae, the witch-doctor went through the mumbo-jumbo of a smelling-out ceremony, the prophet prophesied that if the devil-leopard were allowed to live the whole community would be exterminated.

Furthermore, he divined that as parent of such hellish offspring, the girl's father must have been conversant with her witchcraft, and just as surely he would beget other witch-brats. So with all due ceremony the unfortunate father was "chopped", his wives, some eight in number, buried alive with him, all his goods and chattels forfeited to the crown and the devil-girl Sarubi handed over to the prophet, priest and witch-doctor for disposal. No ordinary execution would do

for such as she; witches have a way of laughing at the confines of the grave; she had to be disposed of in such a manner that her wicked body was no menace to the people and her even-more-to-be-feared spirit securely and permanently barred from returning...

They took her off to the forest, and presently came back. "And hast thou done the needful?" asked King Sanlulu.

"Lord King," replied the Prophet M'sifi, "we did that which seemed good to us, but in the moment of her taking-off the body of the witch-girl changed. She became a true leopard and ran off into the bush."

Now King Sanlulu held his knuckles to his mouth. "*O-ko?*" he answered doubtfully. "And by what sign may this be known?"

"By this, O mighty king, The witch-leopard wore earrings of gold in which blue stones had been set cunningly. The leopard-thing that she became was like any other leopard but bore earrings of gold *set with blue stones.*"

CHAPTER II

CAPTAIN Sir Haddingway Ingraham Jameson Ingraham, more familiarly known throughout the Reserve Forest Area as Hiji, was excessively annoyed.

For two nights meteorological conditions had interfered with his favourite broadcast from the States, a seemingly endless serial detailing the exploits of one Amos Jones and Andrew H. Brown, of Harlem, U.S.A. That morning just as reveille was sounded a half-grown lad named N'goto came paddling from the Upper Mendi country, all but exhausted, weak from a spear

wound in the shoulder, scared half out of his wits, but clinging to a lunatic story with the tenacity of a puppy to an old shoe. Finally to make bad matters worse, the Honorable Basil Bascombe-Bacon had clumped into the station with a string of porters trailing behind him like the tail of a rotund comet, enough duffel to equip an expedition, and an air of outraged propriety.

To cap the stick there seemed some vague connection between N'goto's utterly fantastic story and the Honorable Basil's gripe.

Witchcraft was rampant in the Upper Mendi country, swore N'goto. Men and woman had been chopped in constantly increasing numbers, but the plague increased rather than diminished. Like everybody else N'goto had believed the charges of M'sifi the King's prophet and the chief of the priest and the witch-doctor until they had accused Sarubi his beloved.

Then doubt turned into disbelief and disbelief became suspicion, for at last he noted what his elders had not - all the condemned wizards and witches were people of property or of importance sufficient to make them dangerous to the king's triumvirate of witch-finders.

"They said she was a devil-leopard, O Hiji. She who never harmed a fly unless it bit her first they took into the forest that she might die the death, and when her ghost went forth they said she turned into a true leopard and ran off into the brush. They said that when she changed her shape she still wore the gold rings with blue stones in her ears, and that should be a sign to all people."

"Aye?" said Hiji grimly. It was against the law to chop a witch or even put a murderer to death in the back

county. All such should be imprisoned and held for action by the Crown authorities, but sometimes popular excitement outran legal restraint, then Hiji had to dispense jungle justice of his own - flogging, sending miscreants down river to the prison camp, or even hanging in extreme cases. "What next, O bringer of bad tidings?"

"I loved the girl, my lord. She was as the breath of my nostrils -- "

"Never mind the love interest. What happened?"

"I went into the forest seeking her, O Hiji. Girl or leopard, I loved her, and if I found her I knew she would do me no hurt, for she was to me, so was I to her. O Hiji -" N'goto's eyes seemed suddenly all white - "I found her."

"Found her - changed into a leopard? My sainted Aunt Samantha's Sunday bonnet!"

"By the fat of my heart, O Hiji. I hid beside the pathway which the wild things use to go down to the river, and there I found her. In her ears were rings set with blue stones."

Hiji had been long enough in Africa to know that almost anything could happen there, and sooner or later usually did, so instead of laughing he regarded his visitor gravely. "Whence came the wound, O youth?"

"These matters are so great for my small understanding, Hiji, so I come to you with them, and since I had no boat to travel, I took one, and the owner threw a spear at me as I shoved off into the river -"

"O-ko! Knowest though not that those who steal boats feel the sting of the lash?"

"A sore skin mends, my lord, but my heart will not mend. Sarubi is no more; I shall not have her for my wife

when her initiation is passed. Besides, I had to tell these things to thee."

"All right, young feller. We'll take your case up in due course. Go now to my cook man's house and tell him that I bid him feed thee bread with treacle on it."

CHAPTER III

The Honorable Basil had arrived just after parade, and had hardly quaffed his thirteenth dish of tea before he stated his complaint. He had been shootin' in the Upper Mendi country and three nights before he had gone out lookin' for a lion. Like all night hunters he had worn a flashlight on his cap, and when the light picked up a pair of gleaming eyes he'd let fly with his Knaak combination gun. When his bearers brought the bag in it had proved to be a half-grown leopardess with ears pierced like a woman's and set with gold rings decorated with blue stones.

The Honorable Basil had seemed much aggrieved at this; his manner implied that no leopard should wear earrings in a properly administered British Crown Colony. The whole thing was, to say the least, most bloodily extraordin'ry.

Hiji brushed his little black mustache with the knuckle of a bent forefinger. "You wouldn't have that leopard's pelt with you, by any chance?"

"Have it! 'Course I have! Dye think I've been pullin' your leg? I'll have one of my boys fetch it."

"Thanks," mumiured Hiji, paying less attention than seemed properly polite to the Honorable Basil. N'goto's story - now this. What in blazin' hell did it add up to?"

It was an ordinary leopard pelt the

Honorable Basil's head bearer brought in. The skimmers had stripped off the stippled hide in accordance with local practice, leaving the head and claws intact, and in the tips of the beast's ears were hung small hoops of gold encrusted with blue stones. "Well, I'll be damned!" said Hiji, with conviction.

"Bid the lad N'goto to attend us," he told the elderly who answered his ring, then, to the Honorable Basil, "Would you mind spreadin' that pelt on the floor?" In a moment N'goto came to the veranda and stood with downcast eyes. Those who steal boats feel the bite of the lash, Hiji had told him. Was he about to be flogged?

"O youth," commanded Hiji, "look on this leopard skin and tell me -"

He was interrupted by sharp, nickering cry, more like that of a hurt animal than anything human. The boy threw himself on the pelt, gathered it into his arms and rocking back and forth while he rubbed his cheeks against the beast's head and muttered sobbing phrases of endearment into the ringed ears.

"What's the blighter sayin'?" asked the Honorable Basil.

"He says the fire of love consumes the fat of his heart and that her spirit will sit with him until he dies -"

"My word! What sort o' monkey-talk is this? What's it all mean?"

"Unless I'm more mistaken than usual, it means a tidy bit o' murder's been committed," answered Hiji grimly. "They're a clever little threesome, but this time they overreached themselves. Puttin' the girls rings into that leopard's ears was just a little *too* artistic. We're marchin' in half an hour. Care to be in on the death?"

CHAPTER IV

The council fire was burning high, and at the borderline of light and shadow King Sanlulu's throne - a carved three-legged stool - had been set. Behind him massed his spearmen, about the limits of the clearing crouched his people, summoned from the four corners of his domain, even from the farthest village. At his right hand and a little to the rear squatted his women, and at his left elbow stood K'soka, chief priest of the fetish-gods, M'fela, the witch-doctor, and M'sifi, the soothsayer and prophet.

"Are your eyes keen, and dreadful brethren?" asked Sanlulu of the three who stood at his left hand.

"Like the serpent's or the vulture's, O King."

"Are your ears sharp to hear the words that come not from the tongue?"

"Like the ears of the cat-people who can hear the growing of a blade of grass, O King."

"And are your nostrils open for the smell of blood? Can ye smell out evildoers, scent the spoor of soreerers, and the wickedness of those who work wickedness against me?"

"We can smell the scent of evildoers, O Great King."

"Then go!"

All three of the witch-finders were in full regalia. Their faces were smeared with horizontal lines of alternating white and yellow, in their hair were small dried fish bladders, from their shoulders hung festoons of dried snake skins while at their waists were belts of woven hair from which depended rattling knots of human toe and tinger-bones. For good measure M'fela the witch-doctor bore a little hunting spear like that used for small game. At the king's command they

marched about the fire three times, quickening their pace with each circuit, then as M'fisi and K'soka halted and began to do a sort of standing dance, stamping the fire-hardened earth till puffs of dust came from their feet, M'fela the witch-doctor whirled away toward the close-packed ranks of villagers, waving his spear round his head, turning, twisting, pausing for a moment to stamp viciously upon the ground, then spinning like a ballet dancer in a pirouette. Suddenly he halted in his tracks, turned uncertainly this way and that a moment, then slowly, stealthily, as if he sneaked up on an unsuspecting victim, he crept toward the circle of terrified men and women, came to a full stop and thrust forward with his spear, bringing its flat blade down on the shoulder of a tall man whose yellow cotton tunic and copper ornaments marked him as a person of importance.

Four spearmen rushed across the firelit square and seized the luckless victim by the arms, dragging him toward the throne. The brawny executioner stepped forward, cradling his sickle-shaped knife in the crook of his elbow.

"O man," King Sanlulu pronounced when they had dragged the prisoner to the throne, "I see you. You were a man of substance, having goats and gods and women in abundance, also many precious things of metal and much salt and cloth. But because you have an evil heart and wished ill to your king this night you surely go to join the ghosts and all your treasures shall be mine. Where," he demanded oratorically, "where is the man who dares deny the King's justice? Who is there in all the world who dares deny my right to chop you? If there be any let him now stand forth - "

"I see you, little man who call himself a king!"

The words were pronounced softly, but at their sound Sanlulu seemed to shrink into himself and thrust his knuckles hard against his mouth. Into the firelight, stepping softly on rubber-soled shoes and with his black cane tucked beneath his elbow, came Hiji and to his right and left marched Houssa policeman with submachine guns at the ready. Behind him came a fat, blond Englishman in rumpled white ducks, and at the border of the firelight bayonets gleamed from levelled rifles. At the far end of the street another squad of Houssas halted and set up a Browning gun on its tripod. Death, sure and terrible, ringed the village on all sides; a monkey caught in a snake's coils had more chance of any of Sanlulu's subjects or - Sanlulu.

"Stand on your ugly feet, O misbegotten offspring of a hyena and a deformed monkey!" Hiji prodded Sanlulu none too gently in the flabby stomach with the ferrule of his cane. "Who told thee thou wert a king, or had kingly powers?"

Somewhere in the darkness someone tittered. Whether in the schoolyards of America or England or the jungles of West Central Africa, there is always elation when the bully meets his match.

"Lord, all my magic has run out like water from a leaky pot. I am as nothing in thy sight -"

"And in the sight of all people," prompted Hiji.

" - And in the sight of all people," echoed M'fela reluctantly.

"And thou, O priest, have thy gods the power to save thee in this moment?"

"You, there!" Hiji pointed to M'fela the witch-doctor, K'soka the priest and M'sifi the prophet. "Come here and stand beside this monkey-face who dared to call himself a king."

"Thou has magic, has thou not, O man?" he asked the witch-doctor.

"Yea, lord. I have much magic," tremulously admitted M'fela.

"And thou, O priest, hast power with the gods, even the gods of thy fathers?"

"Yea, lord, it is even as thou sayest," the priest returned.

"And thou, M'sifi, can'st foretell the future?"

"Yea, lord."

"It is well. Prophecy, then, for me, M'sifi. Tell me what the future holds for thee?"

"Lord," the prophet's teeth were chattering so that he could hardly form his words, "I think I see a tall tree with the body of a man suspended from it by the neck, and, lord, I think the man is I."

Hiji looked at him with grudging admiration. "Thou has wit, at any rate, O dog." Then to M'fela.

"And what will thy magic avail thee now, O ju-ju man? Canst thou name one reason why thou shouldst not hang beside the prophet of the man who called himself a king?"

The priest made no reply and Hiji did not press him. After all, the people had faith - of a sort - in their gods, and it would be gratuitous insult to show their impotence. "Hear me, O man who called himself a king, hear me, ye prophet, priest and ju-ju man; hear me all ye people. The maiden Sarubi was innocent of any wrong. This man who called himself a

king coveted her father's wealth and entered into a plot to destroy him and her. In the darkness of the night the priest, who was the only man having access to the stockade of the maidens, entered there and killed two of the girls, then smeared their blood of Sarubi's lips and hands that she might be accused of being a devil-leopard. Is it not so, O K'soka?" He pointed with his stick to the priest.

"Lord, who shall say how thou hast learned the truth?" the priest returned through trembling lips.

"And to make your lies seem truth ye took the maiden to the forest and stripped of her earrings and set them in a leopard's ears, then threw her into the Mendi where the fish-that-walk ate her. Is it not so?"

"Lord, it is so," the wretched three admitted.

"Why don't you hang the blighters and be done with it?" the Honorable Basil asked. "If anybody deserved to have their necks stretched -"

"Don't be so ruddy bloodthirsty, young feller me lad," counselled Hiji. "I'm runnin' this show."

He turned to a trooper. "Man, strip the heathen trapping from these three and throw them into the fire," he ordered.

"A-hee!" the congregation sighed in frightened unison. These things were magic garments - Ju-ju ornaments. Yet they burned like ordinary men's adornment.

"Behold how weak their ju-ju was, O people," shouted Hiji, then to the trooper. "Wash the paint off their faces." In a moment M'sifi, K'soka and M'fela stood denuded of the last vestige of regalia, three very ordinary and very frightened looking men.

"Bid the women stand forward," Hiji ordered, and when the women,

greatly wondering, but with more of curiosity than fear, came near. "Behold these men, O women," he commanded. "Do they look terrible to you?"

There was a long moment's silence, then a young matron giggled. "Lord they seem ordinary men to me, except one is fat and two are old and skinny."

"Well said, O woman. They are but common men who wear the robes of greatness falsely, and for their sins I give them to you to drive forth from the village. Strike, and spare not, O women, and if at daylight they are back again, drive them forth once more. hereafter, when one of them dares show his face in any village let the women cease grinding grain or weaving cloth or cooking food and take up anything that comes to hand and drive him forth with blows and curses. Thus shall ye keep your houses free of evil."

It was not often that the jungle women had a chance to vent repressed resentment on a man, and the tribeswomen were not slow to accept Hiji's invitation. With shrill squeals of excited glee they fell upon the helpless trio, kicking, beating, switching and pummelling them.

"I don't think we'll be bothered by those worthies again," Hiji chuckled to the Honorable Basil. "The women can be trusted to fulfil instructions literally. It'll be as much as his life's worth for any of 'em to show his face in a village. Then, too, they've lost face irreparably. After tonight's disgrace they couldn't scare up a corporal's guard of followers."

"What about the king feller?" The Honorable Basil wanted to know. "You're surely goin' to hang him, ain't you?"

Hiji fixed a fierce stare on the trembling Sanlulu. "O man, how long do you desire to live?" he asked.

A crafty gleam showed in the culprit's eye. "Thou wilt permit me to name my own time, O Hiji?"

"You sayest it."

"Then I demand that I may live until old age has pulled me down like a lion pulling down a buck. Thou has promised, Hiji, and a promise is a promise, I hold thee to thy word, *O-ko*, but I have tricked thee neatly?"

"Think so?" Hiji eyed him grimly. "Then hear me, man. Thou has named the length of thy sentence. Thou shalt be stripped of all thy ornaments, even of thy man's attire, and habited as a woman. Thou shalt carry water and hew wood, grind meal and hoe crops amid the women of the man who thou sought to slay tonight, and if you workest not as well as any woman thy hide shall feel the stick. No one in all the land, neither the men, the women, nor the children shall do thee

honor, but all shall wag their heads at thee and say, "Behold the man who called himself a king. See how he wears women's clothes and works among the women as the meanest of them!"

"O Hiji," wailed Sanlulu as a trooper snatched away his battered top hat and leopard skin and a young girl came forward with a woman's fiber apron, "I think that it would be better if you hanged me now!"

Hiji grinned at him unpleasantly. "I thought you would try to welsh on that bet, old feller; but it's too late now. You asked for it, and you got it!"