



Samba the Coward

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

African

Intermediate

15 min read

In the great country far away south, through which flows the river Nile, there lived a king who had an only child called Samba.

Now, from the time that Samba could walk he showed signs of being afraid of everything, and as he grew bigger he became more and more frightened. At first his father's friends made light of it, and said to each other:

'It is strange to see a boy of our race running into a hut at the trumpeting of an elephant, and trembling with fear if a lion cub half his size comes near him; but, after all, he is only a baby, and when he is older he will be as brave as the rest.'

'Yes, he is only a baby,' answered the king who overheard them, 'it will be all right by-and-by.' But, somehow, he sighed as he said it, and the men looked at him and made no reply.

The years passed away, and Samba had become a tall and strong youth. He was good-natured and pleasant, and was liked by all, and if during his father's hunting parties he was seldom to be seen in any place of danger, he was too great a favourite for much to be said.

'When the king holds the feast and declares him to be his heir, he will cease to be a child,' murmured the rest of the people, as they had done before; and on the day of the ceremony their hearts beat gladly, and they cried to

each other:

‘It is Samba, Samba, whose chin is above the heads of other men, who will defend us against the tribes of the robbers !’

Not many weeks after, the dwellers in the village awoke to find that during the night their herds had been driven away, and their herdsmen carried off into slavery by their enemies. Now was the time for Samba to show the brave spirit that had come to him with his manhood, and to ride forth at the head of the warriors of his race. But Samba could nowhere be found, and a party of the avengers went on their way without him.

It was many days later before he came back, with his head held high, and a tale of a lion which he had tracked to its lair and killed, at the risk of his own life. A little while earlier and his people would have welcomed his story, and believed it all, but now it was too late.

‘Samba the Coward,’ cried a voice from the crowd; and the name stuck to him, even the very children shouted it at him, and his father did not spare him. At length he could bear it no longer, and made up his mind to leave his own land for another where peace had reigned since the memory of man. So, early next morning, he slipped out to the king’s stables, and choosing the quietest horse he could find, he rode away northwards.

Never as long as he lived did Samba forget the terrors of that journey. He could hardly sleep at night for dread of the wild beasts that might be lurking behind every rock or bush, while, by day, the distant roar of a lion would cause him to start so violently, that he almost fell from his horse. A dozen times he was on the point of turning back, and it was not the terror of the mocking words and scornful laughs that kept him from doing so, but the terror lest he should be forced to take part in their wars. Therefore he held on, and deeply thankful he felt when the walls of a city, larger than he had ever dreamed of, rose before him.

Drawing himself up to his full height, he rode proudly through the gate and past the palace, where, as was her custom, the princess was sitting on the terrace roof, watching the bustle in the street below.

‘That is a gallant figure,’ thought she, as Samba, mounted on his big black horse, steered his way skilfully among the crowds; and, beckoning to a slave, she ordered him to go and meet the stranger, and ask him who he was and whence he came.

‘Oh, princess, he is the son of a king, and heir to a country which lies near the Great River,’ answered the slave, when he had returned from questioning Samba. And the princess on hearing this news summoned her father,

and told him that if she was not allowed to wed the stranger she would die unmarried.

Like many other fathers, the king could refuse his daughter nothing, and besides, she had rejected so many suitors already that he was quite alarmed lest no man should be good enough for her. Therefore, after a talk with Samba, who charmed him by his good humour and pleasant ways, he gave his consent, and three days later the wedding feast was celebrated with the utmost splendour.

The princess was very proud of her tall handsome husband, and for some time she was quite content that he should pass the days with her under the palm trees, telling her the stories that she loved, or amusing her with tales of the manners and customs of his country, which were so different to those of her own. But, by-and-by, this was not enough; she wanted other people to be proud of him too, and one day she said:

‘I really almost wish that those Moorish thieves from the north would come on one of their robbing expeditions. I should love so to see you ride out at the head of our men, to chase them home again. Ah, how happy I should be when the city rang with your noble deeds!’

She looked lovingly at him as she spoke; but to her surprise, his face grew dark, and he answered hastily:

‘Never speak to me again of the Moors or of war. It was to escape from them that I fled from my own land, and at the first word of invasion I should leave you for ever.’

‘How funny you are,’ cried she, breaking into a laugh. ‘The idea of anyone as big as you being afraid of a Moor! But still, you mustn’t say those things to anyone except me, or they might think you were in earnest.’

Not very long after this, when the people of the city were holding a great feast outside the walls of the town, a body of Moors, who had been in hiding for days, drove off all the sheep and goats which were peacefully feeding on the slopes of a hill. Directly the loss was discovered, which was not for some hours, the king gave orders that the war drum should be beaten, and the warriors assembled in the great square before the palace, trembling with fury at the insult which had been put upon them. Loud were the cries for instant vengeance, and for Samba, son-in-law of the king, to lead them to battle. But shout as they might, Samba never came.

And where was he ? No further than in a cool, dark cellar of the palace, crouching among huge earthenware pots of grain. With a rush of pain at her heart, there his wife found him, and she tried with all her strength to kindle in him a sense of shame, but in vain. Even the thought of the future danger he might run from the contempt of his subjects was as nothing when compared with the risks of the present.

‘Take off your tunic of mail,’ said the princess at last; and her voice was so stern and cold that none would have known it. ‘Give it to me, and hand me besides your helmet, your sword and spear.’ And with many fearful glances to right and to left, Samba stripped off the armour inlaid with gold, the property of the king’s son-in-law. Silently his wife took, one by one, the pieces from him, and fastened them on her with firm hands, never even glancing at the tall form of her husband who had slunk back to his corner. When she had fastened the last buckle, and lowered her vizor, she went out, and mounting Samba’s horse, gave the signal to the warriors to follow.

Now, although the princess was much shorter than her husband, she was a tall woman, and the horse which she rode was likewise higher than the rest, so that when the men caught sight of the gold-inlaid suit of chain armour, they did not doubt that Samba was taking his rightful place, and cheered him loudly. The princess bowed in answer to their greeting, but kept her vizor down; and touching her horse with the spur, she galloped at the head of her troops to charge the enemy. The Moors, who had not expected to be so quickly pursued, had scarcely time to form themselves into battle array, and were speedily put to flight. Then the little troop of horsemen returned to the city, where all sung the praises of Samba their leader.

The instant they reached the palace the princess flung her reins to a groom, and disappeared up a side staircase, by which she could, unseen, enter her own rooms. Here she found Samba lying idly on a heap of mats; but he raised his head uneasily as the door opened and looked at his wife, not feeling sure how she might act towards him. However, he need not have been afraid of harsh words: she merely unbuttoned her armour as fast as possible, and bade him put it on with all speed. Samba obeyed, not daring to ask any questions; and when he had finished the princess told him to follow her, and led him on to the flat roof of the house, below which a crowd had gathered, cheering lustily.

‘Samba, the king’s son-in-law ! Samba, the bravest, of the brave ! Where is he ? Let him show himself ! And when Samba did show himself the shouts and applause became louder than ever. ‘See how modest he is ! He leaves the glory to others !’ cried they. And Samba only smiled and waved his hand, and said nothing.

Out of all the mass of people assembled there to do honour to Samba, one alone there was who did not shout and praise with the rest. This was the princess’s youngest brother, whose sharp eyes had noted certain things during the fight which recalled his sister much more than they did her husband. Under promise of secrecy, he told his suspicions to the other princes, but only got laughed at, and was bidden to carry his dreams elsewhere.

‘Well, well,’ answered the boy, ‘we shall see who is right; but the next time we give battle to the Moors I will take care to place a private mark on our commander.’

In spite of their defeat, not many days after the Moors sent a fresh body of troops to steal some cattle, and again Samba’s wife dressed herself in her husband’s armour, and rode out at the head of the avenging column. This time the combat was fiercer than before, and in the thick of it her youngest brother drew near, and gave his sister a slight wound on the leg. At the moment she paid no heed to the pain, which, indeed, she scarcely felt; but when the enemy had been put to flight and the little band returned to the palace, faintness suddenly overtook her, and she could hardly stagger up the staircase to her own apartments.

‘I am wounded,’ she cried, sinking down on the mats where he had been lying, ‘but do not be anxious; it is really nothing. You have only got to wound yourself slightly in the same spot and no one will guess that it was I and not you who were fighting.’

‘What !’ cried Samba, his eyes nearly starting from his head in surprise and terror. ‘Can you possibly imagine that I should agree to anything so useless and painful ? Why, I might as well have gone to fight myself !’

‘Ah, I ought to have known better, indeed,’ answered the princess, in a voice that seemed to come from a long way off; but, quick as thought, the moment Samba turned his back she pierced one of his bare legs with a spear.

He gave a loud scream and staggered backwards, from astonishment, much more than from pain. But before he could speak his wife had left the room and had gone to seek the medicine man of the palace.

‘My husband has been wounded,’ said she, when she had found him, ‘come and tend him with speed, for he is faint from loss of blood.’ And she took care that more than one person heard her words, so that all that day the

people pressed up to the gate of the palace, asking for news of their brave champion.

'You see,' observed the king's eldest sons, who had visited the room where Samba lay groaning, 'you see, O, wise young brother, that we were right and you were wrong about Samba, and that he really did go into the battle.' But the boy answered nothing, and only shook his head doubtfully.

It was only two days later that the Moors appeared for the third time, and though the herds had been tethered in a new and safer place, they were promptly carried off as before. 'For,' said the Moors to each other, 'the tribe will never think of our coming back so soon when they have beaten us so badly.'

When the drum sounded to assemble all the fighting men, the princess rose and sought her husband.

'Samba,' cried she, 'my wound is worse than I thought. I can scarcely walk, and could not mount my horse without help. For to-day, then, I cannot do your work, so you must go instead of me.'

'What nonsense,' exclaimed Samba, 'I never heard of such a thing. Why, I might be wounded, or even killed! You have three brothers. The king can choose one of them.'

'They are all too young,' replied his wife; 'the men would not obey them. But if, indeed, you will not go, at least you can help me to harness my horse.' And to this Samba, who was always ready to do anything he was asked when there was no danger about it, agreed readily.

So the horse was quickly harnessed, and when it was done the princess said:

Now ride the horse to the place of meeting outside the gates, and I will join you by a shorter way, and will change places with you.' Samba, who loved riding in times of peace, mounted as she had told him, and when he was safe in the saddle, his wife dealt the horse a sharp cut with her whip, and he dashed off through the town and through the ranks of the warriors who were waiting for him. Instantly the whole place was in motion. Samba tried to check his steed, but he might as well have sought to stop the wind, and it seemed no more than a few minutes before they were grappling hand to hand with the Moors.

Then a miracle happened. Samba the coward, the skulker, the terrified, no sooner found himself pressed hard, unable to escape, than something sprang into life within him, and he fought with all his might. And when a man of his size and strength begins to fight he generally fights well.

That day the victory was really owing to Samba, and the shouts of the people were louder than ever. When he

returned, bearing with him the sword of the Moorish chief, the old king pressed him in his arms and said:

‘Oh, my son, how can I ever show you how grateful I am for this splendid service.’

But Samba, who was good and loyal when fear did not possess him, answered straightly:

‘My father, it is to your daughter and not to me to whom thanks are due, for it is she who has turned the coward that I was into a brave man.’

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