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Opening extract from

Akimbo and the Baboons

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Special visitors

There are some days that just feel exciting, right from the beginning, and this was one of them.

School had finished for the year and a whole month of doing exactly as he pleased stretched out in front of Akimbo. That was thrilling enough, but to make things better, this was the day that his cousin, Kosi, was due to arrive for a three week stay. He was the same age as Akimbo, or almost – Akimbo had been born two days before him, and that made a big difference, or so Akimbo sometimes said.

Kosi liked coming to stay with Akimbo. Not only were the two boys firm friends, but for Kosi,



who lived in a town, it was a chance to stay on the great game reserve where Akimbo's father was head ranger. This was a real treat for him, and he always counted the days until his uncle, Akimbo's father, picked him up at the station in his truck.

So there was a lot of excitement that morning when Kosi arrived and carried his things into the room he was to share with Akimbo. But there was more to come.

'We're having another visitor today,' announced Akimbo's father. 'The baboon lady is arriving at lunchtime.'

Akimbo looked at his father. 'The baboon lady?' he asked. He had not heard of anybody called that before and he wondered what it meant. Was this a lady baboon? Or was it a woman who had a pet baboon?

His father saw Akimbo's puzzlement and

smiled. 'No,' he said, 'it's not a baboon. She's a scientist. She's one of these people who study baboons. And she knows a lot about them, I can tell you!'

Akimbo was a little bit disappointed. He liked baboons, who he thought were even cleverer than monkeys, and it would have been interesting to have a visiting baboon. He and Kosi could have played with him, he imagined, and if the baboon behaved well enough he might have been allowed to sit at the table while they had their meals. Now all he had to look forward to was a scientist.

'You'll like her,' his father went on. 'She's lived with baboons, you know. They treated her as another baboon.'

Kosi laughed. 'And did she eat what they ate?' he enquired.

'You ask her yourself,' said Akimbo's father. 'Ask her about it at lunch.'

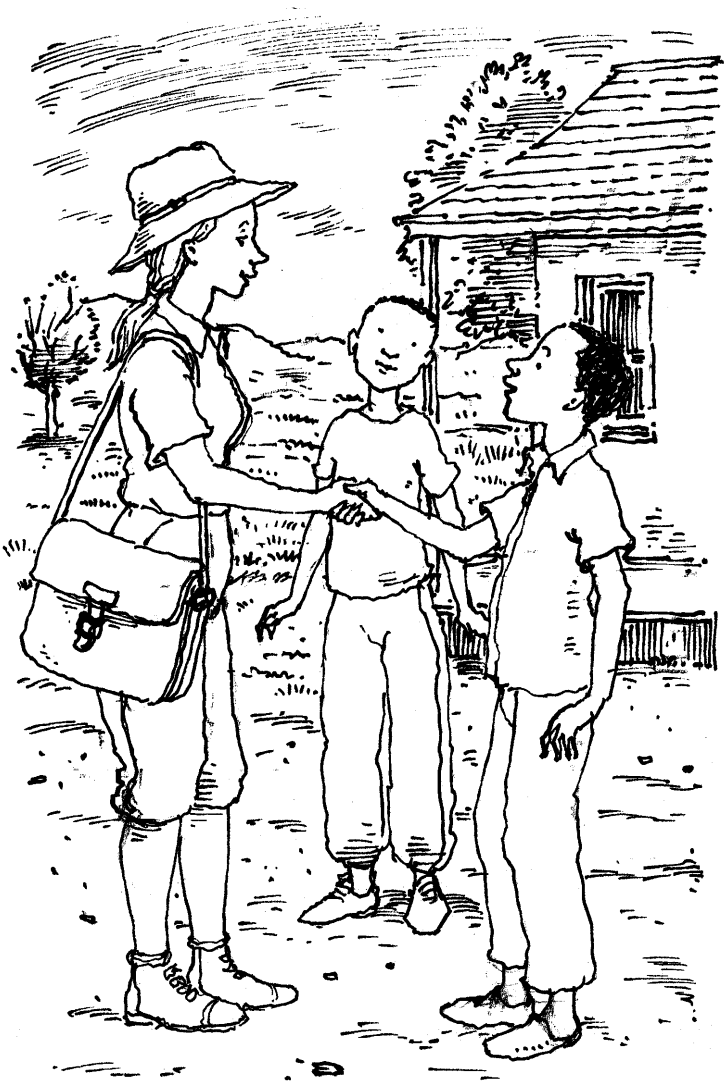
The two boys had plenty to occupy themselves with that morning and lunchtime seemed to come

round very quickly. They had seen no sign of the baboon lady, but when Akimbo's mother sent a message over to the ranger office that lunch was ready, the boys saw Akimbo's father walking over to the house with a tall woman carrying a satchel over her shoulder.

'My name is Jenny,' said the woman as she shook the boys' hands. 'But people often just call me Jen. So you can do that if you want to.'

Akimbo found himself liking Jen immediately. She had a warm smile which seemed to hover about her lips all the time, as if somebody had just said something funny, or was about to. And Akimbo could tell that Kosi liked her too.

He wondered what she was doing in the game reserve. Animal scientists often came to see his father, and they usually had some project or other that they wanted to do. Sometimes they just wanted to count a particular sort of animal. Sometimes they wanted to tag the animals and see where they migrated to. And sometimes they wanted to take blood samples, to send off to their



laboratories for testing. That was easy enough with some animals, but with others it involved putting the animal to sleep for a while with a special dart. That could be dangerous – not only for the animal, but also for the people who had to get close enough to fire the dart.

It became clear at lunchtime what Jen planned to do.

'Perhaps you could tell the boys what your plans are,' said Akimbo's father. 'I know that they're interested.'

'You're interested in baboons?' exclaimed Jen. 'Well, I'm not surprised, boys. They are very fascinating creatures. They're a lot like us, you know – like you and me.'



She began to explain what she was planning to do. With the agreement of Akimbo's father, his men had built a small hut for her in a

part of the reserve where there was a large pack of baboons. Over the next two weeks, she was going to live out there, night and day, and while she was doing this she was going to watch the habits of the baboons.

'There's something I particularly want to find out,' Jen said. 'I want to see how they share their food.'

Akimbo looked surprised. He did not think that animals shared their food very much. He thought it was first come, first served.

'Do they really share?' he asked.

'Yes, they do,' said Jen. 'Not always, but a lot of the time. And that's something I've been studying.'

Kosi, who had been silent, now asked a question. 'Why?' he said.

Akimbo thought that was a rather simple question, but Jen took it seriously.

'I want to find out,' she said, 'because it helps us to understand how baboons see the world.'

The two boys thought about this for a

moment. Then Jen suddenly turned to Akimbo's mother and father.

'Would you let the boys come out to see what I do?' she asked. 'I'm sure that they'd enjoy it.'

Akimbo's father looked at his wife, who hesitated for a moment before she nodded. 'If they promise to behave themselves,' she began.

'They can be looked after by the junior ranger you were going to lend me as my assistant,' said Jen. 'I'm sure he'll watch the boys for you.'

Akimbo's father stared down at his plate. He looked embarrassed by something. 'Actually,' he began, 'there's a bit of a problem there. We're very short-handed at the ranger station, I'm afraid. Two of the men are off sick and so . . . Well, we won't be able to lend you an assistant after all.'

For a few moments nobody said anything. Then, quite unexpectedly, Akimbo broke the silence. 'We'll help,' he blurted out. 'Kosi and I can be your assistants, Jen. Please!'

Again there was silence. Now it was Akimbo's father's turn to speak. 'Well . . .' he began.

It seemed to Akimbo that his father was about to say no. But Jen did not understand it this way. 'Oh, thank you,' she said enthusiastically. 'They'll be very useful, and I'm sure that they'll be very careful, won't you, boys?'

Akimbo and Kosi both nodded vigorously. It was settled!

