

*Excerpted from His Monkey Wife John Collier. Copyright © 2000. All rights reserved.*

## **Chapter One**

If thou be'st born to strange sights and if you don't mind picking your way through the untidy tropics of this, the globe, and this, the heart, in order to behold them, come with me into the highly colored Bargain Basement Toy Bazaar of the Upper Congo. You shall return to England very shortly.

The tall trees on the edge of the clearing have here and there, it seems, lifted their skirts of scrub, giving us the same sickening drop from our expectations as shopwindow ladies do, when their dresses are opened at back or placket, and we shall see only wire and emptiness. So dead are these vistas into the dark jungle, that if there emerged from them, into the sun's spotlight at their entrance, one of those sights we still absurdly expect; an elephant, say, with a leopard hanging as banderillo from his slaty shoulder, but sliding down, leaving red tracks grooved in that slatiness, sliding down to be crushed of course, we should feel that it was just a turn, Great Xmas Treat, materialized from some dressingroom-like pocket in space, and not native to those scaffoldings and canvas backs with hanging ropes and sterile floor and darkness. There are birds, naturally of all sizes and qualities. Their penetrating whistles and clockwork screech and chatter add to the illusion, whichever it is.

This path leads straight to the bungalow of Mr. Fatigay You see, he has introduced some English plants into his garden. His is the only white man's house in Boboma, and this is just as well. The large man, with his round schoolboy jacket and his honest puzzled eye, appears to greater advantage alone here among the infant blacks, to whom it is his vocation to bring literacy and light, than he would if there were other white men about, whose coarser codes he might too readily take on. But that is the way with most of us. Sitting on the wide veranda, however, almost alone, his personality expands naively and something quite poetic appears in the twilight of that hour and of his nature, like the sweet but inconsiderable bloom on a ragged nocturnal weed.

I have said almost alone in order to prepare you, lest, hearing his voice rise and fall with more point and direction than a man employs who idly mutters to himself, and noticing, as we draw near enough to see into the shadows of the veranda, that no other white-clad figure is stretched out there, you should conclude that he is mad. This is not quite so. Like Vaughan, he is least alone when most alone. He has not noticed it, but he, whose shyness limits his conversation to a string of Empire-builder's cliches when he is in the company of his compatriots, he becomes positively fluent and individual only when in the presence of that which moves in the corner behind his chair. He becomes quite a chatterbox. What is it that moves? Look! It's Emily! Here she comes!

Do you wonder, when you see her emerge into the shaft of lamplight, smiling her Irish smile, brushing the floor with the knuckles of her strong capable hands, do you wonder that the branches of the great tree, that which shades the bedrooms from the aching moon, are sometimes torn asunder, when

a dark face juts out over a straining hairy torso [Henry's face, who has shared her arboreal infancy, a face all convulsed in the puzzled clown-grief the Prologue speaker plays on us in *Pagliacci*: 'A word! A moment...'] But no word comes, naturally and the moment is lost, and the heavy boughs press inward and close, drowning that woeful face in a flurry of white blossoms and shining leaves, as if in moon-breaking water. Can you wonder that on the silvered grass-patch her mother and sisters sometimes stand, tangled in each other's comforting arms till they look like a Laocoon group cut from a briar root, wondering if she sleeps well, that winsome baffling creature who has left them for a life set farther beyond the scope of their simple minds than is that of Hollywood from the filmstar's folks, Mamma and Poppa in some little hometown on the prairie.

Can you wonder that, petite, dark and vivacious, she is the life and soul of the lonely bungalow, so that the passing trader or Colonial Office man has no sooner thrust out his legs into the cool comfort of his evening's rest, than he says, "Now then, old man, where's that chimp of yours? Let's see Emily Ho! Ho! Ho!"

But as she ambles forward on such occasions, turning a somersault, perhaps, as slowly and gravely as day and night, see! her smile dawning at the end of it has something of trouble and strain splintering under its sensitive flexibility Loyal in her support of Mr. Fatigay quixotically hospitable in her determination to give such guests what they are most fitted to enjoy she is nonetheless ill at ease. Yet she masks it. This generous hypocrisy is the first sweet ferment of the noble savage heart. It is civilization. This chimp is civilized.

She had not been so before she had come into the possession of the good schoolmaster. That was a year ago, before her captor, an anthropologist, whom she had revered rather than loved, had exchanged her to Mr. Farigay for the more conveniently portable possession of a five-pound note. Then, though eminently deserving of that second-rate sort of praise implicit in such adjectives as "well-grown," "sagacious," and the like, she gave no sign, and was herself unconscious, of any claim to esteem in terms less niggardly and low. What seeds lay latent in her of qualities with such a claim, sprouted only under the sunshine of Mr. Fatigay's smiles, and the gentle waun monotonous rain of the evening monologues, in which, when work was done, he expressed his hopes, dreams, ambitions to the friendly dumbness by his side.

'Ah, Emily!' he would say with something of the gesture as well as of the onomatopoeia with which he habitually strove to make English clearer to the infant natives, "How nice to be at ease again!" lolling his head, and then, in mild explosion, "What a day! What a day!" And he would continue with a monosyllabic expressiveness which I, who have never taught the young, am quite unable to imitate. From simple allusions to physical fatigues and pleasures, he would proceed to higher matters, and would sometimes have daubed in a very fair self-portrait, rather larger than life, before an awareness of his reflection, gesticulating in the dark mirror-bright eye of the chimp, would bring him

back to self-consciousness.

“Why Emily!” he would say fondly but with an uneasy titter. ‘One would think you understood every word I said.’

And, indeed, Emily had soon come to understand the more concrete terms he used, her comprehension falling back only when he soared into abstractions beyond her experience and his expressiveness. Yet it was in the course just of these, she noted, that his rare fits of enthusiasm would come upon him, and having seen him thus transformed and shining, she longed restlessly to know what it was he said then. She had seen the same light play but rather more coldly like an aurora borealis, over his prism and silent face when he sat sometimes with a dry and unattractive object in his hands, evidently voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone. Emily could not read.

She was, however, a schoolmaster’s pet, and on the frequent occasions on which she had accompanied him to the schoolroom, she saw pictures enough of cats with the letters C A T printed beside them. Is it so hard to understand how she came by a curiosity as to the nature of letters, and even, perhaps, of the abstracter function of literature? Our scientists may think so, who have chosen to measure the intelligence of the chimpanzee solely by its reactions to a banana. They suspend the delicacy from the ceiling of a cage, and assess the subject’s mentality in terms of the number of boxes he or she will pile one upon another in order to secure it. They fail to see that nothing is revealed except the value which that particular chimp chooses to set upon the fruit. And, beyond a certain low limit, this surely is in inverse ratio to intelligence. What boy of ten would not pile up a dozen boxes in an attempt to climb within reach of it? How many would Einstein clamber upon? And how many would Shakespeare? Emily though a fruitarian by nature, would have disdained an eagerness capable of more than two and a jump.

If you would arrive at a juster estimate of the potentialities of her race, study Emily’s conduct following upon her first uncertain inklings as to the nature of the printed word. She now never missed an opportunity of following her master into the schoolroom, where her attention became most concentrated, though unostentatiously during the elementary reading lessons. With her, the first steps were more difficult by far than they were for her sooty classmates, but the later ones were less so. She was stimulated, moreover, in the powerful effort demanded of her in the early stages, by a new sensation, a feeling of being slightly inflated by a gas lighter than air whenever certain thoughts or memories crossed her mind. These were always connected with Mr. Fatigay This chimp was awakening to love.

Full consciousness of it, like motor headlights suddenly leaping up behind a nightwalker in a private and violent dawn, came on her one sultry afternoon.

“What makes the lamb love Mary so?”

The children all did cry

chirruped the infant blacks in voices which still echoed so strongly the hollow clicks of their tribal lingo that they sounded as if sticks were being drawn along a wooden paling. And,

“Oh! Mary loves the lamb, you know”

The teacher made reply

came Mr. Farigay’s virile tones in response.

A choking gurgle, sadly out of tune, arose from Emily’s corner. The sound of his voice, rough and sweet to her as wild honey took possession of the wilderness of her heart like a John the Baptist. The words, freely translated as to sexes and species, seemed to fill that desert with the suggestion that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. Her spirit, a caged lark which hears another in the sky beat madly against her bars and roof of dumbness. It seemed that only one more effort was needed for her heart to spurt forth a clear, low, wood-sweet voice to harmonize with that resonant bass. A blank agony of concentration resulted. The striving creature dared not abate it, even to inhale. At what seemed the opening of realization, darkness crashed down upon her, like a cloth flung over a birdcage, and she fell forward in a momentary swoon.

As she came up out of it, into the light of consciousness and memory she paused a little before opening her eyes, in order that she might reassemble the potent impressions which had immediately preceded her collapse. A different, and a sweeter, dizziness was superimposed upon the physical one. Still she kept her eyes fast shut, waiting, like the Sleeping Beauty and it seemed for a hundred years, for her Prince Charming tenderly to awaken her. Then, far away falling as from a height infinitely above the near-unnoted stridulations of the little blacks, she heard the awaited voice:

“Drag her out by the legs, and throw a bucket of water over her.”

Emily swooned again, and this time more deeply her spirit, like Ibsen’s wounded wild duck, clinging to the cold dark mud in the depths below her consciousness.

The impact of the cold drench revived her, and having now nothing to wait for, nor finding any pleasure in arranging her returning thoughts, she rose to her feet in uncertain haste, and staggered blindly from the arid playground, heedless of the hoots and guffaws of her leaping classmates, who had all too eagerly administered the restorative. For what was such infantile derision to one on whose bowed and nakedly twitching head the laughter of the whole universe was being poured?

The chimpanzee cosmology is highly animistic, and it seemed now to Emily as if the slumbering personality of things had awakened and stood up a moment, to jeer and laugh. The bungalow grinned and looked out of its windows at her; the grass huts were doubled up and shaking. The very airs joined hands and danced in their mean mirth, and the trees threw up their top branches and rained down on her the silvery tinkle of a myriad sun-echoing leaves. For the sun’s brazen laughter was the

worst of all, and to escape it the poor chimp shuffled in under the cascade from the quivering trees. Like the water of certain high falls, however, this had broken up in its long descent and had become rain, then mist, then nothing, before it reached the ground.

Here, in the dark dry-rottenness of the lower jungle, Emily found escape from the externalized form of her reverse. Here, with the powdering log, and scaly life, woodlouse and small serpent, the bright hot blood fountains from her wounded heart congealed. Soon their brittle larvae flaked away each sob loosening a little, leaving the subject anemic but sane. It was a suddenly mature chimp that came home from those antifebrile shades, but, tight-lipped and steady-eyed, neither a shattered nor an embittered one.

There is a satisfaction in the bankruptcy of hope and self-esteem, if only it is complete enough. With only the unassailable core of the ego left, one is eased of the intolerable unconscious burden of the debt one's faultiness owes to fortune for preserving its absurdly disproportionate, and nervous, superstructure of greed and pretension. The chimp was aware of this, having heard the schoolchildren sing, "He that is low need fear no fall," and, indeed, having seen some of the elder ones demonstrate it very heartily in one narrow interpretation at least.

Who would have thought, seeing the trim little brown figure trip so self-containedly through the village, or describe such a suave arc on the end of the swinging bough that landed her pat, here, back again at Mr. Fatigay's feet, as he sat at dinner on the veranda; who would have thought, seeing all this, that beneath that rather Charlotte Bronte exterior, there was actually a Charlotte Bronte interior, full of meek pride, hopeless hope, and timid determination. At one moment, in fact, it became positively Emily B., and that was when Mr. Fatigay swallowing the last mouthful of his yam, said, with unwonted coarseness:

"Well, Emily here you are again! I thought you'd got skittish. Thought there must be a tom about, you know, and you'd gone off for the night."

And, in his blindness, the foolish fellow actually hummed a bar or two from the suggestive chorus of his latest syncopated record, "Those BABoon Blues."

Emily turned her face to the wall. She little thought, as neither did Mr. Fatigay that this unusual gaucherie of his was expressive of his pleasure at seeing her safely back again. She tried to concentrate on the idea that he, like lesser men, was at heart just a great big boy with a boy's capacity for the sudden careless blow. This, while it assisted, but perhaps unnecessarily in repressing any impulse towards anger, did little to salve the new hurt in the barely stanchd wound of that afternoon.

As she sat motionless in the gathering darkness, and watched her childhood's home, the jungle, she pondered once more the advisability of withdrawal. The cloudy smoke-blue billows of that forest washed up almost to where they were sitting, as the sea did to the palace steps in *The Little Mer-*

maid, and with the same tremendous appeal of depth on depth on depth to dissolve in. It appeared to go on so far that the actual horizon was lost in it, and the moon, which then began to lift directly opposite them, rose like a silver bird from a twiggy blue nest. As the moon rose it got smaller, and time, which it took up with it, got smaller also, and the forest swept on infinite and eternal beneath. Large enough to be a grave for sorrow. A timeless cloudy sea to melt memory away. "Switch on the light," said Mr. Fatigay and it was gone.

Before the chimp was a white-painted handrail, a bamboo table with pipes, a whiskey and soda, and the Overseas Daily Mail. Beyond these was a wall of darkness in which the moon hung like a word of reminiscence which must pass unnoticed. The white rail and the table stood at the threshold of a new life, stretching beyond her vision, but full, as far as she could see, of strangeness and of pain.