In Search of the Okapi eBook

In Search of the Okapi by Ernest Glanville

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Page 1

THE HUNTER

“Dick, why do you study Arabic so closely?”

“To understand Arabic.”

“And further?”

Dick Compton closed his book and placed it carefully in a leather case.

“It is a pity you were born curious, Venning, otherwise you would have made an excellent companion for a studious man. ’Why do I wish to understand Arabic?’ Why do you stand on one leg watching a tadpole shed its tail.”

“Excuse me, I always sit down to watch a tadpole.”

“Yet I have seen you poised on one leg for an hour like a heron, afraid to put down the other foot lest you should scare some wretched pollywog. Why?”

“I do it for the love of the thing, Dick. What is a page of your crooked signs compared with a single green pond and all that it holds?”

“By Jove! Is that so—and would you find a volume in a caterpillar?”

“Why not? Listen to me, Dick. Take the silver-spiked caterpillar, with a skin of black satin and a length that runs to four inches. He lives his life in the topmost boughs of an African palm—a feathered dome amid the forest—and there beneath the blue sky he browses till he descends into the warm earth to sleep in chrysalis form before he emerges as a splendid moth, with glass windows in his wide wings to sail with the fire-flies through the dark vaults of the silent woods.”

“All that from a caterpillar?”

“That and much more, Dicky.”

“And where will this study of the caterpillar lead you, Godfrey? One can’t live on a caterpillar.”

“Yet there is one kind—fat and creamy—that makes good soup.”

“Ugh, you cormorant! But tell me seriously, what is the end of your studies—where will they lead you?”

“To Central Africa.”

“Do you mean that, Venning?”

“I do, Dick. There is one spot on the map of Africa that is marked black. That spot is covered over hundreds of square miles by the unexplored forest. Think what that means to me!”

“Fever most likely—or three inches of spear-head.”

“A forest big enough to cover England! Just think of the new forms of life—from a new ant to an elephant or hornless giraffe. The okapi was discovered near that great hunting-ground—and, who is to say there are not other animals as strange in its untrodden depths?”

“Is it a wild-fowl, the okapi?”

“A wild-fowl, you duffer!” exclaimed Venning, indignantly. “Haven’t you heard of the dwarfed giraffe, part zebra, discovered by Sir Harry Johnston? It lost the long neck of the original species which browses in the open veld by the necessity to adapt its habits to the changed conditions of life within the forest.”

“Your neck is rather long, my boy, from much stretching to watch things. Look out that you don’t have it shortened. And so you intend to visit Central Africa? That is very curious!”

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“I don’t see anything curious about it.”

“Nor do I, as to one thing. If a fellow is crazy about butterflies, he may as well roam in Africa as a lunatic with a net as anywhere else; but the curious part of the matter is, that my study of Arabic is intended to prepare me for a trip to the very same place.”

“Compton, you don’t mean it,” said the other, jumping from his seat.

“I do, most decidedly.”

“But what has Arabic got to do with the Central African Forest?”

“Quite as much as your short-nosed elephant or long-tailed hippopotamus. I also wish to discover something that has been lost. Don’t open your mouth so wide.”

“Is it an animal, Dick?”

“Good gracious, no! I don’t care twopence about an animal, except it is for the pot, or unless it wants me for dinner. No; mine is another search. It is connected with my father.”

“Yes,” said Venning, quietly; for his friend had suddenly grown grave.

“When I was a little chap, about seventeen years ago, my mother received a letter dated from the ‘great forest.’”

“It contained only these words, ‘Good-bye.’ With it there was a letter in Arabic, written by my father’s headman. That letter was seven months on its travels, and since then no other word have I heard.”

Venning muttered something in sympathy.

“My mother,” continued the other, “died five years ago, without having learnt the meaning of the message in Arabic. She had a wish that no one but I should read the letter, and often she told me that if it contained any instructions or directions, I was to carry them out. Well, I have interpreted the Arabic signs.”

“Yes, Dick; and——”

“And I can’t quite make out the meaning. There is a reference to the journal my father kept, with the statement that it was safely hidden; but then follows a reference to a Garden of Rest, to certain people who protected him, and to a slave-trader who did him an injury. These references to me are a mystery; but what is clear is his desire to have his journal recovered from the Arab slave-dealer, described merely as ‘The Wolf.’”

“And that is why you wish to go to Central Africa?”

“That is why, Venning. I must recover my father’s journal if it exists; I must, if it is not too late, find out how he died; I must find out who are the wild people, and what is the Garden of Rest.”

“The Garden of Rest! That sounds peaceful, but it is very vague, Dick, as a direction. A garden in a forest hundreds of miles in length will take some finding.”

“I have a clue.”

“So.”

“There is mention of the ‘gates’ to the garden, whose summits ’are in the clouds’—twin mountains, I take it.”

“Even so, Dick, I think I should have more chance of finding my new animal than you would have of hitting off your garden.”

“Well, you know now why I have been studying Arabic. I have a little money, and no ties.”

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“Like me. By Jove! why shouldn’t we go out together?”

“Because we have some sense, I suppose,” said Compton, coolly. “Have you ever roughed it?”

“I have slept out in the New Forest—often.”

“Oh, that’s picnicking, with the bark of the fox in place of the lion’s roar, and good food in place of ‘hard tack,’ and perhaps the attentions of a suspicious keeper instead of a surprise attack by wild men of the woods. An explorer needs experience.”

“Yes, and he must buy his own experience; but tell me how he can, unless he makes a beginning.”

“Now we come to the point, Venning. He should begin with some one who already has experience.”

“I see. And you will wait till some seasoned explorer kindly asks you to join him? You’ll have to wait a precious long time.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Dick Compton, with a knowing smile.

“Have you found your explorer, Dick?” shouted Venning, eagerly.

Compton produced a leather purse and extracted a slip of paper cut from an advertisement column, and passed it to his friend.

“By Jove! eh, that’s splendid!” spluttered Venning, in his excitement as he glanced at the paper.

“Read it over.”

Venning read the notice—

“A *gentleman*, who is an experienced traveler, being about to enter upon an expedition into Central Africa, would like to make arrangements with two young men of education and of means to bear a share of the expenses to accompany him.—Apply, for further particulars, to D. H., No. 109 Box, Office of this paper.”

“Let us write at once to D. H.,” he said eagerly.

“I have seen him.”

Venning took a deep breath and stared at his friend.

“I saw him this very morning,” said Compton, quietly.

“And----------”

“He said you were too young! Eh? Go on—go on!”

“And I told him I thought I could find a friend who would join me.”

“You mean to say that he agreed to take you?” cried Venning, jumping up.

Compton nodded.

“Oh, splendid! And you will take me to him? You’re a brick. What is he like, eh? Is he old or young, eh?”

Compton kept cool outwardly, but he could not subdue the glitter of his dark eyes, or keep the colour out of his cheeks.

“He is about five feet four. I can look over his head.”

“Oh!”

“There are grey hairs in his beard.”

“Quite old; old and little! What bad luck! He will have to look up to us.”

“Well, you know, he can’t help being small, can he?”

“I suppose, like most little men, he is as vain as he can stick, bumptious, and fidgety,” said Venning, despondently.

“He struck me as being very quiet. At any rate, you can judge for yourself, as we are due to see him within half an hour. You must tell him that you are a naturalist, as he intends writing a book, in which a great deal of space will be given to animals. He said he felt a ‘bit shaky on his pins’ when it came to scientific terms.”

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“I should be glad to help him there,” said Venning; “but it is too good. He would never take a youngster like me.”

“He said he would rather have a youngster who would carry out his own views about treating a subject, than a man who would try to teach him his business. Come along and see him for yourself.”

“Within half an hour the two friends who had just left school entered a room which was part library, part museum, armoury, dining-room, and cabin, so crammed it was.

“This is my friend Venning, Mr. Hume.”

“Glad to see you, Venning. Sit down anywhere.”

Compton sat down between the horns of a bleached buffalo skull, but Venning stood like one in a trance. His hand had been swallowed up by a huge palm and thick iron-like fingers, and he was staring down on a pair of the broadest shoulders he had seen, with an arching chest to match. This was the pigmy he had imagined—this man with the shoulders of a giant and the chest of a Hercules. Then his eyes ranged over the walls, gradually recovering their animation.

“Know ’em,” said Mr. Hume, waving a bronzed hand towards the wall.

“I think so, sir.”

“Just reel off the names.”

Venning reeled off the names of a score or more of animals without hesitation, and Mr. Hume looked pleased.

“There are some men,” he said, “who come in here and talk over me and round me and under me about fur and feather, and they can’t tell a bighorn from a koodoo by the horns on the wall. Now, my friend, you knew those over there in the corner were the horns of a koodoo, but do you know his habits?”

“No, sir; but I spent a month watching a Dartmoor deer.”

“A month! Can’t learn anything in a month, boy; but you’ve struck the right book. The pages that are spread out under the sky hold the right teaching, for those who wish to learn about animals. There are writers who make a study of structure; they argue from bones, and classify; but bones don’t tell us about the living flesh and blood. You take my meaning?”

“You make a difference between the structure of animals and their habits.”

“That’s so, my lad. Ever read Jeffreys, and the sketches by the ’Son of the Marshes’?”

“They’re splendid.”

Mr. Hume nodded and filled a pipe, having a footlong stem, made out of the wing-bone of an albatross.

“I want to describe the personal habits of animals in their surroundings. I said ‘personal’ habits. Do you take me?”

“No, sir.”

“You think I should use another word, and say, perhaps, ‘distinctive’ habits. I say personal. Now, you take a lion—a bush lion or a veld lion, a yellow lion or a black lion, young or old. That lion, whichever one you take, is a lion by himself. He’s got his own character and his own experience. All lions have ways in common because they’re built alike. They’re heavy and muscular because

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they've got to pull down big game; and because they're heavy they move slowly, and because they move slowly they've got to adopt common tactics in hunting. Good; but one lion differs from another, and so with other animals, right away through the list. So, I say, one must study the personal habits of animals in their own back yard, so to say, before he can give a true description of them. Do you take my meaning?"

"I should like nothing better than to study animals in their home," said the boy, burning with excitement.

"And the two of you think you would like to join me in my expedition?"

Mr. Hume looked at them out of calm yellowish eyes as if he were studying them.

"We should," they said eagerly.

"Think it will turn out a picnic—a glorified sort of camping-out, with black fellows to wait on you, and a lot of shooting and fishing? Is that your idea?"

"We were talking about that this morning," said Compton, "and we came to the conclusion that exploring was hard work. We are prepared for rough living."

"That's right. And you tell me that you are free to go without giving anxiety to relatives, eh?"

"We neither of us have near relatives."

Mr. Hume stood up and felt each one over in turn, making them draw deep breaths.

"Seem sound," he mused, "in wind and limb. But there is one thing. The great danger in Central Africa is from fever—not from animals or blacks." Here he took down a bottle of white powder, and placed a large pinch in a wine-glass of water. "Quinine is the traveler's stand-by, but there are some who cannot take quinine, It has no effect on them, and such people have no business to set foot in fever districts. Drink this?"

Compton emptied the glass with a wry face, and Venning, when his turn came, shuddered; but they got the dose down, and smiled.

"Now," said Mr. Hume, "you both of you give me references to the headmaster of your school, and I will give you one in return. I will make inquiries about you, and I would advise you to make inquiries about me. You can come back here to-morrow afternoon, and if we are mutually satisfied, we will then fix up a contract."

"I don't think we require a reference," said Venning.

“Why not?” said Mr. Hume, sharply.

“Because,” blurted out Venning, turning red—“because you have lived among animals.”

Mr. Hume laughed heartily with a deep rumbling laugh.

“Animals are tricky, boy; and yet,” he added, “there may be a meaning in what you say. They have a dignity in death that is grand. Go and make your inquiries, lads. I am Dave Hume, the hunter, and my life has been passed in wild lands, but there are some in London who know me.”

He rose up to open the door, and Venning overtopped him by inches, yet he did not look either small or unwieldy. His step was springy, and his head, poised on a massive neck, was well set, with the chin raised. He was a man, evidently, who had always looked the world straight in the face. His eyes had a yellowish tinge, and in their colour and their calm they reminded Venning somehow of a lion, an impression heightened by the tawny hue of a long beard.

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The next day, the references having been satisfactorily followed up, the contract was entered upon, and the two boys paid over the sum of Pounds 50 each to David Hume, who in his turn agreed to let them share in any profits which the expedition might make, from any source whatever.

“Profits, Mr. Hume?” they asked.

“Profits from hunting, from trading, or from discovery. I don’t say that we shall make anything. The chances are, of course, that we may lose all before we are a month out, but it is always well to be business-like. There is gold in Central Africa. We may discover a gold reef. There are new animals in the forest. We may catch an okapi, and if we could land it in England it would fetch a large sum. We might snare a live gorilla, and there is not a gorilla in the zoological gardens of Europe.”

“A gorilla!” said Venning, thinking of a picture he had seen of an erect man-ape bending a rifle-barrel into an arch as if it were a cane.

“A gorilla!” said Compton. “I should like to find the Garden of Rest.”

“You have heard his story, Mr. Venning?” said the hunter, nodding his head at Compton.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, it was because of that story that I have taken you two into my expedition; otherwise I should have been obliged to decline your services on account of your youth. But the story interested me, and I will do my best to help Compton in his search.”

“Thank you,” said Compton, quietly.

“The Garden of Rest!” mused the hunter. “That, I take it, would be an Arabian phrase; for such a term would not occur to a native, who is too often idle to attach much value to a state of rest. It sounds peaceful; but I have it in my mind that if we ever reach the place, it will be only after much hard work, much suffering, and danger. You understand that this is no pleasure excursion?”

“We do, sir,” said Compton; “yet we expect to get much pleasure from the expedition.”

“Another word. I am not an exacting man; but there is one thing I will not tolerate, and that is disobedience. It is well to understand that now;” and there came a stern expression into those singular eyes.

“That is only right,” said Compton; and Venning agreed.

CHAPTER II

A NOVEL CRAFT

A month was devoted to preparation—a month that was full of pleasure to the two friends, for they came into close touch with Dave Hume the hunter, and learnt to regard him almost as a brother. Ordinarily, he was curt in his speech and cold in manner, especially with strangers; but at night, when he had shed his boots and coat, he would talk to them freely of his hunting experiences, and listen with interest to their opinions. He never laughed at their mistakes, nor damped their enthusiasm, but he got the best out of them by a fine courtesy that seemed part of his nature.

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Thus it was that when, early in the first week, Venning said he had an idea for a boat that could be easily carried round the cataracts and worked without much labour, he was at once encouraged to give plans and specifications.

“I read once about a ’sneak-box’—a flat-bottomed shooting canoe— that could carry a sail and serve at the same time as a cabin.”

“I have used one myself duck-shooting. Go on.”

“Well, sir, I built a boat on the plan given, and spent a holiday one year on the Broads. It drew very little water, and was easily managed. However, you know all that. But what I was thinking about was a design for a larger boat of the kind, with a propeller attached to it which could be worked by lever.”

“By a lever?”

“Perhaps you have seen a lame man working a bicycle by a lever— well, after that principle. There would be a steel rod with cog-wheels, and one man could work the lever as the lame cyclist does without the labour of rowing.” Venning waited nervously for the criticism.

“At any rate the lever would be a relief after the paddles,” said Mr. Hume, gravely.

“But that is not all,” continued the inventor, hastily. “I would rig up a light American windmill amidships, which could work the screw and get more speed with a following wind in conjunction with a sail rigged up forward.”

“Bravo, my boy!” said Mr. Hume, laughing. “How many revolutions of the screw to the minute do you expect to get out of your windmill?”

“That depends on the power of the wind, sir. Do you think it is a mad scheme?”

“It would impress the natives,” said Compton, “and at any rate we could start wheat-milling, you know, in case we came to the end of our resources.”

“There’s no wheat in Central Africa, you duffer! Besides, sir, it’s mainly a question of gear. With a lever, cog-wheels, and a running chain after the pattern of the cycle chain, one could——”

“And ball bearings,” suggested Compton, slyly.

“Yes; and ball bearings—the friction would be reduced, and we could get more power out of a screw and propeller than we could from four paddles.”

“You may be right,” said Mr. Hume, thoughtfully.

“We don’t want to take a large party, and I confess the water transport has bothered me very much. The wind-mill, I am afraid, we must leave to some other time, but the other part of your scheme is worth placing before practical men, and I will give you a letter to a friend of mine who had a boat built on the Thames.”

Venning saw the friend the very next day; the friend gave him an introduction to a member of a great firm of torpedo-boat builders on the Thames, and this gentleman very kindly gave the matter five minutes’ attention.

“Your idea, eh?” said the great designer. “Explain what advantage you expect to gain.”

“Less labour in working than with paddles, and greater speed.”

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“Humph! Well, my lad, you leave the matter with me, and I will report. You can look over the yards if you like.”

Venning spent the rest of the morning among the wicked-looking sharks of the Navy, and he went back depressed with the thought that his “sneak-box” was merely a plaything. However, he picked up confidence when the next day brought an offer from the builders to turn out an aluminium sneak-box in three divisions, with capacity for a crew of six, to be worked on occasion by two men pulling at levers, driving the propeller by means of endless chains and cog-wheels, the gear to be made of best oil-tempered nickel-steel, with hardened ball bearings. Each division, when detached, of such weight that it could be easily carried by three men, but no guarantee given that the propeller would give the speed desired.

“That is good enough for us, I think,” said Mr. Hume.

“They give no guarantee,” remarked Compton, cautiously.

“No; but they would not undertake the work unless they had some belief in the idea, and if the propeller proves useless, we can at the worst unship it. In any case we must have the boat, and we could not improve on the makers.”

The order was given, and by the fourth week the little boat was launched on the Thames for its first trial. It looked workmanlike in spite of its wide beam and shallow draught, for the great designer who had fashioned the lines of the fastest destroyer afloat had himself drawn up the plans after giving a day’s careful thought to the job. The shaft, which rested on nickel-steel sockets, with ball bearings supported by nickel-steel ribs for lightness, was protected by a water-tight casing, and all the other parts made of the very best metal, so as to secure both lightness and strength, with a complicated set of cog-wheels to take off the strain. The steering was by a neat wheel right forward, where the look-out man could have an uninterrupted view. Forward, too, was the socket for the metal mast. The boat was fifteen feet in length, with a beam of four feet amidships, tapering fore and aft, with a well in the centre, and the remaining space covered in with a light aluminium deck, strengthened by oak bends. There was sleeping-room for two, so that with a crew of four there would have to be four watches of three hours each. The peculiar features of the long, low craft were the two levers rising above the after-deck through slots, which gave each a thrust of about one and a half feet, and two saddle-like seats borne on stout supports, one near the stem facing the bows, and the other further forward facing the stem. Venning perched himself on one seat, Compton on the other, one of the hands took the wheel, and Mr. Hume and the designer sat in the well.

Compton’s clear-cut face, with well-formed jaws, showed no other sign of interest than a rather amused smile, but Venning’s fair features were flushed with excitement and nervous expectation, A man pushed the boat out. It moved at first sluggishly.

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“Full speed ahead!” cried out Mr. Hume.

Venning pulled his lever over, and as he shot it back Compton pulled his, the two moving to and fro easily as if they had been rowing a steady stroke.

“She moves, she moves!” cried Mr. Hume, with a shout.

“Take her over the mile,” said the designer to the steersman; and he pulled out his watch with exactly the same look of calm interest he showed when presiding over the trial of the fastest craft afloat.

The shining aluminium boat answered to her helm, slipped through the muddy waters in a graceful curve, and then steadied for the straight course.

“Let her go, boys.”

The levers worked to and fro with an easy swing; there rose the hum of the chains moving easily below, and the quickened churning of the propeller blades.

The designer glanced from his watch to the bank, which was fast slipping away, and nodded his head at Mr. Hume.

“Easy all. I think she will do;” and he nodded at Venning. “Ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes!”

“A mile in ten minutes—six miles an hour!”

“And it was as easy as nothing,” said Venning—“wasn’t it, Dick?”

“Like cutting bread,” said Compton.

“Very good, I think; but you must remember that she carries no cargo. Now we’ll try her with the sail alone, and then with the sail and screw combined, and then with the screw and oars, for you will see that I have fitted row-locks.”

Under a fair breeze the boat skimmed along at a merry pace, with no wave worth speaking of; and with the sail and screw she put on an additional four miles, and with the oars an extra three, making from nine to ten miles an hour.

“I congratulate you, Mr. Venning,” said the designer, as they stepped out, thoroughly pleased.

“I am sure, sir, we thank you,” said the boy, warmly.

“Eight,” said Mr. Hume; “and we are thoroughly pleased with the craft, every one of us.”

“She is a beauty,” put in Compton—“a real beauty; and I think she would be perfect if a light awning could be fixed up over the after-deck.”

“That could be done easily.

“It would be an improvement, certainly,” said Mr. Hume.

“I will rig up brackets to hold the rods for the awning.”

“And we could fix up mosquito curtains round the sides. That is A 1. Now, what is her name to be?” And Mr. Hume looked at Venning.

He had thought of a name, and was prompt with it—the Okapi.

“And what does that mean?” asked the builder, with a smile.

Venning explained, and the name was adopted.

“Now,” said the builder, “if Mr. Venning will come down to-morrow afternoon, my workmen will take the Okapi to pieces in his presence before packing it for delivery in the docks, and explain thoroughly how it is to be put together. I will give orders for several extra plates with fittings to be placed in one of the divisions, so that if you have an accident you will have the material for repairing the mischief. You understand, aluminium cannot be soldered, but you could cover a hole by means of nuts and screws.”

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Venning was in time next day to receive his instructions, and made in his note-book an outline sketch of each part. While he was so engaged, Mr. Hume, with Compton, were seeing the outfit packed for the steamer, every purchase having been made with great judgment, so that nothing superfluous figured in the list. Their armament consisted of one double express for Mr. Hume, two sporting carbines for the boys, three Mauser revolvers, and one fowling-piece, strong hunting-knives, as well as four Ghoorka knives for cutting a path through the forest. As far as possible all their food-stuff was concentrated in tabloids and essences; each had his own special tin-lined medicine-case, in addition to the common drug-chest; each his own water-bottle of double canvas, a material which, permitting evaporation, keeps the water cool; and each his regulation “billy,” or cooking-tin. As for clothing, it was a mixture of luxury and rough wear, of the best silk underwear, cellular shirts of a light blue, and yellow chamois-skin breeches, warranted to grow tougher with use. Putties were discarded, as likely to give harbourage to “jiggers,” which bore into the toes, in favour of soft leather high boots, tightly fastened at the knee; and the outfit included needles for the making of moccasins, or veld schoen, from the hides of the larger antelope.

“Why do you select all blue shirts, Mr. Hume?” asked Venning.

“On account of the mosquitoes.”

“Consider the feeling of the gorillas,” said Compton, dryly. “Perhaps they would prefer green.”

“They may find us green enough for their taste, Compton; but I am not joking. Mosquitoes have a preference for some colours and an aversion for others. They dislike blue most of all, so you see I have a purpose in selecting blue—not only for the shirts, but for the mosquito curtains.”

“All these precautions for a wretched fly.”

“Exactly. A mosquito’s gimlet carries more terrors for the explorer than the elephant’s trunk, and his hum is more dreaded than the roar of the lion. The mosquito is fever-winged, alert, and bloodthirsty. He carries the germs of malaria with him; and malaria kills off more men than all the reptiles and wild animals combined.”

“Is there no way of fighting?” asked Compton, impressed.

“Oh ay; they are fighting him on the West Coast by draining the swamps, where he breeds about the villages. But who can drain the swamps of the Congo, or let light into the Great Forest?”

“Then we stand a fair chance to catch malaria?”

“A better chance,” said Mr. Hume, grimly, “than we have of catching the okapi. Fear the mosquito, but at the same time take every precaution against its attack. I have an idea myself that nature has provided a safeguard.”

“Quinine?” said Venning.

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“Quinine is an antidote. I mean a preventive—but that is your department, Venning. It will be one of your duties to study the little brute, and you may make a great discovery, for instance, it has been discovered that the mosquito dislikes certain colours. Why? It may be that he would show more distinctly on one colour than on another, and so fall an easy victim to an insect-eating bird. But it may be that the leaves of some plant of a particular hue, or the juices of the plant, are distasteful to the insect. Flies don’t like the leaves of the blue-gum, and I guess mosquitoes have their likes and dislikes. Find the plant they dislike, and we may defy them.”

They had no accommodation for such a luxury as a tent, but instead they purchased canvas hammocks, each with a waterproof covering, and a roll of green canvas with strong eyelet-holes, to serve the purpose of a tent, in addition to a canvas awning with bamboo rods, to cover the whole boat in case they were not able to land for any length of time.

It was a pleasant time for the boys, and when at last they were pitching down the Channel into the Bay of Biscay, having meanwhile passed through a miserable twenty-four hours, they inhaled the strong salt air and clapped each other on the back.

It was grand!

They stood in the bows, one hand on the rail, the other on the brim of a hat, and tasted the salt with a smack of the lips. The wind blew its life into their eyes, brightened them, toughened their skins, reddened them, and the spray, drying on the red, softened the colour to a fine healthy brown. Then the good ship heeled over and rolled back with a swing of the yards, and the first roller from the Atlantic went majestically by. They were on the old, old track of the adventurers, of the sea-rovers, of the great captains, of the empire builders, and before them, far off in the fastness of the Dark Continent, was the Great Forest with all its secrets fast held.

CHAPTER III

THE CANOE ADRIFT

They passed in time the rocks that guard Madeira, the green bay of Funchal, the peak of Teneriffe, and then the ship turned on its heel to the West Coast, and, while yet a thousand miles away, was welcomed by two messengers—a shrike and a hawk-moth, who had sailed along some upper current of air with red sand from the Sahara to filter down at last on to a firm resting-place.

They went away down into the Gulf of Guinea, and with many a call by the way to discharge cargo, approached the mouth of the Congo, whose flood gave a tawny colour to the sea. So far they had seen nothing but the squalid fringe of the Continent, and the

damp heat had steamed them and tried them, but the young explorers had not lost the fine edge of their imagination. They knew that hundreds of miles back in the unexplored heart of the land there were secrets to be unraveled, and though they shed their warmer clothing, they retained their ardour. The river somewhere in its far reaches held for them, and them alone, new forms of life—the grandfather of all the crocodiles, a mammoth hippo; and somewhere in the forest was some huge gorilla waiting to offer them battle. Moreover, were these not the gates of the Place of Rest?

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“Surely,” said Compton, as they steamed slowly into the night off the mouth of the great river, “thy slave is not cast down because the black children of the mud-house at our last calling-place did mock us with their mouths, and the man, their father, wore the silk hat and frock-coat of civilization?”

“Perish the thought,” said Venning, throwing a banana peel at a brilliant flash of phosphorescent light in the oily waters. “Yet the man-who-was-tired, he of the parchment face, who sat on a verandah with his feet on the rail, prophesied that within seven days we should be sighing for English bacon in the country where a white man could breathe.”

“There is no snap in the air; but I can breathe freely. See;” and Compton took a deep breath.

“That is the teaching of the hunter,” said Venning, wisely. “Deep breathing gives a man deep lungs. That is his teaching. Also this, that a man should keep his skin clean and his muscles supple by hard rubbing after the bath. Therefore, I did ask the bo’sun to turn the hose on us in the morning when they clean down the decks. It is good friction.”

“And he has another saying—that it is good for the skin to apply oil with the palm of the hand till the skin reddens. I have a smell about me like a blue gum-tree, for the ointment he gave contains eucalyptus oil.”

“And the fat of a goat. There is much virtue in goats’ fat, and the eucalyptus is not to the taste of the trumpeter.”

“The mosquito?”

“Even so.”

“Then why don’t you say so in good English?” and Compton dropped away from his high-flown speech. “I bet that’s a shark kicking up all that phosphorescence.”

“He swims in fire, like the—like the——”

“Sprat!”

“Like Apollo, you lean-minded insect. With every sweep of his tail he sends out diadems of liquid gems, and his broad nose shovels fire before him like a——”

“Stoker. Exactly; and if we had a lump of fat pork and a hook we could drag him up and collect a basketful of jewels. I dare say he is leering up at us with a green and longing eye.”

“Did you hear that cry?” asked Venning, suddenly.

“No.” “Was it the shark whispering, do you think?”

“Shut up and listen.”

They leant over the rail and peered into the night. The drowsy air throbbed to the measured beat of the engines, but they scarcely noticed that accustomed sound.

“There it is again.”

“Yes. I heard something like a sheep bleating.”

“Would a sheep be swimming out here, you ass?”

“The shark’s off—look!” and they saw a streak of fire shoot forward.

“And there goes another. By Jove, they must have heard the cry!”

“I’m sorry for the sheep then,” muttered Compton.

They bent far forward, listening intently, and following the course taken by the sharks as defined by the gleaming wake. The leadsman swung out the sounder as the vessel slackened down with a yell from the escape-valve that drowned all other sounds with its deafening clamour.

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“By the deep nine!” cried a bass voice.

The bell in the engine-room signaled the skipper’s order, and the ship felt her way once more. Again there was silence, save for the throb of the engines and the grating of the steering-chain at intervals.

“I have not heard the cry again,” said Compton.

“Can you see anything over there—follow the line of my finger— there, just by that gleam?”

“Yes; I think there is something.”

“Then I think the captain ought to know;” and Venning ran off first to Mr. Hume.

“Something afloat, eh?” and Mr. Home rose from his deck-chair.

“Some one in distress, I think,” They went on to the bridge, and Venning began his story; but the captain cut him short by wheeling round to the rail.

“Ahoy, there—ahoy!”

A startling response came in a long, quivering wail out of the dark sea.

“By the lord,” muttered the captain, “what’s that?”

“Jackal,” said Mr. Hume.

“Impossible! We are miles from the shore.”

“Jackal, sure enough. Maybe sent adrift by a flood, and taken to a tree.”

The captain laughed. “I thought it was a hoodoo at least. Well, lad”—turning to Venning—“you don’t want me to pick up a creature like that?”

“I don’t think it is far away, sir. I think I see a tree or boat, and if you would lower me over the bows and ease the vessel——”

“Well?”

“Perhaps I could pick it up.”

“You are not afraid of being bitten?”

“I think it would know I meant it good.”

The skipper laughed good-humouredly. “Well, you’re a plucky lad, and, at any rate, I’d not be losing time.” He touched the bell, and motioned to the steersman. The ship slowed down and came round. “Mr. Bobbins, just sling this young gentleman over the port-bows, and have a light lowered. Do you still stick to your bargain?”

Venning answered by sliding off the bridge and climbing up into the bows, where a knot of sailors had gathered at the gangway. A rope was looped round his thigh, so as to give his arms play, and two men stood to pay him over and down.

“Here she is!” sang out the mate.

The bell rang out, “Stop her,” and Venning went over, catching the rope above his head with his left hand, and taking a turn round with his right foot. There was a scraping sound against the side of the vessel.

“I’ve got hold,” he shouted. “It’s a tree—no, a boat.” Then, “By Jove!”

“What is it?” cried several together, excited by the startled exclamation.

“Lower the light!” The lantern sank over the side, but those above could not see well because of the bulge of the hull.

“Now lower me. I shall get in and make fast.”

“Take care!” cried Mr. Hume.

“Look out for the sharks, sir,” sang out a sailor. “There’s one coming up.”

“Lower away, please—quick!”

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The men lowered. “That’s right. I’m in the boat, or whatever it is. Now let down the lantern.”

Those leaning over the side saw Venning reach up for the lantern, and then they heard a snarling and snapping.

“Stand ready to haul in!” cried the captain. “That brute will attack the boy. One of you men go down.”

The snarling continued, mingled with soothing cries from Venning; and then the weird howl burst forth anew, daunting the sailor who was carrying out the captain’s order.

The mate stepped forward. “Stand aside!” he cried, and swung himself over and down. He reached Venning’s side, and they saw him peering about him.

“By thunder!” he muttered.

“What is it?” demanded the captain, irritably. “D’ye expect me to spend the whole night here?”

“A minute, sir. Let over a running tackle, and we’ll have the whole thing aboard.”

“Lively there! Lower the tackle, and don’t stand staring with your mouths open. Swing out those davits.”

The davits swung out, the tackle ran through the pulleys into the water with a splash, and the mate shifted the unknown craft, with its mysterious freight, amidships. A few moments he occupied in getting the tackle into position.

“Haul in!” he shouted.

“Heave!” roared the captain, in a state of high excitement; and the sailors, wrought up to a pitch, heaved with a will.

The captain, Mr. Hume, and Compton, peering over the side, saw a long, narrow canoe rising up, with the forms of the mate and Venning standing amidships, and some huddled object aft.

The canoe swung clear of the rails, the tackle was made fast, the davits swung in, and then the canoe was slowly lowered to the main deck.

“Why, it’s a man,” shouted Compton.

“And a dog,” muttered the sailors, falling back. “With a mouthful of teeth.”

The mate and Venning stepped out as the canoe reached the deck, and the mate turned the lantern full on the huddled group, showing a jackal, with raised mane and bared teeth, crouching over the prostrate form of a man, whose teeth also were bared, and whose eyes seemed to glare with the same fury that showed in the flaming green eyes of the animal.

“What a pair of demons!”

“The man is gagged and bound, captain,” said Venning. “If the cook will bring a piece of meat for the jackal, I think I can get to the man without trouble.”

“You’ve done very well, Venning,” said Mr. Hume, quietly. “Leave this matter to me; it is more in my line.”

With his eyes on the jackal, he placed his hand on the side of the canoe and moved forward gently while he spoke in Kaffir. “Peace, little friend,” were his words, as he afterwards explained to the amazed captain. “We are hunters both, eh? We know each other, eh? There is no harm in me towards you. You know it, little hunter; you know it well.”

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It was strange to hear the deep accents of an unknown tongue, strange to see a man using speech in complete gravity to a wild animal, but stranger than all to note the effect on the animal itself.

At first the red mouth opened wide and the green eyes flamed up, but as the strong hand crept nearer, the glare went out under the steady gaze of the man's tawny eyes, and next, with a whimper, the jackal crept forward on its stomach, till the sharp black nose smelt the man's hand.

"We are friends, little hunter, we three;" and the great fingers passed over the yellow body up towards the face of the bound man. "Friends—together—for we are hunters all—you, myself, and this poor one here with his speech cut off." "We will see to that, eh?" The fingers were on the man's face, and with a twist the gag was out, and the man drew in his breath with a great sob.

"Ow—ay, that is better; now a little water."

Still keeping his eyes fixed on the man and his beast, Mr. Hume held out a hand for a cup, and with a moistened handkerchief bathed the cracked and swollen lips. The eyes of both the man and his beast continued fixed on the hunter, following his every movement, and never straying to the ring of faces round, showing white in the glare of the light. The strong fingers moved swiftly here and there, loosening the hide ropes that bound the legs and arms, and then rubbing ointment with a strong smell of eucalyptus into the bruised skin.

"So—now a little broth for the man, cook, and a scrap of meat for the jackal. Gently, gently, cook; don't scare them, and don't crowd in, you others."

"Ay, ay," burst out the captain, in a sudden fury. "What's the whole ship's company doing here? Is this a garden-party, Mr. Robbins?"

"Get forward!" roared the mate, in a voice that sent the jackal almost crazy with renewed fright; and at the creature's wild cry the sailors hurried off, muttering that they had taken a whole cargo of misfortune aboard.

The hunter looked reproachfully at the mate, who was mounting to the bridge, and then began once more to soothe the frightened animal, which in time took a bit of raw meat he proffered. The man drank his broth, and then sat up to stare about him with quick glances. When lying down he had seemed black, but, now that he was in the light, it was seen that he was more mahogany than black, with a more prominent nose and thinner lips than are usually found with the negroid stock. His hair, however, was in little tufts, and the white of his eyes had the smoky hue of the negro. As he sat, Mr. Hume rubbed the back of his neck, and fed him with broth, a mouthful at a time, and as this

went on the fierce black eyes again and again returned from their swift, suspicious range to the hunter's face.

"He seems to grow stronger," said Venning.

"Fetch a rug from my cabin; we will make him a bed in his own canoe. He will rest easier there till the morning."

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The rug was brought, and the man nodded his head as it was arranged comfortably; then, with another long intent look at the hunter, he settled himself down with a sigh, spoke a word to his strange companion, which at once curled itself at his feet, and was asleep.

“Now, boys,” said Mr. Hume, “you go to bed. I will watch here, and in the morning, maybe, we will find out the mystery.”

In the morning the steamer was on the yellow waters of the Congo, and the boys forgot even about the strange couple in their first view of the mighty river; but the sight of a native-manned canoe, shooting out from the mist which hung in wisp over the waters, recalled the incident. They found Mr. Hume in an easy-chair, drinking his early morning cup of coffee, and at his feet, stretching along the scuppers, was the canoe, still with its crew aboard and asleep, though the jackal slept apparently with one eye open. The canoe was, they saw, made out of a single tree-trunk, and was thickly coated with the slime of the river, a heavy, sodden, roughly shaped craft, most unlike the light boat that skimmed into view from out the mist.

“What do you make of it?” said Mr. Hume, after the two boys had made a long inspection.

“It seems to me,” said Venning, “that the jackal has a very dark coat.”

“That is so; it is unusually dark. What does that suggest to you?”

“Well, as the colour is adapted to the nature of the country in which the animal hunts, I should say that the jackal came from a wooded district.”

“Good. And what is your opinion, Compton?”

Compton bent down to examine the bows. “Look here, sir,” he said; “there is a prayer to Allah carved in Arabic on a leaden medallion, and fixed into the wood.”

“Is that so?” and the hunter looked at the signs with interest. “I had not seen that. And it means——”

“That Arabs had something to do with the making of the canoe.”

“Umph! I doubt very much if it is Arab-built. That talisman may have been found by a native and fixed on—though that is impossible;” and Mr. Hume pondered. “The Arabs may have taken the canoe from the native owner and fixed in the medallion.”

“He’s awake,” said Venning; and the three of them saw that the man, without so much as a movement of surprise at his awakening under such altered circumstances, was keenly observing them.

After he had gravely inspected each in turn, he sat up and raised his hand in salutation. The rug slipped off his shoulders, showing his bare breast, with every rib exposed, and clearly outlined in blue was the form of an animal.

“A totem!” exclaimed the hunter.

“Otter,” said Venning.

“Ask the steward if he has the porridge ready that I ordered.”

Venning ran off, and returned with a basin of thick oatmeal porridge. The man took it gravely, made another salutation, and ate the whole.

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“There’s nothing wrong with him,” said Mr. Hume, with a smile. “Now we’ll get him out of that and fix him up comfortably. I like his looks, and have hopes that he will be useful.”

They removed him to a deck-chair, whither he was followed by the jackal, who was in such a state of suspicion that he declined food.

“What I think,” said Mr. Hume, in answer to the boys, who wanted his explanation, “is this—that the man and the jackal have come from the interior.”

“From the Great Forest?”

“Probably from the Great Forest; for these reasons—that the men who shaped the canoe had no knowledge of the coast-built craft with their high bows; that the man is of a different race from the coast tribes; and because the jackal, from his dark markings, is evidently from a thickly wooded region. That is merely a theory, which does not help us much, and certainly does not explain how he came to be bound and gagged in a canoe at sea hundreds of miles from the forest. However, the main point is that we have got him, and having got him, will keep him.”

“Against his will, sir?”

“Oh, I reckon he will be only too thankful for our protection.”

“I should think, sir,” said Venning, “the fact of his totem being an otter proves that his tribe derives its living mainly from fish.”

“That is plausible; but it may, again, be a sign of chieftainship, and a chief I have no doubt he is. Maybe he was sent adrift by some rival faction; but that can scarcely be, for he would not have survived a long journey; and, again, the canoe would have gone aground.”

“There is another explanation,” said Compton, with a grin. “He may not have come down the river at all. He may have been set adrift from one of those ships we passed for insubordination.”

“Ships do not carry canoes or jackals,” said Venning, who had made up his mind that the castaway was from the forest, and from nowhere else.

They went down to breakfast, and the morning was occupied in getting their kit and packages together. At noon the steamer was berthed at a pier, and their packages were transferred to a paddle-wheeler, which was to take them over three hundred miles up the wide estuary to a Belgian station. Thence, perhaps, they would proceed hundreds of miles further by another river steamer before they took to their own boat.

“Why, we may be days before we really get to work,” said Venning, when the vastness of the Congo was forced on his attention by a casual reference to “hundreds of miles.”

“Days—weeks, my boy, before we come to the fringe of our field. The river is more than half the length of the Continent; its length is half the distance by sea from Southampton to the Cape, and, next to the Amazon, it pours a greater body of water into the sea than any river in the world.”

“Africa,” said Compton, “seems to be the driest and the wettest, in parts, of any country; and all its great rivers, except the Nile, run to waste.”

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“They’ll keep,” said Mr. Hume. “When the old world gets tired, worn out, and over-populated, it will find use for these big, silent, deserted rivers, that would carry the ships of the world on their yellow waters.”

CHAPTER IV

THE STORY OF MUATA

They went from the wide estuary into the true river, with a width that opened out at times to twenty miles; and while the white men sweltered on the sticky decks, the rescued man grew in strength. When they reached Stanley Pool his skin was like satin again, with a polish on it from the palm-oil he rubbed in continually.

And when he found his strength he found use for his tongue, and in the speech he made to his rescuers. Mr. Hume caught the meaning of a few words of Bantu, Compton detected a phrase or two in Arabic, and Venning, who had been schooling himself since they passed Banana Point at the river mouth, picked out other words in the tongue of the river tribes.

The meaning of his speech, when they had made a mosaic of the different understood facts, was this—that he was a great man in his own land, but only a child now, being without arms or men, but that if the white men ever came to his place, he would be a father and a mother to them. He would throw his shield before them, and protect them with bow and spear.

After this they sat together learning a polyglot speech that would serve roughly as a medium of exchange.

And this was the story of the chief, slowly put together out of these talks—

“I am Muata the chief. The kraal of my house is toward the setting sun, but the fire no longer burns on the hearth. The men-robbers fell upon the place in the early morning. The people were scattered like goats before the lion. Many were taken by the men-robbers, and many were slain; and among them my father.

“The chief’s wife, my mother, fled with me into the Great Forest. Many days she lived on roots, and the ‘little people’ found her in her wanderings. They took her by crooked paths far from the land of her people. Ohe!

“Through the dark woods—through the dark and terrible woods, through the mist and the rain, with much pain, she followed them as they went before her like shadows. And in the folds of her blanket she bore me on her back. It is true.

“She was straight as the palm when she fled from the kraal, and when after long journeying she set me down at the hiding-place, she was thin and bent. Thin and bent was the chief’s wife, she who had maidens to wait on her.

“At the hiding-place in the forest there were people whose kraals had been burnt by the men-robbers. Outcasts they were, of many tribes, living together without a chief; but the place was fat, and they grew fat, being without spirit.

“And Muata the child played with other children and grew. He grew on the fatness of the land, and when he could walk, his playmates were the young of the jackal; his playthings were the bow and the spear.

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“Ohe! Muata grew to strength like the lion’s cub in the knowledge of the hunt. She, even his mother, taught him to follow the trail, showed him the leaf bruised by the foot of a man traveling, showed him the tracks of the beasts, taught him the cries of the animals.

“She rubbed the oil into his skin, set him to hurl the spear, to shaft the arrow, to hit the mark; set him to run and swim, to creep like a snake, to bound like the buck.

“So Muata grew in the ways of a hunter; and when the men of the place went on the hunt, Muata went with them—went as a hunter, and the hut of his mother had meat to spare.

“Then the chief’s wife took the boy to the headmen, and the witch-doctors. They drew on his body the sign of the otter—he who is cunning and brave, who is at home on land or in the water. They made him a warrior, he who was a boy, because there was always meat in the hut of his mother.

“But his mother spoke. ’O Muata, hunter of the wild pig, take your spear and your bow, and the quiver of arrows with the iron heads. You will hunt men.’ Thus it came that Muata went alone on the war-trail. With him went his mother, who carried the pots and the sleeping-mat, she who carried nothing at her kraal.

“The trail led into the Great Forest toward the rising sun, and there were dangers between the sunrise and its setting—dangers between the setting of the sun and its rising.

“A man-ape of great stature, hairy and fierce, stood before us in the path. He lifted his brows at us, and bared his teeth. Muata was afraid, but his mother called to him softly—called to him not to run, called to him to drive this thing from her path.

“Muata notched an arrow and smote the man-ape in the neck. Yoh! He stood like a man upright, and roared. His roar was like the roar of a lion in pain. Foam came from his lips, and his eyes were fierce.

“The knees of Muata shook; his blood was like water. He was afraid, but his mother laughed and cracked her fingers. The man-ape drew near, but she stood—she the chief’s wife. So Muata the boy notched an arrow, and would have loosened it, but she spoke—’Let him come still nearer, O warrior.’

“Muata grew stronger at the word. The man-ape came nearer. Three paces away he stood—and his head was above the head of Muata, his arms were like a young tree, and the chest was like the chest of two men. He opened his mouth and the arrow flew into his throat, bit deep till the point stood out behind. He clutched the shaft with his hands, rocked, and fell, and Muata, taking his spear, thrust it between the great ribs.

“Yoh! the man-ape was dead, and the chief’s wife broke the great teeth from the jaw, and cut off the hairs above the eyes. She burnt them, and mixed them with his blood, for Muata to drink. Muata drank and was strong.

“So those two passed through the forest, through the silent dark of the woods, in pain and hunger. Passed out into the plains where there were kraals and yellow men in white coverings.

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“And the chiefs wife spoke: ’Behold, it is for this I have suffered much for thee, Muata. What I have sown in sorrow and pain I will reap in your strength. Look and look again! Those are of the race who destroyed the kraals of your people. They are men-hunters, kraal-burners, slayers of children. Steal upon them where they walk idly, and for each arrow slay a man.’

“Muata waited on these men a day and a night, and when he sought his mother on the edge of the forest his quiver was empty, and the chief’s wife spoke: ‘Where did the arrow strike, O warrior?’ And Muata answered, ‘In the throat, O my mother.’ And the chief’s wife said again, ’It is well; but the warrior sees to it that he can recover his arrow. And your quiver is empty.’ So Muata returned and recovered his arrows, for the men lay where they fell, the living having gone into the kraals in fear.

“So Muata and the chiefs wife went slowly back to the place of hiding. And because Muata had slain the man-ape and the robbers— they who slay children—the chief’s wife sought out the headmen, and spoke: ’Oh, listen! This is Muata, the son of a chief. He has slain the man-ape, and for each arrow that was in his quiver a man-robber. It is fit that he be your chief.’ But they laughed, and the chiefs wife held her peace.

“And again, after the crops were gathered, Muata went again on the war-trail alone—-went to the river, followed it down the bank, and the little people led him to a kraal in the wood by the river bank— a kraal with a high fence, the kraal of the yellow men-robbers. Muata dived beneath the fence with a short spear in his hand. With his spear he slew the man who watched by the gate, opened the gate, and put fire to the huts. The yellow men ran, some into the forest, and there the little people found them; others fled into a canoe to cross; Muata swam after, and with his spear ripped open the bottom, so that it filled and sank.

“And again, when the place of hiding was reached, the chief’s wife sought out the headmen and spoke, saying that Muata was a chief’s son. They put her aside with words, saying there was no proof of this last thing he had done. But Muata whistled, and the little people came forward, saying the chiefs son had destroyed the kraal of the evil-doers. Then the headmen took counsel, and again put the chief’s wife off.

“The chief’s wife bowed her head, but, seeing that she was weak, and that her mind was fixed on the thing she asked for, Muata took the matter into his own hand. He bade the women prepare a big hut for his mother—he put a stick to their shoulders; and when a man sought to slay him there in the presence of them all, Muata smote the man under the arm with his spear. So they built the great hut, and women waited on the chief’s wife, his mother, carried water for her, cut the wood, and built the fire.

“So Muata was chief, and year by year he led the men of the place against the yellow robbers, till the name of Muata was feared.

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“The would Muata take to himself wives, and would drink beer, and grow fat; but his mother counseled with him, saying he was a boy— saying he was only at the beginning of the path. And Muata listened, for she was wiser than all, and he set his heart on the plan she put before him to win back the land of his people.

“Thus Muata the chief was still a warrior and a hunter. He followed the spoor into the fastnesses of the woods, and trained the young of the jackal to drive the buck towards him.

“Ohe! it was ended. The evil-doers, the child-slayers, the robbers of men, sent spies into the forest, and when Muata returned from his hunting there was wailing at the kraal, and the fire was dead on the hearth. And the women cried, ’O chief, they have taken the lioness; they lured her out with tales of ill that had befallen Muata, even the young lion. So she went forth between the gates, and they, the robbers, carried her away.’

“Muata turned on his heel straightway. He sought the trail of the man-thieves. It was plain and level. It led through the forest, and by night his jackal led him on the scent. By day he followed; by night and day Muata went on the track to the river. At the river he heard news. They had gone on the river towards the setting sun.

“Muata took a canoe from the river people, and with his jackal he followed, while the sun rose and set many times, and he came to the father of rivers.

“The waters were wide, and his canoe was like a leaf carried here and there. His heart was sad, but the spirit of his mother prevailed. He followed, and a man came to him saying that the yellow men were near at hand, and sick of the sickness that shakes. Muata gathered together his strength and pushed on. Ohe! and he fell into the hands of his enemies like a child. He went among them sleeping, and when he awoke his hands and limbs were bound.

“And the enemy mocked him, saying, ‘Is this Muata?’ saying, ’even the ant will make him cry aloud;’ and they smeared fat on him. They shook the ants over him, and they bit deep. They reviled him, they spat on him, as day by day he followed in the canoe tied to their greater canoe. They made plans about him to kill him, but the chief man said even a dog had his price. So they forebore to slay Muata, but they carried him down the father of waters to where there was a still greater canoe with wings. They put a gag into his mouth to still his voice, but in the night the jackal bit through the rope, and Muata was alone on the waters.

“Then the jackal cried suddenly, and Muata was borne out of the water, and he was fed.

“That is the story of Muata, and his heart goes out to the white men who brought him out of the darkness.”

CHAPTER V

TROUBLE BREWING

That was the story of Muata!

The white boys looked and wondered. This man who had been through so many dangers could not be much older than they were. If his story were true, he had shown endurance, courage, and a force of character that set the stamp of greatness upon him as greatness would be reckoned among his kind.

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Was it true that he had slain a gorilla with bow and arrow, that he warred successfully against the Arab slave-hunters? Had he subdued a band of men by sheer force of will?

The boys believed him. They did not stop to ask whether the story was probable. They formed their opinion upon the manner of the young chief—upon his grave dignity, and upon the absence of a boastful spirit.

“If his story is true,” said Mr. Hume, “he owes much to his mother.”

“Where is your mother?” asked Compton.

“The chief’s wife is not a woman,” said Muata. “And yet she is a woman. She beguiled them in the forest by pretence of great submission and fear of the woods. So they trusted her to bring firewood, believing she would not go far from the camp. But she was watching for sign of the little people. This I know, for she vanished in the woods near the river. And the yellow hunters of men knew not how she had gone; but they left word to people by the river to say to me that my mother had been carried away in a canoe.”

“And what will you do now?”

“See, I am no one—a liver on kindness, a slave at the gate. But in time Muata will return to the place of hiding.”

“Better stay with us, Muata. We go into the forest ourselves. We will give you food, and teach you how to use the weapon of the Arab hunters. You will hunt for us, work in the canoe for us, and, maybe, we will go with you to your hiding-place.”

“The forest is dark and terrible. Why, will my father enter the darkness with his sons?”

“We go to hunt, and for the love of the woods and the water. Has not a hunter joy in the hunting?”

“I know it;” and the chief observed them intently, as if he were unpersuaded. “The ways of white men are strange. Muata hunts to keep the hut supplied with meat, but the white man carries his meat with him. When he kills he leaves the meat and takes only the horns or the skin of the thing he has slain. Muata is not a child. When he sees a single vulture in the sky, he knows there are others coming behind. A white man comes out of the beyond into the black man’s country. He is soft-spoken; he is a hunter only. Mawoh! and behind him comes an army.”

“What do you know about white men, Muata?”

“The wise men at the hiding-place talked. They knew one such. He lived among them. His ways were strange. He talked with the trees; he sought among the rocks; he

communed with spirits. He was harmless, but the wise men said others would follow on his trail doing mischief. So I ask, my father, why do you wish to enter the forest?"

"Because," said Compton, leaning forward, "my father was lost in the forest, and I would find him. Tell me, where is the white man your old men talked of?"

"The forest takes, the forest keeps," said Muata, lifting a hand solemnly.

"Do you mean," asked the boy, quietly, "that the white man does not live?"

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“The people dealt well by their white man. They gave him food; they carried water for him, and built his fire. Even I, as a child, carried wood to him and listened at his knees.”

“I am not blaming the people; but I want to find the place that is called the Place of Rest, where my father lived; perhaps where he died.”

“This, then, is the hunting?” said the chief, softly.

Mr. Hume recognized the suspicion in the altered tone and suave manner of the chief.

“We have spoken,” he said sharply. “We go into the forest to hunt and to seek without anger against any. We thought you would have worked in well with us; but I see you are a man of a crooked mind.”

“Softly, my father,” said the chief, quietly. “Is it wise that a chief should listen to the counsel of strangers without taking thought for his people?”

“We saved the chief’s life.”

“The chiefs life is his own”—Muata snapped his fingers—“but the secret of the hiding-place is the life of the people. Go slowly, my father. Muata would work for you and with you; his shield is your shield; his eye is your eye; but the secret of the hiding-place is not his to give away.”

“Then you must land here on the bank among your enemies.”

The chief glanced at the far-off wooded banks, with lines of smoke rising from cooking-fires.

“I have no weapons,” he said.

“We cannot help that,” said Mr. Hume, with indifference. “Either you agree to take us to the Place of Rest, or you land.”

Muata rose up, looked under the flat of his hand all around, then let the cotton sheet they had given him slip to the deck. The jackal started up, with his ears pricked and his eyes fixed on his master’s face. The chief caught hold of a wire rope and jumped on to the rail, where he steadied himself.

“What will you do?” asked Mr. Hume.

Muata turned round and pointed to the otter on his chest.

“You don’t mean to say,” said Venning, indignantly, “that you are going to let him swim ashore? Why, the bank is miles away, and the crocodiles are in between.”

Muata's glance fell on the jackal, and he spoke to it. The animal whined, then crouched.

"A favour, my father," he said. "If the beast followed me, he would be food for the crocodiles. Place him on land when you reach the bank, for the sake of good hunting."

"I will do so."

The chief took another long glance around, then drew himself up for the dive.

"Stop," said Mr. Hume.

Muata looked round.

"Your shield is our shield. So be it. We will not ask you to lead us to your hiding-place. Is that so, Compton?"

"When he leads us," said Compton, nodding his head, "it will be at his own will."

"At any rate," muttered Venning, "he has proved himself to be a man; but I wonder if he would have reached the shore?"

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As he spoke the jackal howled, and the chief, who was still standing on the rail, slipped and fell with a splash. They ran to the side, and the jackal, with another howl, sprang to the rail and thence into the river, where a second or two later it was in the troubled wake of the steamer, beating frantically with its fore paws.

“Man overboard!” shouted Mr. Hume. “Stand by with a rope.”

But the Belgian skipper on the little bridge held to his course, while a small knot of coloured passengers aft stood laughing and chattering.

“Stop her, you swab,” cried Mr. Hume; then, as the man took no notice, he ran to the wheel, thrust aside the steersman, and jammed the wheel over.

The displaced man, with an oath, flung himself at the hunter with the sympathy of the passengers, who, ceasing their laughter, advanced with menacing cries.

Before the boys had time to comprehend the situation, Mr. Hume settled the matter out of hand. Letting go the wheel, he caught his assailant by the waistband, and with a heave flung him overboard. Then with a quick right and left he sent two of the others reeling.

“Now,” he roared at the skipper, “back her, or by the Lord I’ll fling you in as well.”

“Fetch the rifles,” said Compton to Venning.

A moment later the two boys stood at the ready with their rifles, and amid a babel of cries the skipper signaled “Stop her.” The steamer slowed up, swung gently round, and shaped back to where three dark spots showed.

“There are four,” cried Venning, at his first swift glance; “and one is a crocodile. It is making for the jackal.”

“Take the wheel, Compton,” said Mr. Hume, quite calm again. “Give me your gun, Venning.”

The hunter, with the gun, went to the side and looked over. Nearest him was the man he had thrown overboard; beyond was the jackal, making a great splashing; and further on was the face of Muata, who was crying out encouragement to his faithful companion as he swam swiftly towards it; and to the left, moving rapidly towards the jackal, was the crocodile, swimming in a great swirl, with only his eyes showing, and the end of his snout. The hunter steadied himself with a shoulder against a stanchion, and then, without hurry or excitement, and after a look round the deck at the people, to see if there was any further mischief brewing, took deliberate aim and fired.

A shout went up, and the very people who had a minute before been so hostile, now were abject in their praise of Mr. Hume, for the crocodile span round and round in answer to the shot.

“Stand by with a rope, Mr. Compton,” cried the hunter, taking command as if by right; and Compton obeyed promptly, but without excitement.

The first man caught the line and swarmed up wet, but subdued in spirit, casting an appealing glance at his late assailant. Muata, in the mean time, reached the half-drowned jackal, held it by the scruff of the neck with one hand, and, turning over on his back, waited for the rope. This flung and seized, he also climbed on board, but there was nothing abject in his appearance. Standing with his head thrown back and his nostrils quivering, he glared a moment at the group of natives; then, seizing a bar of iron, he made a bound forward, uttering a wild war-whoop.

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There would have been bloodshed had not Mr. Hume, with surprising quietness, flung himself forward and seized the chief round the waist.

Compton, cool and ready, wrenched the bar away; and, seeing this, the natives plucked up spirit, calling on the white man to throw the “black dog” to the crocodiles, which had been attracted by the blood of their wounded fellow, still beating the water in his flurry.

Venning, however, stepped between with his rifle, and the uproar ceased once more.

“Now,” said Mr. Hume, holding the chief by his arm, “what does this mean? What harm have those men done you?”

“My father has the lion’s grip. Mawoh! Muata was a babe in his arms.”

“That may be, but it is no answer.”

“What harm! Did not my father hear the jackal give tongue?”

“I heard; and those jackals there”—indicating the watching group— “yelped at me, so that I flung one into the water. But—what then? Do you seek to slay when your beast howls?”

“My father does not know, then.”

“I want to know, for it seems to me you were all mad together.”

“Ohe! it is the madness that slays. Ask of those mudfish there for news of the man who stood behind them to slay Muata, who had the gun aimed to shoot when Muata leapt into the water. Ask them, and they will lie.”

“What manner of man was this?”

“One of those who hound me in the canoe—even one of the man-hunters who seized my mother.”

Mr. Hume looked at the boys. “Did either of you see an Arab on board? Muata says a man was about to fire at him when he sprang overboard.”

“I thought he fell,” said Compton. “I saw no one with a gun.”

“Nor I,” said Venning; “but the Arab may have gone below.”

Mr. Hume hailed the captain. “My man said an attempt was made on his life. Have you taken an Arab onboard?”

“I have some mad English on board,” said the captain, gruffly; “and I will see they do not stay on longer than I can help.”

“As to that we will see.”

The captain nodded his head and signaled full speed ahead, turning his back on the Englishman.

“I think we can manage the lot,” said Compton, coolly.

Mr. Hume laughed. “Perhaps so; but it would be very awkward to be detained at the next station as prisoners, or to be sent back. We must let the matter slide.”

“Shall we search the ship, sir?”

Mr. Hume shook his head. “Suppose we found some suspicious passenger. What then? There was no actual attempt on Muata, and we have only his word; besides”—-and he glanced at the angry captain— “there is no need to look for trouble—it will come.”

He was right. At the next station, reached within a few hours, the captain lodged a complaint to the authorities in the persons of the Belgian officials, who were evidently charmed with the opportunity of teaching the Englishmen a lesson.

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First of all, they placed Muata in chains straight away on their finding that he was a dangerous person. When Mr. Hume protested, they placed him under restraint; and that done, they pronounced judgment. The English would pay a fine of Pounds 100, surrender their weapons, and return to Banana Point by the next steamer down.

“Is that all?”

“That is all. But stay. As you will be possibly detained a fortnight, there would be a charge for maintenance.”

“Be good enough,” said Mr. Hume, producing a document, “to read that paper. It is a passport from the President of the Congo State— your king—authorizing Mr. Hume and party to proceed with his servants by land or water anywhere within the State for purposes of exploration.”

The officers examined the document with sour faces, and one of them made an observation in a low tone.

“Precisely,” said the other. “This document,” he remarked, turning to Mr. Hume, “is not in order. It has not been visaed by the officers at the sub-stations.”

“But it was initialed by your superior at the coast.”

“It must go back to the sub-stations for endorsement.”

Mr. Hume put a restraint on his temper. “And how long will that take?”

“Who knows? Perhaps a month.”

“And in the mean time?”

“In the mean time, m’sieur, you will remain our guests.”

“Is there no other way?”

“Monsieur must surrender himself to the unpleasant delay. There is no other way.” “Unless—but m’sieur would not perhaps face the expense.”

“Explain, gentlemen.”

“There is a special transport for State business, but to call upon the service for other than State purpose there would be a charge of ten pounds per day.”

“I see.” Mr. Hume saw that these gentlemen wished to make money out of him. “Very good. I will myself go to the sub-stations by your special transport, and if the Governor says the charge is reasonable, I will pay on my return. I think that will meet the matter.”

But it did not at all meet the matter, and the junior officer at once informed his senior that unhappily the special transport had that very morning developed a leak in the boiler.

There followed an embarrassing delay. The authorities waited for Mr. Hume to make a business-like proposal, but the hunter remained grimly silent. The two officers whispered.

“Observe, m’sieur,” said the senior, clearing his throat, “my colleague suggests a middle way. If you will place sum demanded by the State in these cases, in the nature of a surety for good faith, we may permit you and your friends to proceed.”

“My servant also?”

“Your servant?”

“The man you have bound.”

“Ohe! Pardon, m’sieur; you are not aware that he is an offender against the laws—a notorious criminal. He will be detained and tried.”

“I will remain to attend his trial, unless a sum will secure his freedom also?”

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“There is a price on his bead.”

“Offered by the slave-hunters?”

The shot went home. The officers had been hand in glove with the lawless traders, but they did not want the matter bruited about by meddlesome Englishmen. They scowled.

“He has broken the peace,” said the senior, sharply; “he has slain the servants of the State. Am I to understand that you claim to be his master, responsible for his conduct?”

“No, m’sieur,” exclaimed the hunter, quickly, fearing he had gone too far, and shifting his ground. “The man is a stranger; do with him as you please; but as for us, since we are here, we will, with your permission, make the place our headquarters. We could not be in better hands.”

“You wish to wait for another steamer while your passports are visaed?”

“We will proceed in our own boat, which we would put together.”

“Ah, you have a little boat?”

“A very small boat, m’sieur, with barely room for four men. We should be honoured to have your opinion on its qualities, and also upon our stores and their suitability.”

Venning looked at Mr. Hume with puzzled eyes. He could not understand his callous abandonment of Muata.

“But,” he began, “we cannot——”

“I think it is an excellent place,” said Compton, quickly; “and perhaps these gentlemen would be good enough to assist us with advice out of their great experience.”

“We should be delighted,” said Mr. Hume, politely.

The senior officer stroked his huge moustache with an air of renewed importance.

“There are two spare rooms in my little house,” murmured the junior— “one for the stores, the other for sleeping quarters.”

“It is understood,” said Mr. Hume, “that we pay rent, and also that we pay for the protection you may afford us. I insist on that, messieurs.”

The senior nodded a dignified assent, but he was not quite won over, and retired to his quarters, while his junior inspected the landing of the goods, including the sections of the boat. In the afternoon, however, after his nap, the senior succumbed to the

influence of a good cigar, and condescended to sample some of the stores. He was even pleased to crack a few jokes over the novel machinery for working the screw of the Okapi by levers, and in the evening he invited Mr. Hume to a friendly game of cards, thoughtfully including in his invitation a bottle of brandy and a box of cigars, for, said he, he wished to wash out the execrable taste of the everlasting manioc.

All the day Muata stood bound to a post in the square, the central figure of a ring of squatting natives, who chewed manioc and discussed his approaching fate with much satisfaction.

He was there, an erect, stoical figure, when the boys sought their room in the little thatched house—a room bare of furniture, divided from the next compartment by hanging mats of native make.

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“It’s a beastly shame,” said Venning, for about the fourth time, as he stared out at the black faces reflected in the blazing log-fires.

“What is a shame?” asked Compton, who was inspecting the partition before seeking his hammock.

“You know well enough. Not a soul stands by the chief; even his jackal bolted as soon as he jumped ashore.”

“Because Muata ordered him. He is probably watching from the dark.”

“All the worse for us, then. I never thought Mr. Hume would have knuckled down so easily. Hark at him shouting over the game.”

“What is the game, do you think?”

“Cards,” snorted Venning, in disgust.

“So! Queer sort of partition this;” and Compton moved the mat aside. “No need for doors, you see. Hulloa! Who are you?”

“Me Zanzibar boy, master,” exclaimed a soft, oily voice.

“Then clear out.”

“Me put here watch my master—see black fellows no steal.”

“Oh, I see. Chuck a cake of tobacco, Venning. Here! You like that?”

“Ver good,” said the boy, reaching out a yellow hand for the tobacco.

Venning crossed over and peered into the other room. “You boy,” he said, “tell me, what will they do to Muata?”

The Zanzibari chuckled. “You want know, eh?”

“We don’t care. One black fellow does not matter,” said Compton, coolly.

“You brute!” muttered Venning, but stopped as Compton’s hand gripped him.

The Zanzibari chuckled again. “What you give, eh, if cut loose that Muata?”

“What do you say?”

“You pay me? Good. In night Muata is loose. He run up river. Bymby master go along in little boat, pick Muata up, eh? What you pay?” and the boy chuckled softly.

“Suppose I tell your white master, you rascal?”

“Wow! You tell, they kill poor Zanzibar boy.”

“Then clear out,” said Compton, launching a kick; “and if I see any more of you I will tell.”

The boy turned sulky. “Me guard—me stay.”

“You go,” said Compton, “or I will call your masters, and let them deal with you.”

Growling under his breath, the self-styled “guard” slunk soft-footed out of the room. Compton struck a match and looked around the apartment, then turned to Venning with a grin.

“That is the game,” he whispered.

“I think I understand,” Venning replied softly. “That fellow was testing you?”

Compton nodded.

“And you think Mr. Hume has not forgotten Muata?”

“I am sure he has not.”

They crept into their hammocks, but not to sleep, and they were wide awake when Mr. Hume entered noisily some two hours later.

“To-morrow night,” he shouted boisterously.

“With pleasure, and the night after, for good visitors are rare,” called the Belgian.

“And good hosts also. Touching those two men you promised as the crew for my boat?”

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“They will be here to-morrow evening,” said the senior officer, thrusting a head round the mat. “Ah, you are comfortable, eh? Yes, I sent a messenger to Hassan’s camp by the vessel which brought you. Rest well.”

“They are good fellows, these Arabs,” said Mr. Hume, with enthusiasm—“good fellows. I remember once——”

“To-morrow night,” said the officer, as he withdrew, laughing.

Mr. Hume hummed cheerfully as he prepared for bed, taking no notice of his young comrades, who were regarding him with silent disfavour. With one yawn after another he blew out the light, and struggled into his hammock, to fall asleep almost at once.

Venning’s uneasiness returned. He tossed restlessly, listening to the unaccustomed noises from without, and as the hours went by, and at last the sound of talking about the fires died off in a lazy drone, the desire to see what had become of Muata was too strong to resist. Softly he lowered himself to the earth-floor, but, soft as he moved, others had heard.

“Are the mosquitoes troublesome?”

Venning started at the deep voice so unexpected. “I did not know you were awake, sir.”

“I sleep very lightly my boy.”

“As you are awake, sir, I would like to say——”

But he stopped as the mat rustled.

“Come in,” said Mr. Hume.

“Me guard, great master”—in the same soft, oily tones Venning had heard before. “Hear noise. Think may be thieves.”

“Mosquitoes, not thieves,” said Mr. Hume, quietly. “Bring a light.”

The Zanzibar boy complied, and, holding a taper above his head, looked not for mosquitoes, but at the rifles in the corner.

“The skeeters, master,” he muttered, with an evil squint at Compton, who was blinking at the light.

“Better get back into your hammock, Venning. You can go, boy; and keep a good watch, for we are coming to the thieves’ hour.”

The man showed his white teeth in a grin as he withdrew.

“Don’t stir from your hammocks until I do,” said Mr. Hume, very sternly, in a whisper; then louder, “Good night, Venning.”

“Good night, sir,” said Venning, convinced that the master was alive to the game, and more easy in his mind.

As he dropped off to sleep he heard the wail of a jackal, and next he was awakened by the sound of a native chanting. It was already daybreak, and Mr. Hume stood on the verandah, having drawn the mats aside.

The sun, striking under the thatch, shone on the hunter’s tawny hair and beard, and Venning wondered how for a moment he could have doubted the courage of a man with such a lion-like head. But he was to receive another shock.

“Silence, dog!” roared the hunter, addressing the singer, evidently.

Compton, who was sitting on his hammock dressing, looked out.

“By Jove,” he muttered, “he’s shouting at Muata!”

Venning jumped down to the floor and looked out. Muata was still bound to the post, and, with his face to the sun, was chanting his words of greeting or of farewell in tones that lacked the deep chest-notes of his war-cry.

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One of the natives, hearing the order of the white man, flung a stick at the chief with an insult; but Muata, nothing heeding, sang on his slow song in a voice that was almost like a woman's.

"Must white men lose their sleep because a robber is to die?" roared the hunter again.

Venning snatched up a beaker of water and ran out barefooted. He held the water to the chiefs mouth. Muata turned his smouldering eyes on the boy, sucked in a mouthful of the water, and then shot it out over Venning's outstretched arm.

Venning dropped the mug, and went back with a red face to see the two officers regarding him with sour faces.

"Serve you right," shouted Mr. Hume, in apparent fury. "When will you learn to treat a black like the brute he is?"

"Quite so," said the senior officer, showing himself. "I am glad to find you have no ridiculous sentiment."

"Ah! good morning, my friend," said Mr. Hume, heartily. "As for my young comrade, you must pardon him."

"He has his lesson," said the officer, dryly, as he pointed to the soaked pyjama.

"The man woke me with his singing. I have seen men shot for less than that."

"In good time," said the officer, with a sinister look, "the accusers will be here to-night, and to-morrow"—he made a gesture— "to-morrow you can also choose the two men you need for your boat's crew."

After breakfast, Mr. Hume had an opportunity of speaking without the fear of being overheard, for they finished putting the Okapi together, and worked her out by the levers into the river, where she gleamed in the sun.

"I dare say you think I am a brute," he said, "and I don't blame you; but if we mean to save Muata's life, we must appear to be altogether indifferent to his fate. Those men are keeping a close watch on us."

"I know it," said Compton.

"You do, eh?"

"That Zanzibar boy was spying on us last night before you came, and he tried to get us to bribe him to free Muata."

“I hope you were not so foolish as to fall into the trap?” said the hunter, sharply.

“I kicked him out of the place,” said Compton. “I told Venning you were playing a game for Muata’s life.”

“You did me justice?” said Mr. Hume, with his gaze on Venning.

“It seemed to me terrible to leave him without a word of encouragement,” said the boy; “but I am awfully sorry I doubted you, sir.”

“You don’t now, eh? Well, that’s all right, and I think the chief knows too. That is why he spouted the water over you.”

“A strange way of showing his gratitude,” laughed the boy, with a reddening face at the thought of the outrage.

“Not so strange. He saw the Belgians, and did it to put them off their guard.”

“That ought to help us in our plans for his escape.”

“We have plans, have we?”

“You have,” said Compton, confidently; “and your plan is our plan.”

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“Thank you,” said the hunter, quietly. “If the plan is to succeed, it must work to-night. I do not fear these people here, but I must say I fear the Arabs who are expected this evening.”

“I understand that you will choose two of those Arabs as boatmen?”

“The Belgians have arranged that, Compton, not I. Have you any suggestions to offer?”

“I think, sir, that we should get all our things stored in the boat to-day,” said Venning.

“Eight; and then?”

“And then,” said Venning, his face all alight with ardour—“and then—why, sir, then you shoot one of the hippos over there on that little island. Shoot two; and while all the people in the village are cutting them up for a great feed, we could free Muata undetected.”

“That is not so bad,” said Compton, judiciously.

“Not at all,” said Mr. Hume. “But when Muata is free, what is to become of him—-suppose, that is, he can get away unobserved?”

“I have it,” said Compton. “The Zanzibar spy suggested it. Let Muata wait for us up the river, and we will pick him up.”

Mr. Hume stroked his beard for some moments in silence.

“We’ll, try that plan,” he said finally; “but don’t show any excitement. The native, remember, is a very keen observer. Now pull the boat in.”

CHAPTER VI

THE FLIGHT

In the afternoon the village hummed with excitement. The word had gone round that the new white man who had shot the crocodile would give a feast, and the people squatted in rows on the bank watching a couple of their stalwart fellows preparing a canoe for an expedition after the river-horse. When Mr. Hume appeared with his Express in company with the Belgian officers, who were indifferent sportsmen, the people saluted him with a feeling of gratitude for favours to come in the shape of fat meat.

“Good luck,” said the junior officer, “but I back the animals; they are very wary and very fierce.”

“What is the betting?” cried the hunter.

“Oh no, my friend!” exclaimed the senior. “Keep your money for to-night; and don’t drown yourself. We must have one game, you know.”

“Very well. By the way, Compton?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You and Venning may as well amuse yourselves by getting the stores on board in case we leave to-morrow.”

“That depends on how the game goes,” replied the officer. “If you win, we must keep you for a return match.”

“That is only fair. But I may lose; so, my lads, go on with the packing.”

The boat went off up the river hugging the banks, and the whole village sat down to watch the stalk, all but a few who went to and fro between Venning at the house and Compton in the boat, carrying the stores. The two officers turned in, with mats drawn, to enjoy their siesta, and the guards on duty sought the shade of the trees by the bank to watch the hunt.

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The hunt was not a matter to be decided out of hand, by a swift paddle straight up to the sand-bank in the river, and a chance shot.

The canoe crept up slowly and passed out of sight. The old hunters in the watching crowd took counsel together, and then the chief of them announced what would happen. The “slayer of crocodiles” would, he declared, get above the island and then slowly descend with the current upon the river-horse.

“May he shoot straight and his powder be strong,” shouted a river-man; “for it is the father of bulls who sleeps there—he who has eaten many canoes.”

“It is the same,” said the old hunter; and, taking a pinch of snuff, he began to tell the deeds of the old bull hippo.

So the drowsy afternoon passed lazily away to the watchers, and wearily to the white boys. Their thoughts were in the canoe, and, moreover, they were irritated by the slowness of the men who carried the parcels. No man would carry more than one package at a time, and after each journey he sat down to rest and discuss the chances for and against the feast.

When the shadows were creeping across the deserted square—deserted save for the man bound to the post, Venning for the hundredth time looked across with an aching desire to rush over and cut the bonds. As his eyes ranged sadly over the bronzed figure, he detected a movement in the shadow of a hut opposite. Looking more attentively, he saw the round ears of a jackal, and then made out the sharp face resting between the outstretched paws, and the yellow eyes fixed intently on the chief.

Muata lifted his head slowly, as if it were top heavy for the muscles of his neck, and his gaze went sideways to see if any watched.

Venning nodded eagerly from the shelter of the room; made a movement with his hands as if he were cutting; pointed up the river and spread his arms like a swimmer.

Muata let fall his head again, with his chin on his naked breast; and the carriers ranged up for the last load. A shout from the bank made them hurry. Several people who had gone to see about their fires rushed, yelling, across the square to the bank.

“It was as I said,” shouted the old black hunter. “See where he creeps down-stream on the bull.” “Wow! he has hidden the canoe in leaves. It is as a tree floating.”

“Ow ay, we smell meat!” sang a big man, stamping his feet.

“We smell meat—red meat, fat meat; the red meat of the fat cow for the women; the tough meat of the old bull for the men;” and the women clapped their hands.

The Belgian officers were awakened, and stepped out of their darkened rooms. They found the village empty, save for Venning stooping over his last parcel, and Muata at his post with what looked like a yellow native our lying at his feet.

“The bull opens his mouth!” chanted the old hunter. “He wakes from his sleep! There is the smell of man on the wind! He looks around! He sees a tree borne on the current! He will surely eat lead!”

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Venning picked up his parcel and followed the officers. Out of the comer of his eye he saw the seeming yellow cur lift its head and smell at the thongs which were bound about the prisoner's legs. Then he hurried on.

"Wow! the bull drives, the cow into the water. He is cunning. Ow ay, he knows."

"What does he know, old talker?" asked one of the officers.

"The cow is fat," laughed the old man. "The hunter would shoot the fat cow first, and so the bull makes her take the risk. He is wise."

"He is shameless!" screamed the women.

"See them?" said Compton, offering his glasses to Venning and pointing up-stream.

Far up Venning saw three dark objects on the shining glance of the vast river. One, the canoe fringed with branches, slowly drifting upon the other two, raised but a few feet above the water on a gleaming yellow sand island. One hippo, with its huge head swinging, was standing up, looking not unlike an overfed prize pig. Then the other rose, and the two walked towards the water.

"Wow! the old bull keeps on the safe side. I said it; he is wise."

"Shameless!" cried the women.

"Wherefore does the crocodile-slayer delay? Surely he knows the body will sink in the river if it reach the water."

"The smoke! He fires!"

"The cow is down! To the boats children—to the boats!"

Men and boys made a rush, and, out of a tremendous uproar of splashing and shouting, half a dozen canoes were flying at full speed for the cow's meat, altogether indifferent to the future proceedings.

"The smoke again! The bull has it! He is down; he is up; he is in the water! Wow! Look out, O 'slayer of crocodiles!'"

"But the cow lies still!" cried a woman, anxiously.

"Oh ay, there will be meat for the feast. But what of your man in the canoe if the bull seize him?"

"It is his risk," said the woman, calmly.

Venning dropped the glass, and he and Compton stood looking from the island to the old hunter, who seemed to know every point in the game better than they could follow through the glasses.

“Ah, it is well. They tear the branches from the canoe. They row straight for the island. The white man jumps—the men tumble out— wow-wow!—the bull takes the canoe in his jaws. It will go hard with those who go for the meat if he get among them.”

“The white man leaps in the water!” shouted another. “But he holds his gun above him. He reaches the sand; the others crawl up also. They run! I do not see the bull!”

“There are crocodiles!” shrilled a woman, pointing with an arm heavily ringed with brass bangles.

“This is not their fight, mother.”

“But they will take our meat.”

“It is the bull I think of.” “Will he meet the canoes, or will he face the three on the island? The white man sees the canoes; he waves them to go back, but they smell meat; they keep on.” “What is this? He points his gun at them. They stop; they turn back.”

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“A pity,” said one of the officers, with a grin. “We should have seen sport.”

“But the sport is not over,” said the other. “I back the bull. Remember how he put you to flight, my friend. What is the meaning of this, old man?”—this to a hunter.

“Surely, O great one, it means one thing. The white man is afraid the canoes would draw the bull away. He wishes the bull to land—to attack him.”

“More fool he, ay, my friend,” said the officer, with a sneer.

“One of the men on the island is pointing,” said Compton, who had taken up the glasses again. “I see something in the water where the canoe went down.”

“I said it,” shouted the old black; “the bull will fight. Stand, fast, O white man, for it is either you or he.”

Those watching saw the bull land and hurl himself with amazing swiftness at Mr. Hume.

“Why doesn’t he shoot?” yelled Compton.

“Wow! the white man springs aside. The bull squeals; he staggers; he is down. Behind the ear. I say it. There the bullet went in. There will be much meat.” The old man took snuff, and cast a proud look around as if he alone had done the deed.

“By Jove!” muttered Venning, wiping his forehead. “It seemed a near squeak.”

The two officers went back to their cool rooms, and the crowd broke up, the women and children going off dancing to collect firewood. The little fleet of canoes descended on the island, and in a few minutes the carcasses were hidden by bands of naked men, who slashed and cut, while crocodiles, attracted by the blood, appeared from all directions. In a very short time the fleet returned, and Mr. Hume, standing in a heavily laden craft, ran a greater risk than when he faced the savage old bull, for the gunwales were flush with the water, and the men were utterly reckless as they dashed along at the head of the flotilla.

As the men leapt ashore, women seized the meat, and the village at once entered upon the wild orgy of the feast, forgetting Mr. Hume and all else in the one desire to start their jaws on the half-cooked flesh.

“Is all aboard?” asked Mr. Hume, as he jumped ashore.

“Everything,” said Compton. “We watched your shot, sir; it was splendid.”

“Well, that part of the plan has gone off all right. It will be a more difficult job to free Muata and get away ourselves.”

Venning described how he had seen the jackal approach the chief, and as he and Mr. Hume went into the village, leaving Compton in the boat, they cast an anxious glance at the square already agleam with fires in the growing dusk. Muata was still at the post, his head drooping and his body relaxed.

“That’s bad,” muttered the hunter; “he looks quite exhausted.”

“Perhaps he’s shamming.”

“Let us hope so. In any case we may have to wait until past midnight, as I am afraid our hosts will not let me off. It would be better if we could get away early.”

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Fortune favoured them, for as the Zanzibar boy approached with a message from the officers, there arose the sound of rifle-shots from the forest beyond. The people in the square shouted a reply, and presently a party of men, dressed in long white robes, appeared. They halted in the square, and the leader came on alone. He stooped to stare into the face of Muata as he passed, then approached.

“Welcome, Hassan! My people are feasting; thanks to the skill of my friend here;” and the Belgian who had come forward indicated Mr. Hume.

The Arab peered into Mr. Hume’s face and salaamed, with an evil smile on his wide, thin-lipped mouth.

“I am thankful,” he said in the native dialect, “for your kindness in bringing back my slave”—pointing towards Muata.

“It was a small thing,” said Mr. Hume.

“But it pleases me; and when you reach my zareba, all that is mine to command is yours.”

He looked at Venning, and the boy noticed that the pupils of the eyes had a white speck, which gave to them a sinister appearance.

“Good,” said the Belgian. “We will have a night. Pardon me for a short time while I discuss a little matter touching the reward for Muata with my friend Hassan.”

The two went off, the Arab casting a ferocious look back at the chief.

Venning tugged at the hunter’s arm. “Look,” he whispered.

Muata was slipping down the post, as if his legs had utterly given way. The party of new-comers were stacking their arms at the “indaba” house at the end of the square, and the village people were talking, laughing, and eating. Muata reached the ground, but not in a state of collapse, for the next instant the two watchers saw him crawl to the shadow of a hut, where he remained as if stretching his limbs.

“Come,” said Mr. Hume, in a fierce whisper, recovering from his surprise; and the two went swiftly to the river.

Compton had already cast off and was holding by the boat-hook.

“Bring her in.”

The Okapi ran her stern into the bank, and the two stepped aboard, Mr. Hume going forward to the wheel, with his rifle in his hand.

“Shove her off; run as silently as you can out of hearing, and then work the levers.”

Compton looked inquiringly at Venning as he picked up the oars, and then at the village, from which came a loud babble.

“Is he free already?”

Venning nodded.

“Good;” and then they bent themselves to the oars with every nerve on the quiver, and their eyes on the shore.

“Stop! Back-water!”

Obediently they stopped the way of the boat and backed her, wondering what had gone wrong. A turn of the wheel sent them in among the canoes. There was a flash of steel, a plunge of the strong arm down into the boats, accompanied by a ripping noise. Then the hunter waded ashore, and with his great hunting-knife ripped up the boats lying on the bank. Quickly he was back at his place.

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“Now, off!”

Again they pushed off, the boys with their excitement increasing after this interlude, which showed them the imminence of danger. A few long strokes took the Okapi well out; then she was put about with her nose up-stream.

“The levers now, my lads!”

They perched themselves on the saddle-seats, and at the clanking of the levers the beautiful craft slipped swiftly up-stream.

Then out of the dark there rose the mournful howl of a jackal, almost instantly replied to by a similar call at a distance.

“The chief calling to his jackal,” said Mr. Hume. “Thank Heaven, he has got away. Now I will let him know we are also off;” and he, too, gave the jackal hunting-cry.

Back out of the darkness came the chief’s exultant war-cry, and on it a furious shout from the village, followed by the discharge of a rifle, and the rolling alarm of a war-drum. Then shone out the glare of torches at the river bank, and a savage yell announced that the men had discovered the injury done to the canoes.

One of the purchases made in London had been a lamp with very fine reflectors. This Mr. Hume fixed on a movable bracket within reach of his arm as he sat at the wheel, and when the lights at the village faded astern, he lit the lamp, in order to thread a passage by its light through the dark waters. As the noise of shouting, the drumming, and the report of fire-arms died down, other sounds reached their strained hearing—the booming of the Congo bittern, the harsh roar of a bull crocodile, and the cries of water-birds.

Then Venning laughed—a little short nervous laugh. “We have done it,” he said.

“We have, indeed,” said Compton.

“But if we can only pick up Muata and his jackal, we should be all right. Just a nice party.”

The rudder-chains clanked; the boat set up a heavy wash as she turned from her course. There was a splashing, and something snorted almost in Venning’s face.

“Nearly ran into a hippo!” sang out Mr. Hume. “We must keep out into mid-river; it’s too risky inshore. Tell me when you are tired.”

“We’re quite fresh yet,” replied Compton. “It is easier than sculling.”

“Moves like clockwork,” said Venning, gaily. “I could keep on all night.”

“We’ll have to keep on all night and all to-morrow,” muttered Mr. Hume; and in a few minutes he relieved Compton, making him put on a heavy coat before taking the wheel. “It’s the chill that is dangerous. In an hour you will relieve Venning.”

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Turn and turn the boys relieved each other at intervals, but Mr. Hume swang to his lever till the dawn, when the mast was stepped, the sail spread, and the spirit-lamp got out for the making of coffee. After breakfast the awning was spread, the mosquito curtains stretched round, and the boys were ordered to sleep. They demurred at first, but the hunter rather sharply insisted, and no sooner were they stretched on the rugs than they were asleep. The yoke had been slipped over the rudder, and, using the lines, Mr. Hume sailed the Okapi single-handed, taking her across the lake-like width till he was under the wooded hills of the south bank, where he beat about for an hour or so in the hope that Muata might have covered the distance at the native's trotting-pace. It was, he told himself, not likely, however, that the chief could have done so, after being for hours bound to a post; and after a time he beat out again into mid-stream afar off, so that no village natives should spy upon the craft. He did not share in the triumph of his young companions. Too well he knew that they had risked everything by their secret departure; but he could not see that any other course was open to them, as if they had remained it would have been difficult for them to prove that they were not concerned in Muata's escape. He knew, too, that if he had abandoned the chief, as the price of security, the boys would have lost all faith in him.

What, however, he did feel was, that the responsibility rested on him. If a mistake had been made it was his mistake, and if the boys suffered from it the blame would be his.

So he beat out into mid-stream, where the sail of the low-lying craft would be but a speck when viewed from the shore, and with a beam wind laid her on a course which she kept almost dead straight, with a tack at long intervals only. In the shade of the awning the boys slept the dreamless sleep of the healthy, and he let them sleep on till the sun stood almost above the mast, sending down a blaze that scorched. Then he beached the Okapi on the shelving shore of a sand-spit, without vegetation of any kind to give shelter to mosquitoes, and awoke them.

"All hands to bathe!" he shouted; and the three of them were soon in, and no sooner in than out; for, according to the hunter, the virtue of a bathe was not in long immersion, but in friction. "With their heads well protected, but their bodies bare to the sun, the friction was obtained by rubbing handfuls of the dry, clean sand over limbs and body till the skin glowed.

"Now I will snatch a few winks while you work the levers, until the wind springs up again."

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Mr. Hume stretched himself forward under the awning after unstopping the mast; and the two friends, after tossing a bucket of water over the canvas awning, took their seats, clad in pyjamas and body-belts only, and bent gaily to the levers which “click-clanked” merrily. Their feet were naked, for Mr. Hume had taught the lesson that the feet should be cool and the head protected; their arms were bare to the elbow, of a fine mahogany hue; their movements were brisk; but the best evidence of health was in the clearness of their eyes. Fever shows its touch in the “gooseberry” eye, dull and clouded; in the moist pallor of the skin, and in a general listlessness. Even if they are free from fever, white men in Central Africa often grow listless because of insufficient nutriment. Their flesh-diet is chiefly the white meat of birds, and their blood-cells are really starved by the small amount of nitrogenous matter. A deficient diet in its turn is a frequent cause of diarrhoea and constipation, two of the most common complaints among new chums. In his hunting expeditions Mr. Hume had learnt his lesson from experience, and he accordingly was a martinet on the rules of health. All the drinking-water was first boiled. The boys could wear as little as they liked during the heat of the day, so long as they protected their heads and necks, but on the approach of evening they had to get into warm and dry under-garments; they had to keep a sharp watch for the striped “anophele” mosquito, were taught to spray the puncture, if they were tapped by the mosquito lancet, with chloride of ethyl, and had to submit occasionally to a hypodermic injection of quinine. The nitrogen they got from condensed meat juices.

“This is very much more like what I expected,” said Venning, looking from the broad river to the distant wooded banks, and from the dark forest to the blue sky.

“I can see two string of duck, a whole crowd of ibis on a little island, a crocodile and a hippo.”

Compton, who was facing the stern, glanced over his shoulder, then directed his gaze aft again.

“We seem to be traveling slowly,” he growled.

“There’s no hurry, is there?”

Compton raised his head a little, and looked under the shelter of a hand.

“They’re coming,” he said briefly.

“Eh?” Venning stopped, and looked back. The water glimmered under the sun like a vast silver sheet. “I can see nothing.”

“Don’t you see a dark smudge. Well, that is the smoke from a steamer. I thought at first it came from a land-fire. But it does not. Send her along.”

Venning quickened up, and for some minutes pedals and levers worked at almost racing speed.

“We cannot keep this up. Give him a call!” Venning shouted, and Mr. Hume looked round.

“Bid you call?”

“They are after us,” and Venning jerked his head back, while still bending to his work.

The hunter loosened the canvas awning, and stood up for a long look aft. Then he faced about, and threw a quick glance up-river.

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“Keep her straight for that wooded island,” he said, pointing ahead towards the south bank; and Venning pulled the steering-line to place the Okapi on a new course.

Mr. Hume took in the awning and packed it away. “Now, my lads,” he said, “we’ll just face the position. That’s the fort launch racing up, and she could overhaul us in two hours. If we surrender we should be safe from violence, but they would probably confiscate our boat or detain us for weeks. If we resist they would be justified in running us down. What shall we do?”

“Escape,” said Compton.

“Of course,” Venning chimed in.

“By attempting to escape,” continued Mr. Hume, “we as good as admit that we aided and abetted Muata, and, if captured, they would make it harder for us.”

“At any rate, we meant to free Muata.”

“Besides, we must escape,” said Compton, with determination.

The perspiration was rolling off their faces, for, as soon as they worked at high pressure, they felt the pull of the screw.

“Come forward, both of you,” said Mr. Hume, rolling up his sleeves. “Compton, you take the wheel, and Venning, you get out the guns.”

They obeyed him, and he, kneeling on the aft-deck between the two levers, grasped one in either hand, and got more speed out of the Okapi than they had by their united efforts. The muscles stood out like ropes on his brawny arms, and the levers smoked in the slots.

“Keep her to the north of the island.”

The boat hummed along, drew up to the nose of the island, skirted its reedy side, where stood a hippo eating at the rank grass, and then dropped it astern.

“Good,” said Mr. Hume, with a great grunt of satisfaction, as he swept his eyes over the river.

“See those dark spots ahead? They must be the first of the thousand islands that stretch away right up to the Loanda river. If we can get into them we are safe.”

“Can I help?” asked Venning, having set out the rifles in the well, with the ammunition handy.

“Whistle for a wind. That’s all. Fix your eyes on the islands, Compton, and slip in where they are thickest.”

“Ay, ay,” muttered Compton, frowning under the stress of his excitement.

Venning searched for the field-glasses, and as the island they had passed sank low astern, he swept the river for sign of the pursuing launch.

“By Jove!” he muttered, with a start.

“Well?”

“She has shifted her course. I can see the white of her hull right under the trees on the south bank.”

“She must have gained a lot, then,” grunted Mr. Hume, “if you can see her hull.”

“She’s making out again. Perhaps she put in to speak a native village, and maybe they have not seen us; we are low in the water.”

“They’ll see us soon enough. Tell me when she passes the island we just left.”

“She’s making across. No, she’s turning. Ah, now she’s pointing straight for us. I can see several people in her bows.”

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“Now turn your glasses on the islands ahead.”

Venning turned round, and looked up-stream.

“Is the launch nearer than the islands?”

“I can see a stork standing on the edge of the water. The first of the islands is nearest.” He turned again to watch the launch. “There is more smoke—they are stoking up.”

The launch was unquestionably coming up hand over hand, and it was not long before Venning could see the foam at her bows, and the flag of the Congo Free State flying at her stern. Then he saw a ball of smoke.

“She is firing!” he yelled.

Compton never took his eyes off the little cluster of reeds ahead that marked the first of the thousand islands.

“Keep her going!” he shouted.

Mr. Hume smiled grimly, for he was doing the work of two men.

“They are loading the gun!” cried Venning. “Oh, if I only could help!” He buttoned and unbuttoned his coat, then picked up the sculls, and fell to rowing with fierce energy. “The smoke!” he cried. Then, a moment later, “What’s that noise?” as a menacing sound with a shrieking whistle to it smote on his ears.

There was no need for an answer. The shot struck the water about a hundred yards short, and skipped by, wide of the Okapi, but still too near to be pleasant.

“Keep on!” shouted Compton, fiercely.

The levers clanked furiously, and Venning, who had suspended his sculling under the menace of the shot, tugged again at his work.

The steam-whistle of the launch sounded a series of sharp, jerky calls, followed by the firing of a Mauser bullet. Venning’s heart was pumping blood at express speed under the violence of his efforts, and his eyes in a wild stare were fixed on the approaching craft, which had now brought its living freight within recognizable distance. He could distinguish the two Belgian officers and the swart face of the Arab chief, Hassan. He could see the men with rifles, aiming, as it seemed, straight at him, and then he ducked his head as he saw the smoke once more belch from the seven-pounder. At the same moment he was nearly capsized by the sudden swerve of the Okapi, as she almost turned on her keel. The shot struck the water so close that the spray drenched them. Compton looked round and shouted aloud—

“They’re aground! Hurrah!”

Venning, recovering himself, saw the men on the launch hurled to the deck.

“Hurray!” he shouted.

“Keep on!” shouted Compton; and, after another five minutes’ burst, the Okapi swept behind one island and passed in between two others. “Now,” he said, “give me the levers.”

“You’re welcome,” said Mr. Hume, wiping the moisture from his brow and taking a huge breath.

He went forward to the wheel, and threaded the Okapi through narrow passages between islands of all shapes and sizes, until after having got into such a fastness as would be impracticable for the launch to reach, he ran the boat on a shelving sandbank. Then, before anything else was attempted, the awning was fixed, and they settled down for a needed rest. Next the boys smacked each other on the back.

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“Was it by accident or design, Compton, that you led them into the shallows?”

“I saw we could not reach the shelter of the island, and was feeling bad, when I caught a ripple on the water to the right. I edged the Okapi on after the first ball shot was fired, and as we drew nearer I was sure there was a long sandbank. When I made that sharp turn as the second shot was fired, I could see the outline of the bank just under water, and turned to avoid it.”

“It was a mercy you altered our course just at that moment, Compton.”

“Wasn’t it? It was touch and go. We stood to be run down or knocked into smithereens in another minute;” and Venning shook Compton’s hand.

“Did you see them go over like ninepins,” laughed Compton, “when they struck? But I’m not claiming any credit, you know. If it had not been for Mr. Hume——”

“We all did our share,” said the hunter, “and we have every cause to be thankful; but we must not imagine that the chase is over.”

CHAPTER VII

THE THOUSAND ISLANDS

They shoved off again, and Compton, being the least tired, took the sculls and pushed on slowly in search of an anchorage for the night. They passed many likely places, but Mr. Hume had one objection or another to them, and the spot that finally satisfied him was a small wooded island flanked by others of larger size, and so placed that if they were menaced from any side there would be an opening for escape in the opposite direction. The channel into which they steered was so narrow that the branches of the trees joined overhead, and when they tied up, the Okapi was completely hidden. Before forcing their way into the leafy tunnel, they had taken down the awning, but now, after having broken away many branches, they refixed the canvas roof and drew the mosquito-curtains round, after which they sought out and killed all the insect pests that remained within the nets. There was no danger in showing a light, and accordingly the lantern was hung amidships, the spirit-lamp lit, to prepare a nourishing and at the same time “filling” soup. They made a hearty meal, got into warmer clothing, oiled the rifle-barrels, arranged their rugs, and prepared for the night, which came on them with a rush, heralded by the noise of birds seeking their accustomed roosting-places. Such an uproar the boys had not before heard. It seemed as if the Zoological Gardens had emptied its noisiest inhabitants. Parrots flew across the river, every one talking at the top of its voice, while colonies of ibis croaked out the news of the day in gruff, discordant notes; cranes flying laboriously, with long legs trailing, emitted their deep “honks;” frogs lifted up their voices from out the reeds, and at intervals came the

booming cry of the shovel-beaked bittern, and the harsh, baboon-like bark of the green-crested toucan. The noise of the home-going of the winged multitudes ceased as the night drew its black mantle over the river.

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Out of the spell of silence there grew presently other voices, soft whisperings, deep sighings; mysterious sounds telling of things stealthy and oppressed by the stillness; abrupt splashings that startled by their suddenness: grunts, rumblings, and the roar of bull crocodiles. It must not, however, be supposed that there was a continuous succession of sounds. Each noise had its own place, and there would be often long intervals between one sound and another.

Venning, who had the first watch, found this out. He would hear a startling splash, followed by a snort and the snap of jaws; then all would be quiet for several minutes, when, from another direction, would come perhaps a heavy sigh; then another interval of silence, again a splash, and so on until the impression grew on him that the beasts and reptiles who made the noises were working slowly towards him in a circle.

It was his first night on guard in the wilderness, and he felt the uneasiness of the hunter who discovers how limited are his senses compared with those of the wild creatures about him. Man, himself the most secret, the most cunning, the most deadly, and, if truth must be told, the most bloodthirsty, for he kills too often for the love of killing, is the most helpless in the dark. His sense of hearing, of sight, and of smell, fail him—thanks to a wise provision of Nature in the interests of her other children—for if man had the eyes of a cat, the nose of a wolf, and the hearing of a deer, he would have cleared the earth of its creatures, who would have had no rest night or day.

All the time, too, the river talked, as it rolled its great flood along, sending up a soft volume of song from the innumerable sounds produced as it washed along the islands and foamed against the rocks of the shores. Presently, down the narrow channel, there came a rush of water which rocked the boat, and next Venning heard close at hand a strange noise, which he took to be made by a large animal cropping at the river-grass. He looked about for a weapon, and, picking up the long boat-hook, lashed his hunting-knife to the iron hook at the top, converting it into a lance. He had read of hippos swamping boats by seizing the narrow bows or keel in their vast jaws, and he wished to be prepared for a possible attack. Presently the boat again rocked as another animal took to the water, then the new-comer dislodged the other with a snap of the jaws, and the first, with a complaining grunt, surged down the channel. Venning could see nothing in the inky blackness, but he knew the beast had seen the Okapi from the short note of alarm it sounded. Immediately the alarm was repeated. Snorts and splashes arose from all sides. Some great beast who had been standing unnoticed within a few yards of the boat, crashed through the bushes into the water with an uproar that woke the sleepers.

“What is it?” cried Compton.

Mr. Hume made a dart for his rifle.

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The Okapi rocked and heaved, was lifted at the bows to fall back with a splash.

“Hippo,” gasped Venning, making a drive with his weapon through the mosquito curtains. “Got him!—no!—missed!”

“What’s that you’ve got there, Venning?”

“Sort of harpoon.”

“By gum!” said Mr. Hume, taking the weapon, “I’m glad you missed the beggar. I would not give much for our chances if he turned crusty in this place.”

The hippo reappeared aft with a snort, and, much to their relief, continued down the channel into the wider waters.

“Find the watch pleasant?” asked Compton, sleepily, as Mr. Hume turned in.

“Awfully cheerful,” said Venning, earnestly; “but I’m not selfish, and you can take your turn at it on the tick of the hour.”

Compton dived for his rugs, and Venning once more returned to his duties with his harpoon over his knees, and a string of winged visitors entering joyously by the hole he had made in the curtain. He pinned his handkerchief over the rent to stop further free entrance, then made war on those which had entered—an amusement which carried him well into the fourth and last hour of the first watch. Then he sat up to listen for the old sounds—the groans and the snorts—but they had ceased. A mist, like a wet blanket, had settled down over the Okapi, over the islands and the river; and, though any sounds made on the water were startlingly distinct, confined as the sound-waves were by the mist, the creatures had evidently gone to sleep. There was, however, one visitor faithful to him. The light of the lantern, which showed the rolling wreaths of the mist, just reached the water, and in the reflection he saw two greenish points. After long looking, he made out that these were the eyes of a crocodile, whose body was half in and half out of the water, the tail end of him being anchored on the little island. At eleven o’clock he roused Compton by dragging at his ankle.

Compton sat up, rubbed his eyes, and drew his rug over his shoulders.

“What’s the countersign, comrade?” he asked, with a yawn.

“Countersign?”

“Yes; when the watch is relieved he has to say something or other, as a guide to the new man.”

“Oh, I see. Well, let me introduce you to the companion of your watch. See those green points out there?”

“Yes—like dull glass.”

“That’s your new chum. He’s been there an hour without moving, and it’s no good trying to stare him down.”

“What is it?”

“Crocodile. Good night. Wish you joy;” and Venning crept under his waterproof sheet with a sigh of relief.

Neither of the two boys smoked, taking the advice of Mr. Hume, who persuaded them that tobacco acted as a poison when used too early, and spoiled good hunting. It lowered the action of the heart, affected the hearing and the sense of smell. In place of a pipe, therefore, Compton found comfort in chewing, not tobacco, but a meat lozenge. As he chewed he watched the two little dull green spots, and the crocodile watched him with the deadly patience that so often brings grist to the mill, or, rather, food to his jaws.

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It was not a pleasant companionship, and Compton, after a long attempt to stare the reptile down, turned his back to it and watched the efforts of several large moths to get at the light through the mosquito curtains. He could not so much see them as hear them, from the way they bumped into the net, and the little soft splash they made as they dropped into the water. By-and-by there came another sound, made by some large fish, who had also been attracted by the light, and then by the fat moths.

The news that these were good eating quickly spread under water, and presently there was quite a gathering about the boat. Then Compton turned to look at his unwelcome watcher. He was still at his post, his eyes still fixed in an unwinking stare, but seemingly brighter than before. Yes, he was evidently nearer. He was moving! Compton picked up the boat-hook with its dagger-ended spear, and prepared for the attack. Slowly, almost without a ripple, the reptile slithered into the water; then came a rush, a snap of jaws, a swirl of waters, and something heavy and wet came right through the mosquito nets, landing in the well of the boat with a tremendous whack.

“Look out,” yelled Compton; “keep out of his reach.”

“What the dickens is it now?” roared Mr. Hume, as a series of resounding thwacks arose out of the well.

Compton drove his harpoon into the well, and held on like grim death, as the impaled thing lashed out to free itself.

“A crocodile!” he shouted. “I can’t hold him down much longer.”

“Crocodile be blowed!” shouted Mr. Hume, unhooking the lantern and directing its light into the well. “It’s a fish.”

“But,” said Compton, “I saw the crocodile. It came straight for the boat. Venning saw it too.”

“It was over there,” said Venning, peering into the dark.

“Then the fish must have jumped aboard to escape the crocodile. Anyway, we can have fish-steak for breakfast,” and Mr. Hume quieted the fish with a blow on the head.

“I made sure it was the crocodile,” said Compton, in an aggrieved tone. “Look at the hole in the curtains; there’ll be tons of skeeters aboard.”

“You turn in and I’ll smoke,” said the hunter, who smoked enough for three; and, with his pipe filled and lit, he took up the watch.

Once more the little party settled down to pass the night, and this time there was no disturbance until, in the chill of the early morning, the sleepers were awakened to get in

the awning, to make all shipshape aboard, and to prepare breakfast. The fish was not handsome-looking, but he cut up into really good steaks, which were grilled on a gridiron fitted over the stove, and, with hot coffee and a biscuit apiece, they ate a meal which made them proof against the depressing surroundings.

Both Compton and Venning, as soon as there was light enough, took a careful look around for the crocodile; but though that wily brute was probably near, he did not show himself. They could, however, see the track made by the hippo when he had broken through into the water, and Mr. Hume, stepping ashore, went up this track to spy around. He returned with the report that the natives were signaling from village to village by columns of smoke sent up from fires fed with damp wood to make a heavy smoke.

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“They will be keeping a sharp look-out, and we had better remain here.”

“It seems to me,” said Compton, “that we have been here already a week.”

“Quite that,” said Venning.

“The time has seemed long because you have been receiving new impressions.”

“I thought it was a fish I received,” murmured Compton.

“Each impression,” continued the hunter, “is a sort of milestone in your memory, so that an hour crowded with several of these milestones will appear to be longer than a whole blank day. You will get used to such interrupted nights—that is, if our journey does not end here.”

“Oh, come, sir, we have dodged them beautifully.”

“The feeling of security is the beginning of disaster,” said Mr. Hume, oracularly. “The rule of the bush is to keep your eyes skinned.”

“What is the order of the day, then?”

“The order of the day is to watch and wait. Venning will crawl on to the little island on our right and watch the south hank. You, Compton, will take the head of the large island on our left, and I will watch from the other end. If any of us see danger, we will give the whistle of the sand-piper. Each will take water and food, and each, of course, will keep himself hid.”

“We take our guns, of course?”

“Best not. A gunshot would bring a host down upon us. Don’t be discouraged,” continued the hunter, as he saw the boys’ faces drop. “We have got the advantage of position, and we’ve got grit—eh?”

He nodded cheerfully, and they smiled back, and then each crept out to his allotted post. The first part of the watch was by no means bad—so the boys decided when they had settled down, Venning under a bush palm and Compton behind a log. There was a pleasant freshness in the air; and as the broad river uncoiled under the mist, it disclosed fresh beauties, till the lifting veil revealed the wooded heights and the tall columns of smoke, grey against the dark of the woods and black against the indigo blue of the sky. They marked where the hippos stood with their bulky heads to the sun, and saw the crocodiles on the sands of other islands lying motionless with distended jaws. And then the birds came to the hunting. Strings of dark ibis, of duck, and storks; small kingfishers all bejeweled, and greater kingfishers in black and white. The air was full of bird-calls, of the musical ripple of waters, of the hum of the forest moved by the morning wind.

By-and-by, however, the sun got to work in earnest, and the pleasure went out of the watching as the air grew hot and steamy. The sand-flies and the mosquitoes found them out, and blessed the day that brought two tender white boys into their very midst. They gathered to the feast in clouds, but these boys were not there for the fun of the thing. They drew gossamer veils over the brims of their felt hats, and gathered them in about their necks. They pulled

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their soft high boots up to their knees and secured them there; and, moreover, they smeared an abomination of grease and eucalyptus oil over their hands. The mosquitoes set up a shrill trumpeting that could be heard ten paces away, and held a mass meeting to protest; whereupon the father of all the dragon-flies, a magnificent warrior in a steel-blue armour, saw that a conspiracy was afoot, and swept into the midst with a whirr and a snap, a turn here and a flash there, that scattered the host in a twinkling of a gnat's eye.

The islands shimmered in the glare as if they were afloat; the hippos took to the water, and a deep and drowsy silence fell upon the great river. But man, ever restless, was astir, and through the stillness there was borne to the three a soft continuous humming, that merged quietly into the short, clamorous throbs of an engine at work under pressure.

The launch was afloat again! Mr. Hume caught the trail of the smoke first, and Compton next. They marked the course under the north bank right up to a bend about six miles off, and they judged that the launch had stopped there, as the smoke went up in a straight thin column. Then Venning saw a canoe dart out from the south bank, followed by two others from different points. The sun struck like fire on gun-barrel and spear-head, and gleamed on the wet paddles. He moistened his parched lips with a taste of water from his filter-bottle, and gave the call. The answer came, and he drew his friends to him with a low whistling. As they came crouching, he pointed upriver.

"Three canoes put out. Two are hidden behind that outside island, and there is the other creeping round the end."

"Oh ay," said Mr. Hume. "If they're after us, they will have placed outlooks in the tallest trees;" and with his glass he swept the forest.

"They could not see us at that distance."

"But they could see our boat as soon as we appeared in open water. We'll stay where we are."

"Then we shall need our guns."

"It is not our guns that will save us, my lad, but strategy. Any one could fire off a rifle, but it takes nerve to keep cool in readiness to do the right thing at the right time."

"But," said Compton, obstinately, "we don't want to be caught undefended."

“Leave this matter with me,” said the hunter, sternly. “See that crocodile asleep on that stretch of sand? He’s our best protector. Why? Because he is asleep. The natives, seeing him, would think we were not near. We will, however, keep watch together.”

They returned to the boat, made all ready for an instant departure, in case they were discovered, then settled down to wait and watch once more. Gradually the strain wore off, the old silence fell upon the scene, and their eyes grew heavy from sheer monotony. The night had seemed long, bat the day was worse.

Then the boys rubbed their eyes and lifted their heads. Where there had been a bare stretch of water white under the sun between two islands a quarter of a mile off, there appeared a long canoe, with a tall spearman standing in the bows, and a full crew behind.

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The man in the bows looked straight down the channel to their lair, where in the narrow cut the Okapi lay hidden behind a screen of leaves. Then he moved his hand to the right, and the canoe, silently, without a ripple almost, skirted the island on that side, into whose reedy sides the men darted their glances. Again the hand was moved, and the long boat crept across to the island on the left, which was swept by the sharp suspicious eyes of the natives. Again the bowman directed his gaze into the narrow opening, and this time he looked long. There was one small island to pass, and if the canoe kept on the north side, it would have to come right into the hiding-place; if it kept to the south, it would reappear at the end of the passage by which the Okapi had entered.

In either case, the danger of discovery seemed certain. The three pairs of eyes from behind the tall grass were glued to the man's face. They saw him start, then move his hand to the left, and as the canoe went stealthily out of their view round the south side, they heard the sullen plunge made by a crocodile as, disturbed from his sleep, he took to the waters.

Then the three crept back to the boat. "Pull her through the screen," whispered the hunter, as he caught up his rifle, "but make no noise;" and he took up another position ashore, this time facing the other end of the channel.

With great caution the boys coaxed the Okapi through the trailing branches, so that she would be hidden from view if the natives looked up the channel. Then they waited and waited for ages before the hunter showed himself.

"Well?" they asked in a whisper.

"They have passed on."

"And?" they said, watching his face.

"I don't quite like it. They may have no suspicions, but I think they have; for one man pointed up in this direction."

"If they suspected anything they would have stopped surely."

"Perhaps not. The native doesn't like the look of a trap, and it maybe that they passed on with the intention of returning at night. Or they may have gone for the other boats." Mr. Hume stood up to glance shorewards.

"Would it not be better to move on?" said Venning.

"If we could be sure that we should not be seen from the land, that would be the move." He stroked his beard. "I guess we'll move," he said, "just about dusk, for I'm pretty sure in my mind that they did take particular notice of this channel, and my policy is always to listen to your instincts."

“Instincts,” muttered Compton; “call them nerves.”

Mr. Hume laughed. “About the time you were born, Dick, I was playing a lone hand in Lo-Ben’s country as trader and hunter, when a loss of nerve would have meant loss of life. See! So just leave this to me, and shove her along.”

Compton grinned back at the hunter, and tugged at his oar, for the levers clanked too loud for this work. They crept along to another berth a little way off, and tied up in the shadow of the bank; and they had scarcely settled themselves when they heard again the beat of engines. The launch was returning, and was returning in answer to a signal that the game had been found! A pungent smell of smoke suddenly reached them, and, standing up, they saw over the reeds that a fire had been made on one of the neighbouring islands.

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That was the signal!

Glancing shorewards they saw that more canoes were putting off—dark smudges on the water, but growing clearer as the crews dashed the paddles. But there were enemies even nearer. As they pulled the Okapi closer into the shadows a boat swept into view, and, evidently obeying directions given from the island where the fire was, took up a position overlooking the first hiding-place of the Okapi. All the time the launch drew nearer, racing evidently to take advantage of the brief spell of light before the dark, and the canoes raced from the shore to take part in the great man-hunt. As they drew near, the fleet scattered, some going up-stream, others down, and the remainder dashing straight on in among the islands.

As they scattered to take up their positions, there came a report from the launch's gun.

It was the signal for the drive to begin, and as the echo rolled away, a deep silence followed the previous uproar. The savage look-out men, standing erect in the sharp bows of the long canoes, motioned to the paddlemen to stop, and all heads were turned to the wind to catch any sound in case the hunted should attempt to move away. Fierce eyes were directed towards one spot, where the fire blazed on the island over against the place where the Okapi had laid up.

Not a whisper had come from the three in the boat. After they had first seen the signal smoke, which told them so plainly that Mr. Hume's suspicions were justified, they had crouched low, watching every move that was visible to them.

A canoe rounded their hiding-place and crept stealthily by towards the narrow passage with its screen of bushes, every man fixing his gaze directly ahead, the broad nostrils quivering, and spears grasped in the hands that were not busy with the paddles.

Then through the silence there came the sharp yap of a dog who has struck the scent, and next the loud, excited bark. Too cautious to land on the suspected island themselves, some of the canoe-men had drawn near from the north side and thrown a cur on the island to find the white men in their supposed hiding. The dog had, of course, struck the spoor and found the dark hiding, empty, but suspicious-looking. In his fear he gave tongue. The gun from the launch fired, a yell rose from every side, and all the canoes near dashed forward.

Mr. Hume shoved out, and the Okapi slipped up-stream undetected under the uproar, darting from one island to another, and keeping as near the banks as possible. They were doing splendidly! The enemy was behind; it seemed that they must reap the advantage of their caution and resourcefulness, when, without any intimation of danger, they came right upon a canoe lying in mid-channel between two of the innumerable islands.

“Back-water!” cried Mr. Hume, at once.

The boys obeyed without, of course, any knowledge of the course, and the Okapi slackened down.

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“Well met, my friends,” came a voice they knew; and the two looked over their shoulders.

“Dished, after all!” muttered Compton, bitterly; then he snatched up his rifle.

“Hassan thought you would come along this way,” went on the junior officer—for it was he; “but I doubted, and yet here you are.”

“The praise be to Allah,” remarked Hassan, piously, as he glanced along his rifle.

The Okapi had lost the little way she was making, and began to move with the current away from the canoe. Mr. Hume suddenly spoke for the first time since his order.

“Turn that canoe round!” he roared; and his Express leapt to his shoulder. The boys followed suit.

The paddle-men promptly ducked their heads, and one of them called out in his lingo that this was the slayer of crocodiles and of the great bull.

“But, my friend——” began the Belgian, who now, together with Hassan and several Arabs in the stern of the canoe, came under the levelled barrels.

“Oblige me,” said the hunter. “Compton, cover that Arab Hassan with your rifle, and Venning, take the man to the right. If they move their weapons, shoot.”

Hassan snarled and turned a furious face to the Belgian. “This is your folly!” he hissed. “Why didn’t you fire at once?”

Mr. Hume repeated his orders in the native tongue, and the cowed men, using their paddles, turned the long canoe round.

“Now, keep straight on in silence, till I tell you to stop. Follow them”—this to the boys, who immediately picked up their sculls.

The Belgian glanced back. “Come,” he said, “this is not amiable. See, we could, had we liked, have caught you in an ambush.”

“And so your friend Hassan advised you, eh?” replied Mr. Hume; “but you thought we would surrender at discretion. You see, you were mistaken. Now just listen to me. Do not look back again, or this rifle may go off. Out with the sculls, lads.”

Hassan growled out curses at this complete turning of the tables upon him, but the natives bent to their paddles. They bad no wish to be shot down in the cause of the slave-hunter, however ready they would have been to have fallen on the Englishmen if the advantage had been with them.

The darkness was coming on fast as the strange procession passed up the channel to thread the intricate passages among the clustering islands. In a few minutes the canoe would be almost hidden from sight; but the very last thing Mr. Hume wanted was to keep company.

“Baleka!” he cried. “Quicker! I have your heads in one line. One bullet would stretch you all dead. Quicker!” he roared.

The broad paddles flashed, the water churned fiercely, and the long canoe shot off into the dusk; and as it sped on the hunter pulled the wheel over, altering the course of the Okapi, and taking it towards the open water between the islands and the south bank.

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“By Jove! you did that splendidly,” said Compton. “I thought it was all over.”

Venning laughed that little nervous laugh of his. “I wonder why they gave in like that?”

“We had the drop on then,” said Mr. Hume, grimly; “and we knew our own minds. Now, then! up with the sail, and, dark or not, we must get on.”

Very smartly and silently the boys hoisted the sail, and as the Okapi beat up they heard a great uproar from the left. Apparently Hassan was using violent language to the Belgian officer for not having ambushed the “dogs of Englishmen.” Then several rifle-shots were fired from the canoe, and answered from the people down-stream, who were still searching for their prey. But the Okapi slipped on, making a musical ripple under her bows, until she beat up under the great wall of woods on the south bank, when she tacked away into the gathering darkness, feeling for the wind. Down-river was the glare of fires at different spots, where the men had landed from the different canoes; but there was no light ahead through the whole vast width of the river, and they dare not even rig up their own lamp to get what little guidance it could give. The wind was fitful, and the direct progress was slow, so that when the glow went out of the sky they were still within hearing of the shouting. Indeed, it seemed that the shouting gained on them, as if the men in Hassan’s boat were keeping their place in the renewed pursuit, and directing other crews as to the line they should take.

Then the sail napped idly against the mast as the wind died down, and as they unstepped the mast before depending on the screw, a fire sprang out right ahead, sending up a tall column of flame that flung its reflection far across the waters.

“We must make out into the islands again,” said Mr. Hume; but, as the boat pointed on the new course, an answering flame sprang up, and then another and another at brief intervals, until from the fire on the bank there was a semicircle of flame from island to island barring their advance.

“There must be an army out,” muttered Venning.

“It is one canoe, but most likely Hassan’s, firing the dried reeds as they pass from island to island.”

“Then the flames will die out soon.”

“Yes, they will die down; but in the mean time other canoes will come up, and if there are men on the shore waiting, they will see us outlined against the reflection.”

Even as he finished there came a shrill cry from the shore, followed by the wild beat of the war-drum, and next by the sound of paddling.

“Shall we make a bolt for it?” asked Compton.

“Not yet,” said the hunter; and he brought the Okapi stem on for the deep shadows under the bank.

The oars moved softly, covered by the noise of the paddling, and the Okapi slipped out of the reflection into the darkness, while the canoes dashed straight on, passing about one hundred yards behind her stem.

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“Easy now,” whispered Mr. Hume, “and keep quite still.”

The oars were drawn in as the Okapi, caught in a current, was borne right into the bank at a spot where the trees came down to the brink. Mr. Hume caught a branch, and the stern swung round. Before them, about a quarter of a mile off perhaps, was the great fire they had first seen, still fed by natives, whose dark figures stood out and disappeared as they moved about. Out on the river they could hear the noise of paddles, and of men calling to each other.

Near them on the bank something moved, and above the swishing of the current they heard the low whine of an animal.

Mr. Hume pricked his ears at the sound, and crept into the well, where the boys sat anxiously watching.

“Put on your coats,” he muttered.

Again there came the whine, then the sound of an animal scrambling, and next the patter of feet.

“A dog,” whispered Venning.

“I advise keeping on,” said Compton.

“And I,” replied Mr. Hume, “advise that we have something to eat. Will you serve us, Venning?”

They ate hungrily, for through the day they had been too much excited to think of food. And as they feasted their eyes were on the move, and their ears on the stretch. Their manoeuvre had apparently succeeded, for the canoes were all beating up towards the fires under the belief that the Okapi had kept on, and there was no suspicious movement by the people on the shore. So they remained where they were, keeping themselves in position by holding on to the branches. To the boys it was a weird scene, with the blood-red glow on the waters and the sense of vastness and of wildness. They were not afraid, but they could not help a feeling of weariness, and they edged nearer the hunter for the comfort of his presence. For a long time they watched, sitting silent; and by-and-by the fires on the islands died down one by one, until only the flare on the bank remained as a beacon to those on the river. Then the sound of paddling drew near again.

Again the whine came from behind the screen of trees, and there was a rustling among the branches.

Taking a bit of the dried meat he had been eating, Mr. Hume tossed it through the leaves. There came a sniff, a snap of the jaws, and a whimper. The hunter shifted his rifle till it pointed through the boughs.

“Peace,” said a low voice. “It is Muata and his beast. They hunt me yet.”

“Us also, O chief!”

The canoes came rushing in. Already some of the crews had landed near the fire; but others were coming down-stream, hugging the banks for safety, or, maybe, having a last look for the Englishmen.

“It is Muata!” cried Venning, in a joyous whisper. “Muata and his jackal. What luck!”

“S-sh!”

A canoe went by some distance out, after it another, and as they swept into the darkness, a third announced its presence, coming more slowly and closer in. While it was nearly opposite the hiding the howl of the jackal rose from out the bush, wringing a startled exclamation from the two boys by its suddenness.

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“What devil’s noise is that?” sang out a voice they recognized as that of the Belgian officer.

A sharp order was given, the paddles ceased, and the canoe, looming long and black on the water, drifted towards the Okapi.

“I have heard that cry before,” said a rasping voice. “Be ready with your weapons. Allah the merciful may yet deliver those we seek.”

“What would they be doing here inshore?” asked the Belgian.

“They would be here because it is here they would not expect us to search. I think I see something gleam.”

In the water by the shore there was a faint splash, and again the jackal whined.

Mr. Hume pressed his hand on Compton’s shoulder, forcing him into the well; and he did the same by Venning.

“Surely,” said the Belgian, “it is something. Shall we call in the other canoes, and guard the place till daylight?”

“I will have them now,” said Hassan, with fury.

“They will not look on another sun;” and he gave the order to his men to kill when they closed in. “It is they who let free the thief of the forest—the dog Muata.”

“You lie, O woman stealer; Muata freed himself;” and out of the water, out of the blackness, came the voice, without warning, “Muata is here, by your side, man-thief.”

The Arab fired, and the flash from his discharged rifle flamed into the water, into which he peered with features convulsed.

“Kill him!” he yelled.

“Muata!” cried the paddlers. “Haw! To the shore, to the shore, or we perish! The water-wolf, he!”

“Yavuma!” cried the voice from the water; and the canoe heeled over as the chief rose under the sharp bow. “Yavuma!”—he wrenched a paddle from one of the men and hurled it at the Arab. The crank craft rolled as some of the excited men in the stem tried to use their spears. “Yavuma!”—this time with a triumphant whoop, and the canoe turned over!

With a couple of powerful strokes the swimmer had his hand on the Okapi.

“O great one,” he cried, “Muata is come to work and to watch—to be your shield and your spear.”

Mr. Hume reached out a strong hand and pulled the chief on board.

Muata gave a low cry, and with a frightened whimper the jackal shot out from the bank and lighted on the deck. Then the Okapi slid out silently into the river.

“By Jenkins!” gasped Venning.

“It beats all,” laughed Compton. “Well done, Muata.”

As the capsized crew struggled to the shore they yelled abuse and threats, but their power for mischief had gone with the loss of their weapons. Some of them went off down the bank shouting for the canoes that had gone on, and others made their way to the fire; but Mr. Hume and Muata took a spell at the levers, heedless of the noise made, and under their powerful arms the boat was soon far out in the waste of waters—safe, at any rate, for that night.

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CHAPTER VIII

THE BULLS AND THE WILD DOGS

After an hour or so Muata was sent forward as look-out, and with his jackal by his side, apparently aiding him in his task, he showed such eyes for the night that they kept on safely till the morning, when the sail was hoisted, and by breakfast-time they judged they had covered about forty miles—quite enough for safety. They ran the Okapi in among the islands which still stretched away as far as they could see, and made fast, to eat and to sleep. The noon heat woke them. They sat up under the awning and talked of the great drive, of Muata's escape, and of his wonderful luck in finding them—though he made out that there was nothing strange about it, since from the woods he had seen the preparations for the hunt, and had, too, made out the Okapi in the dusk. For the rest, his jackal had scented out the white man's lair, and all he, the chief, had to do was to upset the canoe of the Arab.

"That was no great work for Muata—the otter, the water-wolf," he said.

"And how did the chief escape?"

"Before the shouting arose that Muata was gone, he found a calabash of fat for the cooking, by the door of a hut. Some fat he rubbed on the soles of his feet to kill the scent. Then he sent the jackal into the woods and crawled into a hut, being stiff from the binding. In the hut he remained, rubbing the fat into the joints, till the people came back to the feast."

"The feast was made by us, so that while the people ate we could loosen your bonds."

"Wow! Never yet have I known any to give such thought to a stranger."

"It is our way to stand by those who stand by us."

"It is a great word that;" and the chief turned the thought over in his mind. "Ow aye! They came again to the feast, and Muata went out into the woods in peace."

"And was that all?"

"There was a man gathering fruit in the morning as I passed through a garden, and his knife I took."

"And what did the man do?"

"He took a message to my father, the chief," said Muata, enigmatically. "The chief's son has been like a hunted dog. His stomach hungers for red meat. His spirit thirsts for the

hunt. Wow! O hunter, set your shining boat for the shore, and let us follow the trail. There be buffalo in the lands beyond the hills which line the river."

"That's a splendid idea!" cried Venning. "I'm beginning to get mouldy. A trip ashore would be ripping, now that we have distanced our pursuers."

"I second that motion," said Compton, with a longing glance shorewards. "Do you know, sir, that we have not shot a thing since we entered the Congo?"

"I have no objection," said the hunter. "And we must have a good supply of biltong before we enter the forest; but we cannot afford to take risks. Just examine the shore for a creek, and at dusk we will run across."

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The boys passed the afternoon searching the south bank for signs of a creek, and in the evening the Okapi shaped her course across to a likely spot they had marked out. But though they found a creek, it was not one that commended itself as a hiding to Mr. Hume, and it was not till after a wearisome hunt for hours in the dark that they found a channel leading through the hills which he agreed to follow up; and then, when they had entered about a mile, Muata, with his jackal, was landed to “feel” around for native paths or villages. Muata, after a long absence, reported all safe as far as he could judge, and they tied up. In the morning they found themselves in the thick of the woods, and pushed on down a dark and sluggish stream strewn with fallen timber, till they came to a pool in a gorge. Here they resolved to leave their boat.

They took the Okapi to pieces, stowed them away in a dry cavern in the krantz, covered them with the tarpaulins, and pushed on down through the gorge on foot, emerging beyond the hills which bordered the Congo into a rolling country, park-like in appearance. They studied the land well before they continued, first for signs of native villages, and next for game. Smoke rose far away to the right, but nearer, the country seemed deserted, and as plenty of game appeared in sight, they determined to camp on the slopes of the hill. So they looked about for a good pitch, and made choice of a sunny spot at the foot of a rocky cliff, not far from the stream they had followed, and well screened from view by a thicket of bush in the front. They stowed away their blankets in a small cave at the base of the cliff, and then started off for the first hunt, the boys in a fine state of excitement. They struck into a game-path leading through thick scrub, and five minutes from the start there was a sullen snort, a tremendous crashing in the woods, as if, at least, a herd of elephant were stampeding. Mr. Hume dashed down the game-path, and before the boys could see what manner of beast it was, he had fired and bowled it over with a bullet behind the ear.

“A bit of luck,” he said, as they reached him.

“What is it?” asked Venning, glancing around with bright eyes.

“A buffalo, over there.”

The two boys saw a dark form on the ground, half hidden by a bush, and were running forward.

“Quietly,” said the hunter. “Always approach dangerous game cautiously when they are down—especially buffalo;” and with his finger on the trigger he went up slow-footed.

But the buffalo was stone-dead—a great bull with an immense boss between the bend of his sharp horns.

“It’s the luck of hunting,” said Mr. Hume, as the boys walked round the great beast. “Some days you never get a shot, and other times you find game at your back door, so

to speak. One of you boys will stay with Muata to skin and cut up. It will be a good lesson."

The two looked at each other, and then away over the plain. Skinning and cutting up was not exactly amusing.

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“All right; I’ll stay,” said Venning.

“Each in his turn,” said the hunter. “Come along, Compton;” and they went off, as Venning turned up his shirt-sleeves.

It was hard work, this cutting up, but Muata was a master at the job, and Venning learnt his lesson thoroughly.

The great hide was taken off in one piece without a slit; then long strips of meat were cut off and hung over the branches of a tree. When the rest of the meat had been stripped off, they packed it all away in the hide, slung the bundle to a sapling, and, with each end of the pole on a shoulder, they slowly carried the whole to the camp. Venning hoped that his labours were over; but they had only completed one task. They had now to build a scaffolding on which to hang the strips, after each had been well peppered to keep off the flies, for the drying and smoking. This took another slice out of the day; and when Venning had washed in the river, and cooked and eaten his buffalo-steak, he resigned himself to the study of insects in place of the pursuit of game, while Muata, who had melted down the fat from the kidneys, sat and rubbed the oil into his limbs till his skin shone.

“Have you seen many buffalo?” asked Venning, with a keen eye on a bit of crooked stick that had seemed to move.

“Many.”

“And you understand their ways?”

“I have watched as you watch the stick that is not a stick.”

Venning picked up an insect—a strange creature which had adapted itself to its surroundings by pretending to be a dried twig.

“Tell me what you saw.”

“I saw the twin bulls when they were calves, and I saw them when they led the herd, and when they lost the leadership. I watched them. Ow aye, I knew their ways. Sometime, when I was yet a boy, I could understand what they said.”

“What they said, chief?”

“See, the creatures are like men in their ways, and men are like animals—each man like to one kind of animal. Haw! So I judged what the buffalo would say if he could talk like men.”

“And what was the talk? Tell it me; for I also have given speech to animals when I have watched alone.”

“I will tell you what I thought when I was young, and watched the things of the forest. The wisest among the people I have met is a woman; and among the things of the forest, the wisest were even a buffalo cow who never had calf, and the mother of the yellow pack, who had white eyes in her long head. Haw!

“Now, the pack hunted on the same veld where a troop of buffalo grazed, but the bull who led the troop was wise. He took counsel with the old cow that was calf-less, and the pack could never find the fat heifers or the younger calves unguarded. In the troop were two young bulls—brothers; and these I had watched grow—watched from my hiding. They were strong and fierce, and they eyed the old bull full. Scarcely would they turn

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from his path. Wow! One morning the old bull stood in the game-path, considering in his mind how it came to happen that the earth had been fresh turned. While he stood, the young bulls pressing behind suddenly put their horns to his flanks and urged him forward. Mawoh! The old bull stepped on to the newly turned earth, and went down into a pit that the hunters had dug. He called to the troop to run from the danger, and they crashed through the wood to the open glade.

“Haw! A young dog of the pack heard the bellow from the earth, and creeping near, he looked down upon the great bull. Then, with his nose to the ground, he ran upon the trail of the troop till he saw them in the opening. The young bulls moved among the cows. They pushed the old cow aside, and later went through the tall grass into a shallow vlei, where they wallowed in the mud. Then the young dog ran back to the pack. This is what he said, as I understood—

“‘Behold, O mother,’ he said, ’the great bull, even the leader, is fallen in the trap made by man in the path.’

“Who leads the troop now—the old cow or the two brothers?”

‘The young bulls, O mother, and they lie in the mud.’

“Then the she-dog called the pack together. I heard the call, and knew there would be hunting. She called them and made a plan. I saw afterwards the plan she made. The young dogs she sent round to the far side of the vlei, and she came with the biggest of the pack to the side nearest the forest. From the edge of the wood she looked out on the open. The old cow stood alone, with her head turning now this way, then that way. The others grazed with their calves. The heifers stood foot-deep in the water near the bulls.

“The old dog turned to the pack. ’This comes of the folly of the young,’ she said; and her white eyes ran from dog to dog. ’Those two lie like pigs. We will eat buffalo to-night. Scatter and wait.’

“Three dogs went to the right of her and three to the left. They stretched themselves in the grass. The old cow blew through her nostrils. She struck the ground, and the cows with the young calves ran to her. They gathered in a bunch, heads out. From beyond came the hunting-cry of the young dogs. The heifers moved, but the bulls kept still.’ It is but a dog yapping after a hare,’ they said. ‘Stand you still.’

“But the hunting-cry drew nearer. The cows lowered their heads, bellowing, and the heifers ran. Wow! The young dogs cut one out, and raced her right to where the great mother of the pack crouched. As the heifer came by, the white jaws snapped at her

belly, and bit deep, so that blood flowed, and on the scent of the blood the pack went into the forest. They ate buffalo that night.

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“The young bulls rose from the mud. They ran to and fro in the open; their eyes were red, and the foam dripped from their black lips. Wow! they were angry, Ow aye, they were covered with shame and mud. The old cow moved away, and the cows with young followed her. The heifers, trembling in their limbs, would have followed also, but the bulls headed them off. There was much talk in the forest over this. They said the bulls had learnt wisdom. No dog would take a member of the troop again. The bulls tossed their horns. ‘If a lion comes,’ they said, ‘we would beat him off.’

“The pack tried again, and were beaten off; but the old she yawned. ‘In a few days, my children,’ she said, ’we will eat buffalo, even of the meat of the young bulls. There never were two leaders in a pack’—and her white eyes went to a dog who had hopes of the leadership—’never; and in a day, or two days, these brothers will fight. They will fight hard; and when the fight is done the pack will steal upon them. When they stand panting, with lowered heads and feet wide apart, we will bite at the softness of their bellies.’ She licked her lips, and the tongues of the pack curled over their lips also. So the young dogs were set to watch upon the brothers; and it came to pass as the old mother said—the brothers fought. It began in play. One swung his head at the other, and the other swung back.

“When a grown bull swings his head, O white boy, who picked me out of the sea, it is like the blow of a falling tree. There is the weight of his head with the heavy horns, the arch of his neck, and the power in his shoulders where the muscles lie. The blows roused the fury in them. They looked sideways at each other, then their tails went up, and they came together. Wow!! The noise rang far. The hunting dogs ran swiftly to the pack, and as they ran there followed them the noise of the fight.

“I stole near to watch. It was a battle. The ground was torn up as in the hoeing, where their hoofs clung for a footing under the pressure. First they pushed, head to head, nose near the ground, red eyes looking into red eyes. The heifers stood in a cluster watching. It was a still battle. They saved their breath, and as they breathed the dust flew. For many minutes they pushed, swaying, one losing ground for a time, then gaining it back. The foam gathered on their lips and dropped to the ground. The sweat ran under their bellies. Then one slipped, and the other struck under the shoulder. From the lower rib to the back there ran a white mark. The white mark turned black, and blood came out. At the pain of it the stricken bull grunted and struck up. His horn struck under the body, and with the cracking of his joints he heaved the other over. Haw! He rolled him right over and sprang at him. Wow!! He struck and stood back. The other was on his feet swiftly. With the swiftness of a little cat he gained his feet. So they stood with their heads up, staring with red eyes. Again

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they came together. Again they shoved and strained, and the dust caked on the blood that covered them. The ground beneath them that was dry, was now muddy from the trampled blood. Then they swung their heads and struck, grunting at the blows, and stood apart, and came together, till the blood started from their ears. Their breath came in gasps, and the silence was broken. From their lips, all blood-covered, there came a moaning. Ow aye, the moaning of a mother over her dead. The heifers ran forward, then back; they ran round and galloped away, afraid—galloped into the forest.

“In my heart, O white friend, I was sorry for the brothers. The moaning was the cry of sorrow that one felt for the other. ’O my brother, I must slay you,’ that was the meaning of the moaning. Their tongues rolled out, swollen; their legs shook, their eyes were covered with mist. Yet they swung their heads, and each time the horns were wet with blood, and the moaning came always. Then they came together, and went on their knees. Their muzzles were in the mud; their hind legs were wide apart.

“Ow aye, I looked away and saw the white eyes of the mother of the pack. She was creeping up. Her lips were wet; the hair on her neck stood up. Behind her came others. I gave the low growl of a lion— the cry he makes when he is angry at being disturbed. She threw up her head and sniffed the air. Then she growled in her throat, for there was no taint of lion in the air, but the taint of man! Her white eyes found me out where I sat in a low tree, and there was death in them. So I gathered the air in my lungs and shouted. A man’s shout is as much dreaded as the lion’s roar. The dogs jumped up, but the old mother called to them, and they crouched down. The brothers stood moaning head to head. I shouted again; I whistled. Then the bulls drew apart. One fell slowly on his side; the other smelt at the fallen one. Then he tried to bellow, but his tongue was thick in his mouth. The she-dog crept forward, and I whistled loud. This time he flung up his head and looked around. He saw the white eyes above the grass; he saw the round ears everywhere around. Then he smelt at his brother. Wow! He smelt at him; he licked the blood from his nostrils.

“This is the law among the wild things—when one is down he is down. The weak are driven forth by their fellows; the hurt are left. The bull smelt at his brother; then again he flung his head up to look at the white-eyed one, and he moved away for the vlei, moaning as he went. The dogs let him pass; their eyes scarcely went to him, for they were fixed on the fallen. They moved upon him in silence, a few steps at a time, then crouched with hanging tongues; then a few more steps; and as they closed in the fallen bull watched those he could see. Meat for dogs! He a chief in the forest, who could toss the largest dog the height of a tree! Wow! He gathered his hind feet under him and lifted.

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Slowly he reached his feet, and the white-eyed mother ran in open-mouthed. She gripped the sinews of his hind leg and held on. The pack crowded in. Haw! It was no fight. The bull looked after his brother, who was slowly moving to the vlei, moaning as he went. Then, but for a little time, he fought as a chief should fight when his foes are on him. With a swing of his head here, and a swing there, he stove in the ribs of two of the pack; then he sprang on another, flung him, as a boy would a stone, into the air, watched him go up, watched him come down, then flung him up again, and fell forward on his knees with his nose on the ground, and the pack snapped the flesh from him in mouthfuls. The other bull turned not at the howling of the pack. He walked on slow and straight to the vlei, drank deep, and made a bed in the mud. He covered his wounds with mud, and when his wounds were healed he was an outcast. The troop had another leader, and the old cow led them all to another grazing-ground."

"And what became of you, Muata?"

"Muata stayed in the tree. Mawoh! Muata was afraid. The mother of the pack had not forgotten. Even while she ate she looked at him, and when the milk-mothers with their young came to the forest, having been called, she lay off and watched, with her evil eyes on me. The jackals, smelling blood, howled, sitting on their haunches, and a lion came up growling in his throat. But he did not come right up; he stood a way off, watching, and presently he stretched himself on his stomach to wait. Haw! Even the lion will not attempt to drive the pack from its kill. Ow aye, it is so. The old mother never turned her eyes to watch the lion, but when the pups played, having eaten their fill, she stood up. The pack looked at her and moved off; then the lion rose and came forward. The old one stood her ground, and the great one, when he was within three bounds of her, also stood. The white eyes turned away from the yellow eyes— they turned to me; then she yapped and went off after the pack. The lion looked after her; then he stretched himself on the ground again and stared. He lifted his head to the wind and sniffed. Mawoh! Well, I knew the old mother had told him of my presence; but the lion never looks up. It was well for me, for his mind was uneasy. A long time he lay, while the jackals sat howling. Then he crept round the tree and the carcase. Twice he crept round; then, as the smell of the meal was too much, he trotted up to the carcass and growled at his feast. His back was toward me, and I fled."

"And did you meet the white-eyed mother again?"

"The wisest among the people I have met," said Muata, gravely, "was a woman; and among the creatures of the forest, the wisest was a she-dog. It is in my mind that the leader of the pack was umtaguati. Ow aye, she was a wizard; and it is not well to make war against such."

Venning looked at the chief with curiosity. “Are there many wizards in the forest, Muata?” he asked with a smile.

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“By day and night, many; but most by night. Our people will not venture forth in the darkness of the forest for fear of the wizards and the bad spirits that watch from behind the trees and follow stealthily; but a spell was given to Muata. He could walk in the night.”

“Have you seen these—eh—spirits, Muata?” Muata put the question aside. He rose and pointed to the east.

“The sun dies away and the hunters return.”

“I don’t hear them. Where are they?” “The birds cry out and fly. That is the sign that man is on the move; for hear, you who split up the shining boat, birds will scold at a leopard or a great snake, hovering around as they scold; but they fly from man. From nothing else will they fly. From an eagle they will hide after giving the warning call; but from man they fly.”

A few minutes later the two arrived, Mr. Hume carrying an antelope on his shoulder.

CHAPTER IX

A LION’S CHARGE

They turned in very early after banking up leaves over the fires under the biltong strips, to give them a good smoking during the night, but in the small hours, when the night is at its quietest, the moonlight, shining on Venning’s face, woke him. The fires were glowing bright, altogether too bright for safety, and he rose to cover the glare with some green leaves. He looked at his sleeping companions, for all, tired out by disturbed nights, slept on, except the jackal, which had one eye open.

Venning sat awhile looking down upon the dim uncertain shadows that came and went, as a fleecy mist-like cloud passed overhead. Beyond the fitful murmur of the wind there was no sound but the hooting of a great homed owl somewhere from the woods above. Drawing his blanket round him, and picking up his gun, he walked to a point on the right overlooking the bed of the little river, and there he sat down with his back to a rock and his gun over his knees. Scarcely was he seated when the jackal startled him by its sudden appearance at his side. He scratched its ears, and it sat close to him, staring fixedly down on the river. Just below there was a stretch of sand in the bed gleaming white under the moonlight, and Venning watched this with the eye of a naturalist, in the hope of seeing some of the great forms of animal life. And he had his hope, for several creatures crossed the white patch, and each time the jackal was the first to see them. The round ears would suddenly prick forward, the sharp nose would twitch, and then Venning would dimly discover something down there in the uncertain light. A porcupine he made out, its quills gleaming and rustling as it went down to the water; then a great

wart-pig with curved tusks; and next, after a long interval, a fine buck with long powerful horns. A water-buck he judged it to be from the length of its horns, and it stood there long with its face up-stream, motionless, save for the constant twitching of the large ears. He rested his elbows on his knees as he sat and aimed at the shoulders, but did not fire, for fear of alarming the camp; and presently the buck, even as he watched, vanished as softly and silently as it came. Then Venning's eyes closed, his chin dropped, the gun settled between his knees, and he was asleep.

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He was asleep, and he was awake again so suddenly that he did not know he had slept until he saw the position of the gun. The jackal plucked at his blanket. He remembered that something had disturbed him, and he judged that the jackal had done the same thing just before. He yawned and patted its head; but, instead of sitting down, it ran a few yards, sniffed the air, whined, came back, glanced long over its shoulder into the riverbed, looked into Venning's face, then ran off in the direction of the camp. As soon as it was gone Venning felt lonely. He stood up, thinking to return to the camp, then sat down again, for he heard the sharp stamp that an antelope makes when alarmed, and he hoped to see it come into the moonlight. So he settled down to watch again, and drowsiness fell upon his eyes. He could see the white patch of sand, and as his heavy lids were lowered and lifted between the drowsy intervals, he became dimly conscious that there was something on the sand. Yes; there it was, something grey, short, and thick. A donkey, he told himself. He smiled sleepily. A donkey! It was strange to see the old familiar form out there in the wilderness. He wondered dreamily where it came from; then a shadow cast by the moon on a passing cloud blotted out the river-bed. He rubbed his eyes, and when the cloud had gone there were two animals—donkeys, unmistakably—one larger than the other, both with their heads turned upwards towards him. Another cloud sailed by, and when it had passed he missed them, and, his curiosity roused, he rubbed his eyes again for a closer scrutiny. Surely that was not a bush on the bank? No! it moved. The donkeys were coming towards him. One of them, the larger, moved forward quickly, then stopped. Then a chill ran through him, his heart grew weak, his breathing grew sharp, and the sweat suddenly started out all over his face and body. That was no donkey standing there, with its huge head now sunk almost to the ground, now lifted high, as it tried to make out what manner of living creature it was crouching there by the rock above!

Venning felt the hair stir on his head as the two animals stood gazing at him, and then he knew. The one behind sank to the ground, and with long steps began to creep round to the right. The moon struck along its side, and showed the tawny hide and the whitish under-parts of a lioness. The other, then, was a lion! With a sort of gurgling in his throat he turned his eyes to it, and he saw it trotting up straight for him, its shaggy mane giving to its head and shoulders an enormous size. He felt spell-bound, incapable of moving hand or foot. It was the silence of the ferocious beasts that paralyzed him. Then the jackal howled behind him, and his blood rushed through his veins. His tongue no longer clave to the roof of his mouth, and when the great beast was within ten yards of him, he let forth a terrific yell and jumped to his feet, with his rifle in his hands.

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The lion stopped suddenly in its charge with a low harsh grunt of surprise. Never before in its hunting had it heard such a wild uncanny noise. In one motion it stopped in its charge and swerved to the right, and as it swerved the boy fired. The lion gave a mighty bound, he heard it strike the ground with a heavy thud, and then it seemed to disappear, though he knew it was near from the low growling it set up.

From the camp there came a confused shouting, followed by the sound of a man running.

Venning moistened his lips. “Look out,” he shouted, “there is a lion here.”

“Where are you?”

“Here, by this rock.”

“Stay there, and keep quite still.”

The growling increased, and once more the same paralysis attacked the boy so that he could scarcely breathe. Then some one stood at his side, and the fear went from him at once.

“He’s over there, somewhere; but I can’t see him.”

“I can. Get round the rock, my boy. He’s lying flat with his head between his paws, and it’s a mercy you did not fire again and draw his charge.”

Venning moved round the rock, and Mr. Hume slowly followed. He stopped awhile to listen to the incessant growling.

“You’ve hit him, but not, I think, mortally; anyway, we’ll leave him, if he will leave us. Move on towards the camp quietly—don’t run.”

“No, sir,” said Venning; but it required an effort not to make a bolt for it when he saw the friendly gleam of the fire.

Mr. Hume followed slowly, with his head over his shoulder, towards the place where the growling came from. When he reached the fire he gave a great sigh of relief.

“Thank God. Now tell us what happened, my boy;” and he put his hand on Venning’s arm.

Venning started violently, for just then from the river there came a harsh, growling call; and no sooner had it ceased than the ground shook to a terrific roar.

“The lion answers the lioness,” said the chief, calmly.

“Throw a little wood on the fire, Muata. Now, my lad.”

Venning told his story, and Compton listened with intense excitement; but the hunter treated the whole thing calmly, with set purpose. He had in his experience seen the effect of a terrible shock, in the complete breakdown of the victim, and, personally, he had known one man die from the shock to his system caused exactly by the sudden and unexpected appearance of a lion at night. He kept Venning’s thoughts off the mental picture of the charging lion until dawn, when all hands prepared for the hunt.

“If you hit him hard he will be lying near, and I guess it will be a different matter meeting him by daylight—eh, my lad?”

Venning looked into the hunter’s calm eyes, and felt strong. He went straight to the rock against which he had crouched, and pointed to the deep scars made in the hard ground by the sharp claws as the lion had stopped his charge and wheeled.

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Compton measured the distance from the rock to the claw-marks.

“Fifteen feet! By Jove! it was a narrow squeak. I would have yelled like fits.”

“I did yell.”

Muata pointed to the ground.

“Blood spoor, eh? You did hit him. Put the jackal on the track, chief,” said Mr. Hume.

The jackal took one sniff at the ground, stared sharply around, then peered up into his master’s face.

“Search,” said the chief, in his own tongue. “Follow the great one, O little friend. The trail is laid; the great one has sought out a moist spot; he lies angry and sore in the shade. Search and find.”

The jackal looked intently into the chiefs face, sniffed at the ground, ran forward a few yards, stopped, sniffed again with lifted mane at a spot where the grass was pressed down, threw up his head with eyes half closed, then ran down towards the river, stopping on the bank to look back.

“That is where he joined his mate. There is the spoor on the sand going and returning. That is the round pad of the lion; just note and compare it with the pads of the lioness over there. Just look, and read the writing.”

The two boys looked at the marks in the sand, and followed them down to the moist ground on the edge of the water.

“They entered the river side by side,” they said.

“That is plain; but the writing tells another story. See, this footprint here is faint—very faint, eh? He did not rest his weight on his left fore-foot. Why, eh?”

“Because the bullet struck the left front leg,” they both said.

“They learn the signs, Muata. They will be hunters yet. Tell them if the lion be hard hit, chief.”

Muata waded into the river, which reached to his armpits at the deepest, and bent over something on the further shore. They undressed, and waded through to him.

“Congela,” he said, pointing to the bank. “The great ones came out here. The great, great one was not sore hurt, for he came right through, using all his feet to swim.”

“It will be luck, then, if we find him,” said the hunter.

“Bad luck,” muttered Compton to Venning, with a grin.

“Forward, little friend!” cried Muata. “Search and find. It is a great hunt this day. We follow the hunter of all things.”

They slipped into their clothes and followed at a trot after the jackal, which ran straight on, its bushy tail held low. It followed the river down for a mile or so, then stopped, looking back at its master.

Mr. Hume and the chief stood silently inspecting the hard ground, then they walked on a few yards. The same thoughts seemed to come to each, as the boys judged from their actions; for from the ground their eyes ranged over the land, then were turned skywards. Muata pointed a finger at a ringed crow flying with bent head.

“They killed,” said Mr. Hume.

“Oh!! They killed.”

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“You see,” said the hunter to the two boys, “the pair crouched here; these circular marks in the sand were made by the swing of the tails. They sighted game. One of them—the lioness, no doubt—worked round to drive the game towards the lion.”

“It is a guess,” said Compton. “Perhaps the lion stopped because of his hurt.”

“No; the bleeding has stopped. They not only sighted game, but the lioness drove it from the river-bed towards the lion, and the lion brought it down.”

“Oh, come,” said Compton. “How can you tell that?”

“From the spoor”—laconically. “He sprang twice—here, where he alighted the first time; and the second spring landed him on to the neck of an antelope powerful enough to struggle on into that thicket of reeds. There the two of them pulled it down.”

“And there he is!” shouted Venning.

He pointed to the right of the reeds, and there was a great yellowish beast walking away at a slow walk, with its head sunk.

“The lioness,” said the hunter. “Venning, keep by me, but a little behind. Compton, when I whistle, fire into the reeds.”

Compton nodded his head, and the two went off, while Muata sat down as a spectator.

Mr. Hume walked steadily up to within fifty paces of the reeds on the upper side, then whistled. Immediately Compton fired.

The lion was there. He signified his presence by a low growl, but he did not move. Compton fired again, and this time the reeds shook, and a great shaggy head appeared, with its yellow eyes fixed on the boy. Mr. Hume made a slight noise, and the great head turned at once in his direction. For a moment the lion exchanged glances, then with a growl he turned into the reeds to reappear further on, going slowly in the direction of the lioness.

“It is your shot, Godfrey; take him just behind the shoulder.”

Venning’s heart was thumping against his ribs; but he steadied himself for the shot, and fired. The lion sprang forward, snarling, and faced about towards his enemies. Then up went his tail, and with a savage growl he charged straight down to within about thirty feet, when he stood for a moment, as is the way of the charging lion if his enemy stands fast. The pause was enough; and before the huge muscles of the flanks and backs could be set in motion to hurl the great body forward, a bullet, crashing into his breast, laid him out helpless in the throes of death.

“Your first lion, Godfrey.”

“But you killed him,” said Venning, pulling himself together with a great effort; for he had been through a very severe ordeal.

“The first hit counts. See here, your bullet last night struck him above the elbow, just missing the bone, and your second shot hit him low down in the ribs.”

“My word,” said Compton, as he came up, his eyes blazing with excitement, “it was grand to see that charge. Yes, and to see how you two stood. My heart was in my mouth.”

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“It’s a simple shot,” said the hunter. “All you have to do is to keep perfectly cool and wait for the lion to come to his stand.”

“Very easy,” muttered Compton, with a grimace, as he looked at the white fangs and the cruel-looking claws, finishing off that mighty weapon the lion’s forearm, capable of battering in a man’s head at one blow.

The chief stood looking from the lion to the hunter. “Ye be brothers,” he said, “ye two; both great men of the hunt; chiefs by your own right wherever you go.”

“When I was young,” said Mr. Hume, “I shot lions for the pride of the victory; but long since I gave that up, and only when a lion seeks me have I gone out to kill him.”

“Ye be brothers,” said the chief. “The great one stands alone, for he is merciful in his strength. The spotted one kills for the love of killing. He will kill, if the chance comes, many times more than he can eat. The warrior will slay of his enemies all his spear can reach. The great one eats and is satisfied. The rest may live till he be hungry. I know, for I have met him face to face in the path. I say to him, ‘”Inkose’ (chief), the path is yours.’ I have stood aside, and the ‘inkose’ has gone on his way in peace.’

“If you carried a rifle, chief, it might be otherwise. Take the claws, Venning; we cannot find room for the skin.”

The claws were cut off, and they returned to the camp for breakfast.

CHAPTER X

A NIGHT IN THE REEDS

It was good to sit around the glowing embers where the buffalo-steak sizzled and threw out an odour that made their mouths water, good to sip the hot coffee and to look out upon the great wilderness rising up to the distant watershed of the lower bank of the Congo. From the cliff above starlings flew out to seek their feeding-haunts where the big game fed; and there was a familiar visitor near them in the black and drab stone-chat, whose scolding chirp they had so often heard in England among the gorse and bramble. The metallic cry of guinea-fowl down by the little river had a farm-yard ring; but the chatter of parrots flying overhead was still new, and so with many other calls, so that they sat munching in silence, with eyes and ears too much engaged for speech, even if the buffalo-steak had not given their mouths other occupation. They saw the vultures speeding from out the uttermost reach of the blue vault to feed upon the carcass of the dead monarch, the whereabouts of the feast having been detected from their distant haunts by a keenness of sight which for swiftness outdoes wireless telegraphy. They swept on like frigates of the sky, heads thrust down, and the vast wings seeming to bear them on without beat or motion.

After breakfast the two boys left the camp for a little hunt on their own account, while Mr. Hume remained to help the chief cure the buffalo hide. They struck out down the river, passed the reeds out of which the lion had sprung, saw the cluster of vultures standing round the body of the lion, and then they saw a troop of antelope grazing in a patch of mimosas. After a careful stalk, Compton fired, and the herd dashed off together, with the exception of one, which took its own course at a slower gait.

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“You hit him, Dick.”

“Yes; and we’ll get him. You go to the left, and I’ll keep him away from the river.”

The two dashed off, each on his own line, and for several minutes the stricken animal led them through fairly open country, with every promise of a speedy run, for it was evidently hard hit. Then, taking advantage of an old watercourse, it turned to the right, and when Compton recovered the track he had lost touch with Venning. He gave a “coo-ee,” and then getting a view of the antelope making down to the water, he turned it with another shot, and sprinted to overtake it. Yard by yard he gained in this final burst, and shifted his rifle to his left hand in order to have his right free to use the hunting-knife. Another effort and he was almost within touch; but the buck also had a reserve of power, and, gathering its quarters, it made a couple of bounds, which carried it into the shelter of a thin sprinkling of reeds. Compton responded, and in a few strides was so near that he flung himself forward in an effort to get astride the animal’s back. The buck slipped forward, letting him down, and, when he rose he saw the white tail whisking round a corner in the reeds. On he dashed down a narrow path, which twisted and turned so sharply that he could only see a few yards ahead; but he was never in fault, as when he could not see the game he could hear it plainly, so he never slackened. The chase went on always with the prospect of success tantalizingly before him, until at last he was at fault in a little clearing where the reeds had been beaten down, and from which there branched several lanes. He stopped to listen, but the buck had stopped too. Then he searched for the blood-trail, and, finding it, set off once more, and this time, after another chase lasting about ten minutes, the buck was overtaken and despatched. Then he threw himself on his back and panted for breath. When he had recovered he sat up and wondered, for his hands and bare arms were bleeding from a number of cuts that began to smart most painfully. The sharp saw-like edges of the reeds bad cut into his flesh, and in the excitement he had not noticed the injuries. Thanks, however, to the regulations enforced by Mr. Hume, he carried in the pouches of his belt a little store of quinine, vaseline, and meat lozenges. He rubbed the vaseline on the cuts, mopped his face, and felt all right. Then he put his hand to his mouth and gave a “coo-ee.” The call was strangled in the reeds. He called again, fired off his gun, and waited, but he could hear nothing but a soft whispering. The reeds reached above his head, and he could see nothing but the matted stems around him and the blue sky overhead. He gave a grunt of impatience, lifted the buck, hoisted the body on his shoulder, brought the fore legs round on one side, the hind legs on the other side, and secured them before him with his handkerchief. Then he stooped for his rifle, and plunged into a path with the object of tramping straight through to the outer edge, when he would get his bearings for the camp.

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This was more easily intended than carried out; for the reeds closed in so as to hamper his movements, and in a short time the path ran into other tracks, which doubled here and there without any decided direction, and led him into little dens. In one of these there was the bleached skull of a buffalo, and he sat down on this to consider.

He got the direction of the sun from the shadows, made a rough guess at the points of the compass, and then started off again, picking out a path that seemed wider than the others, and which led in the right way. After steady tramping, he found himself back at the very spot where he had killed the antelope. It was a nasty shock, but, in no way dismayed, he tried to pick up his old spoor, and after a patient search he hit it off, and went on with a little laugh. He hesitated when he entered another little open space, but finally kept on in the same direction, and finding the way easier, stepped out confidently, although the weight of the buck was beginning to tell, combined with the closeness of the air in these long aisles. At last the reeds thinned, and he stepped out into the open. He slipped the legs of the buck over his head to stretch himself, and then a little cry of disgust broke from his lips, for the place he had come to was not the outskirts of the reeds at all, but merely an open space, larger than any he had met before, with a little grass mound in the centre. Mounting this, he could see a run of trees in the distance, and in between a sea of green leaves, giving back myriad points of light under the rays of the sun. Queer soft noises came out of the white rows of reeds all around, and from the vast expanse a continual murmur that was something like the moaning of the wind in the pines.

He fired his gun off and listened. A faint far-off answer he thought he heard; but when he fired again he could detect no sound but the whispering murmur. He cut a couple of stout reeds, fitted one into the other, tied his handkerchief to the top, and planted the pole on the mound. Then he placed the buck at the foot of the pole, covered it with an armful of reeds, took a long look around, and started off once more. He was resolved to keep straight on, path or no path, but after a tussle with the serried ranks of reeds, with their razor-like leaves, he soon gave up that idea as hopeless, and took again to the paths—going very slowly, and taking his direction at intervals. But, try as he would, there were the kinks and twists in the paths which turned him out of his course. The endless game-tracks formed a worse snare than any he had been in of human contrivance; and at places, moreover, the ground was boggy, catching hold of his feet, and exhausting him by the heavy going. Several times animals broke cover and crashed away unseen. At one spot in the ooze he saw the form of a huge crocodile, and at another place the menacing head of a python was reared above the tops of the reeds, with his forked tongue

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flickering about the blunt nose. These sights, and the sudden snorts from unseen beasts, bred in him a growing feeling of uneasiness, which in turn weakened his powers of reasoning, so that he blundered hither and thither in a sort of reckless fury, until he went flat, face downwards, in black mud, that gripped him at every point. If he had struggled he would have been hopelessly bogged, but luckily he recovered his wits, and set himself slowly to extricate himself. His left foot was in up to the knee, and his left arm was sinking each moment, when he steadied himself and drew his knife. Beaching out, he cut a swathe of reeds, drew them towards him with the knife-blade, packed them under his chin and breast, then rolled over on to this firmer support, after a strong and steady pull. Repeating the performance, he managed to get one knee on to a bedding of reeds, then with one violent effort freed himself and reached hard ground.

This incident shook him up so, that coming, after another effort, to the open where he had left the buck, he gave up the struggle, seeing that he must think of some other plan if he wished to get alive out of this prison.

First he rested until his strength came back, then he cleaned his mud-covered rifle, and scraped the black ooze off his clothes with the knife. Then he heard a murmur in the reeds—a snap, then a rustle; a long pause, then a rustling again. He stood up with rifle ready, and he saw a reed shake about ten yards away, then heard it snap. He shouted, and the rustling ceased, to break out after an interval on the other side. Again it was resumed in the front, and in a little while it seemed to him that the reeds were alive with the stealthy rustlings of beasts and reptiles, all moving towards him. A reed bent again a little way off, and he fired in the direction. There was a crash and a growl, followed by a peculiar moaning from the opposite side. From somewhere deep in the sea of green there came the hoarse bellow of a bull crocodile. Nothing now could have induced him to enter that bewildering labyrinth again, and he looked about with a shudder, for the day was sinking to its close, and the night would soon be upon him. There was only one thing that could protect him in the night, and that was fire. With a feverish energy, regardless now of the rustlings about his little island, he began to cut the tallest of the reeds that were hard and sapless, and these he banked in six heaps round the base of the mound; and when the task was done he reared a bigger pile in the centre as a reserve.

Then the black of the night swept over the reeds quick almost as the shadow of a cloud, and with the dark came a sad rustling, as of a thousand whisperings. It was still and not still. Up in the sky was the quietness of a still night, the stars watching and brooding over the silence; but down below, in and out of the miles and miles of avenues, stretching every way through the millions of smooth gleaming stems, came a whispering as if creatures were moving tip-toe, moving up nearer and nearer, treading carefully, watching and listening. An owl brushed like a shadow overhead, and his loud “whoo-whoo” floated away in sadness and sorrow.

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He sat with his back to the reserve heap of reeds, and waited with his rifle over his knees for the signal to fire his first pile. There was as yet no clear meaning in those mysterious whisperings. What he listened for was a sound that he could interpret, and it came very soon in the grunt of a leopard, harsh and grating. The reeds rustled just before him, and then there came a sound, regular and strange—a thump and a swish, then a thump and a swish. Creeping forward, he put a match to the heap, then went back; and as the red flame crackled through the hard shining stems, he saw a dark form crouching beyond, the green eyes blinking in the reflection, and the tufted tail nervously jerking from side to side. It was that made the strange noise. As the flame grew, the leopard sprang up and turned away, stopping for a long stare over its shoulder.

Light fragments from the burning pile floated high up like fire-flies, and far over the white sea of leaves shone the reflection. Others saw it from the far outer edge, and through the night came the report of a gun, and then faintly the echo of a “coo-ee.” He shouted back hoarsely, and though he knew his friends could not possibly force the way to him through that barrier, impenetrable except by the devious game-tracks, he was greatly cheered.

His mind was taken off his loneliness for a time, and he suddenly found that he was fearfully hungry. So with his handy knife he stripped the skin from a hind leg of the antelope, cut off a fine steak, and scraping out a layer of glowing embers, placed the meat on. With the cooking and eating of his supper the time went cheerfully; but meantime the flame had died out, and something alighted with a thud just behind. He whipped round, but could see nothing, and moved to the fire to kick some of the live coals to the next heap. In that instant the antelope was seized and carried off in a couple of bounds just inside the reeds, for he heard plainly the tearing of the flesh, the snarls, the growling, and the crunching of bones. He crouched near the fire, for it was not pleasant to think of that stealthy approach and that bold foray, and wondered whether the buck would satisfy the pair of fierce creatures. The fire flared up, crackled fiercely, sending up, as before, its fiery messengers into the air, then gradually died down to a glowing heap; and the leopards were still at their meal, purring now, a monstrous cat-like purr. There was comfort in it, however, for it seemed to him to tell of hunger satisfied, and by-and-by they indeed went off, grunting to each other. Then there came a long spell of silence. He gathered the unburnt fragments that fringed the two heaps of embers and piled them on one of the heaps. They blazed up, and by the light he rearranged the other stacks of fuel. He realized that he could easily be struck down by a leopard if he ventured away from a fire, and he hit on the idea of building his fires in the shape

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of a cross, one at the top, one at the bottom, one on each side, and space inside for him to lie down. Inside he made a bed of reeds, from which he could draw supplies as they were needed. He fired the top pile, and then, after a long wait, the bottom one, and when that had burnt down to embers, and the night was far advanced, he stretched himself out, protected by four smouldering heaps of ash, that glowed like four red eyes in the dark.

He looked up at the stars for a long time as he rested in his lonely camping-ground, and then dropped into an uneasy sleep. Something awoke him very soon, and his eyes opened on the dark vault above. A booming noise reached him. It was the grunt of a lion this time, but far off—a deep monotonous sound made by the lion on the trot, with his mouth near the ground. It was very far off, and with a sigh of relief he closed his eyes. And then he heard the sound again, and knew it was not the lion that had awakened him. He rose on his elbow and peered about, but the darkness came right up to the ash-heaps, looking white now instead of red. He placed a handful of dry reeds on the nearest heap and blew. There was a glow, a flicker, and then a flare. In the reflection he saw dimly a patch of white, then another patch next it. This roused him, so that he set all the four fires going again, and, with his rifle ready, he stood up to see what manner of visitors these were with the white marks.

He had heard slight noises as he fed the fires, and now the reeds rustled, but he could see no living form. Sitting down, he laid a few handfuls of reeds ready to each fire, then waited with shaken nerves, for there was something mysterious about this visitation. The fires flared up and sunk back to red embers, and yet there was no sign. The embers took on a covering of grey ash, then the rustling began anew, and the white objects reappeared. He turned his head, and saw that they stretched right round! What the dickens were they? He strained his sight, and, at first indistinctly and then clearly, he saw the gleam of eyes above each white patch. Softly he laid a few reeds on the embers, and as they crackled he saw one of the white objects move. As the flame mounted up, he made out an animal with round ears and brindled hide, staring nervously at the fire. It was a wild-dog! Only a dog, and with a “shoo!” he thought to scare the creature off. The yellow eyes went from the fire to his face, a red tongue slithered out over the black nose, and the dog sat down again. All round were the white breasts of the pack, as they sat in silence and stared. He searched about for a missile, found an empty cartridge, and threw it. A dog leapt up and sniffed. The circle seemed to close in.

He shouted at them, and they gave back a yelp, but never stirred.

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“All right,” he said grimly, then aimed at a white breast and fired. The pack scattered into the reeds; there was a beating and kicking noise, followed by a wild rush, a savage snarling and snapping of teeth. Dog was eating dog; and, with a feeling of disgust and contempt, he prepared himself to rest. A little later the white circle was complete again, and the silent inspection was continued. This got on his nerves, and, springing over the fire with his rifle clubbed, he gave two sweeping blows. The dogs slipped away from his front, only to reappear with threatening growls on his flank. He leapt back to safety and fired; but the light was bad, and he missed. Piling on a few more reeds, he emptied his magazine rapidly, facing all parts of the circle, and making some hits, as he judged from the howling that went up.

“There!” he shouted savagely, “will that satisfy you?” The pack fell upon the wounded, and was back again into position, coming closer and closer as the fires died down.

Then he remembered the stories he had heard of the persistence of the wild-dogs—how they would drive off even a lion from his prey— and he fell to counting his cartridges. There were only five left. He counted the dogs. There were more than fifteen, as far as he could reckon; and if he reduced them to ten, he could not hope to withstand the final rush of ten big-jawed and active animals. Even if he could keep them off in that open space, he could not stay there another day; and if they tackled him in the reeds, he would have no chance. He began to rack his brain for a scheme; but while he thought, the circle closed in until quite plainly he could distinguish the staring eyes all centered upon him. He piled on more fuel, and as the flames sprang up they fell back. As the flames died down, they advanced as by a given signal. He kept on adding to the fires until his fingers, groping for fresh reeds, found none, and the sweat broke out on his forehead. In one hour at least there would not be light enough from the smouldering heaps for him to see a mark, and then—something had to be done!

No doubt the watchful eyes saw the sign of fear in his face. At once the circle closed in, and this time he could see that several of the dogs were not sitting, but standing, as if ready for the final spring. He fingered a cartridge, then suddenly flung it into the topmost heap of glowing ash. The eyes of the pack followed the missile, and for a second each dog looked at the heap. As they looked there was a report, and a mass of live embers was scattered high and wide, over them, over the opening, into the fringe of reeds. With wild yelps of fear and pain the pack broke, and Compton groveled on the ground with his hands before his face, for he had flattened himself just in time to escape being blinded by the burning dust, some of which, however, did get into his eyes. A little fly in the eye, as many a cyclist has found to his cost, is enough to engage

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the entire attention for five minutes, but a handful of ash gives more anguish to the square inch; and when Compton succeeded in opening his inflamed vision upon the scene, a transformation had happened in the writhing interval. The air was full of a sharp crackling and little explosions, and the first thing he saw was a slender tongue of flame running up a tall reed, and quivering for a moment high above. Other flames ran in and out among the withered white sheaths that had dropped off, and mounted up the smooth stems, and then there came a wandering puff of wind, which rustled over the bending tops and fanned the little serpent-tongues of fire into one devouring flame.

He had no wish to be roasted. Once more using his knife to cut down a sheaf of stems, he made a flail of these, and beat out the fire to windward. And as he worked on the one side of the little clearing the fire grew on the other side, and then raced along, leaving behind in the blackened area many separate fires, where masses of reeds had been beaten down. And the smoke went up in a growing cloud that blotted out the sky—went up and fortunately rolled away towards the great river under the sufficient strength of the wind; otherwise he would have been suffocated. The cracking of the reeds was like rifle-fire breaking through the roar of the flames, and now and again the crashing of animals on the stampede could be heard. He looked out upon his work with awe, stood and gazed spellbound, wondering if such a sea of flame could ever be stopped, fearing that it would spread out into the bush beyond, and run up into the forest and devour every tree until stopped by the mighty river itself. As he looked, he heard some creature before him writhing in the blackened track of the fire, and presently he made it out—a great crocodile convulsively lashing its powerful tail. Going near with cautious steps, he put it out of its misery with a ball under the forearm; then he went on over the scorched ground very slowly, for the burnt reeds were like sharp stakes to the feet. And as he followed, the fire died out before him, and began to eat its way right and left, working back through the reeds against the wind. Then he heard the report of a gun, and as he stepped from the burnt area on to the short grass that had offered no fuel for the fire, something came springing around him, and before he could pull trigger it was off with a yelp into the darkness under the canopy of smoke. “Coo-ee—coo-ee! Compton—ahoy! Compton!”

Compton croaked and hobbled on.

Then the creature yelped about him again, and his friends were shaking him by the hands.

“You know,” he said with a croak, “I didn’t mean to set fire to the place.”

“Thank God, my boy, you did,” said Mr. Hume, fervently. Then he lifted the boy up in his arms.

“I can walk,” said Compton; and, to prove it, his head rolled helplessly on his shoulder.

Mr. Hume strode off to the river, and washed the layer of soot off the blackened face, laved the red eyes, and moistened the cracked lips and parched tongue. Then he gave the boy a soothing drink, rubbed oil on his feet and face; rolled him in a blanket, and carried him up to the camping-ground under the precipice.

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CHAPTER XI

A TRAP

In the morning they packed up and made their way upstream to the place where they had left the sections of the Okapi, for such a banner of smoke as was still mounting from the smouldering reeds was bound to attract inspection from the natives. They found the hiding-place undisturbed, and, after putting the boat together, went on down to the Congo. Slipping out upon the great river in the dusk, they went on slowly for several miles, tied up till the early dawn, and spread the little sail to the morning breeze. The boat had a singular appearance, for strips of biltong were suspended from the awning, not having been quite cured, and the buffalo-hide was hanging over the side, in soak, to soften it for the final treatment that would take the hair off and leave it soft and pliant.

Compton was allowed a day off, and slept the sleep of the tired; but the others were all occupied—one keeping watch, another steering, and the third cleaning up. The jackal, like Compton, was unemployed, and curled itself up by his feet, opening one eye occasionally to see that all was shipshape. Through the morning they went, and into the afternoon; then Venning, who was outlook-man, gave tongue—

“A sail—a sail!”

“Where—away?” yelled Compton, waking up.

“On the port bow, hull down, paddle showing.”

“Then it’s a canoe, you duffer, not a sail.”

“A canoe it is, sir; single-handed, and bearing right down upon us. Shall we speak her?”

“Luff—luff! and we’ll pour a broadside into her lee scuppers,” said Compton, ferociously.

“She’s signalling,” returned Venning; “distress signal, I think.”

Mr. Hume went forward and took a look through his glasses. A solitary canoe was certainly in view, with a single boatman aboard, who was frantically waving his paddle. Then he swept the shore for signs of life.

“There are some people squatting just by that tall palm,” he muttered. “Have a look, Venning.”

Venning made out several persons at the spot. “They can’t do us any harm,” he said, and brought the glasses to bear on the canoe. “The chap appears to be in a stew about something, from the way he glances over his shoulder.”

They sailed down towards the lonely paddler, who was soon alongside —thanks to an extraordinary agility. He appeared to be greatly pleased at the meeting, grinned continuously, and at once prepared to get aboard the Okapi.

Mr. Hume, however, kept him off with a “not so fast” and a hand against his breast.

“Talk to him, Muata. Ask him what he wants, who he is, and all the rest.”

Muata stepped into the canoe, caught up the paddle, and sat down to palaver. A line was made fast to the canoe, and it drifted astern of the Okapi, which kept on her course.

The canoe-man’s grin faded away, and his eyes rolled as Muata ordered him to sit. He seemed to be a river tribesman, with only a loin-cloth on.

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“Don’t eat him, chief,” sang out Compton; for Muata had a very ugly look on his face as he eyed the stranger.

The man himself seemed to think there was cause for this plea on his behalf, for, to the amazement of all, he responded in broken English—

“Oh yeh-es, he eatee me. Poah black man come to white master for heiup, not to wild black man.”

“By Jove, he talks English! Let the poor beggar come aboard, sir.”

“He’s all right where he is,” said Mr. Hume.

The man did not think so, and began hauling on the rope, when Mr. Hume drew his knife and made as if he would cut the canoe loose. He ceased from pulling, and, after a despairing look, crouched down.

“We will talk,” said Muata, courteously, poising the paddle in his hand. “How is your venerable mother?”

“She has a wonderful dish of fish and manioc for her son’s guests. You will do her the favour to eat of that dish,” said the stranger, humbly.

“And is your venerable mother’s kraal up the river?”

“A sun’s march distant, by a garden of bananas. Also there is a fat goat.”

“And what does her excellent son so far from the village?”

“There were tales of bad men,” said the stranger, plucking up spirit, “and these tales drew me away, for the price offered for their capture was great, and my fetish told me where they were hid.”

“And the little son was greedy? He kept this word of his fetish from the honourable ears of his mother, so that he would have the price to himself, eh?”

“Truly a great chief,” murmured the boatman, with reverence. “It was as you say.”

“And it fell out that, when you came to the place where the boatmen were hid, they were on their guard, so that you fled?”

“O great chief, it was even so. I fled in a canoe.”

“And seeing this our canoe of shining metal, you found courage to leave the reeds wherein you hid to come to us for help?”

“Oh, wonderful!” said the canoe-man, turning up his eyes. “When these eyes saw your shining canoe, they were gladdened, for I said, ‘Here come helpers.’”

“And you will take us to where these men are hidden, so that we may share the price that is on their heads?”

The man grinned. “You can have all the prize—all,” he said, “and after we will go to my venerable mother, and eat fish and goats’ meat.”

Muata smiled gently. “All the price?”

“Did I say all?” said the man, with a swift look at the chief. “I did wrong to my people—a portion to them and a portion to me.”

“That is fair,” said Muata.

“Oh, good words. See, I beat my mouth for the ill word I spoke;” and he struck his mouth. “But see, O chief, we move on, and the bad men will see us going, and make a plan to escape.”

“Let it be so. If they see us they will see we are passing on, and be comforted. And who will pay the price that is set on their heads?”

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“They have the price with them,” said the man, with a cunning look, “in ivory, in palm-oil, and in many things they have robbed from the villages.”

“And what avails them, all those things—which are heavy things—if they have no canoes to carry them in to the traders?”

“Did I say they had no canoes? A great fleet they have waiting in hiding, till all the band come together from the hiding, waiting on the other shore. It was because I saw the fleet of canoes on the river, crossing to the far side, that I hoped to surprise the few who were left.”

“And when may those canoes return?”

“The men collect their goods for the going; the time must be short before they leave.”

“And where do the others lie hid?”

“By the great palm-tree, over there.”

“Where there were men sitting watching? It was because they had no canoes that they did not follow you? Shall I tell you what was in my thought? This, that you and they were friends, and that you were the bait to draw us into the trap.”

The man grinned nervously, and glanced at the water. “Would a little man trust himself in the power of such great chiefs, if his heart was crooked. I came for help, but if it pleases you to continue to the village, and to leave these bad men, it will please me also.”

“And if we attack these men,” asked Muata, after a pause, “what plan have you made for us?”

The boatman was relieved. His eyes brightened again. “See, we would land beyond that point ahead, and in the dark steal upon the robbers.”

“We are too few,” said Muata, after turning the matter over. “Now, if you could bring some of your friends to help, it might be done.”

“I am alone, and you are great warriors. Your name has gone abroad.”

“How? You know us, then?”

“All white men are the same in battle,” said the other, quickly.

“Think over my words—that some men are wanted. There must be men to guard our canoe, others to watch for the return of the robbers from across the river. You must get men, otherwise we do nothing.”

The canoe-man pondered, then he clapped his hand over his mouth.

“Yoh! The fear of death confused me, and drove from my thought that my brother is near with warriors protecting the gardens.”

“Good, then. Go to your brother. Bring him and his warriors to the point you spoke of, light a fire there to guide us, and in the dark we will join you.”

Muata hauled on the rope, boarded the Okapi, and set the canoe adrift.

“Do as I have said—gather the men quickly, light a fire, guide us to the hiding-place, and in the morning we will share the riches. Hurry!”

“And is that the word of the white chief also?” asked the man, suspiciously.

“Did not the white chief leave this palaver to me? Go! for there is no time to waste.”

The paddle flashed as the man sped for the shore near the point he had referred to, which was several miles above the spot where he had been taken in tow.

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“Well?” said Mr. Hume, glancing at the chief, “He goes to collect men to meet us this night.”

“So.”

“Wow! There are bad men—robbers—to be attacked, and much ivory to be taken.”

“We want no ivory, nor quarrels either.”

“But I gave my word we would help him. It is a good thing to fall upon robbers.”

“If there is to be a shindy, I’m in for it,” said Compton.

“Who are the robbers?”

Muata laughed, and snapped his fingers. “You saw the man in the canoe?”

Mr. Hume nodded, and looked after the paddler with knit brows.

“And you?”—to Compton.

“I have eyes, chief.”

“And you?”

“I saw him first,” said Venning.

“And he was a stranger?”

“Of course.”

Muata laughed. “White men know many things, but not all. Haw! Who are those to be eaten up?” He touched his naked breast, and then pointed at each in turn.

“They would attack us,” roared Mr. Hume.

The chief nodded. “Now you know who that stranger was who came with his long story.”

“One black chap is like another,” muttered Compton.

“Who was he?” asked Mr. Hume.

“The servant of the white chiefs who bound me.”

“The Zanzibari boy!” exclaimed Venning. “My Jenkins!”

“Why didn’t you knock the beggar overboard?” said Compton. “What cheek!”

“Does he know you recognized him?” said Mr. Hume.

“The dog was afraid; but at the last he went away, thinking he led Muata by a rope, as he would lead a goat. Had Hassan, the wolf, tried to blind Muata so, then——” The chief touched the hilt of his knife.

“Let us hear the story.”

Muata repeated the whole conversation with much byplay, even imitating the tones, the nervousness, and the sly glances of the Zanzibar spy, for nothing had escaped his keen glance.

“And those men whose presence he suddenly remembered, and who are to meet us to-night, will be Hassan’s slave-robbers, too?”

“Ow aye,” said Muata, with a ferocious gleam in his eyes.

“So, then, they have been waiting for us?”

“On both sides of the river they have been waiting;” and the chief looked out over the brown flood towards the north bank.

“It was well you talked to the man, for he was skillfully disguised, even to me, who am no child in these matters.”

“Muata is old in cunning,” said the chief, quietly. “If he were not wise, he would not be dreaded by the Wolf.”

“I never recognized the beggar,” said Venning, “and even now I cannot recall a feature that was like the Zanzibar! How did you discover him, Muata?”

“Wow! He wore nothing in his ears, there were no marks on his body, he had rubbed the dark juice of the chewing-leaf over his skin, and there was a lie on his tongue, and in his eyes. Ho!—white men, this is my word, that we fall on them to-night.” The chief picked up a Ghoorka knife. “This is my weapon.”

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“We are not man-hunters,” said Mr. Hume. “We will, however, hang about till evening, so that they may think we have no suspicions, and then in the dusk we will push on.”

“Wow!” said the chief. “My plan would be to land above, to creep down and take them unprepared.”

“And the canoes from the other side would steal across and cut you off. No; we will leave them.”

“The canoes from the other side,” said Compton, starting up. “I rather think I saw one shoot into that island—the big one with the palm-tree in the centre.”

“All right,” said the hunter, quickly. “Don’t look that way; take in the sail. If they are there, we don’t want to draw their attack now. Get out the sculls, Venning, and keep her towards the sandbank ahead. Just keep her moving.”

The sail rattled down, and the Okapi lazily moved nearer the shore, leaving about a mile of water between her and the island, towards which Mr. Hume, lying flat, was directing his glasses. The others were looking ostentatiously shorewards.

“You are right, Compton; canoes are gathering under that island.”

“Congela,” said the chief, “there is a man watching us from the land.”

“Signal to him,” said Mr. Hume. “You see, what we want is to keep those canoes where they are till night; and they probably won’t move till they have a signal from their friends ashore.”

Muata called out, and a man who was skulking behind a bush stepped out.

“Why do you watch, my friend?”

“O chiefs,” shouted the man, “all goes well. The men will be here at nightfall, and the fire will be lit to guide you.”

“It is good,” said Muata. “We will wait.”

The man stood for some time watching, then went into the bush, and the crew of the Okapi, to divert suspicion, got out fishing-lines and fished; but all the time Mr. Hume, lying under the awning, watched the distant island, which shielded an unknown number of their watchful foes.

“Woo!” said Muata, “the great one was right; and Muata is still a boy. Haw! Truly, if we had landed, our journey would have ended here.”

“Suppose the canoes dash out before dark?” said Venning.

“Then we will make a run for it.”

It was a long, long afternoon. Anxiously they waited for the sun to set, and the boys marked the slow creeping of the shadows over the river thrown by the ridge on the south bank, and anxiously Mr. Hume watched the island and the broad sweep ahead—-for the danger was ahead. If the enemy had taken precautions to send a portion of the fleet up-river, they stood a chance of being intercepted.

At last the hour had come. The sky was turning grey, the shadows reached right across, and the evening wind was rustling the leaves. The Okapi began to move. She crept away from the shore, and then turned again with her bows to the bank. So she waited a few minutes while the darkness deepened, then, as a flame broke out on land, the sail was run up; she came round once more with her bows up-stream, and slipped along. Looking back, they saw the fire spring up at the appointed landing-place, and, listening intently, they caught the crackling of the burning wood.

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“They move,” said Muata.

The others bent their heads, and presently they too heard the sound that had reached the keener sense of the warrior—a rhythmical beat and hum made by many paddles as the man-hunters, who had hidden behind the island, were dashing forward in hot haste to catch the Okapi, which they expected would be landing its crew. But the Okapi slipped on, and had a very good lead when Hassan and his slave-hunters set up a terrific outcry on finding that once more they had been tricked. They made right across in a long beat for the north bank, then working the screw in turns, with the great lamp at the bows to scare off the hippos, they made good progress till sunrise. For five days thereafter they kept steadily on their way, meeting with no adventure, and keeping out in mid-river to avoid the attention of the villagers. When, at intervals, they did land to buy goats’-milk, bananas, and manioc, they took precautions to approach clearings where there were only a few huts.

CHAPTER XII

THE MAN-EATERS

On the fifth day they turned from the mighty Congo into a tributary that threaded the dark mysterious forest, whose depths had never been trodden yet by white men, whose dark retreats and sombre avenues, into which no ray of sunlight struggled, were the haunt of the gorilla, of pigmies, and of cannibals, dreaded most of all. After the broad Congo this was a mere thread, no more than a few hundred yards across, a gloomy opening in the gloomy woods that marched right down to its shores; that sent out huge branches in a leafy roof over the water near the banks, making dark retreats, in which lurked watchful crocodiles. The stir and bustle of the great river found no echo in this silent byway. Nowhere was there any trace of man. The forest seemed impenetrable, beyond all his puny efforts to make a footing.

There seemed no room enough for a man to set his foot, so close was the foliage from the ground to the topmost bough of the tallest tree. Mile after mile they went on, without a sign of life, then from the shore an arrow whistled, pierced the awning, and rang on the metal deck.

Compton put the wheel over, and the Okapi slid away from that dangerous screen. Then they slowed up and looked, but there was no sound and no sign from the hidden enemy. Doubtless, fierce eyes were glaring out upon them, but they could see nothing, and with a long uneasy look all around they kept on for a mile or so, when they came upon a clearing that spoke of man. It spoke of man, but there was nothing living in the few acres that had been hewn out of the woods. A ring of black embers showed where huts had stood, a dug-out canoe lay half in, half out the waters, a broken clay pot, a rusty hoe, and a litter of bones were gathered forlornly in one spot, and a strip of cloth

fluttered from a scarred post. They ran the Okapi in, and Muata, with his jackal, leapt ashore to decipher what this writing in the forest meant. The jackal showed none of the delight that a dog would have shown under similar conditions, but at once vanished into the wood, with his nose to the ground, bent on the serious business of life—that of nosing out the enemy, while his master, with his favourite Ghoorka knife in his hand, rapidly inspected the ground.

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Instinctively they all felt the need for caution. The boys had the edge taken off their rash ardour long before, but that sinister warning from the forest in the shape of the arrow had driven home again the lesson that it was necessary to be always on guard.

The forest, in its silence and in its gloom, was menacing. They glanced up the river. It stretched away like an avenue cut out of a solid mass of vegetation, and all the length to the spot where the banks seemed to run together, as if the river had ended, there was no sign of living thing.

Suddenly an animal darted across the clearing and crouched behind Muata. It was the jackal, the hair on its neck erect, and its body quivering with fear, or excitement. Then a branch snapped with a startling report, there was a violent shaking of leaves, a short bark-like roar, and then a noise of shaking gradually decreasing.

Muata had fallen back to the river's brink at the roar, but now he turned his attention once more to the clearing.

"What was that?"

"Man-monkey," he said quietly.

"Gorilla! By Jove!" and the boys stared into the forest, and then at each other. "Perhaps he's gone to call up the others. Will he come back, Muata?"

"Not he," said Mr. Hume. "He's just about as frightened as we were. What are the signs, Muata?"

"Wow! Bad—bad signs. These be the bones of men;" and he turned over the ashes with his foot. "They were few who made a home here, and the man-eaters marked them for their own. In the night they fell on the village, killed the men, and rested here while they feasted— rested till the last was eaten; then with the women and the children they went back. That much the signs tell me."

"Does he mean," asked Venning, in horror, "that they were cannibals?"

Mr. Hume nodded his head.

"The brutes," muttered Compton, turning white.

"I don't wonder," said Venning, in a whisper. "This place is enough to breed any horror."

"It will be safe to land," said the chief, quietly.

"But what of the arrow?"

“That was not shot by a man-eater. It was the arrow of a river-man; maybe the same man loosened it as tied the fetish cloth to the pole, for one has been here since the man-eaters left.”

He put two fingers in his mouth and produced a shrill whistle.

There was no answer; and after a time they all landed to stretch their legs, but the associations of the place, with those grim remains of the cannibal feast, were too terrible, and they did not stay long. As the Okapi resumed her voyage up the sombre defile, a faint whistle sounded on the opposite bank. Muata replied in the same fashion, and called out.

Back from the shadows came a quavering answer. Muata called again, and out from under the roof of leaves, formed by the overhanging branches, shot a tiny craft, with two men in her. The Okapi slowed down, and the little canoe, with many a halt, timidly drew near till the occupants could be clearly seen. One—he who wielded the paddle —was a young man, black as soot, with a shaggy head of frizzled wool, and wild, suspicious eyes. The other, who appeared to be urging the other to more speed, was an old man, whose head was covered by an Arab fez.

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“Peace be with you,” said Mr. Hume, in Arab.

“And with you, also,” replied the old man, in a thin voice. “Haste, my son!”—this to the paddler. “They are white men, such as I have spoken of.”

The canoe gradually drew near, and the old man held out a shaking hand to be helped on board the larger boat; but the wild man remained in his dug-out. The old man told his story slowly in a strange dialect understood by Muata, and the purport of it was that the cannibals had surprised the village at dawn, killed all the men with the exception of themselves, and had gone off with the women.

It was a familiar story to Muata, and he related it coldly; but his indifference did not last very long. It was plain that the old man was not of the same race as his companion, and when the two had eaten, Compton asked the old chap how he came to wear a fez and speak Arabic.

“It is the speech of my fathers, effendi,” he said, turning his smoke-bleared eyes on the young face.

“And how came it that an Arab was dwelling with the river-people?” asked Muata. “Sooner would I have looked for an old wolf living at peace with the goats.”

The Arab withdrew his gaze from Compton and fastened it on the otter outlined on the chiefs breast. With a skinny finger he pointed at the chief.

“Allah is great,” he said. “This is his work; and you will follow on the track of the man-eaters.”

“Save your speech, old man, for we work not for river-people; and you forget the arrow that was loosed at us.”

“This one loosed it in rage at the loss of his wife, mistaking you for wolves; but, even so, it was as Allah willed, for the arrow warned you of our presence.”

“You speak in circles, my friend,” said Compton. “Show us the finger of Allah in this matter?”

“This,” said the old man, solemnly, placing his finger on Muata’s breast, “is he they call the River Wolf, the son of the wise woman, the warrior who will follow the track of the man-eaters.”

“What know ye of the wise woman?” demanded the chief.

“We talked together, she and I, at the village that is burnt, of the days when Muata was a babe in her arms, when these limbs of mine were strong to do service for a white man, whose voice was the voice of the young effendi.”

“And where now is the wise woman, old man?”

“It is four days since the cannibals left. Tell me where they would be, O warrior, for the forest is your hunting-ground.”

Muata lowered his eyelids, and took the news of his mother’s capture by the cannibals in silence; but Compton was burning with excitement at the reference to the white man.

“What white man was that you spoke of? I look for such a one.”

“Men search not for the dead, effendi.”

“But for signs of the dead—for the place of his burial, for the book he wrote, for the things he left.”

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The old man nodded. “Allah is great. Is it not as I said; you have been guided hither?”

“But tell me of the white man,” said Compton, impatiently.

“We two, the wise woman and I, talked of the white man; and she knows all. See, I am old, and the past is like a mist, through which old memories pass quickly like shadows; but the wise woman can blow the mist away. Find her, and you will learn all of my white man.”

More than this the old man could not say, and presently he fell asleep; but from the wild man Muata learnt that his mother had indeed been at the village.

“And you will want to leave us, chief?” said Mr. Hume, when the story had been straightened out.

“Ow aye. Shall a son leave the mother who bore him through the dangers of the wood? I will follow;” and his eyes lingered on the Ghoorka knife.

“The knife you can take, chief, and food; but we will miss you. Put him up some biltong, Venning.”

Venning hesitated.

“Put up some for me too,” said Compton, peremptorily.

Mr. Hume raised his brows.

“I mean it so, sir. You will remember that my great hope was to find some trace of my father; and who can this white man be if he is not my father? Will you take me with you, chief?”

The chief shook his head. “This river-man and I go together on the trail.”

Compton stormed and begged; but the chief remained silent, with his eyes on Mr. Hume.

“What’s all the fuss about?” put in Venning. “We have come here to explore and hunt, not to crawl for ever up a river. What is to prevent us all from following on the track of the cannibals?”

“If Compton had made that suggestion,” said Mr. Hume, “we could at least have considered it calmly in the interest of the whole party; but he has thought only of himself.”

“I am awfully sorry,” said Compton, firing up. “I did not think.”

“No,” said the hunter, drily; “otherwise you would have known that I would not permit you to leave us.”

“Of course I could not break up the party,” said Compton, eagerly; “but you will think over Venning’s proposal, won’t you, sir? We have come to explore the forest. Let us begin now when we have such a good reason.”

“Do you hear, Muata; the young men say that we should all follow on the trail?”

“It is my quarrel,” said the chief, not jumping at the offer.

Mr. Hume smoked in silence.

“Yet the man-eaters are strong,” Muata said presently.

“They have also guns given by the man-stealers. The great one and the young lions would be worth many men; but the forest is dark, the way is hard, and not fit for white men.”

Mr. Hume grunted.

“When Muata goes on the war-path, he fights his own way, on his own plan. On the war-path Muata is chief.”

The hunter turned his calm eyes on the wild river-man.

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“Chief of one.”

“Of one or none, it does not matter, great one; since to be chief is to do what is best.”

“Your plans are your own. Consider. If we go, we will do nothing to spoil those plans; but, in the end, if you want help to rescue the wise woman—your mother—then we will be ready to help you.”

“It is a good word; but consider also, great one, that those who walk the forest must know the forest, and those who know the forest must lead, lest there be divided counsels, and wanderings that lead nowhere but to death.”

“Am I, then, a boy at this work?”

“Wow! That was not my thought; but the lion hunts in the open land, the tiger in the bush. If the lion roared in the forest, see, the evil ones would hear and prepare a trap for him.”

“Well, chief, hear this. In all things I will take your advice. If it is good, we will follow it; if bad, you can go your own way.”

“It is well,” said the chief, slowly. “I and this man will follow on the trail to find whither it leads. Tomorrow we will return, and if the great one is then of the same mind, we will start.”

“Good. In the mean time we will find a place where we can leave the boat, with such things as we do not need.”

Muata glanced at the old Arab, then said softly, “When you have found your hiding-place, see that ye three only know of it.” He nodded his head. “I would trust no man with the secret. I should not like to know of it myself, for the things you have would make one of us rich.”

With a little packet of food, his Ghoorka knife, and his jackal, Muata entered the dug-out, and landed again on the clearing. They waved their hands to him, and then turned their attention to the old Arab, who was sipping a cup of coffee with every sign of satisfaction.

“Old man, we go soon on the trail of the cannibals into the forest where you could not follow. What shall we do with you?”

“As Allah wills,” was the resigned reply.

“Think. Is there any village where you would be safe until we return?”

“Few who enter the forest ever return. A day’s journey in a canoe there is a path in the wood that leads to a village. If I could reach the path, it would do; but——”

The Okapi straightway continued up the dark river, through the silence of the sombre woods, and the old man drank his coffee, and then gave himself up to the pleasure of tobacco, with his dull eyes fixed on Compton.

In the afternoon he pointed to a palm-tree. “There is a path,” he said.

“Is there anything you would like?” asked Compton.

“Coffee is good, and tobacco is a great comforter.”

They made him up a packet of these luxuries, and added a blanket.

“Allah is good,” he muttered.

“After we have recovered the wise woman, maybe we will search you out, for we look, then, for the Garden of Rest.”

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“Ay, so he called it. The Garden of Rest, and the gates thereof. Ay, I would see the place again.”

“You know it?” Compton said eagerly. “Then you must have known my father.”

“A white man I knew, effendi. The good white man, many years ago; and my old eyes told me that you were of his blood. If the forest gives you up, search for this path and follow it; and if I be alive, I would go to that place in the clouds. Allah be with you.”

“And with you.”

The Okapi was driven into the bank, and the old man stepped ashore.

“See that you keep your counsel, my friend,” Said Mr. Hume. “We want no prowlers about our camp.”

They turned the Okapi down-stream again, and considered where they should hide her, for that was a thing to be done with the utmost care. It was, however, very difficult to decide; for in the screen of the wood, all along the banks, every spot seemed the same, and there were many reasons against tying up in some dark retreat and leaving the precious craft to its fate, at the mercy of the rising or falling water, and at the risk of discovery by prowling fishermen.

“We must get her aground,” said Mr. Hume; and they poked into the banks here and there in search of a likely landing, ultimately finding a spot where a huge tree had fallen bodily into the river, dragging away with its roots a mass of earth. They marked the place, and returned to the clearing to camp for the night. By the light of a fire and of the lamps they went through the stores, and made up five packages, one for each man to carry. Sheets of oiled canvas were left out, rubber boots, and oilskin coverings for their hats and shoulders. In the morning Compton was left behind in the clearing in charge of the packages, while the other two took the Okapi down to her berth, which was about half a mile down on the same side. They drove the boat into the little natural dock, then with their Ghoorka knives cleared a little place in the forest, and next, with a small pioneer spade, dug a trench in the soft mould more than large enough to hold the boat. Then a foundation was laid of saplings; the walls were also lined with tough wood, and the Okapi, lightened of her cargo and steel deck, was bodily dragged up, and, after a long effort, safely lowered into the dry dock. Everything was made trim, a layer of branches placed over all, then the leaf-mould restored, and all leveled down. Working unceasingly, the job took them till well on into the afternoon, when they rested a while; then, with their knives in hand, set off to work their way back to the clearing. All they had to do was to follow the river. It was simple enough in theory, but in practice it was a tough job, as they had to struggle every foot of the way, squirming and crawling. When they heard Compton’s hail they had come to the conclusion that the forest was a trap, its mysteries a delusion, and its general qualities altogether disgusting.

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“You have been a time!” shouted Compton, as the two, hot, red-faced, and tattered, stepped out and straightened themselves up with hands to the small of the back.

“I’m as hungry as three, and have been under a terrific strain to keep from eating the finest and fattest baked ’possum you ever saw. Come on.”

“’Possum?” said Venning, hurrying forward. “There are no ’possums in Africa.”

“Well, it’s something.”

“Smells nice.”

“Sit down—sit down, and we’ll find out what it is afterwards.”

They sat down with sighs of relief, and the “’possum” disappeared without a word being spoken.

“Beggar was eating earth-nuts over there, and I bowled him over with a stick. See, there’s his skin—long tail and sharp face.”

“Monkey,” said Mr. Hume.

“Prehensile tail,” muttered Venning, examining that appendage. “Anyway, it was good. See anything more?”

“Lots. One crocodile, and about one million ants and insect things. Finished your job?”

“We buried the boat on the bank, and you youngsters had better be at great pains to take your bearings, in case anything happens; and for a sign we’ll lash that pole and its bit of rag to the top of a tree. Up you go, Venning, and make it fast.”

The pole with its dirty flag was lashed to a tall tree, and then they waited for Muata. The jackal was the first to make its appearance, but the chief was not long after, and the river-man, a few minutes later, looking quite exhausted. The chief first ate, then he washed, then at last he condescended to take notice of things, and then to give particulars. He had followed the trail of the cannibals. It led straight into the forest. They could follow in the morning.

With the morning came a heavy white mist that made travelling impossible, and all they could do was to wait in the mugginess until, through a window in the sluggish clouds which hung low overhead, the sun shot its rays and sucked up the moisture. Then they started, and a minute later they were in the silence and the gloom of the most tremendous extent of unbroken wood on the face of the earth—a Sahara of leaves, stretching away to the east for five hundred miles, and reaching over the same extent north and south. Trackless, the forest was, to any one not acquainted with its secrets;

but there were paths through it, and the villagers had made their own approaches to the main system of thoroughfares, so that the going was not difficult, especially as the direction up to a certain distance had been decided upon by the previous day's tracking.

They had, however, to walk in single file, with much care to their steps, for the obstacles were ceaseless in the way of trailing vines, saplings, and fallen trees. The narrow and tortuous avenue they threaded was gloomy in the extreme, affording scarcely any glimpse of the sky, and opening out no vistas between the serried ranks of steins, each clothed in a covering of velvet moss, and all looped together by the parasitical vines, whose boles were often as thick as cables.

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As they plunged deeper into the woods over a yielding surface of leaf-mould, which sent up a warm smell, the silence was as the silence of a huge cavern, into which is borne the hollow rumbling of the waves, the sound in place of that being the continual murmur of the sea of leaves moved by a breeze ever so slight, so soft that no chance breath of it found its way below.

Yet the place was not really silent, and by-and-by, as their ears grew attuned to the new surroundings, the boys detected the sounds made by living things large and small, far and near—sounds which seemed a part of the silence, because they were all soft and a little mysterious, with a pause in between, as if the insect or creature which made them was listening to find if any enemy had heard him. They were little detached sounds, as if an insect would start out to sing its song, and then suddenly think better of it; and even when some large animal made its presence known by the snapping of a branch, or a sudden scurry in the undergrowth, the noise ceased almost as soon as it began.

“It gives me the creeps,” muttered Venning, after a long silence.

“That’s just it,” said Compton; “everything appears to be creeping.”

“Even the trees. They seem to watch and whisper and wait, and the news of our coming has been carried right away for miles. Shouldn’t wonder if the trees were to close in and shut us up.”

“Oh, come, now; that’s a bit too fanciful.”

They shifted their loads to relieve aching shoulders, and kept on through the unending avenues in another long spell of silence.

“Reminds me of the reeds again,” said Compton; “only this is worse.”

“By Jenkins! just imagine the blaze and the scorch if this forest caught afire like your reeds.”

“Couldn’t—too damp. We’ve been tramping for two hours, and I have not seen a bird, or an animal, or a reptile; nothing but snails and ants. Don’t see where the game comes in.”

“We’re not after game; we’re after cannibals.”

“By Jove! yes, I suppose we are—that is, if they are cannibals. I thought the species had died out.”

“It will be a long time before cannibalism dies out,” said Mr. Hume, who was bringing up the rear, “particularly in those parts where the people find a difficulty in getting flesh-food; but, at the same time, scarcity of flesh-food does not always turn a tribe to

cannibalism. What does happen is this—that people who live in a poor district become small In the Kalihari you find the bushmen, in the forest you find the pigmies."

"Then the forest is poor in animals?"

"It has its types, but I should say they must be very few. You see, animals want sun, And where would they find it here? No! what animals haunt the forest will not be found on the ground."

"I see," said Compton, with a grin; "they fly."

"I know," interposed Venning, triumphantly; "they live in the tree-tops."

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Compton looked up at the matted roof of leaves and branches.

“Well, all I hope is that a tall giraffe will not fall through on top of me.”

“There is one thing that should give you comfort,” said Venning, solemnly.

“What is that?”

“It would be the giraffe who would suffer.”

“Wait till I have got rid of these parcels, young ’un,” said Compton. “Are you getting tired?”

“Well, I am,” said Venning—“tired and stuffy.”

“Glad to be back on the boat again—eh? Well, if it’s any comfort to you, I’m tired too. Haven’t got my land-legs yet.”

Mr. Hume cried a halt, to their great content, and though there were some hours yet to evening, he set them to work to make the camp. The work was the same they undertook each evening they were in the forest. First they cleared a circle about twenty feet in diameter, with an outer ring of large trees, and, using the trunks as posts, built a fence with the saplings and young trees. A hole was dug in the soft ground for the fireplace, and another fence built round to screen the glare of the fire. Next their waterproof sheets were arranged, the sheet of canvas stretched overhead, and, when all was shipshape, the three white members of the party went through a course of massage, which prepared them for the one good meal of the day. Then they overhauled their clothing, repaired any tears, oiled the rifles, and entered up the log-books. There was always something to do, and according to the man-of-war discipline observed, every man had to do his share of work—a rule which gave the mind employment, and kept it from dwelling on the monotony and the depressing silence of the woods. While the camp was springing into existence out of the tangled woods, the jackal kept guard, circling at a distance, like a well-trained collie herding a flock of sheep.

The first night was a repetition of many others. When the night came down, as it did long before darkness set in on the wide river, where the afterglow was reflected from the waters, it was black beyond thought, so black that a few yards from the fire the sharpest pair of eyes could not see a hand held a foot away. And with the darkness came a sense of mystery, a hollow murmur as of the surf heard a long way off, which intensified the brooding stillness; and at times the groaning of the trees.

“What noise is that?” asked Venning, hearing the sound.

“The trees talk,” said Muata, gravely.

“Eh? The trees talk! Wonderful!” muttered Compton, sarcastically; but, nevertheless, he listened with open mouth and staring eyes.

“What do they say, chief?”

“The young ones ask for room; they shove and push to reach up into the air, to feel the touch of the rain, to enjoy the warmth of the sun.”

“And the big trees?”

“They cry out against the young, who come thrusting their branches up from below, who crowd in upon the old people.”

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“And the squeaking noise?”

“That is made by one branch rubbing against another. Wow! It is nothing. Hear them talk when a wind is blowing; then it is as if all the great ones were gathered together roaring to the four comers, with the voice of the storm booming from the skies, and the bellowing of a great herd of bulls, and in between the cries of women in fear and the screaming of tigers. Mawoh! It is then a man would hide in a hole. Now it is quiet; they but whisper among themselves half asleep, but in the morning they will stretch their limbs.”

“Of course,” said Compton, “and yawn!”

“How will a tree grow if it does not stretch? It bends this way and that, to loosen the bark, to make its body and its arms supple and tough, so that it can bend to the blast and yet spring back straight again. Tell me what would happen if the young tree were bark-bound. It would die—as these old ones die smothered by the creeping arms around them. Ow aye, they stretch in the morning and grow.”

So they talked in the night, and listened to the strange sounds that came mysteriously out of the brooding silence.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TREE-LION

The next day they came to the end of the trail that Muata had followed with the river-man; but the scent was still on the ground, and for a mile or so the jackal led the way, slinking along like a shadow with his nose down and his bushy tail drooping. Then he stopped, and, after a look up into the face of his master, stretched himself out, as much as to say his part was over.

“They have gained on us,” said Mr. Hume.

“They rose early and travelled fast,” said Muata. “The scent is cold, but there is the trail marked on the tree;” and he pointed to a slight cut in the bark, from which had oozed a thick juice, now caked hard.

“Some one pierced the bark.”

“It is the sign of the wise woman, and she made it, maybe, with a wire from her armlets.”

They went on more slowly, guided only by the faint cuts at intervals on tree-trunks, all of which “bled,” giving out a milky sap; and then again the sign failed. About them were the trees in endless columns, overhead was the roof of leaves, and on the ground was a

tangle of undergrowth and decaying vegetation, that gave out a moist earthy smell, which set the lungs labouring for oxygen. The boys were uncomfortable. Their skins were clammy, their eyes were heavy, and their limbs languid. Mr. Hume was glad to sit down, and even Muata showed the effect of the muggy atmosphere in a dulling of his skin. The river-man, sullen and silent, was alone apparently unaffected; but they did not reckon him one of the party, for no one of them had broken through his apathy.

Muata began patiently to make casts in that labyrinth that seemed to hold no living thing but themselves, and as he went slowly through the undergrowth, the boys went off to sleep, from which they awoke, heavy and unrefreshed, at the cry to “fall in.”

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The trail had been recovered fifty yards further on, the intervening ground having been covered apparently by the cannibals without leaving a sign. Venning blundered on a little way before he discovered that he had left his bundle behind.

“I’ll wait for you,” said Compton, sitting down on a tree-stump, while Mr. Hume, who had left his position in the rear to consult with Muata, had his back turned.

Venning recovered his bundle, and turned to retrace his steps, but for the time his heavy eyes were no longer faithful guides, and, instead of taking the right direction, he entered a likely looking opening through the trees to the left and hurried on. When he had covered a distance that should have brought him to Compton, he stopped.

“Halloa! halloa!” he cried.

There was no answer.

“Compton! I say, no larks. Where are you?”

A little in advance he heard the rustle of leaves, and went on quickly. When he reached the place where the sound came from there was nothing there, and he gathered his wits together. With a little laugh at his carelessness, he began to retrace his steps, but there was a problem to be dealt with at every step, for he could see nothing familiar. In that multitude of trees, planted so close together, each tree seemed alike. He put his hand to his mouth and uttered a long “coo-ee.” The call seemed to be shut in, sounding in his ears very weak and quavering.

“Coo-ee!”—and again “coo-ee!” Ah, that was an answer; and with a glad shout he set off in the direction whence came an answer to his call, forced his way through the undergrowth, tripped and fell over a dead branch with a thud that made his head throb so that he was glad to sit back with closed eyes.

When he opened them again he heard a rustling of the leaves, and moved his lips to call out. “Compton!”

There was unmistakably the sound of some one jumping aside as if startled.

“Over here!” said Venning; and then he closed his eyes again with a feeling of languor. Compton, in the meanwhile growing impatient, walked a few steps in the direction his chum had taken. The rest of the party had moved on, thinking, no doubt, he was following, and he knew that neither he nor Venning could pick up the spoor if they lost touch. He peered through the scrub for some time without seeing any one, and then he heard a low cry—a strangled sort of cry, as if Venning were calling in a very feeble voice. Unshipping his Lee-Metford carbine from the loop, by which it hung at his side, he dashed forward, fully expecting to find his friend in the hands of man or beast.

But at the last stopping-place there was no sign of his friend; and, with head bent, he listened for some sound, his mouth firmly set, and his dark eyes glancing from under his well-marked, brows.

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He could hear the beating of his heart, and the innumerable creeping sounds that seemed to have no origin. He was about to shout, when again he heard a thin cry, and, suppressing the shout, he began to advance cautiously from tree to tree, planting his steps carefully. In the soft mould he saw now the footmarks left by Venning as he had hurried, the print of his heel at one spot, a little further on a broken branch, and next, some dislodged moss from a huge tree. He peered round this, examining the ground ahead, then stepped out into a little clearing, across which Venning had walked. He started as he looked down, then threw up his gun, with a quick glance round, for on the ground, side by side with the footprints, were the pugs of a lion or leopard.

Venning was in danger, then! With an involuntary action he pressed his hat down firmly on his head, then moved forward, swiftly and silently, to another tree beyond. Looking round this, he saw at once through the twining tendrils the form of an animal, moving slowly, with flattened ears and twitching tail.

This did not surprise him, for he was prepared by the spoor; but what surprised him was to see that the brute was advancing towards him—not retreating. For a moment he felt sick at the thought that he was too late, that his friend had been already attacked, and that the beast had left Venning for the new-comer.

The brute was unmistakably stalking some one. Its body was stretched out, the forearms reaching out in long stealthy strides, the round head sunk low, with a fixed snarl that bared the white teeth. A leopard it was in form, but without the black rosettes on a grey ground, the colour being of a uniform yellow along the sides, with black markings down the muscular shoulders, and a streak of white from the throat under the belly. The eyes were large, and of a greenish hue. They were fixed in a steadfast stare on some spot to the left. Compton glanced in that direction, and, to his joy, he saw Venning, alive, seated with his chin on his breast, and his back to a fallen stump. As Compton looked, the boy's eyes opened, and his head turned as if he had heard some noise.

Compton's distress left him. A feeling of great thankfulness swept over him when he saw that he was not too late, that his friend lived; and with firm nerves he stepped clear of the tree to shoot. The movement caught the notice of the leopard. It had crouched down as Venning turned, but now it lifted its round head to view the new-comer. With a low growl it made a sudden leap forward, covering an incredible distance, which brought it nearer to Compton, and as it gathered itself together he fired, then sprang aside. There was a rush through the air, a thud, and a tearing noise. There, almost within reach of him, with the blood running over its face from a scalp-wound, and its fore-paws tearing the moss from a tree, was the leopard; and, swift as thought, Compton fired from his hip at the shoulder. The leopard rolled over, growling, then tried to drag itself by its powerful paws towards Compton, its mouth wide open. He fired again, into the gaping jaws, the muscles relaxed, the beast fell, and he ran towards Venning.

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“Are you all right, old chap?”

Venning held on to his friend’s arm, and as they stood, the leopard screamed.

“He is quite done, old fellow. Come and see.”

Venning went forward quietly, as if still in a daze, and they looked down on the leopard, struggling in the death-throes. It raised its torn head, and again the scream rang out from its red jaws—a terrible cry, and out of the forest came the answer, shrill and fearsome. With a low growl the leopard fell forward, dead; but they could hear an animal advancing rapidly, with fierce grunts; though from what direction it was impossible to tell.

“It must be the mate,” said Compton, with an anxious look at Venning. “How do you feel?”

“I’m all right now;” and he passed his hand over his forehead. “I can help you this time. If it is the mate, it will go first to its dead.”

“Then we’d better crouch down by that tree.”

They knelt side by side a little way off, with their rifles ready; but, though the noise made by the advancing animal grew louder, they could see no movement whatever.

Then an extraordinary thing occurred. A bough above shook heavily, and a large flattened body shot down from one branch to another, tail, neck, and legs at the full stretch, alighting easily on the rounded branch. It paused for a moment, then flew right across from one tree to another, a distance of about thirty feet, when again it gathered itself together for another flying leap to the ground, alighting with singular ease within a few paces of the spot where the dead leopard was lying.

With outstretched neck and twitching nose, it stepped to its mate, sniffed, then threw its head up with bristling hair and emitted a terrible scream of rage, ending in a harsh cough.

As Compton pressed the trigger it bounded aside, as if it had seen him, and an instant later had reached the trunk of a tree.

“Where is it?”

“Went up that tree,” said Venning, rising and stretching his neck.

“You take that side, I this.”

They moved slowly, finger on trigger and eyes swiftly scanning the branches, but they made the circuit of the tree without a glimpse of the yellow and black body that had so swiftly come and gone.

“Where the dickens has it gone?”

“Maybe into a hole up there.”

They stood staring up in bewilderment, but there was not a movement anywhere, and presently they wandered around examining the trees near. The beast had vanished as completely as if it had been no bigger than a fly.

“Well,” said Compton, with a short laugh, “I’m going to take the skin off the dead one, before it disappears too.”

They set to work stripping the skin off the muscular body, stopping often to listen and glance around. The work, however, was completed in peace, and then, suddenly remembering their position, they hastened to retrace their steps. Slowly they hit off the trail, and finally arrived as far as the place where Venning had first missed his bundle.

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“It’s after us, Dick!”—in a whisper.

“Where?”

“Up among the branches. I saw it spring across as I looked back.”

They looked up into the trees, and then at the dark shadows before them, for the afternoon was slipping away.

“I don’t like it. The beggar may spring on us at any moment.”

“Or it may wait bill it is too dark for us to see.”

“Yes, by Jove!”

“It is bad; but I am afraid we do not know the worst.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mr. Hume must have missed us a long time back; and he would have come after us if ——”

“I see,” said Compton, gravely. “You think that something has happened to them?”

Venning nodded. “It’s all my fault, Dick.”

Compton was glancing up into the trees. “We must dispose of that brute first. But how?”

“I have an idea,” said Venning, after a long pause. “One of us will go on. Animals can’t count. Seeing one of us moving, he may show himself to the other, who remains hidden.”

“Good. I will go on;” and at once Compton, taking the more dangerous post, advanced slowly, leaving Venning standing against a tree.

A few moments later the watcher saw a dark form flitting through the branches high up, without, however, offering a ghost of a mark, and there was nothing left for him but to follow Compton and explain.

“And I suppose it’s watching us now?” said the latter, gloomily. “Any good to climb up a tree?”

“I should think not. Why, it’s at home up there. You can see that from the length of the claws, and the length of the tail, which acts as a steerer, a balancing-pole, and a brake. You see when it brings the tail down——?”

“No, I don’t; but I do see that we are in a fix, and that the others must be in a worse position.”

“I cannot imagine Mr. Hume being caught in a trap, especially when he has the jackal.”

“And Muata!”

“And the black chap!”

“By Jove! suppose that fellow has proved treacherous;” and the two turned this unpleasant thought over in their minds until a light sound attracted their notice. Looking up, they caught the glare of fierce green eyes.

“We’ve got him now!” yelled Compton. “Round that side.”

Venning dashed round the tree, and three shots were fired in rapid succession at a vanishing object.

“Missed again!”

“By gum, yes; and if we go on playing hide-and-seek any longer, we’ll be missing ourselves. We’ve got to build a camp at once. That’s the place, between those three trees. I’ll cut, and you build.”

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Compton, rolling up his sleeves, cut down saplings, and Venning built a low roof, using the long tendrils of the creepers to bind it. Then the spaces in between the trunks were filled in, and large chunks of tinder were cut out of a fallen tree and placed at the entrance, a fire of dry wood being made in a hole inside. There was enough water in their flasks for a “billy” of tea, and by the time they had finished their meal the darkness was on them. No sooner had they settled down to watch than their foe was down, sniffing out the position, and they were thankful they had acted in time. They beard it at the back first, then overhead, and next at the side, its presence indicated by low growls. Then it was in the front, and Compton fired at a momentary gleam of two luminous spots. It bounded right on the roof, which shook to its weight, then clawed up a tree, detaching fragments of moss, and again leapt to the ground, emitting this time a ferocious roar. It seemed as if its long patience were exhausted, and that it was lashing itself into a fury, for it was here and there with lightning quickness, striking blows at the fence, and at times seizing a branch in its teeth, but so quick that they could not move their weapons smartly enough to cover the point of attack.

It was nervous work for the watchers. Every moment they expected to find themselves under the claws and teeth of the maddened beast, with the odds all against them, for in such a small enclosure they would be helpless. It was bad enough when the brute was emitting his terrible roars and screams, but the spells of silence were worse.

In one of these spells Venning felt for the raw skin of the slaughtered leopard, and threw it out into the darkness. There were stealthy footsteps, the noise of sniffing, followed by the sound of an animal rolling on the ground, and they fired together. With a snarl the leopard bounded right to the very mouth of the opening, knocking over the smouldering tinder and sending out a shower of sparks. Venning fired. Compton lunged forward with his big knife, and the leopard leapt aside.

“Hit him that time, I bet,” muttered Venning, who was shaking with excitement.

Then followed a weary time of waiting in complete silence, broken only by the soft melancholy murmur of the forest. They refilled the magazines of their carbines, built up the tinder fire, and stretched their ears to catch the first warning note of danger. Then the whisperings swarmed in upon them. A creak of a branch, the turn of a leaf, the scraping of creeping insects, the whizzing of moths, and the murmur of the forest, all seemed to them the whisperings of stealthy foes. Every now and again they moistened their lips, which dried after the repeated spells during which they held their breath, while intently listening for the footfalls of the enemy.

Then, with a feeling of relief, they heard an unmistakable wouf! That, at least, was a tangible sound—the sound of a startled animal.

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Presently they heard its footsteps, as it came cautiously forward, a little way at a time. Once more the fingers coiled round the triggers, and the barrels were raised.

Then came a yelp, this time of fear, followed by the leopard's terrible scream. Some animal darted by the opening, so close that they could see the gleam of its eyes as it glanced in upon them, and after it with a bound went a larger form. They listened to the dwindling noise of the chase, and Compton stirred up the fire.

"What's up now, eh?"

"It," said Venning, referring to the leopard, "is after something, don't you think?"

"I hope to goodness it will have a good run, then."

But even as he spoke the sound of the chase grew; the smaller animal flashed by again with the savage pursuer at its heels, flew round the trees, and leapt inside—leapt in and pressed itself down behind the two of them. With a snarl, the leopard stopped before the smouldering logs, and then sprang on to the roof, at which it struck two or three tremendous blows before bounding off again.

"Where's my knife?" yelled Compton.

Venning felt a warm tongue on his hand, and drew it away with a cry, as if he had been stung.

"Use your knife, man. I'm blinded."

"All right," gasped Venning.

"Feel for it first, or you'll be hitting me. Quick! I say."

"What is it?" cried Venning, alarmed at the sudden change in Compton's tones from rage to alarm.

"Something's pulling me. It's got its arm through the side."

There was a sudden fierce yap and a snapping of jaws. Compton's shirt gave way with a tear, and outside in the dark the leopard screamed. Inside the cry was answered by the howl of a jackal.

"It's our jackal," shouted Venning.

"Where—what?"

"Here;" and Venning laughed hysterically. "Poor old chap!" then, "Good old jacky!"

“Nonsense!” said Compton; but his band groped out in the dark, and when he felt the rough tongue, he joined in the laugh. They were as pleased as if Mr. Hums or Muata had returned.

“Did the brute really hook you?”

“Forced his paw through,” said Compton, shuddering, “but the jackal bit him.”

The jackal’s tail thumped the ground, then they felt it stiffen, and were again on the alert. Venning ran his fingers lightly along the jackal’s back till he reached the nose, which was pointing straight up. Without a moment’s delay he raised his rifle and fired.

At the same moment the saplings forming the roof snapped and fell in upon them with an added weight, which knocked them flat. They were dimly conscious of a tremendous struggle, but when they had crawled out of the litter, they were thankful to find that each was still alive. After the first hurried words, they faced the darkness apprehensively, for their shelter was gone, and their rifles were under the branches.

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“Quick!” said Compton, “help pull the branches away.”

Guided by the tinder, they felt for the branches and pulled, but let go at once and fell back, for a fierce growl greeted them almost in their faces.

“By Jove!” muttered Compton, “it’s all over now. Don’t run; let us stick together.”

“I’m not running,” said Venning. “We’ve got our sheath-knives.”

They drew their knives, and, holding each other by the disengaged hand, fell back step by step, till they found the support of a tree-trunk, when they waited for the attack. From time to time the low growls gave warning of the enemy’s close presence, and to them each sound was as a death-knell; for what were their knives against a foe so powerful, who had, too, the advantage of sight?

For perhaps two hours of awful suspense they stood, and then Compton lost patience.

“I can’t stand this,” he said. “That brute’s playing with us, and I’m going to finish it.”

“Wait; when the morning comes we can see.”

“Will it ever come? No.”

Compton struck a match, cradled it in his hand till it caught, then, with his face showing rigid by the reflection, he moved forward. Venning went too, shoulder to shoulder. Each held his knife, point up, every muscle on the strain. A snarl greeted each step, and presently they saw two glowing spots before the match went out. Another match was struck by a steady hand, and this time the spots blazed out from the blackness.

Venning felt for his log-book, tore out a sheet, screwed it up, lit it, and held the flame up.

There, less than six feet away, was the leopard, its mouth open, the gleaming fangs showing their full length—a sight so forbidding that he dropped the paper and sprang back.

“Light another,” said Compton, steadily.

This was done. He went down on his knees, reached out, seized the butt of a rifle, and drew it forth. A second later a bullet crashed into the brain of the leopard, and then, worn out by the strain they had been under so long, they sat with their backs to the trees.

“I’m going to sleep,” said Compton.

“I wonder what’s become of the jackal?” muttered Venning, drawing up his knees with a sigh of relief.

“Don’t know, and don’t care, for he’s better off than we are. Good night.”

“Good night, old chap; and it was awfully good of you to turn back.”

Snore! Venning yawned, and in five minutes they were both asleep in the forest, without so much as a twig to cover them. But they were not altogether unprotected, for when they rubbed the sleep out of their eyes in the morning, they found the jackal curled up at their feet, with one ear cocked and one eye open. But a very different jackal he was from the graceful animal they knew so well. His body was distended to enormous proportions, and it was clear how his absence was to be accounted for. While

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they had stood in the dark, expecting every moment to be pounced upon, he had been gorging on the dead leopard. They now looked at their foe of the night, and found why it was that it had left them uninjured. There were three wounds on the body—the bullet-hole in the forehead, a fleshy wound on the hind leg, and a hit on the spine, which had disabled it just as it was in the act of springing down upon the roof.

“It’s your bag,” said Compton. “To think that we stood shivering and shaking for two mortal hours, while all the time the beggar was helpless!”

Venning did not echo the complaint; he was too much occupied examining his prize, and taking exact measurements with a tape, which he entered in his log’ book, together with a description of the markings.

“It’s a new species,” he said, with the pride of an explorer who discovers a new mountain. “I will call it a tree-lion—leo arboriensis Venningii—that is, if you don’t wish it called after you.”

“Call it anything you like, old fellow; but I should say it was just an ordinary leopard.”

“You never saw a leopard with those markings.”

“And no one ever saw a climbing lion.”

“It has adapted itself to changed conditions. The markings match the colouring of the branches, and there has been a change in the formation of the claws”—holding up a huge paw—“while the forearm is a little curved, and the skin between the elbow and the body bears a resemblance in its growth to that found on the so-called ‘flying-squirrel.’”

“It’s a tough customer, whatever it is, and I hope that it is the last of its kind. Do you know that we have no more water?”

“I shall examine the contents of the stomach, and I fully expect to find that its usual prey is the monkey.”

“It had a great hankering for white man, at any rate. Did you hear me say there was no water?”

“Its hind legs are very much longer than the fore legs—another proof of an arboreal existence. It’s a most important find. I wish Mr. Hume were here.”

“So do I,” said Compton, heartily, stirring the jackal with his foot.

That sagacious animal rose slowly, stretched itself, one leg at a time, sniffed at the dead leopard, or tree-lion, whatever it was, and then curled itself up again.

“Coo-ee—coo-ee!” came out of the woods.

“Coo-ee!” replied Compton, to the glad sound. “Coo-ee!” and he fired off his gun.

Muata’s shrill whistle pierced through the files of trees, and the jackal slunk away.

“Hurrah!” yelled Compton, taking off his cap. “Hurrah! Here we are— all safe!”

“All safe, thank God;” and Mr. Hume hurried forward, with his eyes beaming. “Thank God.”

“It is as I thought. Here is the hind leg of a monkey, with some of the hair still attached;” and Venning held up a disgusting-looking object.

Mr. Hume looked at the dead animal, the broken hut, and back at Compton.

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“We shot it last night, and its mate in the afternoon.”

Then he pulled Venning to his feet and shook him. “Believe he’s gone off his head.”

“I’ve not,” said Venning; and he held out a blood-stained hand to Mr. Hume, who took it with a great happy laugh. “Have you seen a beast like that before, Muata?”

“Any one would think,” said Compton, “that nothing had happened— that we had not been lost, and that he had not brought us into this mess.”

“Steady,” said Mr. Hume, with a smile.

“Dick is right, sir. If it had not been for him, I should have been dead. I am a little bit excited now; but I will tell you all soon. Well, Muata?”

“Wow!” exclaimed the chief, who had been talking with the river-man. “One of these I have seen, and he also. It was a great thing to kill two; of all things that walk they are the fiercest.”

“And I am very thirsty,” said Compton.

“Their home is in the trees,” continued Muata.

Venning nodded. “Leo arboriensis.”

“Venningii,” added Compton, as he took his lips from a water-bottle. “And now we’ll have breakfast, if you don’t mind.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE OVERHEAD PATH

“We were stopped by ants,” said Mr. Hume, in explanation.

“By ants!”

“No less. I missed you not long after we had started, and passed the word on to the others to turn back. And in the mean time an army of marching ants had cut the line of communications.

“Couldn’t you sweep them aside, or jump over?”

“I did not venture to try, my boy. I did try climbing across from tree to tree, but their skirmishers were everywhere. As for jumping across, I took the chiefs word for it, that

the feat was impossible. Once that kind of ant gets a grip, he does not let go, except with the morsel he has fastened on to. And there were millions!"

"I can hardly imagine you were stopped by ants," said Compton.

"The ground before us was alive as far as we could see, and red. It was like standing on the bank of a river, and the myriads went on through the day until dusk. I have seen swarms of locusts on the march in the voetganger stage, and a large swarm will cover a length of three miles, but never would I have believed so many living things could gather together."

Compton laughed again. "Held up by an army of ants! I can't get the idea."

Mr. Hume rolled back his sleeves, and there were red marks from wrist to shoulder.

"And that was done only by the scouts on the tree I attempted to climb. Muata says they have put whole villages to flight."

"Eweh," said the chief, "and even the elephant will turn from their path, else would they get into his ears, his trunk, and to the soft parts between his legs, biting each a little piece of skin. They fear nothing. Death to them is nothing. I have seen them stop a fire by the numbers of dead they heaped upon it in their march."

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“So we had to wait, and it was not a pleasant time for me. But, thank goodness, you are safe—aye, and safe, thanks to your own pluck.”

“Dick did it all,” said Venning. “I seemed to get dizzy all at once.”

“I am not surprised,” said Mr. Hume, looking grave; “and I think we ought to go back. The air is too heavy.”

“After a good sleep I shall feel better,” said Venning.

“It would be too bad to turn back.”

“It would be too bad if you fell ill.”

“What do you say, Muata?”

Muata lifted his hand. “Those who would cross the forest must be of the forest. Who are the people of the forest? Not those who live in the plains. Even the river-people are afraid to go far in. What are the creatures of the forest? They are those born among the trees, and those who dwell in the open seldom enter into the darkness and the quiet of the wood.”

“Yet,” said Compton, “there are people of the forest, and animals also, and they live.” “For them are the trees.”

“But when they go about they must travel under the trees.”

“That is your word,” said the chief. “But it must be so.”

“Muata is right,” said Mr. Hume. “We have only entered the fringe, and already we are different people. The lungs cry for pure air.”

“Yet there is a way,” said Muata; and his eyes fell upon the tawny hide of the tree-lion. “How, chief?”

“On top of the trees, not under!” cried Venning, who had seen that the chief was working up to some point.

Muata spread out his fingers gravely. “Even so,” he said. “There are paths on the tree-tops known to the little people, and made by them. Maybe they will let us travel also by them.”

The others stared at the chief in amazement; and even Venning, in spite of his intelligent anticipation, was too surprised to speak.

“There you can look upon the sky; there the wind blows fresh.”

They looked up at the roof of branches, and then around into the sombre aisles.

“And where are the little people?” Muata smiled. “Who knows? They come like shadows, and like shadows they go. Even now they may be near watching to see if we are friends or enemies.”

“You would not tell us an idle tale, chief. Let us hear what is in your mind.”

“Stay here, my friends, while I seek the little men. Maybe, if I find them, they will put us on our way; but if I fail, then my word is that you go back to the river, lest the sickness of the woods come upon you.”

“We will wait; but I have seen no signs of the little men. They may be far and difficult to find.”

“They have watched us all the way,” said Muata, calmly; “and it was in my heart that they had fallen upon the young chiefs in the night.”

“Glad we didn’t know,” said Compton, thoughtfully.

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Muata went off on his self-appointed task, and the white men felt, as they saw him disappear, how impossible it was for them to cope with the mystery of the forest. They were even more helpless than castaways at sea without a compass; for at sea in the day there is the clear sweep to the horizon miles away, while in the forest all they could be certain of was a little circle with a radius of less than fifty yards. Beyond that was the unknown, because unseen—a vague blur of trees that might be sheltering wild animals or savage men. And what made their helplessness the more felt, was the knowledge that Muata knew so much, and that others—the mysterious pigmies—knew still more. If there had been open glades, stretches of greensward, rippling brooks, or even a hard clean carpet such as is found under a pine forest, they would have been undismayed; but this gloomy, shrouded fastness, without glimpse of sunbeams, was becoming a nightmare.

Yet it would never do to become a prey to depression, for there is no danger so fatal to the explorer as low spirits, the forerunner of sickness.

By common consent they fought against a strong fit of the blues. Mr. Hume and Compton held a consultation over Venning, examined him, doctored him, and put him through the ordeal of a Turkish bath roughly made with the aid of the oil-sheets. After that he was rolled up in blankets and left to slumber. Compton was next treated in the same way, and then Mr. Hume busied himself with his note-book.

When the boys woke up in the afternoon, much refreshed, Muata had returned.

“Fall in, lads.”

“Has he found them?” and the boys were up and glancing round for the pigmies.

“Yes; we are to go ‘upstairs’ at once.”

“But where are they?”

“The little people have gone on,” said Muata. “They will spy out on the man-eaters.”

“You really did find them?”

“Ow aye; they know Muata. They and I have been on the path before, else they would have fallen on the young chiefs in the night—for they saw. The killing of the fierce ones much rejoiced them. It opened their lips about the upper way.”

“We are ready,” said Compton, “for the upper way—for the trapeze and the aerial flight.”

Muata struck off into the woods, and the rest crowded on him, glancing up at every tree for signs of the new track.

“Behold the road,” said the chief, showing his white teeth in a rare smile, as he caught in his hand a trailing vine that swung clear from the neighbouring growth, and reached up forty feet or so to a thick branch.

“Are we to swarm up that?”

Muata nodded.

“And what will you do with the jackal?”

The chief turned a look of disgust at his bloated ally. “He will follow underneath;” and reaching up, tie went hand over hand, using his toes very much like fingers to help. Then he lowered a rope which he had coiled round his waist; and Mr. Hume, putting the loop under his arm, trusted his weight to the swaying vine. Venning and Compton followed, with the help of the rope, but the river-man declined. He preferred to travel on the firm ground with the jackal. From the branch the four passed to the fork of the tree and held on.

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“I don’t see any path,” said Venning.

“Nothing in the shape of a foot-bridge that I can see; and it would not be quite safe to fall, would it?” replied Compton, as he glanced down.

Muata went on up into the topmost branches, and, when they followed him, they found a small platform of saplings lashed to the branches by vines, and from this vantage they looked out over a wonderful sea of leaves, reaching unbroken as far as eye could reach, with billows and hollows, patches of light and shade, and splashes of colour where red flowers gleamed. And it was good to see the domed sky, the white clouds racing low, with shadows moving swiftly over that sea of leaves; to see the flight of birds, and to hear the voices of living things.

The tree on which they stood was very tall, but there were others as tall, standing up like rocks out of the sea; and when they grew accustomed to the strange surroundings, they saw something peculiar in the shape of these tree islands. They were cleft through the centre, leaving a narrow passage, quite distinct to any one standing in line—as they were, for instance—with the domed head of a tall tree about three hundred yards away.

“That is our way,” said Muata.

“But where is the foothold?”

Muata pointed to notches cut in a lateral branch, and walked to the end of it, steadying himself by holding to a guiding branch above; then passed over the slight intervening distance between the last notch and the next tree by swinging on a vine tendril, otherwise a “monkey-rope.”

The others followed very gingerly, for the feat was like walking on a yard-arm, but each in turn reached the farther tree. After a little, as they went on, now walking, now swinging, they all were able to pick up the singular track by the notches, by the lay of the lateral branches, and by the absence of projecting twigs along the course. These had all been cut back, leaving a sort of tunnel, not easily discernible, however, because of its undulating character to accommodate itself to the varying height of the trees. They very soon found two obstacles in the way of easy progress, due to the small size of the engineers who had designed this extraordinary road. In the first place, the notches on the branches were too small; and in the next, the tunnel was too low for their height, so that they had to stoop; while it was also evident that the overland swing-bridges between the trees were too frail for their weight. They quickly, therefore, resorted to their Ghoorka knives and to the rope. Venning, being the lightest, crossed over first by the monkey vine-bridge, when he made the rope fast to his end. It was then secured at the other, enabling the heavy weights, Mr. Hume and the chief, to pass next, Compton bringing up the rear with the rope round his waist, to guard against a fall in case of accident. Naturally, their progress was at first very slow, though not so much

slower than it would have been had they to force a way through the undergrowth below; and the river-man found his work cut out to keep pace underneath when at times he encountered dense thickets.

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By the time they had covered the three hundred yards and reached the next platform, they were finding their “tree-legs.”

They stopped a while to take their bearings, looking out on the same unbroken expanse of tree-tops, tossed up into all manner of inequalities, and then recommenced their acrobatic, performance, making for the next “station.” With a few slips, a few scratches, and bruised shins, they kept on until they had covered about a mile, when the growing dusk warned them to form camp.

“We’d better go down below,” said Mr. Hume.

“Not I,” said Venning. “I had enough of down below last night; I’m going to sleep on deck, sir.”

“Ditto,” said Compton, emphatically; “and I don’t see why we all should not camp out aloft. We could easily widen the platform, rig up the waterproof sheets as a tent, and haul up some mould to make a fireplace.”

The idea was acted upon vigorously, the platform widened and strengthened, the roof pitched, the mould hauled up in a bag made out of one of the leopard skins, and the fire lit upon a foundation so made. They roosted high and secure, but they could not claim in the morning that they had passed a pleasant night, for the bed was hard, the space cramped, and each one dreamt he was falling off a tremendously high perch. Moreover, sound travelled more freely up above, and, in place of the brooding silence of the under-world, there were many strange noises up aloft, the most menacing being an occasional booming roar, which they recognized as the cry of the gorilla.

The morning was wet as usual, and heavy clouds trailed over the forest like a leaden mist on the sea. They crouched under the tent, listening to the drip, drip, drip, and filling their water-bottles from the tricklings. About ten the clouds lifted, and then the sun drove his arrows through until, almost in a twinkling, the great wet blanket rolled itself up and vanished swiftly into the horizon, leaving behind the sparkling of myriad raindrops on the leaves. Then for an hour the forest steamed, as the sun licked the drops off the roof and chased the moisture along the boughs. When the way was dried for them, they went on, going barefooted this time, for the better grip to be obtained.

Other creatures had waited for the drying of the leaves beside themselves, and whenever they passed the white-grey branches of a wild fig tree, they were treated to a scolding from green parrots on the feed, and heard frequently the clapping report of the wood-pigeons as they brought their wings together, and the harsh cry of the toucans. Oh yes, there was life and there was death.

Venning, going on ahead, saw below him in the fork of a tree the face of a monkey, with the eyes closed as if in sleep. He stopped to look, stooping his head, and his eyes

caught a slight movement. Then he saw that the sleeping monkey was cradled in the coils of a python resting in the forks of the tree, its head raised a little, and its tail gripping a branch. The head of the monkey rested peacefully on one of the black and yellow coils, for death had come upon it swiftly.

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“What do you look at?” asked Muata, bending forward.

“Shall I shoot?

“So,” muttered the chief. “It is the silent hunter. Let him be; let him be, and pass on. No other looks at man as he looks. It is his kill; pass on.”

They passed on, leaving the “silent hunter” with the monkey, that looked as if he slept, and silent and motionless he remained as each one paused to glance down, his dull, unwinking yellow eyes showing like coloured glass in the lifted head.

“Look well,” said Muata, warningly; “where there is one, there will be another near. The silent ones hunt in couples.”

“Would they attack men?”

“Ask the ‘little’ people.”

“But they are no bigger than monkeys.”

“There is the monkey bigger than man, and he, too, must give way to the silent hunter.”

“What! Is the gorilla afraid of the python?”

“Between the ape and the serpent there is always war. See where you place your foot then, for you travel the monkey-path, and we go hand and foot like monkeys. Look well where you place your hand, for a straight branch may be the body of the silent hunter.”

Venning went on with renewed caution, studying the branches above and below, for, lover as he was of all manner of live things, he had the common repugnance to the serpent-kind. But the trees were innocent of guile, and presently some other object claimed his absorbed attention, no less than an old man gorilla, who thrust his black head above a tree-top a little way off, and violently shook the branches. At the noise every one stopped and peered out.

“Look!” he shouted.

“By Jove, a gorilla!” cried Compton, from the rear.

The great head was thrust forward, with its low black forehead and blacker muzzle; then they saw the whites of the eyelids as the fierce creature swiftly raised and lowered its brows; then the gleam of the great tusks as the mouth opened to emit a tremendous roar. The branches cracked under its grip as it shook them again before disappearing. Mr. Hume unslung his rifle and planted himself firmly, for, from the sound, it seemed as if the great ape were coming straight for them. But the noise of its progress ceased,

and, after a long wait, the march was resumed. They kept a very keen outlook, and at times stopped to listen, but apparently the gorilla had vanished. Yet many were the startled looks whenever the least sound broke on their ears, for the face of the great ape, suddenly thrust into view, was a terrifying object.

“Halloa!” said Venning, pulling up, “the path seems to end here. See, the branch is broken off; and there is no swing-bridge. Yet the track did go straight on, for you can see the old marks across there.”

“Wow!” said Muata, as his dark eyes swiftly took in the details.

“If I climbed up that branch, I think I could get into the other tree, and you could then use the rope.”

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“What is it now?” asked Mr. Hume.

“They have cut the track,” said the chief; “and it is as I thought, they have gone down from this tree to the ground, maybe to climb up further on.”

“Why?”

“Maybe a man has fallen to the ground here—who can say; or the stinging ants have made a home. That tree beyond is taboo to the little people, and we also will go down here.”

“What’s the good?” said Venning, beginning to climb up.

“No, no,” said Mr. Hume. “We must leave this to the chief;” and he turned to descend.

Venning, however, was standing well placed for a swing, and he let himself go, reaching out with his left hand for another hold, and gaining the other side easily. Compton, of course, followed, and the two stood examining the tree for sign of the path. The track certainly had gone through that tree, but there were no signs of recent passage, and moss had grown over the branches. They called down that they were going on, and, passing across several trees, found themselves once more cut off from the next tree, on which the well-beaten track once again ran on.

“Here’s the place,” they shouted, to guide the others; then looked about to see how they were to cross.

“We’ll have to shin down,” said Compton, “for there’s no crossing here.”

Venning sat down astride a branch with his back to the trunk.

“May as well rest awhile till they come up.”

“That’s a queer-looking branch underneath,” said Compton, following suit, and dropping a piece of bark on a bough that had attracted his attention. “It’s covered all over with little squares of velvet moss. See!”

“Suppose we lower our guns by the rope, then we can swarm down easily,” replied Venning, who had seen too many branches to be interested; and passing the rope round the two rifles, he lowered them to the ground, letting the rope follow.

“I believe it’s moving, or else I’ve got fever or something.”

“What’s moving?”

“That;” and Compton pointed down.

“By Jenkins!” muttered Venning; and the two knitted their brows as they peered down into the shadows, for the branch certainly was moving, and moving away as if it meant to part company with the trunk. Their glances ran along the branch outwards, and then their eyes suddenly dilated, and their bodies stiffened.

So they stood like images, their hands clasping a branch, their heads thrust forward, and their eyes staring. On the same level with their heads and about twelve feet off was the head of that moving “branch,” square-nosed, wedge-shaped, with the line of the jaws running right round to the broad part under the eyes, and a black-forked tongue flickering through an opening beneath the nostrils, It was the fixed stare of the lidless eyes, and the rigid position of the grim head poised in mid air on a neck that began like the muscular wrist of an athlete, thickening to where it was anchored on a branch three feet away to the size of an athlete’s leg. And while the head, with the three feet of neck remained rigid, the body was gliding out and up, finding an anchorage in the forks of the tree on a level with the head, in readiness for the attack.

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With an effort they drew their eyes away from that cold glance that held them almost paralyzed and glanced down. Beyond, the light branches shook as the huge coils passed over them. Such coils! As they moved into the sunlight they saw the glitter of the scales and the ridges of the muscles, and the movement was like the movement of several serpents instead of one.

Venning looked again at the motionless head. “When it has gathered its length behind and above its head,” he said slowly, “it will strike.”

“And you dropped the guns!”

“No one can stare a snake out—no one,” said Venning; and his eyes were fixed.

“How far can it strike?”

“It has no lids to its eyes. It just looks and looks. Compton!”

Compton took Venning by the arm and shook him. “Come on,” he cried. “What are we standing here for?”

But as he spoke his eyes went up involuntarily, and his pupils expanded.

“It’s coming closer,” he whispered.

“And its eyes are brighter.” Venning shut his eyes, and gripped his companion.

They swayed, and just managed to save themselves from a headlong fall by grasping a branch. The shock restored them, and the next minute they had swung themselves up on to the branch, and from that to the next. It was done in an instant, but when they cast a breathless look down, they saw the unwinking eyes looking up at them from the very spot they had just left. The snake had a double coil round the branch that had supported them, while the huge body bridged the distance to the branches from which the blow had been delivered just a moment too late. As they looked, the hinder part of the body fell with a thud against the tree-trunk, and began to ripple up.

“Back,” said Compton, “to the next tree.”

They darted to the vine-bridge, swung over, then stopped to see if the snake would follow.

“The monkey-rope would never bear its weight,” said Venning.

“Can you hear it? By Jove, I feel all of a jump. I felt as if I had to stand there and watch it come right up.”

“Ugh!” said Compton. “It was awful. Get ready to run. I see it—over there—just opposite; it’s going up—no, down. I say, it will chase us from underneath. Come on!”

Venning went a little lower, the better to see the ground.

“Hi! underneath, Mr. Hume! Muata! Hi! Coo-ee!”

“Halloa! What is it?”

“A snake! He’s going down the next tree to this. Look out!”

“All right; but you will find it safer down here.”

They were of that same opinion, and were down with a run, that took some of the bark off their shins, as well as off the trees.

“And where are your guns?”

“Dropped them,” said Compton.

“I see. Dropped them first, and discovered your danger after.”

“Rub it in, sir. We ought to have followed you; and we have had a fine fright. It’s big enough to scare any one.”

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All the time, they had their eyes turned up on the watch for the slightest movement, but the tree was as quiet as if it had not harboured anything more dangerous than a caterpillar.

“Where’s Muata and the other boy, sir?”

“Gone after a red bush-pig. I think I hear them breaking back.”

They heard the hunting cry of the jackal, then a sound of crashing, and an animal, brick-red—a strange hue for the sombre shadows of the forest—darted into view, and seeing them, halted with snout lowered, and the bristling neck curving up grandly to the high shoulders. A moment it stood there facing them, defiant, its little eyes gleaming, its tusks showing white, and the foam dripping from its jaws. A moment, and then it sank to the ground, and was hidden under a writhing mound of coils. Swift as an arrow the python had swooped at the prey, fastened on the neck with its jaws, and then overwhelmed it by the avalanche of its enormous length. There followed a sickening crunch of bones, and next a wild cry from the jackal, repeated by Muata and the river-man.

Mr. Hume advanced with his Express ready, but Muata, running round, begged him not to fire.

“It is the father of the wood-spirits. He took the red pig instead of one of us.”

“Not for the want of trying,” said Venning. “He nearly had us both, Muata.”

“But he took the pig,” said Muata. “It is his hunt, and it means well for us that he took the pig.”

“It certainly does; but how are we to get our guns, if we don’t shoot him?”

Muata placed his weapon on the ground and advanced. The python had completed its work so far. Two vast coils were round the crushed body of the boar; the head rested on the upmost coil, with the eyes fixed on the intruders, and the rest of the body reached away into the shadows.

Muata advanced with the palms of his hands open, and his eyes downcast, as if he were in the presence of some great chief. Yet he showed no fear, never faltered, but walked up to the guns, picked them up within a foot of the spot where the length of the serpent had formed a loop, and returned. The lidless eyes watched, but not a coil moved.

“It is well,” said Muata, gravely, as he returned the rifles. “He means well by us.”

“You would not have said that if you had been up the tree with us, and with him,” grumbled Compton.

“The tree is taboo. I said it.”

“Do you mean that he lives here? I should think he would starve.”

“That would be your word, young great one. But, see, look at my father there. He is big, very big, very heavy, very old. He does not care to move far. Yet he is wise. So he has chosen his hunt; and he has chosen well.”

“I cannot see it. The little people give him a wide berth, and a pig might come along once a year.”

“Such is your wisdom, little great one. But, see, in the trees above there is a roadway, and on the ground below there are other paths for the things of the forest who neither fly nor climb. These trees lie in the way of such a road. On the ground, if you had looked you would have seen the spoor of the red pig and other things of the forest.”

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“By Jove, yes!” and the boys stared at the unfamiliar spoor of animals. “But why do they use this particular part of the forest?”

“That we shall see, for our way lies now along this ground-path. The little people have done their tracking. The man-eaters are near.”

CHAPTER XV

FIGHT WITH A GORILLA

“The man-eaters,” said Venning, blankly. “I had forgotten about them.”

“And there is another thing you have forgotten,” said Mr. Hume, sternly, “you and Compton. You have forgotten to obey orders. My orders were to descend from the tree. You both kept on, and by so doing ran a very great risk. Understand now, that you will do exactly what I wish.”

Compton looked rebellious, and opened his lips.

“Not a word!” said the hunter, in a roar, with a hard look in his eyes, that gave a fierce expression to his face.

The two boys stared at him dumfounded.

“You understand?” he said.

“I do, sir,” replied Compton, gravely; for, high-spirited as he was, he was in the wrong, and had the courage to admit it.

That night they saw the fires of the man-eaters, who had encamped on a knoll comparatively free from trees and entirely bare of underwood. Beyond the knoll was the gleam of water, and at the same time they heard the familiar trumpeting of the mosquito hosts, whose attentions they had been free from ever since they left the river. They anointed their faces and hands with an ointment that contained eucalyptus oil, while Muata and the river-man went off to scout. Then they stood in the shadow of a great tree and watched the weird scene in the thick of the forest. There were several fires, and about each squatted a ring of wild black men. Their skins glistened like ebony from the fat they had liberally rubbed in, and their teeth and eyes gleamed in the reflection of the fires. Their hair, fizzled out in mops, had the appearance of fantastic Scotch bonnets; but apparently all their vanity had been lavished on their heads, for of dress they wore nothing but anklets and a strip of hide round the waist. They talked unceasingly, cracking their fingers and making play with their hands, while all the time one or another of the different groups was on his feet, stamping the ground, swinging a club, and shouting at the top of his voice.

“Ah men,” said Mr. Hume. “Not a woman or a boy among them.”

“What have they done with their prisoners, if these are the same we are after?”

What, indeed! Their eyes searched the shadows at the foot of the knoll for trace of the unfortunate people who had been captured, but they could neither see nor hear anything.

“Ugh, the brutes!” muttered Venning, with a shudder, as he brought his rifle to the “ready.”

Mr. Hume pressed the barrel down. “We’ll have no night attack,” he whispered. “At the first note of danger they’d scatter like shadows, when they would have the eyes and the ears of us. Well hear what Muata has to say, and then wait for the morning.”

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“There are thirty-six of them,” muttered Compton. A bull crocodile roared from the water near at hand, and one of the black men imitated the cry, drawing a yell of wild laughter from his comrades. It was the wildest of scenes. The little circle of red fire threw into light against an impenetrable wall of black the trunks of a few trees, the trailing vines, and the forms of the savage men. That was the one bit of the world visible, a space on which appeared some of the lowest forms of the human race; but, though they could see not an inch beyond the furthest reflection of the fires, they knew how well the setting fitted the picture. It seemed only natural that in that gloomy wilderness of wood these savage types should prevail, for if man had to live there, he could only hold his own by a cunning and ferocity greater than the beasts possessed. Every item of the scene stamped itself on the minds of the boys as they stood for a long time watching the antics of the savages.

It was a relief when Muata made his presence known by a cricket-like chirrup.

“Are these the men we are after, chief?” asked Mr. Hume, when the two scouts silently crept up. “They are the same, but the trail is different.” “Then they are already on another hunt, and have left the women and children they captured elsewhere? Is that so?”

“As you have seen, they are warriors only. Such of the women and children who yet live are hidden. These await the coming of the other wolves.”

“Oh oh! Then there is to be a great war-party?” “A great killing! I went near, round by the riverside, where also there is a fire as a signal. I heard their talk. Others will join them in the night or the morning, and together they will go in the war-canoes.”

“And who are they that are expected?”

“I said we had not done with the thief-of-the-wood and the river, the man-robber, the slayer of babes.”

“Hassan! Do you mean that the Arabs are coming?”

“Even so, O great one. They are well matched, the man-eaters and the man-stealers.”

“And whom do they go against?”

“What should bring Hassan here but one thing, and that the fear of Muata?”

“Humph!” muttered Mr. Hume.

“They go against my people, so that when Muata returns there will not be one left—-man, woman, child, or dog—to greet him, not one hut left to shelter him, not a single manioc-root for him to eat. Hassan will let in the waters upon the Garden of Rest.”

“Eh?”

“That is his word. He has sworn it in his beard, and these jackals howl it out. They talk of new fish that are to come to their nets.”

“New fish?”

“Oh aye. When the water is let in, they will stand on the sloping banks of the Garden of Rest and net the drowned.”

“These are strange words, Muata. What are you talking about?”

“I talk of the plan that is made by Hassan to destroy utterly my people in the Garden of Rest,” said the chief, gloomily—“the secret hiding whence I went forth against the man-stealers. Hassan comes hither in the morning, and with these eaters of men, these jackals of the wood, he will go on his way.”

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“I see,” said Mr. Hume, slowly. “They are not on our trail.”

“Let us go for them now,” said Compton, who had been eagerly listening.

Muata paid no heed to the words.

“There must be a new plan, chief,” said Mr. Hume.

“And what says the great one?”

“There is only one good plan, Muata, but you have yourself opposed it.”

“What is the plan, my father?”

“We should get to the Garden of Rest in advance of the enemy, and be ready to beat them off. That would be the best way, but you have said you would not lead us to your secret hiding.”

“It is the plan,” said Muata.

“What!” cried Compton, “would you run away from these swabs without firing a shot? What do you say, Venning?”

“I am willing to listen to all sides,” said Venning, judiciously.

“We must not fire a shot,"' said the hunter, with decision; “we must withdraw without Hassan knowing of our presence. If they learnt we were hereabouts, they would be on their guard, and, having the ‘legs’ of us by reason of their canoes, and the advantage by reason of their numbers, they would push on, and arrive at the hiding-place before us. If they do not suspect our presence, they will take matters easy, and give us time.”

“But what of Muata’s mother?”

“That is the chief’s matter,” said Muata.

“And what of the Okapi?” asked Venning. “This is my word. You will go back in the morning,” said the chief, “marching quickly; and when you have found the shining canoe, you will move fast up the river to the place where the first little river from the forest joins it on the right bank. There you will find me.”

“And if we don’t find you?”

“Haw! What Muata says, that he will do.”

“And how are we to find our way back through the woods?”

Muata drummed his fingers against the stretched skin of his cheek, making a hollow noise.

“Behold,” he said, “there is your guide.”

They looked around in the dark, but could see no one.

“Do not look hard, for he is afraid of the white man’s eyes.”

“If we knew what we were expected to look at,” said Compton, “we’d know where we were; but—oh——”

He broke off, and stared at a little figure that barely reached up to Muata’s waist.

“A pigmy, by Jenkins!”

“By Jove! yes.”

Mr. Hume unhooked a steel chain from his belt, with a knife attached, and offered it to the little man, who, at a word from Muata, grabbed at it, and, after a minute inspection, hung it round his neck. Muata said a few more words to the new guide, then, lifting his hand, gave the farewell salutation to his friends, and disappeared with the silent river-man. The little man, taking one end of the rope, led them away from the camp of the cannibals, and after a brief rest, without the comfort of a fire, they were early

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on the march; but it was not until the sun was well out that they saw what manner of man their new guide was. A strange monkey-figure —very black, with wrinkled skin about the elbows, thin arms, knobby knees, a bulging stomach, and round bright eyes! He carried a little bow, a sheaf of tiny arrows, and wore the glittering chain and knife round his neck. He took the “upper road,” and was very like a monkey in the ease and agility with which he manoeuvred the branches. Presently he was joined by two companions, who appeared apparently from the tree-tops—one was black, the other lighter in colour, and of vast pigmy stature, reaching a height of quite 4 ft. 6 in. It was found advisable to give these two some badge of office, for when they had become accustomed to the white men, they stopped the march for a violent discussion about the glittering jewel worn with such outrageous pride by the first man. The present of a red silk handkerchief to one, and of a tin box that had held meat tabloids to the other, restored peace. The handkerchief was converted into a turban, the box into a decoration for the breast, and then, chatting like a treeful of monkeys, the three guides went on at a quick pace. There was no midday rest, no halt for coffee-making; they had evidently been told by Muata to hurry, and whenever their white men showed a tendency to slacken, they frowned, cracked their fingers, and capered about. Towards night, however, they descended from the upper road.

“Thank goodness, they’ll have to stop when it grows dark,” sighed Venning.

The little men gave a long rolling call by moving the hand before the mouth; then two of them slipped away, and presently an answering call came out of the wood. A little later the travellers stood on the edge of a small clearing, surrounded by little round huts made of leaves, and in the centre stood the gigantic warrior with the tin box, and his proud companion with the flame-coloured head. They were grinning from ear to ear as they beckoned their “white men” to advance within the circle of that forest city! Stepping over one of the leafy buildings, and just avoiding knocking down the pillars of an edifice that was probably the town hall, they entered the opening, piled their outfit, and started a fire to prepare the evening meal. The town had appeared deserted, except for the three little guides; but as the giants sipped from their pannikins little forms flitted nearer, and quaint little faces peered at them from every point.

“Take no notice of them,” whispered Mr. Hume, as he handed a pannikin to the first guide.

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As that sooty imp sipped, with a loud indrawing of his breath in dread of scalding, and a loud outward blowing in token of satisfaction at the comforting taste, the other two guides took the proffered pannikins from the boys, and the entire population crept closer and closer, with many a timid jump. When, however, these strange visitors from the strange outer world, where there was no roof of trees to keep off the shooting stars and other dangers—when these queer people began to massage each other in turn, to rub and to thump, to slap and knead the limbs and muscles, then, in their intense curiosity, even the children forgot their timidity and crowded round. A pickaninny—the queerest little mite—even ventured to poke a tiny finger into the ribs of one of the three. After that there was a great pow-wow. Mr. Hume, with a man in the palm of each hand, a boy on each shoulder, and a couple hanging from each brawny arm, sent the spectators into shrieks of amusement, and they there and then christened him "The Gorilla," in token of esteem—a piece of flattery which was to have a startling sequel. As night fell the little people lamented the disappearance of the sun with a long, melancholy, dirge-like wail; but when darkness was upon them they built up the fire and prepared their evening meal from the body of a red pig they had killed. When the three travellers wrapped themselves up in their blankets, their hosts were still busily engaged in eating and talking, and long into the night, whenever they glanced up through half-closed lids, there were the little forms still about the fires. But in the morning, behold, they were alone with the three guides! The huts remained, and the town house, with its posts, at least six feet high; but the little doors were open, and the huts were empty.

"They've gone," said Venning, much disappointed. "And they have stolen nothing," said Mr. Hume, after a careful inspection of the kit.

The guides pointed to the trees, and once more they were traveling the upper road through the moist leaves, glistening under the sun from the myriad drops of condensed mist. It was more than they could do to keep pace with the agile leaders, and time and again the little men had to wait for the big-limbed, awkward-footed strangers to come up. As on the previous day, they stuck to the work, grudging even a few minutes' rest in the heat of the burning noon, and they only relaxed their efforts to introduce a peculiar sporting event, which nearly put an end to the party. The quick eye of the light-coloured guide saw some object in the tree-tops, and miming out lightly to the end of the branch, he gave a peculiar bark. In response there came the familiar barking roar of a gorilla, followed by the appearance of the black face at a little distance. Immediately the three little men grossly insulted the great monarch of the woods, whose undisputed sway no denizen of the forest cared to dispute, who had been known to break the back of

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a leopard, and to outstare some chance lion prowling on the outskirts. They made "monkey faces" at him, and no monkey can stand that. They raised their eyebrows, grinned, shot out their jaws, made little grunting noises; and when the great ape imitated them unconsciously in his rage, they broke into unseemly laughter. The gorilla took up the gage of battle and advanced, snapping the branches as a sign of what he would do when he laid a hand or a foot on his enemies. The little men doubled back and put themselves under the sheltering bulk of the hunter's powerful frame, while the two boys sat astride of a big branch, the better to handle their carbines. The gorilla, however, did not push his attack home. They heard his surly grunt as he stopped to take stock of them, and as he did not venture closer, they had to resume the march, not, however, without a very distinct feeling of uneasiness. For when they had got into the swing once more, the gorilla dogged them. Like a hungry shark about an open boat at sea he came and went, now following steadily behind, now ranging up on the starboard quarter, now forging ahead, again coming up mysteriously from the depths below, and now breaking cover on the port side, but never giving a chance for a shot, and always reappearing at a new point after a long interval of silence.

"I don't like the game of hide-and-seek," said Mr. Hume, stopping.

"It's the fault of those little beggars," said Compton. "They appear to enjoy the joke."

The guides pointed to the ground and started to descend, pausing, however, to see if they were followed.

"I suppose we may as well go down?"

The little men laughed when they saw the others descending, and, sliding to the ground down slender vine-ropes, they immediately set to work insulting the gorilla again by a series of rapidly emitted cries. This brought the brute up with a charge, just as the three white men had their attention occupied, and their hands engaged, by the descent. From the branches above there dropped a huge black hairy object, with apparently four pairs of hands.

"By the Lord," cried Mr. Hume, who was the first to see the enemy, "drop!"

He shinned down on top of Compton, who in turn descended on Venning, and the whole three of them reached the ground together in a jumble. The gorilla lighted on all fours a few feet away, then, instead of springing on his helpless victims, he slowly raised himself to an erect position, and so standing on short bow-legs, emitted a tremendous roar, beginning with low mutterings, increasing to the deep-throated bark, and then dying away in hoarse grumblings. A terrible object he was truly, with his fierce grey eyes, formidable dog-teeth projecting from his powerful jaws, which rested without the

interval of anything like a neck on the curve of a chest that swept out vast on the well-founded ribs, wrought in strength to support the weight of the protruding stomach.

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One arm was raised with the palm of the hand on the chest, the other hung down, a truly fearful weapon, reaching to the crooked knee, and ending in great flattened fingers, that were bent inwards. After the roar the fierce creature lowered itself on to the knuckles of its arms, and seemed as if in another instant it would spring on its foes, still scrambling for a footing, when a piece of mould struck it on the cheek. It made a side-spring at the sooty guide, who nimbly jumped out of reach, and, when it turned, Mr. Hume was on his feet swinging his rifle-strap over his head. Quick as a trained boxer the long black arm shot out and sent the rifle flying through the air, but as its fierce eyes followed the whirling flight of the weapon, the hunter, putting forth all his great strength, smote the animal full on the ear, a blow that would have felled the strongest man. Then he leapt back, just in time to escape a terrific sweep of a hooked hand that would have disembowelled him, as the monster, after a shake of the head, delivered its favourite blow at the abdomen of its adversary. Going down on its knuckles again, it leapt high into the air, and as it descended thrust a long black arm round a tree to seize Mr. Hume, who all the time was calling out for a weapon. The flat fingers hooked under the leather belt, and with a fierce grunt the gorilla put forth its strength to draw the white man closer, while the latter, with his feet braced against the tree, resisted. Then Compton and Venning, who had unslung their rifles, but who had been confused by the rapid movements of the great ape, found their opportunity and fired. Both bullets took effect, and the gorilla, loosening his hold, turned with a roar upon his new foes. His aspect as he faced them was truly ferocious, and his strength was apparently unimpaired, for the thin pencil-like bullets had merely bored two little holes through a fleshy part. A moment his terrible eyes glared at them, and then with a mighty bound he leapt towards them. They fired hastily, and then in stepping back the one stumbled against the other, so that they both fell. They were at the gorilla's mercy! One step forward and he would have struck the life out of them with a couple of blows, but fortunately habit was too strong for him, and he raised himself erect to give out his defiant challenge. A little man tugged at Mr. Hume, who stood transfixed with horror. Looking down, the hunter saw the haft of his Ghoorka knife. He acted at once. Seizing it, he ran forward, and raising himself up, brought the heavy blade down on the monster's skull just as the last guttural bark was emitted. The boys, with their hands lifted in a despairing effort to ward off the danger, saw the gleam of metal, heard the rushing swish and the dull sound as the keen blade bit through skin and bone; and then they saw the monstrous black form suddenly sink to the ground. The next second they were snatched up and tossed aside out

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of reach, and as they regained their feet they heard the report of a rifle as Mr. Hume fired into ‘’ the hairy body. With its last effort the dying ape seized the hunter by the leg and hurled him to the ground, his fall being luckily broken by a decaying branch, which was crushed under his weight. Bruised and shaken, the three travellers stood by the carcase, over which the little men were singing a song of triumph, as if they had been the chief actors instead of intensely interested spectators. One of them was tugging at the knife to free it from the skull, and as he could not move it, the second, and then the third, had a try, all laughing with much merriment.

“It’s fun for them,” said Venning, rubbing a bruised arm.

“I believe,” said Mr. Hume, sourly, “they contrived the whole thing as a gladiatorial spectacle for their amusement. I don’t think I was ever so near death;” and he shook hands gravely. “If you had not fired when you did, he would have had me.”

“And what about us?” said Compton. “I never saw anything so awful, and never felt so helpless, as when it stood over us.”

“A good job for us he did stand,” said Venning, taking out his tape. “I should like to have his measurements. Just straighten him out.” He passed the tape over. “Length, 6 ft. 2 in.; round the chest, 55 in.; round the abdomen, 60 in.; length of arm, 44 in.; biceps, 14 in.—not so very huge; forearm, 15 in.; calf, 13 in. His power is in the muscles of the shoulders, chest, and back.”

“And jaw,” said Compton. “Look at the sweep of the jaw-bone. He would crack a man’s thigh with ease.”

“And just think,” said Venning, “that he has practically four hands, that he can spring like a lion, climb like a leopard, walk like a man, swing like a monkey, bite like a hyaena, and strike like a battering-ram. I guess I’ve had enough of gorillas.”

When Mr. Hume signalled to the guides to continue, they expressed by signs their astonishment that the white men did not sit down to make a meal off the gorilla; and when they really did gather that the feast was to be abandoned, one remained behind, and another disappeared into the trees, while the third resumed the journey with backward looks of regret. About an hour later they met the entire pigmy tribe on the way to the feast, and as they swarmed over the tree in passing, the little people greeted Mr. Hume with much honour as the “father of all the gorillas.”

The next day the travellers reached the opening whence they had started on the trail of the cannibals a few days before. They parted with the sooty guide, giving him a handful of sugar, a stick of tobacco, a small tin of salt, and a cartridge-case. The latter he

placed proudly in a hole in the lobe of his ear; the other things he stowed away in his little sack, made from the skin of a small monkey.

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When he had gone, the three plunged into the wood to follow the river down to the spot where the Okapi had been docked. After leaving many shreds and patches of clothing on the thorns, Mr. Hume and Venning discovered the spot by the "blaze" on the trees adjoining made by the axe. If it had not been for those signs, they would not have recognized the place, for they had expected to find a clearing, and, instead, there was already a thicket of young shoots, which had sprouted from the buried saplings. Cutting away this growth, they soon removed the soft mould and the covering of branches. Then they cut a way down to the river, and ran the Okapi out into the water. The chains were greased, the deck riveted in position, the mast fixed, and the boat washed down. That done, Venning put into effect a scheme he had been turning over in his mind for a regular hot-air bath that would steam all the ague, rheumatism, and fever out of them.

"What we must do," Mr. Hume was always insisting, "is to keep the circulation active."

"We're going to have a Turkish bath," said Venning, firmly—"a real one—one that will clear all the germs put at a run, and remove this continual singing in the ears."

"Does your head sing?" asked Compton, pressing his forehead. "My brain seems to be on the shake as if it were jelly."

"That's the feeling," said Venning; "and I've got a notion. See the well? Good; that's to be our hot-air bath. We'll rig the oil-sheets over it by means of a couple of bent saplings. We'll put the lamp inside, bank loam around it, moisten the loam with water, leave it until it steams, then pack one of us in. I'll be the first, to show that it is safe."

"Good," said the hunter, gravely. "And when you have been steamed, we'll knead you, wash you down with warm water, and shave your head."

They did it. Venning went under the sheet; he went in nearly black, and very heavy in the head. He came out brown and white, with a feeling of lightness; and when he had been shaved, shampooed, thumped, whacked, and kneaded, he felt "pounds better." Compton and Mr. Hume each underwent the hot-air cure, with the same good results; and then, clothed in clean underwear, and protected by a dose of quinine, they manned the levers, and went skimming along the river, glad to be back in their good boat.

"We must call for the old Arab," said Compton, "now that we are bound for the Place of Rest."

"He'll be in the way," growled Venning; "and we have no time to lose."

"We will call for him," said Mr. Hume. "If we miss Muata, the old chap could act as guide."

So they put in where the tall palm grew, and while Venning guarded the boat, the other two went up the path to find the village. They found it in ruins, and on a post was the head of the old Arab with a lot of Arab writing.

Compton read it out. “Hassan has been. Those who are silent when they could talk remain silent for ever.”

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“So,” muttered Mr. Hume, staring around under frowning brows, “Hassan has been.”

“Poor old harmless chap,” said Compton; “and he knew my father. I should like,” he added sternly, “to meet that Hassan, Mr. Hume.” “So should I, my boy.”

“He certainly tried to get some news of us from the old Arab, and failing, lolled him.”

“Ay, ay. That’s the whole story, lad.” They took the head of the old man, who, they believed, had been faithful to them at the cost of his life, and gave it reverent burial. Then they returned to the boat, and pushed off.

“Not there?” asked Venning.

“Ay, he was there, but Hassan has been before us, and the old man was dead.”

“He must hate us very much to pursue us so relentlessly,” said Venning, when he had heard the story.

“He is not bothering about us,” said Mr. Hume. “I take it that he has heard of Muata’s hiding-place, this Garden of Rest, and wants it for his own use. Now, lads, is this to be our quarrel? There is no call upon us to interfere, and we should escape a lot of trouble if we did not interfere. I put the matter to you. Shall we ’bout ship, and go down past the Stanley Falls towards the Zambesi and the south, where there is good hunting.”

“We’ll keep on, sir, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, it’s all the same to me,” said the hunter.

“Don’t tell me,” said Compton. “You are not indifferent about it, for you said you would like to meet Hassan.”

“So I would, lad. I would rather shoot a man like that than a lion. The animal kills for food, the man slays for the savage lust of power.”

“Then we keep on,” said Compton, “and no more speeches from the captain to the crew on the score of turning back.”

“There’s one thing,” said Mr. Hume; “this Garden of Rest, if we find it, may turn out to be a complete naturalist’s preserve.”

“Hurrah!” cried Venning. “Give me the beetles, and you can have the gorillas. Let’s hope we shall have a real rest in this wonderful place.”

“Won’t be much rest while Hassan is around,” said Compton; “but we’ll have the pull of him if we can get there first.”

“Without his knowledge,” added the hunter. “The advantage of a surprise is everything in native warfare, as you have gathered in listening to Muata’s yams.”

“We’ll have to lie up to-night, I suppose, or else we shall overrun the spot where we are to meet Muata.”

“It cannot be very far. I take it we are now travelling on the short leg of a triangle, the long leg being the track we made through the forest, and the other leg the tributary stream down which Hassan went to pick up his cannibal allies.”

“All we want, then,” said Compton, “is a few hours’ start, for we can show a clean pair of heels to any canoe afloat.”

“That is right enough; but you have to reckon with a cunning foe, and it is more than probable that Hassan has left some of his men ahead to keep watch. We’ll hug the shore, and keep on as long as possible.”

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The levers clanked merrily, the little screw lashed up the dark waters. One reach of the river was very much like another, but the silence and the absence of life which at first had depressed them now gave them comfort, for in this gloomy waterway a strange human being meant a possible enemy.

CHAPTER XVI

ACROSS THE LAGOON

As the night came stealthily creeping over wood and water, sending hosts of birds with loud scoldings to their chosen roosting-places— for out of those myriads of trees only certain trees were selected— the boat was put in near the right bank. The levers were muffled, and the “lookout,” with a bill-hook ready to fend off any snag, and a bull’s-eye lantern to shoot a sudden light, took up his position in the bows. She crept on slowly through the pitch darkness, the crew easing off at times to listen as some loud noise broke the silence—the plunge of a hippo, the snort of an angry bull, the swirl of a fish, or the cry of an otter from the bank. In one of these silences a whisper came from the bows.

“Look,” said Venning; and he flashed the bull’s-eye on the bank.

The others, glancing along the streamer of light, saw reflected two bright eyes, a gleaming muzzle, and the tips of curved horns.

“A buffalo,” whispered Mr. Hume.

As the boat drifted slowly past, they watched the bright eyes, and the eyes of the animal followed them. Out of the intense blackness only those points were visible—the luminous eyes, the shining muzzle, and the tips of the horns. The rest was left to the imagination; yet the picture seemed to stand out of a shaggy forest bull, his fore feet on the brink of the water, and his head thrown up.

“What a picture for a flash-light photo!” muttered Venning, longingly.

“What a mark for a shot!” sighed Mr. Hume. “And red meat would be very welcome."’

As they slipped away the buffalo snorted, crashed into the forest, and battered his way on a course parallel to them to get another view of that mysterious light, for presently they heard his snort again. A little further on a bull hippo charged at them, but the glare of the light full in his eyes stopped him, and he remained open-mouthed, so that all they saw was a yawning gulf bristling with ivory. Mr. Hume, who had picked up his Express at the first snort, laid it down again with a laugh.

“Took the fight out of him that time, Venning; but it’s a little risky.”

“Keeps one wide awake, at any rate,” said Compton.

“We’ll continue for an hour or so and then tie up, for we may have a heavy day to-morrow.”

For a couple of miles the boat felt its way through the dark without incident, and then the look-out signalled another discovery.

“Light ahead!”

The Okapi was brought broadside on, so that the crew could have a clear view of the river; and they sat for some time in silence, looking at the strange object—a tiny but steady glow of fire.

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“Shut off the bull’s-eye, Venning. We’ll make for mid-stream, and approach the fire with caution.”

The boat moved out into the current, then worked up very tenderly while Venning steered, with his eyes fixed on that little speck of red. Slowly they advanced, cautiously were the levers pulled over and shot back, so that there should be no noise, and silently the smooth craft cut into the darkness. But light travels far, and they seemed to get no nearer.

“I believe it’s a light in a boat,” muttered the lookout.

The others slowed up, and they listened, but they heard no sound of paddles, only innumerable stealthy whisperings from the woods.

“It is stationary,” said Mr. Hume, “and ashore, as you may see from its fixity. Beep her away. We can’t be too careful.”

They made a long reach down, going very warily, and taking care not to keep their eyes solely upon the fire; for a light is a good lure to draw the careless into an ambush, unless they are on the look-out for danger in a different quarter.

“I can’t see any one about,” said Venning, who was using the night-glasses.

In complete silence they came at last opposite the fire, but no sooner had they passed it than it went out.

“Put her round,” whispered Mr. Hume.

The boat answered her helm like a well-trained horse, and they went back on their course to see if they could fetch the light again.

“Yes, there it is.”

“Then it’s a signal,” muttered Mr. Hume; “only to be seen by some one coming up-stream.”

“Suppose it is meant for us?”

Mr. Hume went forward with his Express, and relieved Venning at the helm.

“We’ll creep nearer in this time, but be ready to make a dash if it proves to be one of Hassan’s watch-parties.”

This time the Okapi hugged the shore, and stopped when it came opposite the light.

Out of the darkness came a low laugh. “I have been awaiting you, O great one; but you came so softly that I should not have known except for these wise ones here.”

“Welcome, Muata!” The boat was run in now without further pause, and Mr. Hume leapt ashore with the line. “And who are the wise ones, chief, that could smell us out in the dark?”

“Who but the jackal and the wise woman?”

“You found your mother, then! I’m very glad—very glad. And what about Hassan? He has passed this way, and made his sign at the village where we left the old Arab.”

“The Arab thief comes up the little river with many canoes and the whole pack of man-eaters. So we three will get into the shining canoe, if the great one wills, and make good the time before sunrise.”

“The boat is ready.”

Muata called. The fire was put out, and presently two figures appeared within the range of the bull’s-eye lantern—a woman and the jackal. The woman halted to speak a few words to Muata, then she put a hand on the hunter’s shoulder and peered into his face. She laughed and said something.

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“What says the wise woman, Muata?”

“Lion—not gorilla. Haw! We heard the story from the little men how the great one cleft the skull of the gorilla; and how they called you my father, after the man-monkey. But I told her you were more lion than ape, and she has judged for herself.”

Mr. Hume laughed, and held a hand to help the woman into the boat; but she stepped aboard unassisted, and moved forward, the jackal following very humbly.

“And the river-man?”

“He struck the trail of three man-eaters, and followed them, seeing red. Maybe he slew them and was slain, for there was much noise, and he did not return. So we here are all till we reach the hiding-place.”

The boat was pushed off, and Muata took one of the levers.

“Let the young lions sleep,” he said. “We can have no better watch than we now have. See! the jackal smelt you while you were still afar, and the chiefs wife heard the noise of the boat before I did. Wow! We are safe while they watch.”

“Does the chiefs wife smoke?” “Ow ay! tobacco would please her heart.” Mr. Hume passed a pipe and tobacco to the woman, and Compton gave her a lighted match. She took them as if they were ordinary objects of her life, lit the pipe, and by the flame of the match leant forward to peer into the boy’s face as she had stared at Mr. Hume. And she spoke a word or two before turning her face to the bows for the long watch.

“The river runs into the sea; but the river is always full. That is her word, young lion.”

“Which means?”

“I told her you were the white man’s son, and she has seen for herself. Maybe her words mean that when the father is gone the son takes his place. But in time you will know, for her meaning is sometimes hard to understand. Now sleep, you two, for there is great need for us ahead.”

Without more ado the two “young lions” rolled themselves in their blankets and enjoyed the rare luxury of an untroubled sleep, and when they awoke they were in a vast lagoon, out of which stood the bleached skeletons of dead trees, with gaunt bare branches, in all manner of fantastic shapes. But it was only the trees that were dead, for the astonished eyes of the boys rested on such a multiplicity of animal life as they had never before seen. Birds roosted on the aforesaid dead branches—sooty ibis, white pelicans, crows, kingfishers, and here and there, like sentinels on the topmost branches, a white-headed eagle, with his hooked bill, dominating the scene. Wheeling through the air were strings of duck and wisps of snipe in battalions, rows of cranes with

their long legs trailing, and on the surface of the smooth water, on scores of small islands, formed originally by uprooted trees, and under the water, there were yet innumerable creatures. It was certainly grand hunting for all. There were flies and gnats for the frogs, tadpoles and the spawn of frogs for

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the little fishes, little fishes were preyed on by the ducks and the big fishes, while the birds and the big fishes in turn provided breakfast, dinner, and supper for the crocodiles. Apparently the crocodiles were too tough, too musky, and too powerful, to serve as food for any other animal higher up in the scale; but it is not to be supposed that they had merely to open their jaws to snatch a meal, for there were shallows all about where the waders could go to sleep in peace, standing on one leg. And there they stood, regiments of them—crested cranes, blue cranes, black ibis, pink ibis, flamingoes, and wild geese.. And the noise was tremendous!

The Okapi sailed under a gentle breeze right into the thick of this sportsman's paradise, and from the low islands armies of mosquitoes gaily advanced to meet her until they formed a moving cloud around her, only kept off from eating up the crew by the merciful intervention of the canvas awning and mosquito curtains.

"What a magnificent specimen of the spoonbill bittern," groaned Venning. "If we had only brought an air-gun—for I suppose we cannot fire."

"Look at those fat geese in a row," said Compton. "What a stew they would make. Just one shot, sir."

"It won't do," said Mr. Hume. "A single shot would raise noise enough to wake the seven sleepers."

"There is another way," said Muata.

"What way?"

"A line such as you used for fish—see." He shaved off some thin shreds of buffalo biltong, chewed it, and dropped it astern. An inquisitive teal watched him keenly, and, as the boat went by, made a swoop for the fragment. The incident was noticed, and a big gander, curiously tame, came sailing up, arching its neck in imitation of the swan. The boys were at the lockers in a flash, drew out a couple of lines, bent on a large hook, buoyed it, by the advice of Mr. Hume, between two floats, baited the hooks, and payed the line over the stem, while Muata dropped over a few more pellets. There was a flotilla of duck and geese following in the wake of the Okapi, and in less than a minute there were two bites. Compton had the black and grey gander, while Venning had a fat duck in tow. The Okapi was backed full speed astern and the astonished fowl pulled on board before they knew what had happened. The geese sheered off at once, speaking to each other in subdued tones, but in the next quarter of an hour three more ducks were added to the bag. Then a piratical craft appeared in the very thick of the peaceful convoy, opened its broadside, as it were, and engulfed a couple. There was a swirl in the water, a resounding smack made by a long scaley tail, and a third fowl went the way

of the others. Beating their wings, the duck rose with loud quacks to seek the safety of a shallow, and the leery green eyes of the piratical crocodile appeared above the disturbed water.

“You old thief!” cried Venning.

“It is his hunting-ground,” said Muata, with a chuckle, as he passed the birds to his mother, who began at once to pluck them.

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“Out with the big pot and the preserved vegetables,” said Compton. “We’ll have one big feast, even if we go hungry for a week.”

The pot was got out, water from the lagoon was boiled, strained, and boiled again, then, as each bird was cleaned, it was cut up and placed in the pot, the offal falling to the share of the jackal. It was a great meal, of soup, game, cabbage, potatoes, onions, and carrots, all mixed up, and when it had been eaten down to the last drop, with a dose of quinine for safety, and a cup of coffee for comfort, they were all shiny and happy. The oily fat from the birds, which formed a layer on the top while the mess was boiling, had been carefully removed, and when it had cooled, Muata and his mother rubbed it over their faces, necks, arms, and hair until they glistened.

“Well, I’m sugared!” said Compton.

“Fat very good for the skin,” said Muata, showing his teeth. “You try.”

“Better for the guns, chief.’’

“Wow! and for the big knife;” and the chief polished up his Ghoorka blade, while the boys greased the rifles and stared at the chief’s wife, thinking, as they stared, of the adventures which she had been through since she fled from the kraal of her husband, driven out by the slave-hunters. They had seen old black women at the villages, wrinkled old crones, phenomenally thin; but this woman was not much wrinkled, and she was not thin. Neither was she ugly as those others had been, for she carried herself straight, and there was a dignity about her actions whenever she moved her long bare arms. But they came to the conclusion that she was not a person to sew on buttons, for there was a hard look about the eyes, and the whole cast of the face was set and stem. It did not seem possible that she could smile, and, remembering the careless laughter of native women, who were amused at anything or nothing, she was a mystery to them. So they very soon gave up trying to make anything out of her, and turned their attention to the lagoon, which stretched away a good ten miles on either hand to the dark fringe of forest. Evidently the forest had grown where the shallow waters now were, as the dead trees testified.

“The land has sunk about here,” said Venning, “and underneath there must be a coal-bed in process of formation. Now, if there were hills around, and a nice clean sand-beach, I should like to spend months here.”

“Too many mosquitoes!”

“Besides,” said Mr. Hume, striking in, “there are hills.”

“Where? Over there? Why, that’s a cloud!”

“Perhaps so; but the cloud rests on a hill-top. Isn’t that so, Muata?”

“Those be the gates to the Place of Rest.”

“By Jimminy! How far?” This was something to be excited about.

Muata held up five fingers. “So many suns will rise and set.”

“And does the forest lie in between?”

“Between and beyond.”

“And the Place of Rest, is that forest also?”

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“The sun shines there all day,” said the chief; “and a man can see his shadow lengthen. The little ones play on the white sand, the women and the girls work in the gardens on the open slopes of the hills, and the men——”

“Well, what about the men?”

“They lie in the sand like lizards, and talk like parrots.”

It was the chief’s wife who spoke scornfully, using the language they had mastered.

“Wow!” chimed in the chief, “they are timid people, the men; but the time is at hand when those who will not fight will be set to do women’s work in the gardens.”

The woman nodded her head grimly. “The time is at hand when the reapers will work, not in the cornfields, but about the fires where the men sit. Hassan is to be feared; but he can only enter if he is helped from within.”

“I listen, O wise one,” said the son, sternly. “Even if I weed them all out so that there are none left but Muata and these three white strangers, your counsel shall be followed.”

“It is well,” said the mother, nodding her head.

“You seem to have little faith in your people,” said Compton.

“Haw! They grow fat and timid. They have no fight in them. Once before, when I was a boy, I beat them; but they have forgotten.”

“I rather think, chief, that they would be as well off under Hassan as under you.”

“Hassan would yoke them in and drive them out through the forest into the plains. A man must fight for his kraal. That is the law.”

“It is the law,” said the woman.

“And that is the Place of Rest?” said Venning, lingering on the sight. “More like a place of trouble for some; but, at any rate, if there are hills and open places, I shall be glad to get there. It would be a real treat to have space enough for a trot. But, I say, it is time you two slept.”

“That is just what I have been thinking,” said Mr. Hume.

The two boys took the levers, but Muata declined to rest. He said there were two openings leading from the lagoon to the hills—one a broad channel, commonly used, the other a smaller channel.

“We will take the little river,” he said, “so that Hassan, who will follow the other track, will not know of our going. But it is hard to find this little water-path, and I must search for it.”

“Don’t go up a track that will not give water for the boat. Are you sure that it will carry us?”

“Ow ay! there is water enough, great one. So sleep well.”

For a couple of hours the boys worked the levers, and at the end they came upon a thicket of reeds, along which the Okapi skirted, while the chief and his mother kept a keen outlook. Twice they plunged into the reeds on a false trail; and then, as they lay off scanning the oily water for trace of a current, the woman held up her hand.

“It is Hassan,” said the chief.

Venning reached for his glasses, and far back over the shining lake he saw little black specks emerging, as it were, out of the forest.

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“Canoes,” he said; “a great many.”

If they did not find the outlet soon they would be sighted. Muata and his mother spoke a few words rapidly, and then he signalled to the crew to enter the reeds. This done, and the boat screened, he slipped into the water and disappeared shorewards. For some time he was away, during which the flotilla of canoes came into view like a flock of ducks, still so far off that the boys could not hear the sound of paddles. Presently Muata splashed back, and, towing the boat, made across a barrier of reeds that had been banked up, forming a sort of natural breakwater, and most effectually hiding the mouth of the stream he sought. Mr. Hume was awakened, and the entire crew, taking to the water, managed to hoist the boat over the barrier. This done, they climbed on board again, and were soon in the mouth of a dark river, almost overhung by great trees.

“That is well done,” said Muata. “Now we can sleep, great one; for the other river runs far from this, so that Hassan’s men will not hear us.”

They were soon asleep. Even the chief’s wife stretched herself out with the jackal at her feet, and the two boys were left in sole charge. They had been toughened by the rough-and-tumble of their strange experiences, and inured to the brooding silence and dark avenues of the forest; but they entered into a scene that tried their nerves. The trees closed in as they advanced, and very soon they entered a leafy tunnel, lit up by a faint light that barely showed up the slimy banks, covered by a network of snake-like roots. The little waves churned up by the screw splashed softly upon the roots, making the only sound that disturbed the sombre silence of the place. So low was the leafy roof at places that branches rustled on the awning.

“Fix up the big lantern in the bows, old man,” said Compton, who was facing up-stream. “There is not light enough to steer by. Better sit up there with the bill-hook while I work the levers.”

Venning went forward, and soon a shaft of light pierced the gloom.

For a mile or more they threaded this tunnel, and not a sign of life was there the whole way. When they emerged from the darkness into comparative space and light, the boys wiped their faces, which were clammy with moisture.

“A few more experiences like that, Dick, and we cross the river for good.”

“Eh?”

“Why, man, it’s the Styx. It has given me the shivers.”

“Quinine,” said Compton; and they dosed one another there and then. “I say, I’d give the whole five hundred miles square of this forest for one little glade in Epping.”

“Bother!”

“Of all the squirmy, snaky, gloomy, airless, sunless, moist, decaying masses of misery, I think this is the worst.”

“It is, Dick; it is. There’s not a butterfly even.”

“Thunder! It’s raining fire! No; it’s an ant S It’s raining ants, by gum!”

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“You ass, you’ve hooked the bill into a nest. There—that round, black thing—like a football. They’re running up the bill-hook.”

There was a splash as the boat was shoved off, then muttered exclamations and a yelp from the jackal: Many scores of ants had invaded the Okapi, and each ant, full of murderous rage for the wanton attack upon the nest, seized hold of the first soft thing it came across, and once it gripped it held on like a bull-dog. War was waged on the invaders, and when the last had been discovered and crushed, there was no sleep in the savage eyes of the awakened.

Incidents like these alone varied the monotony of the dreary days they spent in that mournful slough, and if it had not been for the regular exercise at the levers, and the hope of a speedy release from their surroundings, the young explorers must have succumbed. As it was, they lost colour, became pale, languid, and heavy-eyed; and Mr. Hume, noting the signs of the dreaded wasting sickness with anxiety, did not spare himself or Muata when it came to their turn to work the levers.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PLACE OF REST

The chiefs wife urged them on. Neither night nor day did she seem to rest, for whenever one of the boys, in a feverish sleep, tossed his arms about, she was at his side with a drink compounded of herbs, that kept the fever away. She took her spell at the levers, her long round arms moving with unexpected power, and only the hunter himself could tire her out. As for him, he was not happy unless he was working, and at times he made the screw spin again under his fierce strokes, whenever his eyes fell on the wan faces of his young companions stewing in the insufferable heat. He shortened the journey by twenty-four hours, for on the afternoon of the fourth day the woman, for the first time, showed signs of joy.

“Lift up your heads, O young lions,” she cried; “let the light come into your eyes, and the strength into your limbs, for we are at the gates! You will catch the cool wind in your mouths. Your nostrils will sniff the air of the hills; your feet will tread the open way; your eyes will see the white clouds afar. Awake, my children, we are at the gates.”

They lifted their heads, throbbing with the touch of fever, and before them they saw a sheet of clear water; beyond that a glistening wall of rock, and following up higher and higher, they saw the deep blue of the sky.

“We are out at last,” said the hunter, in his deep tones. “Off with the awning, Muata; let us breathe again.”

The awning was thrown back, and the boys sat up, drawing in the air in great gulps.

“This is but the beginning,” said the woman. “A little further and your eyes will rest on the gardens below and the hilltops above. You will skip like the he-goat from rock to rock. You will shout and rejoice. I know. I was young, too, and I also came through the dark way.”

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“Where now, Muata?” asked the hunter.

“If the great one cares to leave the canoe, we could reach the top to-night, and sleep far above the woods. None come here. The water is ‘taboo,’ and the boat would be safe.”

“Let us go up,” urged Compton.

“Yes; up out of this stagnation,” cried Venning, with a longing look up.

Mr. Hume ran the boat in, and Muata leapt ashore. As his feet felt the firm ground he raised one hand high and broke into a chant, the woman joining in at intervals. As he chanted he stamped his feet on the sand; and this song was of himself—of his deeds in the past, of his triumphs in the future.

“Wow!” he said, when he had finished. “There were many days that Muata thought never to look upon these walls again; many times, when his heart was dark, when his blood was like water; and lo! he stands against the walls of his home.”

“Of his resting-place,” corrected the woman. “His home lies beneath the setting sun.”

“I know how you feel, Muata. If I were to see again the cliffs of old England, I would sing too.”

“It must be like finding a new beetle,” said Venning.

“We are not out of the woods yet,” chimed in Mr. Hume, grimly, “so just give your attention to our stores. We must carry up as much as we can, for, ‘taboo’ or not ‘taboo,’ I do not like the idea of leaving all our things here.”

They made up in parcels as much of the stores as they could carry, and the woman strode off first, erect and graceful, with the largest parcel on her head. Venning followed, carrying only his carbine, blanket, and bandolier; then Muata, with sixty pounds’ weight on his head, then Compton, and, last of all, Mr. Hume, with an ample load. A fairly open path, over a lattice-work of roots, mounted up through the trees, and the hunter “blazed” the path by chipping a slice of bark off every fifth tree. Up and up the woman swung with free strides, her short leather skirts, trimmed with beads, rattling as she went; and after many a breather, for the sake of the whites, she strode out, one thousand feet above the lake, on to a rock-strewn slope, free of trees. A glance back showed the evening mist rolling like a huge curtain over the sombre forest, so that they seemed to be looking down upon a silent sea.

“A little more, my children—a little more, and you will sleep under a roof.”

She swung off, balancing the load easily, and the others followed in and out among great rocks that had an unfamiliar look, bending their bodies to the steep and labouring

for breath; and as they went Mr. Hume drew marks on the ground, as a guide, with the point of his knife, for he trusted no man in the wilderness, except himself. After another thousand feet of climbing, they entered into a gorge, that narrowed at the summit to a mere cleft, and from that cleft they stepped out on to a broad platform, which dominated a wide valley rimmed with cliffs.

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“Behold the Place of Rest, O white men; and ye, O great one, who marked the trees below, and whose glance went ever back to note the way so that you should know it again, know that we have led you to the hiding, whose secret was our refuge.”

“Ay, mother,” said Mr. Hume, quietly, though surprised she had seen his actions; “and remember that we are here to help you keep out the wolf from your refuge. I marked the trail, as ye saw, for it is well that a man should know his way out as well as in.”

“He is right, O wise one,” said Muata, bearing down his mother’s suspicious look. “Should Hassan prevail in the fight, there would be no Muata to guide these our friends to safety.”

“He prevail!” cried the woman, sternly; then her finger shot out, and her form seemed to increase in stature. “Look, O warrior of feeble words; see how it greets the chief;” and her eyes blazed as she followed the flight of a great bird that swept out of the mist. “A sign—a sign, my son.”

“A black eagle,” said Venning. “Maybe it has its nest somewhere about here.”

“As this is the Place of Rest,” said Mr. Hume, “it would do us all good to sit down. Where is the hut you spoke of, mother?”

“Shall I carry you, little one?” said the woman, with a loud laugh. “A few steps only. A little way, and you can eat and sleep.”

She passed to the right under shelter of a cliff, and came very quickly to the door of a wide cave, that ran back some thirty feet.

“Here is your home, and in the morning the sun will look in at the door, and from the threshold, when you awake, you may sit and feast on such a sight as will gladden your eyes, for now the shadows hide it.”

They threw their packages on the floor and sat down on a carpet of clean white sand.

“A little further there is water. Muata, my son, for the last time do woman’s work and light the fire, while I go below for food.”

“Say nothing to the people of my coming,” said the chief. “Presently I will go down secretly, and see how the men bear themselves.”

“Wow! I see now it is the chief, and not a carrier of wood.”

She went off into the gathering gloom, but was back in the hour with a great bunch of yellow bananas, a calabash of goats’-milk, and a young kid, showing no signs of weariness for all her toil. Those bananas, growing with an upward curve against the

stem to relieve the dead weight on the branch as they grew, were just then a finer sight than the most magnificent scenery, and the travellers made a great feast, which done, they stretched themselves out on the clean dry sand up there in the clean, crisp air, and slept till the sun next morning streamed into the open cave.

They woke up to find themselves alone, but not forgotten; for outside there lay a little heap of good things, including fresh eggs, a calabash of milk, sweet potatoes, and a bundle of firewood.

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“By Jove!” cried Compton; “look at the view. Isn’t it splendid?”

“Well, it won’t vanish,” said Mr. Hume, “so we’ll have breakfast first.”

Further on along the ledge there was a little cascade, falling into a bath-like opening evidently, from the signs, of human construction, and here, in ice-cold water, they refreshed themselves. After breakfast they were like new men. The keen air put to flight the beginnings of malaria contracted in the noisome atmosphere of the dark water-course they had last travelled, and brought the sparkle into their eyes, and a smile to the lips.

“Now for the view—for a good long look at the Garden of Rest.”

“Not yet. We’ll first overhaul our rifles and stock of ammunition. This is no picnic, you know. We may be fighting for our lives to-morrow; so to work!”

Orders had to be obeyed, and the ammunition was sorted out— providing 150 rounds for the Express, 250 rounds each for the three carbines, and 175 rounds for the shot-gun.

“That is a short supply, boys. We must be careful not to throw away a single shot; for, remember, we’ve got to go a long way before we reach safety, even after this business of Hassan’s is done. We must try and do with fifty rounds apiece in this little affair.”

“Little affair!” muttered Venning, remembering the flotilla of canoes and the mob of fierce-looking cannibals.

“Big or little, we can’t afford to indulge in reckless firing. One bullet, one man, is my motto.”

“But we cannot all shoot like you,” grumbled Venning.

“A matter of habit,” said the hunter, quietly. “All you have to do is to get the advantage of position, and then it is no merit to shoot straight. Drop three men out of a hundred, and you will stop the remainder; drop thirty out of a thousand, and the same thing happens. If there are only a hundred, and you have the upper ground, let them come within two hundred yards; if the enemy is in great numbers, open at five hundred yards; and anywhere down to fifty yards according to his dwindling strength. Shoot straight every time, and the plan answers like clockwork.”

“Have you tried it?”

“Many times, but only in self-defence. Now we’ll just examine our position, for it is always good to have open a line of retreat.”

They walked along the ledge to the mouth of the gorge up which they had ascended, saw that the ledge ended there, then retraced their steps past the cave and the bath to a spot where a break in the ledge opened up a way down into the valley.

“Just take note of that path,” said the hunter, “and follow it down.”

“What a beautiful spot!” said Compton.

“It does the eyes good to look on it,” said Venning, enthusiastically. “See how the sun shines on the broad leaves— banana-leaves, I think—bordering the silver stream.”

“Never mind the silver stream,” broke in Mr. Hume, testily. “Fix your attention on this path. Get it into your mind. See how it drops down to that solitary palm.”

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“Now remember that if you are down there, and have to run, you are to make for that palm, ascend here, and cut along to the gorge. Have you got that fixed? Good. Now we will go back.”

At last, with their feet dangling over the edge of the ledge before the cave, they were at liberty to satisfy their longing to take their fill of the beauty outspread before them. Perhaps it was by contrast with the monotony of the forest that the scene below them seemed to them all to be the most beautiful that had ever gladdened the eyes of men. Imagine a valley about five miles in length, narrowing at each end, and opening out about the centre to a width of two miles, the sides of grass sloping up to a buttress of rock, and rippling along the whole length into folds, with little valleys in between—-narrow at the summit, where they joined the rock-wall, and wide at the base, where they opened out on the parent valley, through which flowed a broad stream, fringed its whole length with a border of pale green banana-leaves with stems of gold. In the little valleys were gardens, showing up like a chessboard pattern in neat patches of green, red, and brown, according to whether there was ripening millet, young maize, or new-turned mould. Halfway down the valley was a village of beehive-shaped huts, with an open space in the centre, adorned with one fine tree, under whose spreading branches they could see distinctly the forms of men. In the strong white light every object could be easily picked out—goats browsing among the rocks at the base of the cliffs; flocks of birds circling above the gardens; fowls walking among the huts; tiny little black forms toddling in the sun, and their mothers squatting with their faces turned to the council tree.

“No women in the gardens,” said Mr. Hume, “and that always means war.”

Venning readjusted his glasses. “There is something I can’t quite make out at the back of the village. Looks like men lying down.”

Mr. Hume took the glasses and turned them on the spot. “Humph!” he muttered, while his brow clouded. “They are dead men.”

“Five,” said Compton.

“Yes, five. Muata has been at work!”

“Muata? He was sitting here quietly eating last night.”

“Maybe it was either he or they, and he happened to be first to strike.”

“It is awful!” muttered Venning.

The discovery destroyed their pleasure in the gentle beauty of the scene below, and they fell to discussing Hassan’s probable plan of attack, arriving at the conclusion that

the chances of success were with him, when they contrasted his force with the small band of men down below.

“While they are talking,” said Compton, “Hassan will be seizing the best positions. Why on earth don’t they do something?”

“Perhaps they are at work already,” said Mr. Hume. “There is a small party coming down the valley from the left. Muata said something about Hassan’s determination to drown the people of the valley. He could only flood the valley by damming the stream at its outlet, which would lie to the left, and I guess those men have been seeing to the defence.”

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“The leading man has plumes in his head. A chief, I suppose.”

“It is the chief himself, Dick.”

“So it is. I can make out his Ghoorka knife. Let’s give him a shout;” and the two sent a loud “coo-ee” ringing down the slope. The sound reached the ears of the little band of warriors, for they stood to look up; it also reached the people in the village with a startling effect. The men jumped up from the ground, women snatched up children and scuttled hither and thither like ants disturbed. From the depths below a cry came up clear and crisp—the marvellous voice of the native, trained through long centuries to speed a message of war or peace, of victory or disaster, from hill to hill.

“Ohe! Ohe! my brothers, the chief awaits you.”

“Does he?” said Mr. Hume, dryly. “Then he may wait until he sends up a proper escort. Oh, here they come, I suppose,” as half of Muata’s body-guard detached themselves and advanced towards the palm-tree.

“Shall we go down?” said Compton, rising.

“Sit still, my lad. No chief ever hurries; and, you understand, we are all chiefs.”

“Are we, though?”

“We take rank with Muata, if he is the head chief; not out of pride, you understand, but out of policy. So just keep cool. Just look as if you were a sixth-form boy approached by a deputation from the kids. See?”

“I’ll be as cool and haughty as a——”

“Freshman in a bun-shop,” interposed Venning. “Me, too;” and he put on a high and mighty look.

“Don’t overdo it, my boy,” said Mr. Hume, with a grave smile.

There were seven men coming up, and they breasted the slope in single file at a walk which quickly got over the ground. On reaching the ledge they advanced at a trot up to within a few feet, when they suddenly halted, grounded their spears with a clang, and raised the right hand with the fingers spread. They were fine lads, straight of limb, supple and lithe, without, however, much show of muscle. Their quick glances, with a certain quality of wildness in the eyes, ranged over the three seated and silent whites.

“Greeting, O white men from out the forest, and the water beyond, and the father of waters beyond that.” The spokesman stepped forward. “Greeting from the great black one, the river-wolf—he who met the wild man of the woods alone; he who crept in at the

gate and slew the man-hunters; he the chief Muata. Greeting to the lion-killer, the cleaver of heads, the maker of plans, who came out of the mist in a shining boat. Greeting to the young lions who slew the tree-lion."

"What is your word?"

"The great chief awaits at the war council."

"Go down and tell your chief we will descend when we have made war medicine."

"Wow!" The spokesman fell back into the ranks. The seven warriors stood for a time in silence; then, at a word from the spokesman, they went through a salute, turned, and marched back in single file, chanting a war song as they went, as an accompaniment to a dancing stride.

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“What is the war medicine we are to make, sir?”

“Just the remains of our breakfast and supper, with a dose of quinine to finish up.”

“And those chaps will be telling the people down below that we are making strong medicine, warranted to kill Hassan at sight, and ward off spears, bullets, mosquitoes, and Arab swords.”

“Well, it will give them courage, if they think all that,” said Mr. Hume, coolly, as he inspected the rations.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FIGHT IN THE DEFILE

In the afternoon, having hidden away the reserve ammunition, they at last went down to the war council assembled under the tree in the village. Mindful of the instructions of Mr. Hume, the two boys were quite self-possessed and incurious, though it was a great effort to restrain expressions of surprise when they were face to face with Muata.

If they were under the necessity to play a part, so in a greater measure was he. The men about him were a mixed lot—of adventurers who had been compelled to seek a harbourage from revengeful enemies, of fugitives who had escaped from the slave gangs—and they were of several tribes. Only a strong hand could keep them in order, and Muata could not afford for a moment to sacrifice his authority. He was master in that valley, or nothing. Hence he received the greeting of his old white friends without a sign of cordiality.

His naturally fine face was hideous in war-paint, two lines of yellow extending to his ears from the comers of his mouth, and another black line running from the centre of the forehead down between the eyes. Two long black feathers were secured in his head circlet, and about his throat he wore a necklace made of the teeth of the gorilla and the claws of a lion. His eyes were fierce and bright, and the quivering of his nostrils showed also that he was labouring under suppressed excitement. Mr. Hume recognized at once that he was face to face with a crisis, and instinctively he realized that it depended on him to save the situation, not only for himself and his young companions, but for Muata also. His calm eyes travelled over the ring of black faces behind the chief. He saw there were two parties. On one side were the young warriors, men of the chiefs age, who probably had been brought up in the valley; on the other was a larger number of older men, whose lowering looks told a tale of distrust and incipient revolt.

“Behold,” he said, making up his mind to the role he would play, “we are the chief’s ‘white men.’ We have made strong medicine. Shall I speak, O black bull of the forest?”

“Speak,” said Muata, who had caught the hunter’s eye when he acknowledged himself to be the chief’s white man.

“Thus says the medicine,” said the hunter, in his deep tones. “There are wolves on the way to eat up the people of this place.”

“Eh—hum!” sneered the older men. “We know.”

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“We are ready for them,” shouted the young warriors.

“Ye know—yes; but thus says my medicine—that you are not agreed among yourselves.”

“Er—hum!”

The hunter paused, and his strange eyes dwelt on the faces of the old men so that they looked away.

“There are some among you who would make terms with the enemy. There were some who had sent secret word to Hassan. Go ye a little way up the slope and ye will see the bodies of some of those slain in their treachery!”

“Wow!” The older men exchanged uneasy glances, and a woman’s voice rang out exultingly, “Ye speak the truth, O lion.”

“Thus says my medicine. If ye do not stand together, the enemy will enter at the gates, and not one will be left alive, for Hassan will slay those whose hearts were with him as he will those who were against him.”

One of the older warriors interrupted, shooting a finger at Muata.

“Great one, give us the word that we may slay this dog who comes to make trouble. Is this the counsel of a wise man on the coming of the enemy?”

“What would you do with him?” asked Muata, suavely.

“Send him after those others;” and the man pointed up the hill.

“You stand alone in your words,” said the chief, doubtfully.

The spokesman, with a look of fierce triumph, looked around.

“These also I speak for.”

“Haw!” said the chief, slowly, running his eye over the old men. “All men of wisdom! Do ye all hold with these words? Be not hasty. Ye have heard the words of the white man. Think well before ye speak.”

“How do we know that he is not Hassan’s man?” said the first spokesman, fiercely. “He was summoned to the council when the sun was young, and he has only now come. Who vouches for him?”

“I—Muata, the chief. Yet Muata does not give face to him or to you. Ye have heard both sides. Think well and decide quickly, for the day is passing, and we must be at the gates this night. First let me know”—and the chief’s voice was very mild—“do we agree in resisting Hassan, or is it that we differ about the white men?”

“We will fight against Hassan,” said the spokesman, quickly; “but this white man has spoken evil words. We know him not; and if thus early he begins to make mischief, what will happen when the fight is fierce? Stand by me, friends, so that the chief may see our mind.”

“Nay,” said an older man, who had been watching the chiefs face— “nay, let us talk the matter over.”

But it was too late, and the spokesman stepped aside, drawing with him a score of men.

“Is that all?” asked the chief, quietly, and his eyes ran keenly over the faces of the other warriors. “I will consider, for it is well that we should have no differences.”

“Hark to the wisdom!” shouted the warriors.

“We must stand together,” continued Muata, “or we fall. And I am glad of this thing; it has shown our weakness.” He stood a moment, then, with a sudden glance back at his young men, he bounded forward, and with one stroke of his terrible knife struck the leader of the band to the ground. “Hold!” he roared, as the young men, with a terrific shout, sprang forward. “Let a man move but a hand, and he is dead.”

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There was one breathless moment, during which men stood with upraised spears, their eyes glaring, their breasts heaving, and their breath coming in quick gasps. A woman laughed and the tension slackened.

“Back—back!” and before the fierce word of command the young warriors drew off.

“One is enough,” growled Muata, transformed, terrible in his fury, and glaring at the small band who stood around the fallen body. “If I thought that ye were in the counsels of this dog who lies there, not one of ye would be spared. It was in his heart to betray us to Hassan.”

“We knew it not, great black one,” muttered the men, humbly.

“If I thought ye knew,” growled the chief, with a terrible look, “there would be an end to you. See that ye carry yourselves well.”

The three travellers had stood fast during this scene, and now Muata, having wiped the blood from his knife, turned to them.

“It is the law,” he said, as if in explanation. “Haw! when I descended into the valley, in the night, I heard evil words spoken round the fire. It was time to act, and as it was seen by your medicine, the law was done.”

“Ohe! the law was done,” chanted the young warriors. “In the dark he came—the great strong one—silently out of the woods, and in the morning he smote.”

“It is the law. If any of you feel a thorn in the foot, you cut it out. Good; we are now whole.”

“We are whole, O chief,” cried all the warriors together. “Good; then we will go up to the gateways to be ready. In three companies we will go, and with each will so one of the chief’s white men. Ye have seen how strong is the white man’s medicine. If any hold back, the medicine will tell.”

The chief divided the men into three equal numbers of about fifty each, which left over some twenty-five of the older men who had sided with the slain man.

“Ye,” he said, addressing them, “will stay here with the women; and if it chance that the enemy prevail, take the women and the flocks to the foot of the rocks above, where the white men were. O Inkosikase! (chieftainess).”

Muata’s mother came forward, armed with spear, and behind her came other women carrying bows and arrows.

“These men, O mother, will stay by the kraal. They have learnt wisdom; but if they weaken, send a messenger to me.”

“There will be no messenger needed, O son,” said the woman, as she eyed the cowed men. “So go forth to the battle, for your scouts upon the heights call. They see the man-eaters and the women stealers.” Her long arm shot out, and every man stared to the far end of the valley.

Muata gave a few sharp orders, and the first band of fifty young men went off up the valley at a trot.

“O great one, you said the word that helped betwixt me and my men. I go forward with the next band—do you follow with the others; so that when Hassan presses us back, as he must, being the stronger, you will let a part of his men pass through the gate; then stop the rest, and we who ran will deal with those who got through.”

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“Is that your plan?”

“It is a good plan. When the leopard is caged his cunning goes. Your men will know where to hide; I have overlooked the place.”

“Good. The plan will be carried out.”

“There is also a second plan;” and Muata fixed his eyes on Compton. “Some men will be hidden within the valley, to fall upon those who enter. I wish the young lion to remain with them.”

“I should like that,” said Compton, quietly.

“Very well, my lad,” said Mr. Hume; “and I think Venning had better go with you. I prefer it. And hark! if the plan fails, you know the way to the boat. Shake hands.”

They shook hands, and the two lads placed themselves beside Muata as he went off with the second band. Mr. Hume, with the last company, followed at a slower gait, along a path that skirted the river with its fringe of banana trees, whose broad leaves shone in the sun. After a couple of miles, the river entered the defile through which long since it had cut its way out of the valley. It was at the entrance to the defile that an ambush was formed by Muata of fifteen men, with Compton and Venning. The warriors were already in position behind fallen rocks, the two lads being higher up the slope. They showed themselves as Mr. Hume came up, and waved their hats to him.

“Good luck!” they shouted, with a lump in their throats, for they loved the “great one,” and they feared the task allotted to him was full of danger.

“Take cover,” he said cheerily; “take good aim; and remember the palm tree, if things go wrong.”

“And remember,” they cried, “that we want you back safe and sound.”

“I’ll take precious care of myself,” he said with a smile, and followed his men into the dark defile.

“I wish we were going with him,” said Venning.

“The next best thing is to do our part as well as we can.”

They stretched themselves out each behind a rock and waited.

“There is one thing,” muttered Venning, after fidgeting about; “we cannot wait long, for it will be dark within an hour.”

“The sooner they come the better.”

They watched the shadows creeping across the valley—already over the river and halfway up the opposite slope; they watched the light on the cliffs above; but, most of all, they watched the young warriors crouching below them.

“They hear something,” said Venning; and his finger curled round the trigger.

“Keep cool, old chap. Remember, we don’t fire until after these men have given the sign. They are coming!”

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Sure enough, they were coming. The crouching warriors were quivering with excitement, as their gleaming eyes sought the mouth of the defile, out of which came a confused murmur. From a murmur to a hoarse rumble, then swiftly to the sound of fierce cries, the noise grew, and then a man leapt into view, and after him a score, all running as if for life. The plan was working, but was it not working too thoroughly? Would those men in whom was the panic of flight be able to stand? Muata came last, the long feathers streaming from his head; and as he ran, he shouted at his flying men words of insult. He cleared the defile, and at his heels there grew a fierce and growing clamour. Then, like a pack of wolves on the heels of a deer, the wild men of the woods burst into view. Close together they ran, and when they saw the valley stretching green and peaceful before them, they halted to drink in the sight. They feasted their eyes on the gardens, on the little flocks of goats, on the huts, on the women and children streaming up the slope on the right. Then they shouted in their joy of the promise of blood, of loot, of feasting— shouted and bounded forward. As they were in their stride once more, a wild yell rang out of the defile—a yell of fear and warning, that reached them, and that brought them up with a jerk. They faced round impatiently towards the defile again, and, behold, the mouth was held by a party of the enemy! But only a small party, less than half their number. With a yell they charged, and then they halted, and then they broke, and in a twinkling they had lost their cunning and were themselves the fugitives; for at the first step two of their leading men had fallen, and into the thick of them, from a distance of a hundred yards, came an accurate and unexpected rifle-fire. A trap! They shouted to each other, then broke streaming across the river in a frantic search for hiding. In vain they fled, for the valley seemed alive with men, Muata's band having scattered purposely; while keen-eyed boys, standing in tree-tops, marked down the fugitives, and shouted directions to the hunters. Even the women, led by the chief's mother, came down to join in the pursuit.

This work was not to the taste of the two white boys. They had played their part, and now they entered the defile to seek their companion.

Compton went ahead into the shadows, following the river, and thinking of nothing but the fight that they knew from the sounds was raging somewhere before them. As he turned a corner made by a projection in the wall, a dark hand seized him by the neck, and he was on his back, with a roaring sound in his ears, and a feeling of suffocation.

"What's the matter?" he gasped presently, when the grip on his throat relaxed.

"Can you stand?"

"Yes, of course." Compton got up. "You look queer."

"Feel queer," said Venning. "Enough to make a chap queer to see you go down like that with a big black on top of you."

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“Where is he?” and Compton hunted for his rifle.

“Shot him; but, for all I knew, I might have shot you. He fell in the river. Perhaps there are more of them hiding.”

“You shot him?”

“Yes—go along; but for goodness’ sake don’t let another one jump on you.”

Compton gripped his friend’s hand, then went on, very cautiously this time, for a little way, until he heard the crack of the Express, followed by the Hunter’s bull voice calling on the men to “stand fast.” He dashed on.

“We are coming,” yelled Venning, in a voice that sounded very youthful; but keen ears heard the high treble, and to them it brought comfort.

“The chiefs white men,” was the cry that rose, that reached Mr. Hume as he fought coolly, warily, in a crisis of the battle, knowing that, if he gave back an inch, the men behind him would bolt, and Hassan’s horde would swarm into the valley.

“Hurrah, my brave lads!” he roared. “You there behind, meet the white men and lead them up to the place where I first stood.”

“Yebo Inkose! (yes, chief)” cried a Zulu of the Angoni.

Thus the chief’s “white men” were met in the gorge by a dark figure panting heavily, who led them through other dark forms, some lying groaning, others silent—led them up to a ledge that overlooked the enemy.

“What now?” asked Compton, looking at the Zulu, and in the better light noticing the wounds on his head and left arm.

The Zulu pointed down. “Fire, O white men, between that tree and the rock. There they are thickest.”

The two rifles flashed out simultaneously.

“Hurrah!” roared the Hunter from below. “Give them the whole magazine.”

“Empty the magazines,” said Venning between his teeth; and the Lee-Metfords poured out a little rain of thin bullets into a space between the tree and the rock.

“Yavuma!” cried the Zulu.

“Yavuma!” roared the Hunter. “Stand firm, my children!”

The Zulu knelt on the brink of the ledge and peered down into the gloom, out of which came the shouts of the enemy, thrown into confusion, when apparently all was going well with the attack. An arrow struck on the rock, then another.

“The tree,” he said, pointing into a great tree-top. “Let one chief fire into the tree and the other at the white spot.”

“I see the white spot,” said Compton; and again he emptied his magazine, while Venning riddled the tree-top, out of which at the discharge men dropped in haste.

“Cease firing,” came the command from below. “Now, my children, forward once more. They run.”

“They run!” shouted Muata’s men, as they swept out from the defile after Mr. Hume.

“At the white spot,” said the Zulu, gripping Compton by the arm. “Fire; ye will not hurt our men. There are men with guns where the white is; and, see, others join them. Quick! Shoot, white men, or they slay our friends.”

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A flame spurted out from the gloom down where the white specks gathered, and the Lee-Metfords were not idle. The little bullets rang into the place where those white-robed Arabs were waiting with their rifles, and before they could play their part, the beaten van of their assaulting party broke upon them in their flight. The battle was over! Muata, returning from the killing of the men he had decoyed into the valley, raised the shout of victory, and the two boys went down into the gorge to join in the throng of exultant and excited warriors.

“Way for the chief’s white men!” cried the Angoni Zulu, staggering from his hurts.

“Bayate! to the white men,” shouted the warriors, rattling their spears.

“We are no chiefs men,” said Compton, proudly.

“Ohe!” said Muata, overhearing the words. “Lion’s cub, I hear. Ye shall have the chief’s feather; and the great one, where is he?”

Out of the darkness beyond came the chant of deep voices—the song of the men who had held the gate, “The great one,” “Lion-throated,” “He whose roar filled the valley,” and so on, until they recognized the form of their chief, when very wisely they directed their praise to his deeds.

Mr. Hume, bare-armed, reeking of battle, hoarse from shouting, stepped up and gripped hands with the boys.

“We go to our house on the hill, chief,” he said.

“There will be feasting to-night, my brothers, and your places will be beside the chief,” said Muata.

“’Sot for us. Feast well; but watch well also, for Hassan has not had his fill. Come, lads.”

They left Muata giving directions for guarding the gate, and went back through the gorge into the valley, and down towards the village, where they were met by a band of women carrying torches and singing. The women formed a ring about them, and in this the chiefs mother danced, stamping her feet, and clapping her hands, while she sang of the battle.

“We go up to the cave,” said Mr. Hume, when the dance was over. “Send us food, mother.”

“In plenty, O shield of my son!”

“And hark to this, wise woman—see that the warriors drink sparingly, for the wolf is most dangerous when he comes to the kraal a second time secretly.”

“Wow! That is my thought also; but men are foolish. If the horn is filled, they would empty it without thought of the morrow. Ohe! you will eat well;” and she issued orders to some women, who returned to the village, and other orders to a couple of boys, who were only too glad to lead the popular white men up to the cave, to light the fires and bring water. And almost as soon as they were at the cave the women arrived with meat, fruit, and milk.

The Hunter stretched himself at once on the blankets. “I am not so young as I was,” he explained.

“That won’t do,” said Venning, lighting the lamp. “You must not go to sleep without having had your supper.” He turned the light on. “Why, you’re wounded!”

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“I dare say, lad. It was pretty hot down there at one time.”

“Oh, you know this is not fair to us! I say, Dick, come here.”

“What is it?” asked Compton, coming in from attending the fire.

“Mr. Hume has got himself wounded, and he never told us.”

“Don’t bother about me, lads; I’ll be all right in the morning.”

But they did bother about him—washed the blood from his face, cleansed and treated a jagged wound on the skull and fomented a swelling on the right wrist, and then insisted on his taking food.

“Now, you go to sleep,” said Venning; “and in the morning, perhaps, you’ll tell us all about it.”

They were very silent, until the Hunter fell into a deep sleep, when they tiptoed out to the fire, and sat long into the night listening to the noisy shouts of rejoicing that floated up from the village below, where the fires gleamed brightly, too anxious themselves to even discuss Mr. Hume’s injuries. In the morning, however, when they opened their drowsy eyes, they were gladdened by the sight of the Hunter returning from the bath, with the drops still glistening on his tawny beard.

“Now tell us,” they said, when the breakfast was prepared, “all about the fight.”

“It is soon told. I let the enemy pass in pursuit of Muata, as arranged, but when it came to our part in the plan—that of closing the defile—we found the job tougher than we anticipated. Those cannibals are hard fighters. They fell back as we unmasked our ambush; but they rallied quickly, and delivered one assault upon another. I tell you, we were at our last gasp when your arrival decided the matter.”

“You must have come to close quarters?”

Mr. Hume nodded his head. “I received the blow on the wrist guarding my head from a club, and the cut on the head from a spear.”

“And you used your knife?”

“I dare say I did my share,” said the Hunter, who had held the defile alone at one time, his staunchest supporter, the Angoni Zulu, having fallen back exhausted.

For a trying spell his undaunted spirit had stood between the valley and destruction, and the wild men went back to Hassan with a tale of a terrible white man who had struck down their bravest with a great blade.

“That Ghoorka knife,” he said, “is a great weapon;” and with that summing-up of the struggle in the gloom of the defile he lit his pipe, and sat down to gaze upon the valley, so peaceful in appearance, so charged with the everlasting tragedy of life. “If those people were whites, or Arabs, they would now be following up the enemy to crush him while he is disorganized. But being blacks, they don’t look further ahead than their noses, which were made short for the purpose.”

“Let us go down and offer to lead an expedition in pursuit,” said Compton.

“I guess not, Dick. They’d leave us to do all the fighting ourselves; and there’s no sense in that. What we have to think about is how to get away.”

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“Surely there is no difficulty about that. We will go when it suits us.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Mr. Hume, gravely.

“But Muata is our friend.”

“Muata cannot do what he likes, and, if he could, you’ve got to remember this—that Muata in the Okapi, dependent on us, is another person to Muata the chief in his own kraal.”

“I don’t think he would be treacherous,” said Venning.

“He need not go so far as that to upset our plans. Maybe he would find it convenient to keep us here as his ‘white men’ until it suits him to let us go. You see, he has got to think of himself as chief and of his people first.”

“I don’t think he would treat us unfairly,” said Compton, warmly, “especially as they owe so much to us.”

“That’s nothing.”

“But, sir, these people were kind to my father; and Muata stood by us all along like a brick.”

“Well,” said Mr. Hume, lighting his pipe, “I always find it pays to keep your powder dry and your eyes skinned. So whether Muata continues friendly or not, be always on your guard.”

Muata was friendly. He paid them a visit, and he proclaimed them chiefs with full right to offer council at the Indabas under the title of “The Old Lion,” “The Young Lion,” and “The Spider,” the last distinction falling to Venning, because of his fondness for the pursuit of insects. Muata then dismissed his body-guard and joined his newly appointed chiefs at the fire. He sat a long time silent, his eyes bloodshot, his brows bent, and when he did speak, his words veiled a hidden meaning.

“The place is yours,” he said, “to go and to come, to eat and to drink, to take and keep. Choose any place, and the people will build huts for you.”

“This cave is dry and comfortable. We want no huts, chief.”

“It is well enough now, but in the rains it is not good.”

“We shall be well on our way before the rains set in, chief.”

“Wow! The Spider has seen how the ants live.”

The Spider admitted that he had studied the ways of the ant.

“Good. There are strangers in the house of the ant.”

“Oh yes; you mean what are called the ‘cows’ of the ants.”

“Haw! That was the word given them by the white man who was here before. They enter the house of the ant, but out of it never do they pass.”

“Is this, then, the house of the ant?” asked Mr. Hume, quietly.

The chief turned to the Hunter an impassive face. “My people can build ye good huts, and there are many places thereunder near running waters, with well-grown gardens. Choose which ye like, my brothers.”

“We will examine and select,” said Mr. Hume, with assumed unconcern. “And what of Hassan?”

The chief rose. “He will return like the badger to a bee-tree when the bees have quieted down.”

“And you wish to keep us to help you drive him from the honey again? Is that it?”

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The chief looked down upon the valley. “A child I came here, O great one; a boy I herded goats among the hills; and while yet other boys kept the birds off the grain, I went alone into the darkness of the woods beyond to seek the man-hunters. Now they seek me. Ye have helped in one great fight. All the time Muata has been at war—the hunter and the hunted.”

He turned his face again towards them, and there was in it a touch of dignity. He broke into a kind of chant.

“Ye may hear the laughter of the little ones. There are no such at the door of Muata’s hut, for a man cannot take unto himself wives and keep his arm strong to cast the spear, his eyes clear to follow the trail, and his heart strong to face the dangers that come out of the forest.

“Ye hear the voice of the young men and maidens singing in the dance. Ye may see the mothers about their work, and the old men at the fire. For them the cloud is past. They sit in the warmth of the sun, and heed not the shadows that gather in the trees. The boy who sits in the tree to frighten the birds from the grain has his turn at the dance. But the chief, he watches always; for Muata there is no rest in the Place of Rest.”

“You are the first chief ever I heard take that weight upon his shoulders,” said Mr. Hume, with admiration he could not restrain.

“Why don’t you resign?” said Compton.

“Haw!”

“Let some one else be chief.”

Muata’s nostrils quivered in disgust. “Wow! I am a chief, and the son of a chief. Who is there to take my place?”

“But you were a long time away.”

“Ohe! and, as ye have seen, men conspired to let Hassan and his man-eaters in upon the valley. So my word to you, my brothers, is, to choose ground for huts;” and the chief stalked away.

“I don’t envy him his post,” said Mr. Hume, looking after him; “but I was right, you see.”

“Well, when we want to go we will go,” said Compton. “In the mean time we will make the best of these quarters and this valley, which is a good enough place for a holiday. And remember I have to find my father’s journal.”

Leaving the Hunter at the cave, the Young Lion and the Spider went off on an excursion, and, of course, turned their steps first of all to the gorge, to see the place where the great stand had been made. They were greeted by a small band of warriors, who were squatting on the ledge from which they had fired, and who apparently were on guard. They found themselves on the outer slope of the crater, looking down once more on the interminable reaches of the forest, with just a gleam of water showing at intervals to mark the course of the river up which Hassan's flotilla of canoes had sailed after leaving the wide lagoon. Descending from the ledge to the level of the gorge, they saw the place where the Hunter had made his stand—a little square of rock opening on to the wood path, up which the wild men had rushed to the attack. This path, as they saw, was nothing else than the dry cataract of a river, strewn with boulders, and then they suddenly turned to each other with an exclamation at the thought, "What had become of the river?"

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“It’s queer!” said Venning. “Where is the water?”

On looking around, they beard for the first time a peculiar subterranean rumbling, and going back a few feet, saw the river disappear in a smooth, green slide down into a wide fissure. They stood looking down, fascinated at this mysterious, silent, and stealthy disappearance of the waters that come with such a sparkle out of the bright valley; then dropped stones down, and stooped their heads in vain to catch even the slightest sound out of the depths. The fissure was about twenty feet wide, with a sloping lip on the near side, and a straight wall on the far or forest side. The slope seemed to carry the water to the left, and with a desire to discover its course, they tugged at a large post which stood against the wall of the gorge and rolled it into the fissure. It whizzed away down into the dark, and nearly dragged Compton after it, for the sleeve of his coat caught on a projecting point, and he was jerked on to his knees, being saved from further danger by the coat tearing.

“Thanks,” he said, looking a little white; “I am quite satisfied that the water disappears.”

“I rather think,” said Venning, “that we have pulled up a gate-post. See, there is one on the other side. A few tree-trunks thrown across would make a fine barricade. Come on back into the valley.”

They went back slowly, looking up at the dark walls of the rocky gorge, and Venning stopped.

“See that rock up there?”

“Looks as if it would drop at any moment.”

“Remember what Muata said about Hassan drowning out the valley.”

“One of his figures of speech.”

“S’pose that rock fell; it would just about fill up this passage, river and all. And if it did not quite, a few men working from the ledge, which you see would be behind the dam, could easily fill up the cracks. Then the river could be dammed and the valley flooded.”

“They’d have to blast the rock, and the task would be too troublesome.”

They returned slowly through the defile, stopping at the place where the warrior had sprung out on Compton, and on reaching the valley, went down among the rustling bananas and among the gardens, where the women stopped their work to shout out merry greetings, and to offer them earth-nuts, wild cherries, sweet cane from the maize patches, and a thick porridge-like beverage made from the red millet. They watched the little pickaninnies basking in the sun, and as they strolled, rejoicing in the brightness and in the beauty of this little island of rest, set within an ocean of trees, they were followed

by an admiring company of lads, each carrying his hurling-stick. Coming to a little patch of reeds in the far corner of the valley, the black boys, with shouts, gave chase to a long-tailed finch, clothed in a beautiful waistcoat of orange. The two white chiefs threw aside their dignity, and when, after a breathless chase, the bird, hampered by its streaming tail-feathers, was caught, each chief stuck a feather in his hatband. They worked round the valley, seeing many strange birds and curious insects, back towards the cave, arriving on the ledge at dusk. At once they opened out on Mr. Hume with a description of where they had been and what they had seen.

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The Hunter listened patiently, but he was evidently preoccupied.

“We have seen all the valley, sir, and if we do have to stay here longer than we thought, it is a consolation to think that it is a jolly place.”

“I have been away myself,” said Mr. Hume, “and I made an unpleasant discovery. At first I thought it best to keep it from you, but I know you would not like that.”

“No, sir.”

“The boat has gone!”

“Gone!”

“Clean gone; stolen or hidden away. I went down shortly after you had left, found the path by the marks I had made, never saw a living soul or any spoor but our own; and I tell you it was a great shock when I saw at the first glance that the boat was not there.”

“I wonder——” began Venning.

“It is no good wondering,” said the Hunter, testily. “Muata or his mother has had a hand in this.”

“We can soon put that right,” said Compton, “by demanding that the boat be produced within a certain time.”

“That would mean war,” said Mr. Hume. “I had thought of that, and so no doubt has Muata. The odds are in his favour by force of numbers, for he could starve us out in a week. Violence is no use. Our best plan is to remain friendly, but watchful.”

“Don’t you think,” said Venning, thoughtfully, “that we are on the wrong scent? Suppose the boat was stolen by Hassan’s men.”

“It may be—it may be, lad; and yet, if Hassan’s men did find the boat, it seems to me they would have let it alone to disguise the fact of their presence. Anyway, we will make a further search to-morrow.”

They had cause now for uneasiness, and the boys for the first time began to entertain suspicions about Muata’s faithfulness, for the loss of the Okapi in the very thick of the forest meant to them what marooning is to the sailor man. They sat discussing the matter long into the night, and when morning came they looked out on the valley with other feelings than before. It was to them a prison, lovely still, but changed; and their eyes went to the spot where they had seen the bodies of the men upon whom Muata had fulfilled the law as he understood it, the terrible law of swift vengeance upon any who opposed the will of the chief. There were armed men on their way to the gorge

from the village, and very soon, before the dew had dried on the grass, and while the morning clouds hung white on the hilltops, the chief himself came up with his headmen. And the reason of his coming was none else than to make Mr. Hume vice-chief, with full power, in his absence, over life and property in the valley; for, said he, “I go upon the trail myself, and who should have authority when I am gone but you, my friend?”

The headmen expressed themselves delighted.

“But,” said the Hunter, troubled by this upset of his theory that Muata would think only of himself, “our boat has been taken.”

“The water there is taboo,” said Muata, without showing any surprise. “No one would go there but that one who may go. If the boat is gone it will be returned at the appointed time. See, my friend, I give you my seat under the council tree; have you also trust in Muata, the lone hunter.”

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“Do you go alone?”

“Ay, alone with the silent one—he of the four legs;” and a faint smile lit up the chiefs sombre and stern countenance, as he glanced at the jackal now reappearing after good eating.

Mr. Hume went aside with Muata to dissuade him from his purpose, but the chief was determined, having in his mind a plan to destroy Hassan’s canoes, as he had learnt from his spies that the Arab was arranging for another attack. So while the Hunter went down to be formally received by the clan, the two sub-chiefs, the Young Lion, and the Spider, went off on a reconnaissance of their own to the water that was “taboo,” to all but one, as Muata had hinted. They picked up the trail from the marks that Mr. Hume had renewed on his last trip, and arrived on the banks of the unruffled pool. By contrast with the open valley bathed in sunshine, this sheet of water at the foot of the perpendicular cliffs was gloomy and creepy. There was, too, a mystery about it, for it had no visible source. There was no ripple on its smooth surface, no trace of a current, except in the centre, where, from time to time, bubbles appeared and disappeared, leaving just a trace of foam. They tossed pebbles in to judge the depth from the sound which ranged from the “splash” of the shallows to the gurgling “plop” of the deeps, and followed the pebbles with rocks, till at last the sluggish pool was stirred and furrowed with waves. And in the very midst of their sport a black hand appeared above the waters, and with a heavy roll the body itself floated before them, dead and stark.

The boys stood with their hands arrested, staring at this startling apparition.

Slowly it drifted away, the strong white teeth set in a grin, a dark oily stain trailing from numerous wounds on the body and limbs.

“It’s a cannibal,” said Compton, in a whisper.

“How did he come to be here?” muttered Venning, with a fearful glance around.

They stepped back to the shelter of a tree, and listened, for if one cannibal had found his way to the pool, it was pretty certain that others had. But there was no sound down in those shaded depths. The little waves on the pool quieted down, the surface recovered its glassy smoothness, the bubbles reappeared in the centre, and broke with a faint noise audible yet in the stillness. The pool had yielded up one of its secrets, and the poor body was now come to the end of its voyage, anchored apparently against a log of wood which had grounded against the bank.

“We can’t leave it there!”

“No, Dick.”

But the sudden, unexpected, ghastly upheaval from the deep of that stark body had naturally badly shaken them, and they stood where they were in nervous expectation of some other horror. If this place was “taboo” except to one yet unknown to them, it might be that solitary priest or priestess of the pool was now watching them, even if there were no other cannibals near at hand. So they lingered yet a little longer behind their tree, advancing a foot again and again, only to withdraw it at some fancied noise.

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At last Compton stepped out with his carbine at the ready, stood on the shore a moment then went on till he was opposite the dead man. There Vending joined him.

There was a movement in the water among some reeds, then a ripple like that made by a heavy fish, and the body, leaving its moorings, went slowly away.

“Crocodile,” muttered Venning, whose nerves had never quite recovered the shock caused the night the lion charged.

Compton frowned and shook his head.

The dark body went straight on, stopped a spell at a cluster of reeds, then moved on across, moved by some volition not its own, and not due to the current.

“It’s very queer, Venning.”

“It’s horrible.”

Compton’s glance came back from the gruesome spectacle to the log, and with a start of surprise he stooped down to pick up something.

As he did so, Venning, with a yell of terror, gripped him by the shoulder. Looking up and across, Compton saw the dead man stand erect in the water, his head and shoulders above the surface, and his face towards them! He felt the moisture break out on his brow when the horrid thing began to advance without movement of its own.

Venning pointed a finger across. “It’s coming,” he gasped, turned and ran; and Compton felt no shame in running after.

They flew from the dark pool and its nameless horror; but when from the height they paused breathless and gasping to look down, there was no stain, or blot, or ripple on its calm face.

“Ugh!” said Compton, “it looks what it is—’ Deadman’s Pool.’”

Venning shuddered, turned his back upon the sheer drop with the still water at its bottom, and did not stop again until he had the peaceful valley at his feet, when he took off his hat.

“Thank goodness, we came out with our wits whole.”

“It was a trick,” muttered Compton, abstractedly.

“But who could play a trick like that?” asked Venning, in trembling excitement. “No human being!”

Compton put his hand on the other's shoulder. "We've both had a rare fright, old man, but neither you nor I will let a thing like that upset our appetite. Mr. Hume promised us a treat in green mealies for tea, and I smell some strange dish."

"Hulloa, lads, I was just thinking of starting out after you. Seen anything?"

"We've had a scare," said Compton, lightly, with a meaning look at Mr. Hume; but already the observant eyes of the Hunter had seen that Venning was upset.

"All right; just try this roast mealie;" and the strong hand steadied the boy to his seat.

Mr. Hume talked, while they ate, about the ceremony of his initiation as vice-chief and of the long, wordy arguments he had listened to in a case at law concerning the ownership of a monkey, to which there were two claimants, the boy who had caught it, and the man who owned the garden where it had been caught.

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“Now,” he said, when they had eaten, “you have something to tell me. Go ahead.”

They related the incident, which lost nothing of its repulsiveness by the relation:

“And you saw no one.”

“No one alive, but I believe there was trickery. There must have been,” said Compton, with knit brows.

“I think so too, but the trick was horrible enough to produce the effect desired. I must say I felt a creepy sensation when I was down there yesterday.”

“But we saw no one,” said Venning, with a shudder.

“By Jove! I forgot this;” and Compton produced a fragment of cloth. “I took that from a post in the pool.”

“A bit of rag,” said the Hunter.

“Yes; but a bit torn out of my sleeve yesterday over there in the defile.”

Venning snatched at it. “I have it,” he shouted.

“I see you have; but you need not yell.”

“The blind river! It comes out under the pool!”

Compton stared.

“What do you mean?” asked Mr. Hume.

“Why, sir, we dropped a tree stump into the opening which swallows the river over there. As it slipped from our hands, it caught Dick’s sleeve, tearing out the bit of cloth, and nearly taking him down too.”

“Well, what then?”

“Why, the stump turns up in the pool a thousand feet below, and so must the river! You see, after entering the fissure, it twists back underground, to emerge down there at the bottom of the cliff.”

“Of course,” said Compton, eagerly; “and that body must have followed the same course.”

“Exactly.”

“That accounts for the appearance of the pool and of the dead man, but it does not explain the trickery.”

“Perhaps it does,” said Venning, who, now that he saw a cause for things, recovered his nerve and his spirit. “There is a subterranean passage. The formation here is volcanic. The valley is an extinct crater, the hills are the walls. Well, in volcanic formations, there are usually enormous caverns. Now, then, how do we know that the Okapi has not been taken into one of those caverns opening on to the pool?”

“Good; go on to the trickery.”

“The person who hid the boat, if it is hidden, would probably be on the watch to scare off any who tried to find out what had become of it. Well, then, if we admit that, it is easy to admit the rest— that a good swimmer could play the trick played on us.”

“Let me find him,” said Compton, angrily.

“Yes—yes,” muttered Mr. Hume; “there’s a lot in that, and we’ll follow it up, but not without a good plan.”

He filled his pipe, and stared into the fire for some time.

“Clearly,” he said, “what we should do first is to find out if any one leaves the valley for the pool. As far as we know, there is the gorge up which we came, but there may be openings direct from the valley into the underground passages. We will leave the pool alone, as if we had had enough of it, and examine the interior cliffs.”

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CHAPTER XIX

THE MAKER OF LAWS

The discovery made as to the source of Deadman's Pool gave a new interest to the valley, and the boys played the role of detectives under an arrangement to report the results of their investigations at night. Each spent a day of careful observation, and at the camp-fire each wore a look of preoccupation.

"Any success?"

They nodded their heads.

"I met the chief's mother at the council tree," said Mr. Hume, "and she said she would pay us a visit in the morning. She has been ill, or she would have come before."

"Well," said Venning, "I met a boy five minutes after I left the cave, and he stuck to me like a leech."

"One followed me also," muttered Compton.

"Seems to me we are under police inspection."

"Yes; there were boys everywhere."

"Anyway, I found a 'splash' beetle."

"Eh!"

"A beetle that has developed the protective instinct till it looks like a splash of white on a rock. Here it is;" and Venning displayed his find.

"Doesn't help us much."

"No; but when I took it off the rock I could hear a faint rumbling from below, over here to the left, between our gorge and the canon where the river disappears."

"Come, that's something."

"Yes; but as far as I could make out, there was not an opening in the cliff on that side big enough to hold a swallow's nest."

"Better luck to-morrow. Now, lads, if that old woman puts any leading questions about the pool, don't give yourselves away."

But when the chief's mother came up the next day, she never breathed a word about the pool. She talked of the "good white man" who had lived in the cave when Muata was a boy.

"Often have I sat here and talked with him, and well do I remember his teaching."

"Let us hear, mother," said Compton.

"He taught us how to till the land, so that it would produce other crops than manioc. The men he showed how to win iron from the rock, and how to forge the spear-heads and the hoes for the tilling. Medicine he made from the leaves and the juices of the trees, and he bade the women keep clean the huts and the place around the village. But the thing he said most was that living here in peace, in a place set aside for the weak, it was well we saw that no strangers who came in should ever leave. For, said he, the strong will take from the weak."

"This is a small place," said Venning—"too small for any people to fight over."

"I thought I heard the sound of battle in the valley but two days since."

"It might serve Hassan as a robber's den; but I spoke of other people—white men, mother."

"Since I had ears to hear the meaning of words," she said, "the talk was ever of white men, and one 'white man' warned us against those very men who eat up the land and the waters."

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“But what use would this little spot be to them? In a short time it will be too small for your own people.”

“When that day comes, O Spider, we would be free to go to the land of my fathers, where my son will find his kraal.”

“You will want many canoes, mother, when that day comes.”

“And they tell me,” said the woman, with a keen glance, “that you white men are good boat-builders. Aye, I have seen your boats on the great river, with wings and with fire.”

“Our boat—the one you sat in—the boat down in the pool, has wings,” said Venning, innocently.

“Muata the chief tells me the boat has gone. Wow! The place is taboo; I knew the spirit people would take it; but you can build others.”

“We have no tools.”

“Wow! You could make them.”

“We have no skill in such work.”

The wise woman pondered. “He, the white man who lived here, consulted a familiar he carried much with him; he would find from it how to build boats and to forge iron.”

Compton produced his log-book. “See, mother, was it like that?”

“Wow! It was like.”

“Bring me the ‘familiar’ of the white man, for he was my father, as you know, and you will hear his voice again. Maybe we will learn from it how to make tools for the building of boats.”

“I will search, O son of my white man.”

She sat awhile, then produced a cob-pipe, and, after getting a fill of tobacco, went off smoking with the bowl against her cheek.

“Humph!” said Venning. “Wants to keep us as boat-builders. I bet she’s taken the Okapi as the first of the fleet for the great exodus.”

“And intends that we should be the navigators as well as the builders.”

Mr. Hume was of the same opinion when he joined them later on and was in possession of the wise woman’s remarks.

“She is the power behind the throne,” he said musingly, “and I have been wondering for some time what was her object. Now I see. I have been giving my consent as chief to laws which are framed evidently to keep us here.”

“Making laws?”

“Been doing nothing else. There was a law making it a crime for any man to leave the valley without the consent of the people. Another law calling on all—men as well as women—to work for the good of the clan. Another making it a crime to withhold knowledge that would be for the general good. There was another declaring that the vice-chief must have at least two wives.”

“But you have not one wife.”

“That is easily remedied,” said the Hunter, with a groan.

“What do you mean, sir?”

“See that?” and Mr. Hume pointed at a spot in the valley where many women were at work.

“They are building a hut,” said Venning.

“My hut!” Mr. Hume filled his pipe with great deliberation, took a coal from the fire, and stared at his two companions till his hand was scorched. “I am to be married at the full moon!”

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Venning sniggered.

“You can’t mean it, sir,” said Compton.

“It’s true enough,” said the Hunter, solemnly. “I was passing the acts, as it were, without paying much attention when the women clapped their hands. ‘What was that last law?’ I said to the chief councillor, whose duty it is to keep the laws in his mind. ’The great chief,’ he said, ’will take to himself two wives at the full moon.’ ‘I repeal that act,’ I said; but they would not understand. A law was a law when it became a law, and no one could alter it, but considering my position they would build my hut for me. And, as you see, they are building it.”

He stared gloomily down into the valley; while Venning and Compton made singular grimaces in the effort to keep becomingly grave.

“It is a great honour,” said Compton, presently.

“And two of them!” said Venning. “I don’t know, I’m sure. I’m no lawyer, but I rather think that you, as an Englishman, would not be allowed to take two. Polygamy would become bigamy.”

“I never thought of that,” said the Hunter, brightening up.

“On the other hand,” went on Venning, with a judicial air, “as you have been sworn in as a member of the clan, you become of course amenable to the laws, and it may be that two wives will not meet the requirements of your exalted rank.”

Mr. Hume leant forward, and caught Venning by the ear.

“It is no joking matter,” he went on. “When will the moon be at the full?”

“In three weeks from to-day,” said Compton, grinning.

“Then before that we must be well away, or we may find ourselves life prisoners. Have you made any discovery to-day?”

“None! We were ‘shadowed,’ as before, by boys.”

“So. Well, I will take measures to-morrow to put an end to this spying. They have had their fun out of me as chief, but I will have my turn.”

Next day the vice-chief had his turn. He declared the next three days to be a period of work. Some of the men were to build a boom across the river in the defile, others were to construct a stone wall across the gorge leading from the Deadman’s Pool; while he started the women and children on a new set of huts, having condemned the old village

as unfit for habitation. Further, he passed a law that any man, woman, or child found wandering about idle during the three days, would have to pass a night on the banks of the “tabooed” pool tied to a tree; and, finally, he appointed himself and the two sub-chiefs, the Young Lion and the Spider, as overseers, with right to appoint substitutes in their place.

“Those be the new laws,” he said, in a roar, when the astounded council had listened to the end. “If any one disputes them, I will tie them head to heels and throw them into the river to learn wisdom.”

No one so much as murmured, for they did not like the look of those yellow eyes.

“Then see that ye begin your appointed work at sunrise,” he said, “for I will make medicine to see these laws are obeyed.”

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Then he returned to the ledge, and spent the afternoon with the two boys making rockets, using stout reeds as cases. In the dark these were fired off with great and awe-inspiring' effect on the villagers, who scuttled into their huts, and remained hid for the rest of the night, convinced that the "strong medicine" would indeed find them out if they did not obey this strange new law.

"I think I have fixed them for a time," said the Hunter, grimly, as he described his new feat as a lawmaker. "For three days we should have liberty to fully inspect the side of the valley above the pool."

In the morning, at sunrise, the entire clan started out promptly to their allotted tasks, and Mr. Hume inspected each gang. The women and children went to the far end of the valley, where the reeds grew, and the wise woman was appointed inspector.

"What is this new law, O great one?" she asked quietly, having been much subdued by the fiery rockets.

"You made the law, mother, that all should work, and I have honoured it. See that you honour it also."

"Yebo, great one. We women do not complain. It is a joy to us to see the men work also. Maybe in time," she added significantly, "the great one will do his turn also."

"Each in his turn, mother."

He went on up to the gorge, where Venning was on duty, remained a few minutes inspecting the work of wall-building, which should have been done before for defence, then appointed one of the headmen as overseer, and went on with Venning to the river outlet, where Compton was in charge. An overseer was appointed there, and Compton went on a tour of inspection from gang to gang, while the other two made a close investigation of the cliff for an entrance to the caves. The two following days they each in turn acted as general inspector of the works, while the two disengaged made a close inspection of the cliff; but at the end of the third day they had no success to report.

"The only thing to do now," said Mr. Hume, "is to visit the pool, and make a close examination of the walls."

"We could not examine the wall without swimming in the pool," said Venning, "and before I do that I am prepared to stay here a very long time."

"I cannot say I relish the idea myself, but I see no other way out of the mess. We must have the Okapi before the full moon. I will take a look at the pool alone to-morrow."

CHAPTER XX

THE SECRET WAY

But when day dawned the vice-chief was summoned to hear a message from Muata, who had reported that Hassan had discovered the dark river leading up to the tabooed pool, and was sending up a strong fleet of canoes, while still more canoes were gathering on the other river by which he had made his first attack. His orders were that a body of picked men were to join him to take part in an attack on the first body of the enemy. Mr. Hume was fully occupied in carrying out these instructions, but on the chiefs mother suggesting that the chosen band should be accompanied by the Young Lion, he emphatically declined to allow this.

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“As you wish to keep us here,” he said, “we will stay here; and, take notice, we have already seen what was in the mind of the chief by taking steps to protect the entrance above the tabooed water.”

The chiefs mother desisted, but she went up to interview the two young chiefs.

“The great one,” she said, “has very strong medicine?”

Compton nodded his head gravely.

“He was consulting with the spirits in the night when he sent forth those fire-devils?”

Another nod.

“Wow! And the spirits told him to build a wall across the entrance, and to make a fence across the river?”

“That was wisely done, as you see, mother.”

“Haw! Tell me why the spirits told him to move the village to a place which is further from this cave;” and she looked through narrowed eyes.

“Ohe!” said Venning, “that was also wise. The old village stood on low ground, the new village is on high ground.”

“And a tall man sees over the head of a small one,” she answered, with a scornful laugh.

“Wait, mother of wisdom. If the enemy secured the gates and flooded the valley, which would be safer—the village on low ground, or the village on a hill?”

“Yoh! It is strong medicine.” She sat looking at them for some time in silence. “It is only the great one who can make medicine?”

Compton looked thoughtful.

“Come,” she said, in a wheedling tone, touching him with a finger, “make medicine for one who carried food to the good white man.”

“What would you like to know, mother?”

“Tell me, O son of him who taught us—tell me, O lion’s cub—tell me if the chief will find his own kraal.”

“That would need strong medicine—very strong.”

“Only a little. Consider; it was these hands who carried the good white man water and wood. Only a little word, his son.”

“A little word, mother; but it requires much thought, and how can a son make medicine without his father’s ’familiar’—the thing he consulted, the thing you promised to bring to me?”

“I will fetch it,” said the woman, rising. “In the morning you shall have it;” and she went in the direction of the gorge.

“Seems to me, Dick, the old lady is at the bottom of this mystery. You’d better be very careful how you deal with her.”

“I want to get my father’s book,” said Compton.

“Of course you do; but you want to get back the Okapi as well, and if you offend her it may turn out more awkward for us.”

“Well, then, suppose we follow her now?” and Compton, always ready to act, jumped up.

“What’s the good? Remember how she spotted Mr. Hume the day he ‘blazed’ the trees. Believe she’s got eyes in the back of her head. No; but I learnt a trick from a keeper in dear old Surrey that will do what we want.”

In the dusk Venning put the trick into effect with the help of his companions. It was simple enough. He drew fine linen threads from a handkerchief, stained them black and stretched them across the track down the gorge at five different intervals, and at the height of a few inches from the ground.

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In the morning, at sunrise, the chief's mother was at the cave. Seeing Mr. Hume, she promptly begged a pipe of tobacco, and sitting down, expounded at great length the laws of the clan, together with those which had been passed during the past few days.

"The chief's hut," she said, "will be ready at the round of the moon, and the people look forward to much feasting."

"They had better be preparing to meet Hassan and his wolves, lest they themselves be food for the pot."

She snapped her fingers. "Hassan will die within the gates, and his wolves will perish in the uttermost depths."

"What depths are they?"

She laughed, and, with a glance at Compton, went off down towards the village, bearing on her head a square-shaped package.

"Your book, Compton! Better follow her. Evidently she wants to speak to you alone, Keep her engaged while Venning and I go back on her trail."

Compton overtook her below the ledge, where, as if expecting his coming, she was waiting; and while they were engaged, the others went off on the trail.

"Hurrah!" said Venning, pointing to the ground as they turned into the gorge; "the first string is broken. She came out this way."

They went on, keen as hounds on the scent, and both pointed to the snapped ends of the second string. Passing over the stone wall just built which here crossed the defile, they came to the third cotton— broken also. The fourth was, however, intact, and so was the fifth.

"Thank goodness!" muttered Venning.

"Bad luck, you mean."

"No, sir; good luck. I was beginning to think that she had gone right on down to that dismal pool."

They went back to the broken strand, and Mr. Hume brought the broken ends together. "Just hold them in position." He climbed on the wall, and, with the gorge opening away between the enclosing cliffs, he took his line from the spot where Venning kept his fingers on the broken ends.

“Good,” he said, returning. “The cotton was broken at a point two or three yards out of the straight track. She must have gone towards the wall on our right.”

Venning’s eyes went to the cliff; but the Hunter examined the ground, and expressed his satisfaction at what he saw in a low chuckle.

“What do you see?” asked Venning, breathlessly, glancing quickly at Mr. Hume’s face, and back at the wall of rock.

“I should like Muata to be here. It is a good point.”

“What, sir—what?”

“A woman’s skirt on the dew, lad. See, a man would pass through those two rocks there and leave no mark; but a woman, with the swing of her skirt, wipes a spread of dew off on either side. You can see the dark smudge in the glister of the dewdrops.”

“I see,” said Venning, starting forward towards two rocks with a passage between.

“Steady, lad. Follow me.”

He went forward to the rocks, which were almost under the right wall, and inch by inch examined the stony ground.

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“The direction should be there,” he said, pointing ahead; “but there’s nothing but a dead wall.”

They ranged up and down in a fruitless attempt to pick up the lost spoor, and came back to the two rocks.

“Maybe she did not pass this way, sir.”

“A sign is a sign, and a spoor a spoor. She passed between these rocks this morning.”

“Then she must have come down the wall;” and Venning, stepping forward, placed his hand on the rock. He started back and stared up at the rock. Then he touched it again, with a curious look in his face, and next placed his ear against it. “Come here, sir.”

Mr. Home went forward, and, placing his hand on the rock, felt it vibrating. Then he placed his ear to the rock.

“What do you hear?” asked Venning.

“A noise like the roar of the sea.”

“Or the rush of a great body of water.”

“Seek ye the honey-bee, O Spider.”

They whipped round at the mocking voice, and saw the Inkosikase standing a few feet off, having come upon them with great quietness.

“Where is the young chief?” asked Mr. Hume at once.

“Be not afraid, great one. He sits over the ‘familiar’ of his father, learning wisdom and strong medicine. And is your medicine at fault, great one, that you should set snares in the path for a woman, as boys do for the coneys?”

She laughed, and the great one caught hold of his beard, as he eyed her, wondering whether the time had come to make her speak.

“Is it honey ye seek, O Spider, young chief who watches always?”

“It is honey, mother.” Venning tapped the rock. “Ye may hear the bees humming within. We would enter the hive.”

She laughed again. “Ohe! ye are too wise for me, ye two. If I did not show you the way, I see ye would find it.”

She stepped past them, walked a few paces, then, with one hand upreaching to a knob of rock, and a naked toe in a notch, she climbed up the height of a man, stepped to a ledge, and held a hand down to Venning. A few steps along the ledge, when they stood by her side, brought them to a depression in the cliff. Removing a few stones, she said with a look of sadness—

“Behold the depth that was my secret, and is now yours.”

A gush of moist air came out of the dark opening, bringing with if the sound of hoarse mutterings. Now they had found the opening, they did not know what to do, far; it was not inviting, and they stood looking at it warily:

“You would have me enter first,” she said quietly. “Come, then, for it is not all dark within.”

She disappeared, and Mr. Hume followed next, with a whisper to Venning that they must not let her get out of sight. A little way they passed along a narrow passage, facing a rushing current of moist air, and then stepped out into a cavern dimly lit by a shaft of light that crept through the roof. The woman crossed the floor, and they followed her down another passage, into another cavern larger than the first. This, too, was dimly lit, and as they stood with a feeling of mystery and uncertainty that comes to men when they quit the surface bathed in light fop the-dark underground, they felt the floor vibrate under their feet, and heard, as if the source of the uproar were near at hand, a great booming with a shrill note at intervals.

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“Would ye enter further?” asked the woman.

“Have ye entered further, mother?”

“Yebo, ’Ngonyama (lion).”

“Then lead on.”

“Listen, Ngonyama; listen, Indhlovu (elephant). There is a path for the lion in the veld, and another for the elephant in the forest; but this path is only for those who know it, and are welcome to those who made it. The sun shines without. It were better if Ngonyama and the Spider blinked their eyes in the light Mid the warmth.”

“If ye have trodden the way, so will we. Lead on.”

“Ye lose your wisdom, great one; but see, I go;” and she went from the cave into a vaulted passage, in which they encountered the blast laden with moisture, that made the walls slimy and the floor a series of puddles.

The way was dark, and they splashed and stumbled in growing discomfort in the footsteps of the leader, who kept on at a quick walk, showing a thorough familiarity with the passage. Sometimes, as they could tell from the sound, the roof of the passage extended to great heights; at others it closed in till they had to stoop their heads. But their guide kept on without a pause, and presently, to their great relief, they saw ahead a faint reflection of the light upon a wet slab of rock. Hurrying on, they emerged from the passage into a vast chamber, across which, though there was light enough to distinguish each other, they could not see. Mr. Hume took a step forward, with his face turned up, in an effort to see the roof through the films of vapour that floated overhead.

“Stop, Ngonyama—see to your footing;” and the woman’s hand restrained him.

He started back involuntarily, for at his feet there was a yawning abyss, out of which came the sound of rushing waters, and the curling wraiths of vapours, but so deep and so dark that the eye could detect no gleam of the flood beneath.

“Thanks, mother.”

“Ohe! Ngonyama, remember I stood between you and death that time.”

She moved away to the right, and they followed, going on a ledge which skirted the yawning abyss.

It was a perilous passage, and both of them would have been glad to turn back after they had gone a few steps, if the woman had suggested it. A feeling of vertigo seized them, so that they had to stop, leaning away from them for fear of falling over out of

sheer dizziness. When they did move again, they groped for a footing with a complete feeling of helplessness, expecting every moment to slip on the slimy rock, and the further they advanced the worse they felt, for it would be as bad to turn back as go on. Looking back, Mr. Hume at one pause saw a little splatter of flame. Venning had groped for a match and struck a light; but before he could see anything by its reflection, Mr. Hume blew it out, and placed his heavy hand on the boy's shoulders to steady him.

"Worst thing you could do," he said.

"It's so dark," muttered the boy.

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“Dark enough, but she’s gone ahead safely enough.”

They stood for some time, and seemed to gather comfort from the touch of each other’s hands.

“I am ready now,” said Venning.

“That’s good. Keep your eyes raised and your shoulder to the wall. Forward!”

They crept rather than walked round that fearful gallery, traversing the unknown height with the roar of waters coming up from the unseen depth, and the silent wraiths of vapour making the darkness visible as they curled upwards to disappear into the vast vault.

“If I can only get safe out of this,” thought Venning at each step, “I will never try to leave the valley again by this way.”

The valley was only a few hundred yards away, but it seemed to him that he must have left it ages ago. Every second had been charged with a new sensation since he left the brightness outside, and each slow, wary, suspicious movement he made had in it a whole sequence of fears. Would he slip? “Would his foot fall on firm rock? Would something—he knew not what—grab him from out that awful pit? Would some one or something—he was sure there was something creeping behind—would it spring on him? Would that woman’s hand suddenly shoot out from some crevice and hurl the both of them headlong? Was it never coming to an end? And the rock was shaking worse than ever! It would be easier to crawl! Of course it would. He went down on his hands and knees and laughed, because it was so easy. There was something on his back, something that jogged about and hit him on the side of the head, that gripped him round the chest! What was it? He felt gingerly, and laughed again. His carbine! What was the use of a carbine there? No good, of course. What a joke to throw it down and hear the splash, or, better, to fire it off and hear the echoes!

“Venning!”

The boy chuckled as he sat on the ledge tugging at the buckle.

“Why, lad!”

The great hands closed on the boy, lifted him up, and bore him lightly as the man felt his way with his feet. He counted his steps, assuring himself that before he came to seventy-five they would be at the end.

“Ngonyama!” cried a voice, quite close.

“We are coming, mother.”

“Ngonyama! Ngonyama! Ngonyama!” and the voice grew fainter.

“Wait—wait, O mother of chiefs, for the way is dark, and we move slow.”

“Slower fast, slower fast, Ngonyama, it matters not.”

“It is far, mother! Are we near the end?”

“Near the end—very near! Is it the dead ye carry, Ngonyama?”

“Nay, mother; the boy is but sick. But where are you, that ye see and are not seen, that your voice is near and yet far?”

The woman laughed. “So ye grow afraid, O great one? Said I not, Indhlovu, that this was not your path? Death is around.”

Mr. Hume went forward steadily, counting his paces to keep his mind from wandering, and to his great joy he came suddenly on an opening in the wall which led towards welcome light, away from the horrors of that unfathomable pit. The woman waited for him there, looking very tall against the light.

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“The boy is sick, mother—a little water.”

“It is water now. Outside it was the honey he asked for. Set him down, Ngonyama—the child is weakly; set him down, and see to yourself.”

“What words we these, woman?”

“Woman, yes; but master here, Ngonyama; and my words are easy to understand. Let the child be, and I will bring you out of this.”

“Bring me water,” he said sternly.

“There is plenty beyond. Carry him to the water if ye will, but the water will have you both.” She laughed shrilly.

Mr. Hume went on towards the light, and found himself in another cavern reaching far up to a roof, from which hung long stalactites glistening white. There was light enough reflected from these hanging pillars to see, and he looked anxiously into Venning’s face. The boy’s eyes were closed.

“Water,” he said.

“Ohe! there is water beyond;” and she pointed ahead.

Again he went on without a thought about the marvels that disclosed themselves in the cave in the shapes of crystals and cones of sulphuric origin; but, as he advanced, he was aware of strange, intermittent sounds resembling explosions. Pushing on, he saw the white spray of falling water, then the gleam of wet rock, and stopped at the edge of a cataract, milk white from the churned foam. He soaked a handkerchief in the water and bathed the boy’s face.

The woman was at his side. “Leave him; he belongs to the water. Leave him and follow, lest ye also go down.”

“He Is only weak, mother. In a little time he will be ready to follow.”

He applied himself to the task of bringing the boy round, and when he looked up again the woman had gone. Then for the first time he glanced around him, and saw that he stood in a small cave opening into a noble vault, lit up from top to bottom by a broad fan of light that streamed through a fissure in the roof. Opposite to where he stood, and a little above, the river emerged from its subterranean passage in a long green slide, to break into white where it fell upon the rocks before its headlong rush at his feet. In the rock above the point where the river emerged there were several round holes, and at intervals of a few seconds, columns of water spurted through these with loud reports. They shot far out, then broke into fine spray, on which the light produced wonderful

colour effects. He could scarcely take his eyes off these blow-holes, so strange, so fascinating was the sight, and it was only the faint sound of a sigh that called his attention to his patient.

CHAPTER XXI

A VOICE FROM THE DEAD

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Compton had found his father's book. When the woman gave it to him he sat down for an hour turning over the leaves, closely filled with neatly written handwriting interspersed with many sketches. To him it was a message from the dead—a priceless treasure; and as he read and saw how valuable it was as a record of close and intelligent observation in a new field, he was seized with an eagerness to be off with it out of the wilderness. He hurried to the cave, but, of course, there was no one there. Then, still carrying the priceless book, he ran on to the gorge, where the warriors whose task it was to guard that part were gathering. Some of them were examining the broken lengths of cotton, and drew his attention to them.

"It is medicine," he said briefly. "Have ye seen Ngonyama?"

They had not seen him since in the early morning one had noticed the great chief and the Spider enter the gorge.

"And it is not meet," they added, "that we should seek to find out where the chiefs had gone, since the place below was taboo."

"It is well," said Compton; and he returned to the cave to wait with as much patience as he could summon, under the impression that his friends had, of course, gone down to the pool in search of the missing boat.

The afternoon, however, passed quickly, for he was poring over the Journal, and it was almost dark when a step without attracted his attention.

"I say," he shouted, "come and see."

But it was not Venning who entered, but the chiefs mother. She looked tired, and her short skirt was stained with mud and moss.

"Halloa, it's you, is it?"

She squatted before the fire with her eyes on the book. "Ye will make medicine now, son of the wise man. Ye will teach our men how to build swift boats, and how to make the 'fire that kills."

"You are wet; you have been in the water."

"Oh! it is a little thing."

"I thought you were the great one, or the Spider. I have not seen them since the morning."

"Maybe they have gone a journey. What says the medicine?"

“It says that until they return safe as when they went, it will not speak,” said Compton, with a chill suspicion growing in his mind.

She laughed. “Look again, son of my friend. Maybe they will not return except the things be done that must be done.”

“What things?”

“I have said. The things that will make our people strong for the going out—the swift canoes and the shooting fire. That is my word.”

“And this is my word. If any injury befall them, the medicine that is here”—and he tapped the book—“will work against yon and yours.”

He looked at her very sternly, attempting to carry the matter with a high hand, for he judged from her words that something had happened to his friends.

“Wow! Are my people so few that a boy can talk to me in this way?” She snapped her fingers.

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“And what stand would you and your people have made against the wild men but for Ngonyama? What will they do when Hassan comes again, if the great one is not at hand to help?”

“Ohe! Little chief,” she laughed, “you cannot frighten me with tales of Hassan; and think well over my word.”

She went away down towards the new village that had been built beyond the river, and her voice rose in a chant as she went—a chant that was taken up and thrown back by the women returning home from the gardens. Compton built up the fire, and then walked up to the mouth of the gorge, restless and consumed with anxiety. Those words of the woman, “maybe they will not return,” haunted him. They seemed to him ominous of danger. All night he patrolled up and down the ledge, between the cave and the gorge, fearing they would not come, and yet expecting to hear their voices at any moment; and in the morning he was heavy-eyed from want of sleep. The night-guards from the gorge trotted by, their places having been relieved.

“Have ye seen Ngonyama and the Spider?”

“There is smoke,” they said. “Maybe the white chiefs make the fire.”

“Where?”

“Beyond the water that is taboo.”

He hurried off with his glasses, and from the gorge saw smoke rising far down the forest; and the sight gave him hope, for it might mean that his friends had followed the river down from Deadman’s Pool on the trail of the missing boat. Bidding the men keep a good watch, and report any new development to him at once, he went back to the eave to breakfast and to renewed study of the journal. As he read, his attention became riveted on a series of sketches which laid bare the subterranean passages under the south-west portion of the cliff, between the gorge and the canon giving outlet to the river. As he read, too absorbed to think of anything else, he came upon the following note:—

“If it chance that understanding eye should fall on these notes, let my directions be carefully observed. No stranger—certainly no white man—would be permitted to leave the valley once he discovered its existence, by setting foot within its encircling cliffs. Let him not try to escape by the gorge on the south, for though apparently undefended, it is really guarded by a band of women who have the right to kill any person—not taboo—-who passes through. These women, victims of a dark and degrading superstition, are recruited from the village, and once they quit the valley they are never seen, for they live about the shores of the pool beneath the cliff and in caverns adjoining, which form the lower or basement rooms of a series of stupendous vaults produced by volcanic

agency. By night they prowl about the slopes above the pool; by day, some of them keep watch over the passage through the gorge and through the canon from loopholes to which they have access from the lower vaults. I know, because I myself tried to escape by this passage,

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and only escaped owing to the vigilance of the chief woman in the valley, who exercises control over the band, and who had her own purpose to achieve in saving my life. I was useful to her. When ultimately, after much labour, I discovered the only safe way out, I was, owing to repeated attacks of fever, too weak to avail myself of the discovery. My hope is that my efforts may be of service to some one —if, unhappily, any should follow in my footsteps—who would be better prepared to face the dangers and the difficulties of the forest beyond. Listen, then, to these instructions; On the ledge skirting the south cliff, and leading up to the gorge, there is a cave, which may be recognized from the existence near it of a bath hewn out of the lava by human hands. That cave is the key to the underground passage."

Compton looked up with shilling eyes. "The very place I am in," he muttered.

"For many months it was my home—if I may so misuse a word so charged with bitterness to me. Not a day passed but my thoughts went in sickness of spirit to my home, to my wife and little one; and it was when I was thinking of them that I thought I heard them calling my name from the cave. A sick man's fancy! But there had been a sound, and on entering to the far end of the cavern, I heard it repeated—a faint droning, such as would be produced by a shell held to the ear. There was, too, a current of air, and, feeling in the darkness, I found the crack through which it emerged. With a spear-head I easily broke the rock away, for it was a mere envelope. Thrusting the spear in, I felt there was an opening beyond. When I had satisfied myself that the passage extended for some distance, my first precaution was to find a slab of rock to fit the opening I had made."

Compton laid down the book, looked out to see that no one was near, and crept to the far end of the cave. Pressing with his hand, he soon found the rock yield. Satisfied, he returned to the journal with renewed eagerness.

"My first careful examination of the passage disclosed the welcome fact that it extended a great distance in a westerly direction, but without lights I saw it would be dangerous to attempt a thorough investigation. Accordingly, I occupied myself for several days in making a supply of candles, using the barrels of my gun as a mould, and mixing beeswax with oil clarified from the fat of animals, such as monkeys and coneys. Provided with two such candles, I began my explorations underground, and after many failures discovered a way of escape, which others may benefit by. The passage, in an uninterrupted course, dips under the gorge and enters the south-west cliff, which is completely honeycombed. After dipping under the gorge, it branches in several directions, but care must be taken to follow the extreme right-hand passage. This follows the outer shell, skirts what I have called the Hall of Winds, dips down through a long tunnel, and emerges on the outer slope at a

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point near the spot where the river disappears. The passage is safe, but can only be taken provided a candle or torch is used. If these directions should come under the notice of some unhappy traveller, let him accept my earnest wishes for success in his efforts to escape from a place which to me was first a haven of rest and then a hateful prison, and there is a feeling I have that I have not written this in vain."

The son of the lonely Englishman who had written the foregoing in sadness of spirit, but in hope for others, sat long staring before him with a lump in his throat.

"Not in vain, my father—not in vain did you labour," he murmured. Again he read over the directions, then very carefully he packed the journal and strapped it on his back, to be with him wherever he went. Noticing how the time had passed while he had been receiving the message from the dead, he hurried to the gorge to see if there were any signs of his friends, and his eyes went to the dark walls, and to the silent pool far below, with a feeling of intense repugnance at the thought of the ghoulish women who lurked unseen, but seeing all.

"Have you seen Ngonyama?"

"The smoke ascends no longer, Inkose; but we have seen the signal answered."

"How so?"

"Another smoke arose yet further off, and yet another, and beyond that another, till the word of the fire-makers was passed back even to the wide waters."

"Then it was not Ngonyama who made the fire."

"It was made by the enemy, Inkose."

"Have you sent out spies?"

"Of what use, lion's cub? Muata, the black one, hangs on their trail, and when the time has come he will spring. Wow! They are fools to come up by that path."

He went back deep in thought, and made up his mind to see the wise woman again. So he passed down into the valley, crossed the river to the new village built on a small flat-topped hill, and found the chief's mother sitting before his hut.

"I want my brothers," he said at once.

"The valley is open—search for them. You are a chief; put the men to the search. Why come to me?"

“Because you only know.”

“Haw! If they are not in the valley they are out of the valley, and once they are out they have broken the law. Who am I that you should ask, since the law is made by the men?”

“Maybe, mother, they are not in the valley or out of the valley.”

She threw a startled look at Compton, which he was keen to notice; then, with an expression of puzzlement, she nodded her head.

“Your meaning is dark, lion’s cub. See, the valley is kraaled in like the goat-pen, and if the goats be not in the kraal they are outside the kraal. As for Ngonyama, see where the women build his hut against his coming.”

“I see,” said Compton. “Perhaps he was sent for by the chief, and has gone a journey, for the enemy are on the move.”

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“That is plainer to me,” she said quickly. “It must be so, for the chief loves Ngonyama.”

“Yes; that must be the reason. It lifts a load off my mind, mother.”

“Ow aye I did not like to see your face clouded; and now you will make medicine for me?”

“I will; bat there are a few things I require. I am young at this work, mother, and cannot do without all the aids.”

“Oh ay, I know,” and she nodded her head with a fierce look in her eyes. “The blood of a man, the heart of a kid, and the tongue of a crocodile.”

“No, no; a calabash of fat and a little wax. Only that.”

“Your medicine is not like mine,” she said musingly; “but I have it in my mind now that the good white man used much fat in his medicine.”

She went into her hut, and returned presently with a calabash filled with fat and a square of wax.

“And ye will build fast canoes?”

“We will do great things, mother,” said Compton, taking the things. “But it is not well that people should pry in upon one who is making medicine. He must have quiet.”

“Wow! No one shall pass your house in the rocks, O wizard of mine.”

He hurried up to the cave, passing the reed patch on his way to cut several stout stems, and began without delay his preparations for making candles. While the fat and wax were melting in a couple of “billies,” he cut down the canes into sections of about six inches each, and buried them on end with the mouth up in soft ground near the bath, with a length of stout cord strung down the centre of each tube, and secured by a cross-piece. When the stuff had melted, he filled up the moulds, twelve in all, and left them to cool off. Then taking a stout cane left over, he cut away one of the joints, leaving a socket, thus converting it into a very handy candle-stick. Next he made up a parcel of food and medicine, carefully oiled his rifle, to protect it against the damp underground, and then went off up to the gorge to have a last look for his friends.

The warriors were buzzing about the barricade, evidently in a state of great excitement, and Compton saw the cause of this in the person of a solitary man ascending the slope from the direction of the pool.

“It is the chief’s runner,” said the men as the man came plainly into view.

Up he came, breasting the steep ascent with a look behind at frequent intervals as if he feared pursuit, and when he reached the wall, he drew a great breath of relief.

“Mawoh!” he grunted. “I saw the dead water heave, and there was a laugh from nowhere.”

“What message?” asked one of the headmen.

“It is for Ngonyama,” said the runner.

The headman fell back and looked at Compton, who then stepped forward.

“Give the message to me.”

“Wow! This, then, is the chief’s word. ’Say to Ngonyama, the great white one, that the enemy will come against the valley up from the dead water. Ngonyama will let them advance until they are in the jaws of the rocks. Then will Muata, the black one, fall on the rear and eat them up.’ So said the chief.”

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Compton tamed to the headmen. “Where are the white chiefs?”

“We do not know, Inkose,” they said uneasily.

“Ye will take the orders of your chief yourselves then, for unless my brothers are restored in safety, I will not help you.”

“Maybe,” said a man in a whisper, “the wizards have taken them to themselves to learn wisdom.”

“Who are these wizards?” demanded Compton, sternly.

“Haw! Inkose, how shall we know?” But their eyes went fearfully to the silent walls of the gorge.

“Who does know?”

“We know not, Inkose. These things are not for us.”

“I know;” and Compton eyed them sternly. “It is a woman who is chief in this place. Say to her the words of the chief, and bring me her reply.”

They hesitated, muttering.

“Ye know the black one,” said Dick, quietly. “He has asked for Ngonyama. Let the woman produce Ngonyama or give her authority, lest the black one turn his anger on you.”

“The lion’s cub says well,” answered an old man. “I will go.”

As he went off, Compton bade the indunas see to the defence, “For,” said he, “without the white men, you will have to fight hard for your kraal.” The indunas laughed as they gave their orders, saying that all they wished for was a good fight. Compton retired to his cave, and it was not long before the chiefs mother herself came up with her bodyguard of women, armed with bow and arrows.

“Ye sent for me, O great chief?” she cried, with a little mocking laugh.

“You have heard the chiefs message?”

“And this is my answer,” she replied, pointing to the women. “We will meet the enemy.”

“And Ngonyama?”

“Ngonyama! I have heard that name too often. See, young one, there is not room in a kraal for two strong bulls.”

She nodded her head with a very hard look in her eyes.

Compton kept down his rising wrath at this ominous speech.

“Very well, mother,” he said quietly. “You know best. I will now get about my work, if ye order that I am left in silence.”

“I will see to that,” she answered; “and see to it that you do all I have asked, lest you also go to those wizards you spoke of to the men.”

She looked at him meaningly, and went on with her escort.

Compton watched them out of sight, then ran to his moulds. Taking out the canes, he split them down in turn, disclosing a dozen candles, roughly moulded, and very greasy, but he hoped suitable for his venture. One he fixed in the socket of the torch, the others he packed away carefully in an oilskin bag. Then slinging on his carbine, bandolier, haversack, and making them all secure by strapping a belt over all, he crept through the opening at the far end of the cave, replaced the rock, and lit his candle. After much spluttering and a great deal of smoke, the flame caught, and he started on his tour, breathing a fervent hope that it would lead him to his lost friends.

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CHAPTER XXII

A TERRIBLE NIGHT

We will return now to Mr. Hume, who was left supporting the unconscious form of Venning on the brink of the rushing river, with the vast vault above him, and the roar of sharp explosions bellowing at intervals through the hollows. As he stooped over his young companion, he caught a fluttering of the eyelids, and placing the boy on the ground with a pillow made by his rolled-up coat, he unfastened the little medicine-bag which each always carried, and gave him a strong restorative. Then he chafed the cold hands, took off the wet shoes, and did the same to the feet, which were like marble. As the blood circulated under the friction, Venning regained his colour, and suddenly looked about him.

“I’m here, lad,” said Mr. Home, cheerily. “You grew a little dizzy, but you’re all right.”

“What’s that noise?” asked the boy, breathlessly. Mr. Hume picked him up, and carried him to the door of the vault.

“Magnificent, isn’t it? Aren’t you glad we came? One of the wonders of the world; and you’ve got the crow over Dick this time.”

Venning sighed. “It’s rather awful,” he muttered. “It’s grand, lad, grand! See how the water juts out like a column of steam with the roar of a big gun, and how the light falls upon it in a thousand hues, as the fine spray falls.”

Venning’s eyes opened wide as they looked up. “Like golden rain at a display of fireworks.”

“The very thing, lad,” answered the hunter, enthusiastically.

Venning’s eyes ranged slowly down to the well of green water arching out from the black wall, and then to the snow-white flood where the foam hissed in its giddy descent.

“Where is she?”

“She’ll be back soon. But we cannot wait for her here——there is too much moisture. We’ll get back to a drier place.”

Still carrying the boy, he made his way back to the great chamber, lit up mysteriously by those pale cones and glistening columns. Here he found a dry place in a comer, and after placing Venning on the ground, he struck a match.

“Here’s a find,” he said, pouncing on a piece of driftwood.

With his Ghoorka knife he soon split it up, and in a short time a fire was blazing, throwing a red reflection on the stalactites. It was an eerie place, echoing to the thunders of the explosions, with pitch-dark comers, and those ghost-like forms in the misty heights, but Mr. Hume would not allow his patient time to brood over the surroundings. He shaved off fragments of biltong for him to eat, talking cheerfully all the time, and at last had the satisfaction of seeing the overwrought nerves of the lad quieted in sleep. Then the anxiety that had filled him all the time appeared in the expression of his face, and he stepped away a few yards to send a call for the woman ringing up into the vault. The cry ran away mournfully

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in a series of diminishing echoes, but no answer came, and he looked to his weapons, built up the fire with other fragments of wood that had been evidently borne in at times of flood, and explored the cave. There was no sign of the woman anywhere, but he found three exits. Relinquishing any idea of following them until Venning was fit to walk, he returned to the fire, and sat down with his back to the rock waiting for the woman's return. If he felt doubt or fear, he fought against it, resolving that, come what would, his first care was to save his companion, but that there was cause for doubt he knew very well from the remarks and bearing of the woman. Probably, he thought, the secret of the underground was hers only, and she might well have a motive sufficiently strong to preserve that secret even at the sacrifice of their lives. Full of these thoughts, he began another examination of the cave, confining himself this time to a search of the floor. Going down on hands and knees, and carrying a lighted stick, he minutely inspected the thin layer of dust which had settled since the last flood-waters had rushed through. Traversing slowly the width of the cave, he found his own spoor and the spoor of the woman. Then working round with the object of finding which of the three openings she had taken on leaving, he came upon a calabash and a kaross made of goats'-skin. The calabash, from the smell, contained goats'-milk. Leaving the fire-stick to mark the spot to which he had carried his search, he went back to place the kaross over the sleeping boy. Then taking another stick from the fire, he took up the spooring from the place he had left off, and crawled inch by inch, till he came to the first exit. Here he saw his spoor entering together with the footprints of the woman, both very plain from the mud which had adhered to their feet. The woman, however, had not passed out. That, at any rate, was one point settled, and he went on with a feeling of distinct relief at the thought that there might be another way out than by the fearful track they had followed on entering. On nearing the second exit he paused, startled by what seemed to him the sound of shrill voices borne suddenly in a pause between the bellowing of the water-jets in the neighbouring vault. When he listened he could, however, distinguish no sound in the mutterings and the boomings that was human, and repressing a desire to cry out, he groped along up to the second exit. Here, however, there were no footprints. The surface was smooth rock, and he was passing on when something about the rock attracted his attention again. Leaving one of the sticks again to guide him on his return by its glowing end, he returned to the fire, rebuilt it, waited till it was fairly blazing, then with another glaring torch he ran to continue his search. He found what he had half expected, that the rock had been polished by the passage of many feet, which had worn out quite a marked depression.

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He also satisfied himself that the woman had not passed out there, for as her feet had been wet she must have left some trace on the smooth surface. There remained now the third and last exit, and as he edged away to the left, he saw that the beaten track also led in the same direction. He rose and walked, feeling for the opening with his right hand, and, coming to it, he was glad, but not surprised, to make two discoveries, first, that the well-marked path entered the opening, and second, that the woman had also passed that way. There was the spoor of one foot clearly outlined in particles of moist dust.

"That's good," he muttered, standing up. "But I don't like the look of that path. Means people. But what sort of people? And the kaross and the goats'-milk. People again. No good taking risks."

He went back to the fire, drew the sticks away, thrust the burning ends into crevices, and left the comer in darkness once more. Then he sat down by Venning with his rifle across his knees and waited. He had no thought of moving a foot from the cave until Venning was fit to move; he would let him have his sleep out, and if he was no better, well, then, he would carry him. So he sat waiting and watching, listening to the hoarse rumblings which all the time ascended from below, and to the tremendous reports, a little dulled by the intervening wall, made by the spurting water. He watched the coming of the night, marked the gradual fading of the sheen on the stalactites, until softly the shadows sank and merged into the darkness of the cave, leaving nothing visible but a faint gleam where the nearest sulphur cone stood.

Eerie it was in the dim light, eerier it was now in the dark, with those hoarse mutterings from beneath, and those thunderous reverberations pealing at irregular intervals through the unknown spaces above. He had his pipe, but his habitual caution deterred him from seeking its comfort, and he was glad he had abstained, and glad at having extinguished the fire, when suddenly he heard the sound of shrill laughter. A sullen roar from the water-hole beyond drowned the sound, but he knew in every fibre that he had not been mistaken. There were others beside him and Venning in the vaults, but not for a moment was he pleased at the thought. Instinct or the association of the place warned them of danger. For a long spell, however, he could distinguish nothing human in the hurly-burly of sounds, and then again, nearer and plainer, the shrill peal rang out exultant, with a note in it of some savage beast flinging back the news to the pack that the scent was hot.

Slowly he stooped his head to hear if Venning slept, for he dreaded what would happen if the boy awoke in the pitchy darkness and heard that demoniac cry. The boy's breathing came at regular intervals, and with a muttered prayer that he would sleep on, the Hunter felt for the trigger.

“Ngonyama!” From the height a voice calling to him dropped soft as the flight of a bat, faint as a whisper, yet clear as a bell in all that turmoil.

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He smiled grimly, but did not answer. This was some trick of the woman. If she was friendly, why had she left them?

“Indhlovu! “—again it fell as from afar.

He ran his hand over the bandolier, loosened the cartridges, and let his fingers curl round the trigger again.

A gust of wind blowing through some fissure shrieked amid the heights as if terrified at having wandered into such a prison, then for a long time the old sounds continued to make sport in the vaults and tunnels without any interruption.

Then Venning suddenly woke, and Mr. Hume was in a fever to keep the boy’s mind occupied, and to get him asleep again.

“Drink this,” he said, picking up the calabash, “and go to sleep again.”

Venning took a long drink, “I dreamt I was by the sea, listening to the waves. It was almost as good as being home again.”

“That’s right. It’s the sound of water. Go to sleep again and dream of old England, the best medicine you could have.”

“I think I will,” said Venning; and, with a sigh, he pulled the kaross over him, being too tired out to wonder how it came there.

“Sleep well, lad, sleep well;” and the big hand rested on the boy’s shoulder to comfort him with its touch, but the man’s face was turned with a straining expression towards the exit which he had last inspected, for it seemed to him that he had seen a streak of light, such as would be thrown in advance by a torch.

To his relief. Venning dropped off once more into a deep slumber, and he bent forward, alert in every fibre. He was not mistaken. There was a light over in the dark, not a light that sparkled, but a greenish glow, not unlike the eye of an animal as seen at night in the reflection of a bull’s-eye lantern. It moved, too, like the eye of an animal, and presently other lights gathered around and at the back, giving off no radiance, not bright enough to throw up into relief the objects that produced them, but watchful, like the eyes of a pack of wild-dogs regarding their prey. The Hunter tried an experiment. Feeling for his great knife, he struck a stone, and watched to see if there was any movement of surprise which would indicate that there were living creatures aware of his presence. There was no such movement. Like bits of dull green glass with a light behind, these mysterious points remained as they had been, moving gently as if to the action of respiration. He raised his rifle, tempted to fire under the feeling of nervous suspense that tried his iron nerves, but lowered it at once, with a glance down at the dark form at his side. He would wait; and he sat watching the things, whatever they were, that

seemed to be watching him with such cold and silent intentness. Then he made out that they were not animals. The eyes of animals blink, and these did not. Moreover, any animal, however fierce, would turn its eyes away at times; but these remained staring.

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What were they? He had seen fungus glow like that in the forest, but never so many together. And then he strained his ears to gather from any sound an inkling of their nature, but, beyond the bellowings and the sullen roar, he could hear nothing. How long could he stand the suspense? Already he felt a strong impulse to jump up, to shout, to break up that fixed regard, to come to the death-grapple, if need be, rather than sit there in doubt. The minutes slipped by slowly; each slowly spun its time out, as if every minute were an hour, each hour a week, and the moisture gathered on his brow, when at last the tension was broken.

“Sisters, I smell smoke!”

“Thank God,” was the man’s thought, “they are living.” The suspense fell from him. He pulled himself together, and was ready for anything.

“Smoke!” The voice reached him in sharp shrill accents that pierced the continual growling of the waters. “Who is here?”

“Ngonyama!” was the reply uttered by several.

“He is terrible, sisters. Hear the thunder of his voice. Let us fly, lest he tear us.” And the speaker laughed.

“That is not his voice! He is afraid; he crouches like the panther in the trap, trembling. His strength has gone from him.”

“I heard a lion was in the plains, and the cows ran together in a cluster, for they were afraid.”

A shrill laughter was the response, but the dull lights remained where they were, and again there was a long spell of silence, as far as the voices were concerned. Then the lights went out. The Hunter stooped forward, listening, but he could hear no footfall. He put the gun down, and grasped the knife in his right hand, for he could use it with better effect in a sudden assault.

“I smell meat!”

The voice came now from another quarter, and then the lights shone out one after another.

“What meat is this, sister?”

“Indhlovu.”

“Wow! There are fat pickings on the bones of the great one; but he is powerful. I hear his trumpeting.”

“Haw! it is the voice of the unseen, mother. Indhlovu has fallen into the pit that was set for him. His power has gone.”

Again the voices ceased, again the strange lights were dimmed; but the Hunter was ready, for he knew now they were quartering the cave in search of him. He had no fear, only a feeling of intense disgust, coupled with a determination to scare the lives out of these ghouls, if they ventured on an attack. By-and-by he beard faint rustlings, and then breathings; but it was impossible to see, and he sat perfectly still. Then the voices broke out again at another point.

“He is here, my sisters.”

“Wow! We are hungry; let us eat. We are thirsty; let us drink.”

“Sisters, terrible is the power in the arm of Indhlovu. He strikes, and lo! as a falling tree sweeps a passage through the forest, so would he sweep us away. Let him weaken; let hunger fasten on his vitals, and fear trouble his brain.”

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“We are wolves; we would tear him down in his strength, while his blood is red.”

“Terrible is the trunk of Indhlovu, and terrible is the arm of Ngonyama. In his hand is a broad knife, and with one stroke will he split a head. Let the darkness hold him.”

“We hunger, and he will go. The wizard will claim him for his own; the dark waters will drag him down. Give him to us.”

“He watches over his cub, and who so fierce as the lion who protects his young? The cub will sicken. The sound of the waters will trouble his brain; his spirit will fly before the terror of the darkness. Wait, my sisters, till his cub be dead.”

“Demons!” cried the Hunter, his patience gone in a storm of fury. “Away!” He sprang forward with a roar, and his knife, whistling through the air, fell upon the gleaming cone, and struck from it sparks of fire.

With cries of fear the women—if women they were—fled, their lights showing again from the second exit, where was the beaten footway, and then out of the dark tunnel came a peal of fiendish laughter. Then silence, or, rather, a relief from the mocking voices; but there was a reminder of their presence in one of those pale greenish lights. He strode towards it, saw it had been dropped, picked it up, and found that it came from some substance held in a bag of open network. With a short laugh he saw it was fungus, a discovery that took all the mystery out of the recent performance, and since it appeared that the only thing formidable about his persecutors was their trickery in making the most of the terrors of the dark, he remade the fire, for there was no mistaking the chillness of the air. As he thought over the fantastic doings of the visitors, he laughed again, and presently feeling the warmth of the fire, he yawned and closed his eyes.

“Only a parcel of women,” he muttered, and was asleep.

And as he slept, believing there was no danger, the shadows closed in as the fire dwindled—closed in, taking queer shapes. Across the smooth, gleaming surface of the cone these shadows came, like stooping forms, with long lean arms. There were whisperings, too, “clicks” made by the tongue, and Venning, opening his eyes, suddenly heard these sounds at once, notwithstanding the walls of the cavern trembled to the hollow thunder of the waters. His eyes fell upon something beyond-the fire. He did not move, or cry out, or wonder where he was; his mind was focussed like his wide-opened eyes on that object. It was like a face, and yet he could not make out whether it was the face of man, or bird, or beast, or reptile. One glance at the thing by any one else would have been more than enough, so terrible it was; but Venning’s overpowering curiosity as a naturalist mercifully blotter-put the horror. He was trying to identify it, and made mental notes such as these:—

“Forehead low, receding; brows contracted; eyes small, deep-set, venomous; lower part of face banded black, and undecipherable; neck long, skinny, vulture-like; rest of body not visible.”

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“Snake, or wild-cat,” he said.

“Eh?” said Mr. Hume, waking at once.

There was a ring of metal, a sudden babel of fierce cries, the flash of a rifle-shot, and the clap of the report, followed by shrieks.

“It’s all right, lad,” shouted Mr. Hume, as Venning straggled to rise; “keep down.”

There was a sharp hissing. Something struck the rock above the Hunter as he was stooping over Venning, and fell down into the fire. It was a barbed arrow. He fired again, scattered the fire with a kick, and crouched over the boy. Several arrows rang viciously against the rock. He felt for Venning’s carbine, swung it round with one hand, and emptied the magazine, firing at different points. With yells of disappointment, rage, and fear, the creatures of the night fled once more.

“Are you all right, my boy?”

“Yes; but what does it mean? What were they? I thought the thing was a snake.”

“What did you see?”

“Something staring out of the shadows. I could not make out what it was, and as you awoke it seemed to jump forward and strike.”

“Ay, the blow fell on my belt. Thank God, you warned me; but it was my fault. I should have kept awake. They’re only women, lad. Don’t let any fancies come into your head.”

Venning sniffed. “Smell anything? Seems to me like sulphur.”

“It’s the gunpowder fumes, hanging low.”

Venning sat up. “What is that booming noise?”

“The sound of falling water.”

The boy was silent for some time, while the Hunter reloaded the carbine and his Express.

“So——we are still down below.”

“But I know the way out, and as soon as it is daylight we’ll get back into the valley. Have no fears.”

Venning’s hand went out to feel for his companion. “I must have given you a lot of trouble. You’ve got your coat off.”

“I didn’t want it, and it came in handy as a pillow.”

“Put it on,” said Venning, “and give me my gun.”

Mr. Hume laughed cheerily. “Feeling yourself again—eh? Well, that’s good. And now we’ll put an end to this nonsense.”

“I certainly smell sulphur,” said Venning; “and what is that blue streak there?” He took a step towards the smooth cone. “It is sulphur!” he cried. “See, it’s burning.”

Mr. Hume stepped to his side, and saw the unmistakable blue flame given off by burning sulphur, while a whiff of the fumes made him choke.

“You’re right; it’s a mass of sulphur. The burning wad front the cartridge must have set it alight.” He sliced off the burning patch with his knife. “We don’t want to be fumigated, or to die of suffocation. Now, if you feel strong enough, we’ll explore the cave.”

“Is it safe? I mean, are there any chasms?”

“Smooth as a floor. Keep close by me.”

They examined the cavern carefully by means of the strange lantern filled with fungus, and Mr. Hume halted by the second exit.

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“This is where they enter,” he said, “and I think our best plan will be to build a fire in the mouth. We should then have the advantage over them, as we should see them once they came into the reflection.”

They set about collecting wood, when Venning had a thought.

“Which way does the draught set in the tunnel—away from the cavern or into it?”

“Why?”

“Because, if the current of air blows away from us, we can easily keep them out.”

“It blows from the cave into the tunnel. I found that out before.”

“Then we have got them, whoever they are. Make the fire in the passage, pile up blocks of this sulphur on the inner side, and the wind will carry the fumes down into the tunnel.”

“A splendid plan,” said Mr. Hume; and very soon it was carded out, a couple of shots being fired into the dark passage as a warning to the enemy to keep off. As the flames caught the sulphur, a thick smoke rolled away. “That will stop them; and now we can wait in peace till the morning.”

The rest of the night passed for them in peace as far as their assailants were concerned, but the chilling damp of the vaults got into their bones, and Venning was pinched and shivering when the first ray of sunshine struck slanting down through the mist-laden atmosphere, bringing with it a message of hope from the bright outer world.

CHAPTER XXIII

THROUGH THE VAULTS

They shared the goats’-milk remaining in the calabash, and at once entered the first exit, that was to lead them, as they ardently hoped, into the warmth and light of the day. Venning went first, carrying only the strange lantern, and Mr. Hume a foot behind, ready to support the boy with a helping hand if he were again overcome by dizziness. Their progress was slow, owing to the dark, but the going was easy enough with a gradual ascent. What pleased them very much was the dwindling of the hubbub made by the waters—a sign that they were going away from that source of danger. In silence and in darkness they kept on up to a point where the walls widened out, and where there was a familiar hut-like smell, necessitating a pause for investigation. Mr. Hume struck a match—for the fungus-lamp shed no ray—and holding it up, disclosed a slab of rock with a pile of white ash on it. Blowing upon this, he started a glow from the still live embers beneath, and placing on a few half-burnt sticks, soon made a fire. By its light

they saw a couple of rush-mats, such as the natives make, on the floor, and these, added to the fire, made a blaze which lit up a cavern bearing evidence of frequent use; for there were other mats on a ledge, together with several calabashes, and an earthen pot of native make. Seeing where the passage continued, they hurried on, for these human belongings reminded them forcibly of the existence of beings they had no wish to meet in those dark passages.

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“How do you account for people living down here?” asked Venning.

“They may be outcasts from the village, afflicted either by disease or madness, or they may be members of some dark superstition.”

“Ugh! I wonder if the Inkosikasi has any connection with them?”

“I rather think so, and when we get out we will have a word with her.”

“When we get out! But it will be fine to see old Dick again, and to see the birds and insects on the move in the sun. Halloa! the path turns again—bends to the left.”

“Keep on slowly.”

As they went the noise of waters again reached them, growing in volume; and when the path turned abruptly to the right, they looked out through a small opening on billows of mist that rolled upwards out of sight.

“Seem to have reached a spot above last night’s resting-place.”

The wall on their left was very thin, and shook to each report; but presently the passage made a bend to the right, which took them away once more from the mist-laden vault, and then, through a narrow doorway, opened into one of the best-lighted caverns they had yet entered. The light which streamed in from the wall beyond was very welcome to them, but the taste of earth in the air blowing through the crack was better. The first thing they did was to run across to the crack and look out.

“The river—and the valley!” cried Venning.

Below them was the green of the valley bathed in sunshine, the river glittering like silver, and the scene like a glimpse of Paradise after the gloom of their vast prison.

“There goes the eagle we saw when we first arrived, and right away yonder I can see a flock of goats among the rocks.”

“Perhaps we could get through and climb down.” Mr. Hume thrust an arm through, and spread his fingers to the wind. “We are on the south-west side of the cliff, nearly overlooking the entrance to the canon.”

“It is very steep there. We should want a rope—and a long rope, too.”

“Yes, I am afraid we must keep on; but, at any rate, it is a comfort to know where we are.”

They stepped back and turned to examine the cavern. The floor was dry, the roof high, and it would have made a good room. And a room in occupation it was; for, now they took stock of it, there were signs of the occupants everywhere—a stack of wood in one corner, several karosses rolled up, sleeping-mats, cooking-pots, wooden spoons, a bundle of reeds for arrow-making, and a half-shaped bow, and other odds and ends. But what fixed their attention were a number of white objects on a ledge.

“Look like ostrich eggs,” said Venning, reaching up “No, they’re not. Skulls—Ethiopian.”

“Pah! Drop it,” said Mr. Hume.

“Why?” said Venning, who had no qualms in these matters. “You can see it is Ethiopian from the receding forehead, the high cheek-bones, the heavy under-jaw and strong teeth. No white man ever has teeth like that.”

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“Drop it,” said Mr. Hume, sternly.

“But why?”

“Look at this.” Mr. Hume pointed to a square block in the centre of, the room—a block all stained with dark streaks that came from a basin in the centre. Venning approached it. “Blood—perhaps a sacrificial stone.”

“And this,” said Mr. Hume, pointing to a bone projecting from one of the pots. “They are man-eaters.”

Venning put down the skull and looked with a white face at his companion.

“Cannibals! That is why they tried to kill us last night.”

The Hunter nodded his head. “I did not want to tell you, but I could not stand a lecture on skulls.”

“Let us go.”

“First let us take a couple of these mats. Cut up, they would serve as torches at a pinch.” He tied one on Venning’s back and one on his own. “Forward!”

When they wished to proceed, however, they could not find the continuation of the passage, and, to their dismay, it seemed as if they would have to retrace their steps in search for another way out, when behind a hanging mat in the left-hand corner they found a narrow opening. It was not inviting, but they were glad of any path that led away from that evil place, and away also from the lower depths. So, though the way became more and more difficult as they advanced, they continued to press on, now up, now down, at another place going on their hands and knees, and further on having to wriggle between cracks which sorely nipped the Hunter as he forced his heavy frame through. And in the end they came out on the verge of the vast vault, which appeared to fill so much of the space below; emerged on a wind-swept platform, with a sudden din after the quiet of the tortuous passage as of demons shrieking through the air.

Here Venning gave up. He had been now over twenty-four hours underground without one good meal, except the drain of goats’-milk, and after the shock of the previous afternoon, when he hung in mid-air, the disappointment at coming upon another forbidding pit was too much for him. He crouched back against the rock, and sat down.

Mr. Hume spread the mat under the boy, wrapped the kaross over him, and made him comfortable as could be, and then he looked anxiously about. Little comfort did he gain. They had evidently pursued a false trail, and the platform was the end, standing sheer on the edge of that very vaulted space, down which, far down, the jets of water shot out through the blow-holes. Their windings had brought them, after all, to an

impasse, and the only retreat was through the chamber of the skulls, where perhaps the savage beings of the underground vault were already collected. Looking over and down, he could see the jets of water shooting out to fall in a mantle of spray, on which the arrow-like shafts of sunlight sparkled in iridescent hues, and through the spray he could see the white waters of the cataract. Above his head there was a jutting rock, which shut out the wall immediately above, but outside the rock he saw the roof of the vault, gaunt ribs of rock pierced at intervals by fissures, through which shone the blue of the sky. Turning to Venning, he saw that the boy's eyes were fixed on those openings with a longing in his look that wrung the man's heart.

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Clearly there were only two courses open. They must either go back by the path they had entered by—making up their minds to cross that dizzy ledge in the darkness—or he would have to leave the boy somewhere while he went for help. He gave up the latter alternative at once, and set his mind on the first.

“We will rest for an hour,” he said. “Then we will go down.”

“To look for another way?” asked the boy, wearily.

“Or to follow the track we entered by.”

“I couldn’t,” whispered the boy.

“Then we will try another passage—the one ‘they’ went down by. Of course”—and the Hunter’s voice gained in cheeriness—“that is our plan, and if we hurry we shall be outside in no time.”

“Very well,” said the boy, jumping up with a sudden flush in his cheeks, showing a return of feverishness.

“Rest awhile, lad; it is morning yet. See how the sun’s rays slant towards the west. At noon they will be vertical, and then we shall have the whole afternoon.”

They sat down with their eyes turned up to the specks of blue, and watched the sun-shafts dip from the west towards the centre till they poured their white light straight down. Then they started for the long downward track, Mr. Hume this time leading the way with his rifle ready.

When they came again to the cavern of the skulls, the Hunter paused before pushing the mat aside. For some seconds he stood listening; then, cautious still, with the point of his knife he forced apart a couple of the rush strands and peeped through. The place seemed as it had been, and he was about to step in when he remembered that Venning had placed the skull on the block of stone. There was the block, but there was no skull upon it. Standing back, he whispered to Venning to keep where he was; then, with his rifle ready, he quietly moved the mat aside.

There was a howl, as some creature, squatting on the floor, turned a lined and hideous face towards the corner, and then scuttled out of view. Mr. Hume leapt to the floor, and ran to seize the creature who had taken refuge under a hanging mat. His hand, however, met with no resistance, and, brushing the mat aside, he saw an opening leading down.

“It went down there,” he said, as Venning, showing a startled face at the opening, called out to know what had happened.

Venning jumped down, and looked into the new outlet. “Let us follow,” he said eagerly.

Mr. Hume shook his head. “We know one has gone. There are probably others; and we don’t know that it would lead us out. The other way would.”

“It makes me ill to think of the other way,” said Venning, vehemently.

“It looks like a rabbit-hole.”

“I’ll go first.”

“It may mean another night, if it takes up much time.”

“I’m sure it’s right,” persisted the boy.

“Very well, here goes;” and the Hunter submitted against his judgment, because he feared beyond anything the breakdown of the boy’s nerves.

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He was obliged to slide down this black opening, and when he found a footing in a dark, cellar-like place, he at once struck a match under the belief that he stood in a mere pit and nothing else, but a puff of wind blew the match out.

“Come along; there is an opening.”

The opening they found, and, as they entered it, they heard a shuffling noise behind.

“It’s that hag gone up into the room,” cried the Hunter, “and she’ll give the alarm. We must go after her.”

Venning, however, pushed on. “This is the way,” he said wildly; and Mr. Hume could do no less than follow, frowning as he went.

But it did seem that the boy was right. The little black hole of a passage suddenly opened out into light that almost blinded them by its brilliancy. It was a broad track. On the right was the wall of the cliff pierced with little holes, through which they looked down again on the canon itself, the opposite walls seeming very near.

“Wasn’t I right?” asked Venning, with an excited laugh. “We can’t be very far above. I fancy I can hear the river.”

“Well, there is this about it, if the worst comes, and we can’t find a way out, we can signal from one of these holes to people in the valley.”

“And Dick would find a way to rescue us—Dick and Muata. Hurrah! Then we won’t have to go down into that awful darkness.”

“No; but we may as well see where this leads to.”

They had to skirt a Y-shaped fall in the track, and this accomplished, their course, after many windings, terminated at a totally unexpected spot, no less than a point high up the face of the cliff rising sheer up from the Deadman’s Pool. They stepped out from the passage into broad day, and raised their hats to let the wind blow upon them, but they found that they were as far off from escape as before. Below, the cliff sank hundreds of feet; above, it rose like a wall without foothold; but they were thankful for the sunlight, for the far view over the dark forest, for the privilege to look once more on the unruffled sky. Now that they were in the light, they could take stock of each other, and found it in their hearts to start a feeble laugh at the covering of mud, smoke, and green mould that almost disguised their identity.

But it was a comfort to stretch their aching limbs in the sun, to take the pure air into their lungs, to look restfully away over the trees that marched unbroken to the uttermost horizon. They dozed under the influence of the sunlight, blinking their eyes like cats, and when Mr. Hume stirred at last, the sun was slipping down the western slope.

“We must be going,” he said, looking down.

“I suppose so,” said Venning, wearily.

“There’s something astir down there. Men are moving up the slope towards the gorge —and, by George, they are Hassan’s men too!”

Venning stood up, and looked down upon a file of little figures breasting the slope.

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“Good thing I had that wall built. Dick will be having his hands full. Come along; we may get out in time yet to take a share in the fight, for his sake.”

Venning remained staring down, with a look in his face that brought the Hunter back.

“What do you see?”

“Of all the idiots,” said the boy—“of all the miserable, shortsighted, thick-headed, addle-pated duffers and asses we are the worst! We took pains to find a way into a fiendish maze of tunnels, pits, and caverns, occupied by vampires and enveloped in darkness, in search of a thing that was never there.”

“As what?”

“Look there!” and the boy pointed down. “There’s our boat—down there, out in the broad daylight.”

“You’re mistaken, lad.”

“There—straight down—in that patch of reeds on the right of the pool.”

“That’s her, right enough,” said Mr. Hume, excitedly.

“And to think we’ve been wandering about in fear of our lives on a false scent.”

“It makes me feel bad; but the mistake has been made, and now we’ve got to get out, and get out in time to help Dick.”

“Oh, Dick’s all right,” said Venning, crossly. “He’s got plenty to eat, and a warm bed.”

“Chew this;” and the Hunter handed his last bit of biltong.

Venning took it, and followed on into the passage, chewing and growling over their folly.

“We will laugh over our troubles,” said the Hunter, patiently, “when we get out.”

“When we get out! I don’t believe there is a way out. Anyhow, I am not going a step further beyond the place where we found the loopholes.”

Mr. Hume made no reply.

“I have been thinking over it,” Venning went on.

“The place cant be very high above the level of the ground outside. We could easily attract attention by filing a shot out. Then we would make a rope out of the rushes in these mats, lower it with a bit of stone at the end, on which we could write directions to

Dick with a bit of burnt stick, to hitch on a rope. We would haul in the rope, make it fast, and then shin down."

"But suppose Dick is busy beating off the attack of Hassan's men?"

"Then we'll wait. I'm not going further—not a foot. If you like, sir, you can go, but I will stay. I am not going down into those horrible caves." His voice rose to a shout.

"All right," said the Hunter, soothingly. "In any case, I am afraid we have left it too late."

"Late or early, I'll not go on."

When they did reach the loopholes, they found on looking out that the valley on that side was already in the shadow.

"We will stay, then," said Mr. Hume. "Let me unstrap the mat from your shoulders."

Venning had already sat down with a dogged look in his face, and Mr. Hume had to lift him up to loosen the mat. The boy—there was no disguising the matter any farther—-was ill, and it would clearly be dangerous to excite him by opposition.

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After making the boy comfortable, Mr. Hume sat smoking his pipe, the first time for many hours, in lieu of food. He himself was feeling the effect of the long period of anxiety, for he had scarcely eaten a mouthful, beyond his drink of milk, as he had given his little store to his young friend, who was in more need of it. But it was not of himself he thought. He had a new anxiety about Dick, and bitterly blamed himself for having so blindly followed the woman into this horrible place, that was one succession of death-traps.

“I’m very thirsty,” muttered the boy.

Mr. Home leaned over him. “Keep quiet,” he said, “and I’ll bring you some water.”

Taking only his Ghoorka knife and his match-box, the Hunter went on to the Cave of Skulls. Luckily for the denizens of that ominous place, none of them were there to bar his entrance, for he was in a grim mood, so making a bonfire of some of the mats, he looked about. One calabash contained water, and this he carried back, together with something equally precious—a bunch of bananas that were black with smoke, yet fit to eat by any one who was very hungry or did not see them. The boy was sitting up waiting with burning eyes.

“You were so long,” he muttered.

“But I won’t go away again, old chap. I’ve brought you quite a feast.”

Venning took a long drink, ate the bananas, and fell back on his pillow, while the Hunter resumed his seat to watch through another night. It seemed as if they were to be left in peace. Since that solitary, withered, and scared creature dived out of the cave they had seen no one. But still he sat on guard as the hours slipped slowly by, and then there came a surprising thing.

Just the tinkle made by a drop of water falling into a pool!

It came at regular intervals, incessant, musical, and he began to count it, wondering at the height it fell, and marvelling at the noise it made.

And then he leapt to his feet, and stood a moment in breathless amazement. A single drop of water to be heard above all that multitudinous clamour! What did it mean? It meant a silence so profound that from the black depth of the yawning cavity the tiny tinkle could reach him. It meant that the roaring torrent was stilled!

CHAPTER XXIV

LETTING IN THE RIVER

The river was no longer thundering through the underground passage, and as the sudden silence following the stopping of engines on a passenger steamer will awaken every sleeper even more quickly than the roaring of a gale, so this lull in the tremendous din aroused Venning.

“What is the matter?” he asked, starting up.

“The river has stopped.”

They sat straining their ears for the swift roar of the waters, but out of the slumbering depths below there came only the regular splash and tinkle of the falling drops.

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“I don’t understand it,” muttered the Hunter.

“I do,” said Venning, with a shout. “Hassan has blocked up the mouth of the canon.”

“Nonsense, boy; how could he?”

“Look out of the loophole.”

Mr. Hume put his face to the hole. “The water has risen, I think, from the noise.”

“You remember what Muata said about the drowning of the valley? Well, that is what is happening. The Arab has blocked the mouth by blasting a mass of rock which overhung the river. That’s what!”

They pondered over this new phase.

“If we had food, this would be the safest place, after all, then.”

“Food, Dick, and a way out.”

“Dick, of course. Anyhow, sir, it is a relief to have silence; the noise made my head throb so, I did not know what I was doing.”

Before, they had to shout into each other’s ears, now they spoke in low tones, but even so the echoes seemed to people the dark with whispers, and they desisted from talk. In the silence they heard presently the swirl and lapping of waters out in the canon, then the sound of men talking, and, what was strange, a noise as of paddles, These outside sounds were muffled and indistinct, but as the night went on they heard a laugh ring out from below, loud and shrill, followed by a confused murmuring, which quickly gained distinctness in the form of a wild chant. The denizens of the underground world were on the move. Looking down over the parapet they saw a spurt of flame, and as the fire made for itself a ring of red light far down in the dark, they could make out dimly the forms of people sitting round in a circle. Then the smell of smoke reached them, and, after an interval, the strong odour of burning flesh.

“Go to sleep, lad,” said Mr. Hume; “they will not disturb us. They have other prey, found, perhaps, on the scene of the fight in the gorge.”

Venning shuddered, and sought his mat, while the Hunter continued to look down on the unholy feast in the bowels of the earth, with an itch to send a bullet smashing into the midst of the circle.

“Come and rest,” said Venning. “Don’t you ever feel tired?”

“Tired enough, lad; but I don’t like this news about the river rising;” and ha went to the loophole.

“We’re safe enough, sir—safe enough for to-night. There are six miles at the back of the dam, and it would take a lot of water to rise a foot an hour in the canon, and we are more than thirty feet above the normal level, I dare say. Do rest.”

Mr. Hume sat down, and closed his eyes, but when he heard the regular breathing of the tired boy, he was up again. It was the thought of Dick that filled him with sleepless anxiety, and he leant on the parapet, fuming over plans in his mind with wearying reiteration. He was staring straight before him, when a light appeared on his own level, accompanied by the ring of metal on rock. Instinctively his rifle was levelled, and, with his finger on the trigger, he sighted a foot below the light, which was now quite stationary, but, obedient to a sudden overmastering impulse, he as quickly lowered the rifle.

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A moment the light remained fixed; then it was raised, lowered, and moved from side to side as if the holder were examining the ground; then it advanced.

“Stop!” thundered Mr. Hume. “Stand back. There is a chasm at your feet.”

He had suddenly remembered the platform on which he and Venning had emerged on their first attempt after leaving the Cave of Skulls, and somehow he felt that the person who held that light had strayed to that very place in ignorance.

He heard a startled exclamation, saw the light fall from the person’s band, and marked its swift descent, before the flame was extinguished by the rush of air; then it was his turn to fall back.

“Who are you?”

“It’s Dick,” shouted Venning, with a sob in his voice.

“Dick,” muttered the Hunter, cold to the heart at the thought of the falling light.

“Hurrah!” There was no mistaking that shout. “Where are you? How can I get to you?”

“For God’s sake, don’t move!” cried the Hunter, in a shaken voice. “Stay where you are. We’ll join you.”

From below there came a shrill clamour, but the Hunter, never pausing to give the creatures a thought, lifted Venning in his arms and felt his way to the cave, clambered up through the hole, found the other exit hidden by the mat, and crept down the broken passage beyond. In a turn of the passage they saw Compton’s face peering out under a lighted candle, the one visible object in the darkness, set in a strained expression, in which were blended joy, anxiety, and wonder.

They gripped hands in silence, then—

“We’ve found the boat,” said Venning.

“What is that noise down below?” asked Dick.

“Have you got any food?” This from Mr. Hume.

“A sackful.”

“Then let us eat first of all.”

They sat down there and then and ate, and when they had eaten they were silent, because the creatures below were silent too, and Mr. Hume knew that then they were

dangerous. He went back to stand behind the mat knife in hand, ready to attack, for now that he had got his two boys back, he said to himself grimly that he would stand no nonsense. Back in that dark passage Dick sat with his friend's head on his shoulder, and one limp hand grasped in his, marvelling much at the mystery of the place and at the providential meeting. He had cause to wonder how Venning had borne the horrors of the underground as well as he had, for towards the morning it seemed as if those ghouls of darkness vied with each other in producing the most appalling shrieks, howls, and bursts of mirthless laughter. They played ventriloquial tricks in the passages and caverns, making the sounds come from different points after varying intervals of silence; and all the time, as could be gathered from occasional words in the incoherent gabble, uttering threats against the white men.

Then, at the very break of dawn, after a couple of hours of silence, the plot they had formed was put into shape.

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“Ngonyama!”

Mr. Hume stepped out on to the platform. “Who calls?”

“It is I, the Inkosikase.”

She was standing at the very parapet where he himself had leant when he saw the light borne by Dick on the spot where he now stood. She stood up boldly on the canon side of the great cavity, about fifty yards away.

“Your life was forfeit, Ngonyama, but I spared you—I spared you.”

“I hear.”

“You are but a mouse in these earth runs, Indhlovu.”

The Hunter laughed, and the unseen creatures took up the laugh, flinging it back till the hollow places rang with the wild noise.

“Hear, and take heed. Take heed lest they fall on you. Wow! Ye have seen my power and the strength of my medicine in the stilling of the waters.”

“It was Hassan who stilled the waters. Say on.”

“Yoh!” The woman paused, taken aback. “See, my medicine tells me you came here to search for the shining canoe. Maybe I can tell you where it is hid by the wizards.”

“I know, wise woman. Say on.”

“Wow! But,” she said triumphantly, “ye do not know the way out, and ye are helpless till I tell you.”

“I know.”

“Then why do you stay here?”

“Enough! I know the way out. What is your message to me?”

His confidence staggered her, and it was some moments before she could speak.

“But there is the young chief. Ye would save him. I will make a bargain with you for his life.”

“He is here, woman.”

Dick stepped out from the shadows, and she threw up her arms with a wail.

“Say what you have to say,” said Mr. Hume, sternly, “for I see you would have some service of me, and had hoped to buy me with news I have no want for.”

“Ngonyama, great white one, I am but a woman, and ye are too strong for me.”

Mr. Hume nodded.

“I am a woman; only a woman.”

“Was it a woman’s task to set those ravens upon me and the young chief?”

“I am a mother, Indhlovu, and a mother’s heart is strong for her child. I feared you because of my son. You were strong, and he trusted you. He was away, and you were left to do as you wished—to take his place, to destroy him. It is the way of men to use power for themselves.”

“It is not my way.”

“O great white one, give me counsel. The Arab thief has truly stopped the river, and the waters rise in the valley—rise among the gardens; and when Muata returns he will see water where there was grass.”

“Ay, Muata will ask how this thing happened. And they will answer, because a woman interfered with his plans. The son will know that it was his mother who brought this evil on the place because she thought she could do better than Ngonyama.”

“It is true; it is true,” she wailed, beating her breast. “So tell me, great one, how this evil may be put right, but it must be done quickly, for the Arab has brought canoes up, and his men are in the valley ready to seize the women and children.”

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This was startling news indeed. “Canoes in the valley?”

“In the valley itself; and our men are scattered here and there on the ridges at the mercy of these wolves, though they fight hard. Ngonyama, tell me!”

“There is only one thing to do,” said Venning, joining in.

“I listen,” she cried, leaning forward. “Quick, wise one. You who played with the little ones at the huts, you who talk to the ants, tell me.”

“The one thing to do is to let the water in.”

“Ye mock me,” she cried fiercely.

“Let in the water, and the canoes will be dashed to pieces; the women and the little ones saved.” “But how can this be done?”

“You know this place and the secrets of it. Those holes behind you that look out on the valley were made by hands. Is there no place where the wall is thin?”

The woman lifted up her hands and shouted a cry of exultation, then she ran swiftly, and they saw her presently standing above the V-shaped wedge in the wall, a deep scar in the cliff made by the fall of a portion of the rock. With wonderful agility she climbed down to the apex and set to work on the face of the rock with a kind of maniacal fury. When she climbed out to the top they saw she had drawn a square, with a mark at each corner plainly visible.

“Ngonyama, for the sake of the little ones and the women, for your own sakes, if ye wish to live, send a bullet to each mark.”

“By Jove!” said Venning, “that’s a good notion. The rock must be thin there, and the force of the bullet should crack it.”

“Quick, white one. I can hear the death-song of our warriors. Quick, if ye would see the sun again.”

Mr. Hume raised his Express. He saw the need as well as she for swift measures, and he planted each smashing shot on the little white mark at each corner of the square.

The square was starred with cracks from side to side, and before the echoes of the reports had ceased to roll and rumble through the vaults, there was a dark stain on the rock.

The water was coming through, but the woman, in her mad impatience, could not bear the delay. Clambering down, she worked feverishly at the cracks with a spear-head, and with a sharp hiss a stream of water like steam shot out.

“Climb up,” roared Mr. Hume.

“Another thrust, Indhlovu, and a woman will have won. One blow for the sake of my child—the chief.” Her long sinewy arm flew back, and she drove the spear-head into the crack.

Then came a tremendous report. The block of loosened stone flew out as if propelled from a big gun, whizzed far out, and after it, with a deafening roar, flashed a white column, that widened as it leapt forward. Spreading his arms, the Hunter threw himself back, bearing his companions with him, as a mass of water struck the platform on which they had stood. As the flood poured through the opening, tearing and

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screaming like a thousand furies, other fragments of rock were torn out and sent whirling down, to increase the terrible din rising up from the cauldron below, where the waters once again rushed and boiled through the dark tunnels, after their terrific leap. The whole upper space of the great vault was filled with a mist, which condensed and fell in a fine rain upon the three crouching figures, deafened by the uproar, and expecting every moment to be involved in one complete break-up of the interior walls under the smashing blows of the flood. As they crawled back into the passage for safety, some solid object crashed against the rock near them, and the broken blade of a canoe paddle shot past them into the passage.

It was sign of the terrible fate that must have overtaken those of Hassan's men who had entered the valley by canoe. It served as a spur to urge them to escape.

They crept into the Cave of Skulls, and there finding some relief from the uproar, Mr. Hume asked Compton if he knew the way out. Compton nodded, lit the last of his candles, and, guided by marks he had made on the wall, led the way out and down to a spot where he pointed to a hole several feet above the ground. They passed through that, and after a long and wearying march—during the last part of which the Hunter again carried Venning—they crawled out into the old cave, and through that on to the ledge overlooking the valley.

A glance took in the position. Muata's people were gathered on the tableland where stood the new village, watching the sinking of the river, as unaccountable to them as had been the swift rising in the night that had cut them off and marked them out as easy victims to the men in the canoes, which Hassan, in his great cunning, had brought up to complete his plan for the complete destruction of the community. Of Hassan's men, and the canoes, carried up through the forest with so much labour, there was no trace. Men and canoes must have been sucked into the canon, dashed to pieces, and swept down into the dark, probably to emerge in the Deadman's Pool.

Mr. Hume gave a hail to the people below. "Bayate!" they shouted, recognizing him. Some of the men swam across and came up.

They made a humble salute to the white men. "Great ones, the people are afraid. The earth shook and the water arose, and out of the dark came men in canoes. We were afraid. It was witchcraft. Again the earth shook, the waters sank, and the canoes were swept away."

"Say to the women they may go about their work in peace, for the white chiefs keep watch, and all is well. And say to the headman to send up food, fruit, milk, and the flesh of a kid."

These orders were promptly obeyed, and the three were soon busy at a good meal, that put life and strength into them, so that when they feasted their eyes upon the wonderful beauty of-the garden-valley, the horrors of the underground world swiftly faded into the background, phantoms of reality.

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And while they rested in the afternoon, Muata came out of the gorge chanting his song of triumph at the head of the picked warriors who had gone down into the forest to hang on the trail of the wild men.

His song died away as his eye fell upon the still swollen river, on the sheen of pools gathered where the ground was flat, on the banks of debris showing the highwater mark far up the little side valleys.

“Greeting, Ngonyama!”

“And to you, chief.”

“My brothers have not slept.” The young chief’s eagle-glance dwelt swiftly on the three friends. “They have looked on great trouble.”

“You have come from victory, chief; your men are fresh.”

“Ohe! they are fresh, for the fight was short.”

“Then send some of them up the cliff on the other side, so that they may overlook the place where the river goes under.”

Muata looked down into the valley again, and asked the question which he had been burning to ask all the time, but could not for fear of showing anxiety.

“So Hassan has tried to drown out the valley?”

“The river rose and the river fell! While he sent some men to attack the gorge, he found the river-gate unguarded, and seized it, blocked the course of the river with a great rock loosened from above, and then, as the water rose, lowered canoes on the inside, and sent his men forward to eat up your village.”

“Where was Ngonyama when the gates were unguarded?”

“In the caverns under the cliff.”

“Wow!”

“The wise woman led us there. She left us there, fearing I, Ngonyama, would supplant you, her son; and on the second morning, when she found that Hassan was too cunning, she came with an offer of liberty if we would destroy his plan. We told her the way. It was to let the water in.”

“It was a good plan. Haw!”

“She let the water in to save the people of the valley, and Hassan’s men were lost utterly; but the first victim was your mother, Muata.”

“It was a good death,” said Muata, after a long pause.

“Ay, it was a good death, chief. Now send your men up the cliff, so that they overlook the river-gates.”

“I will see to it, Ngonyama;” and Muata went down with his band to the village once again, chanting the deep-chested song of victory.

The jackal, who had accompanied Muata on the new trail, remained with his white friends. He was thin, he was famished, and he sat with his left front paw lifted. Venning, who had a fellow-feeling for one in distress, being himself worn out, took the paw, discovered a nasty cut on the pad, washed it out with warm water, treated it with carbolic, bound it up, and gave the animal the pot to dean, which he did, polishing it out with his long red tongue.

The boy and the jackal stretched themselves on a kaross to the sun, while Mr. Hume and Compton went away off to make sure about the Okapi; for, as they said, they were in no mind to lose the boat, after all their exertions, just because they were a little tired.

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In the drowsy noon the tired boy slept, and through the afternoon, opening his eyes for a moment occasionally as the voices of the women rose to a higher pitch in a mournful dirge they were singing over the missing, and at intervals the jackal would raise his sharp muzzle and sniff the air. There was some note in the dirge that disturbed the boy, and there was some taint in the air that made the jackal uneasy. Once it stood up as if to explore, but the sight of its bandaged foot brought a pucker to his brows, and it curled itself up again after an intent look into the face of his human companion.

For the rest of the day the dirge went on, rising and sinking like the murmur of the sea in its flow and ebb on a still day. At dusk the two came back from their long march to the Deadman's Pool, bringing the report that they had recovered the missing boat, and concealed it in a place of their own choosing this time. Venning awoke to hear the news, but he heard it without enthusiasm, just as they had imparted the news in tones of weary indifference.

The sickness of the forest was on them all—its monotony, its vastness, and its brooding silence—and it caught them when they were most liable to the attack; that is, when they were tired out, with all the spring gone from mind and sinews.

"My poor father!" muttered Compton, as he sat down with his back to the rock. "No wonder he looked upon this as a prison, placed as it is in this wilderness of trees."

Mr. Hume nodded, and sat with his arms resting on his knees, smoking, and staring at nothing.

Muata joined them, but his coming did not rouse them.

"I have looked down on the gates, Ngonyama. As you said, the river was blocked by Hassan; but there is no sign of the thief, only some canoes dropped by his men in their flight."

He sat down and smoked, too, with the same listless look on his face.

The jackal rose at his master's coming, and stood whining and sniffing the air.

No one took any notice of him but Venning, who coaxed him to him, and placed an arm round his yellow neck.

"Why don't they sing something else?" said Compton, irritably, as the mournful wail dinned its misery into his ears.

Muata looked at the white men. "It is the rains," he said.

"Eh?"

“The rains are coming. Maybe that is why Hassan struck so soon, for when the rains come, every warrior is like the bow-string that has been soaked in water. They hide the sun, they breed chills and sickness. I can feel the breath of them in my bones. It is the rains.”

He shivered, and threw a stick on the fire. “In the morning,” he said, “we must find a new home, for the rains blow in at the mouth of this cave. The clouds hang low on the hills.”

“We have found our boat, chief; we will go on our way,” said the Hunter, bluntly.

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“That way would be the way of death,” answered the chief, slowly. “It is bad here, but in the woods it is like the spray blown off from the rushing waters. Every tree is a rain-cloud, every leaf drops water, and the air you breathe in the woods is wet. If you would live, great one, you must stay here. Wet when you sleep, when you eat, when you sit you sit in wet, when you stand the water runs off; wet, all wet in the rains down in the woods.”

“Ugh!” said Venning, with a shudder; and Compton put on another stick.

“We will see,” said the Hunter.

They sat in silence, pondering over this new source of worry, then turned in to sleep. They slept heavily, having taken great care first of all to block up the entrance to the underground passage, and as they dropped off to sleep, they heard the women chanting still in the village below. The fire glowed red in the entrance, making the roof look like beaten gold, but the air blew chill, and the sleepers were restless. A hand would reach out to the firewood for another log, or to tuck the blankets under the body, so that the cold could not sift under.

The jackal was as weary as the rest. Several times he ran to the entrance to look out with pricked ears, then back again to stare into a sleepy face; but as his human companions gradually sank into heavy sleep, he crouched on the floor with his sharp nose resting between his forepaws, the one sound, the other bandaged.

CHAPTER XXV

THE CRY IN THE NIGHT

As the fire-sticks snapped under the heat, the jackal would open his yellow eyes and start back with his gaze fixed inquiringly on the fire, whose mystery he could never solve. One of these starts roused Venning, who, seeing the cause, threw out a hand and drew the animal to him. He felt nervous, and the company of the jackal comforted him, and the jackal in its turn forgot its uneasiness in the warmth of the blankets. With a little sigh it curled up and went to sleep.

The boy was the only one awake, and out in the wide space beyond he heard a voice calling—

“Ngonyama’”

He held his breath, and his throat grew very dry, for it was the voice he had heard in the cavern, only sad this time, and not mocking as before.

“Ngonyama!—yama!” It came thin and melancholy, with a long lingering on the last syllables.

He put his hand out to rouse Mr. Hume, then drew it back ashamed of his fancies; but the movement awoke the jackal. It lifted its head, snuffed the air, then sprang up with the ruff on its neck erect, and its sharp white teeth gleaming. Several moments it stood so, then with many a look out, curled itself up again.

Venning had watched it breathlessly, now he patted it to sleep, and dozed off himself, only to wake up in a violent tremble, with that sound quivering plaintively in the air—

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“Ngonyama! Ngonyama!”

He brushed his hand across his forehead, and found his face burning hot. He removed his blanket from his shoulders and sat up, still patting the jackal. The fire was before him, and the dark ring of the cave’s mouth; but his eyes dilated as he looked, for within the glare of the fire was that same awful face he had seen down in the darkness.

He would have cried out, but his voice would not come; and with an effort—for all the blood seemed to have left his limbs—he slowly moved his hand to Mr. Hume’s.

The Hunter made no sign; but Venning, with his face turned still in a frozen stare towards the entrance, caught a change in the breathing, and knew that his touch had answered its purpose. To the boy they were acting over the scene in the cavern again. He was waiting for the shrill laugh, the sudden treacherous thrust of steel in the dark, and then the ring of metal on the rocks.

Then, without any sign having been given that he was awake, the jackal in a bound was over the fire, swollen to double his size by the bristling hair, and uttering as he charged a fierce yelp.

Muata seemed to awake and spring forward all in one movement. A moment he paused in the glare of the light, stooping forward, the glare showing red on his blade, and the next he was gone with a war-whoop, and in his place stood the Hunter, crouching also with the broad blade in his hand. Between the fierce yelp of the jackal and the spring of the Hunter only a few seconds had passed. The three of them less than half a minute since had been asleep; and now, out of the darkness on the ledge beyond came the ring of metal and the savage grunts of men fighting for their lives.

Venning remained where he was, too ill to rise; and Compton, not yet trained to act on a sudden emergency, sat up, bewildered by the noise.

“Mr. Hume—Godfrey—what is it?”

“The witches,” said Venning, “out of the underground. I saw one looking in.”

“Eh?”

Compton felt for his carbine, and, gathering his wits, ran out, receiving promptly, on getting within the ring of light, a blow on his arm, followed by a clutch at his throat. Driving the muzzle of his gun forward into something soft which emitted a grunt, he freed himself from his assailant, and sprang aside. He heard the whizz of weapons, the clash of blows, and saw dark forms indistinctly moving rapidly this way and that; then his rifle flashed as he saw a crouching form stealing upon him.

“Yavuma!” cried the Hunter’s voice, giving the Kaffir war-cry as he swung his terrible weapon at a foe.

“Yavuma ’” cried Muata, with the jackal snarling by his side. “Fire, little great one, into the thick.”

It was very well to say fire, but Compton could not tell friend from foe until, bending low, he made out that while two men had their backs to the cliff there were others around them in an enclosing ring. Judging these were the enemy, though he could make out no distinguishing point, he went down on his knee and fired rapidly.

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A man dashed by him towards the gorge, and the rest who could followed. One gave a slashing left-hand stroke with a long sword as he went by the kneeling marksman, and Compton went down in a heap. The man paused to finish his work, but with a savage roar the Hunter leapt forward and bore him to the ground.

At the heels of the flying men went the jackal, and after him, soft-footed, went Muata, still-voiced.

The fight was over. Mr. Hume picked Dick up and carried him into the cave.

“A light,” said the Hunter.

Venning, with his head throbbing, crawled feebly to where the lantern was, lit it with trembling fingers, and, sitting up, threw the light on the two forms—on the one face, beaded, working still with the fury of the fight; on the other, still, white, and blood-stained.

The boy’s hand shook more violently, and in his weakness he sobbed.

“Put the lantern down,” said Mr. Hume, fiercely.

Quickly he staunched the flow of blood, cut away the hair, and then, with an impatient look at the sobbing boy, lowered the head he was supporting, and searched for liniment, ointment, and restoratives.

Bending over his task, he worked with skilful fingers, and then, with a sigh, watched the white face intently. Then he went outside to listen, to bend over the figures lying still in the darkness, and returning, built up the fire.

Venning watched him return to Dick, saw the long, anxious scrutiny, and then burst out crying as he saw a look of relief come into the rugged face.

“Don’t worry, lad; he’ll pick up.”

“I know you think I’m no good,” was the boy’s heartbroken reply.

Mr. Home was at his side. “Nonsense, lad. I know what it is to have a touch of fever; and besides, I believe it was you who gave warning.”

“I heard some one calling Ngonyama,” said the boy, in a whisper, “and I saw the face in the entrance—the same face I saw down under there. Were they the witches?”

“It was Hassan and some of his men. They must have escaped from the river and remained in hiding. I felt your hand in the night, and it woke me. So, you see, you did your part. Now rest, there’s a good chap.”

Mr. Hume made the boy a cooling drink, with a dose of quinine.

“I would have helped, if I could.”

“You did help,” said the Hunter, earnestly. “If it had not been for you we should have been killed while we slept. You saved our lives, just as you saved the valley by your thought of letting the water out.”

Venning was comforted. He rose up on his elbow to have another look at Dick, saw that the colour was coming back into the white face, and leant back on his pillow.

In the morning Muata came into the cave, staggering like a drunken man from loss of blood, and at his heels limped the jackal with his tongue out.

“Well?” said the Hunter.

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“The last fell on the shores of the dead pool, and the last was Hassan himself.”

The chiefs bloodshot eyes roamed over the cave, until they rested on Venning’s startled face.

“On the brink of the pool he fell, and where he fell there, too, was the Inkosikase.” It seemed as if he were addressing the remark to Venning.

“I heard her call ‘Ngonyama’ in the night,” whispered the boy.

“Wow!”

“So the young chief told me after you had gone,” said the Hunter.

Venning nodded his head.

The chief accepted the explanation. “The Inkosikase waited for the wolf by the water’s edge,” he said simply, “and I smote him behind the ear. So her spirit is at rest.”

“Let me see to your wounds, chief.”

“Wow! It is well my people should see them;” and the warrior went down with unsteady steps to the village, leaving a trail of blood; and when the people had shouted in triumph at his story of the last fight, the medicine men took him into their charge, when his life was in danger of escaping through one of those gaping cuts made by Arab swords on his body.

For a fortnight Mr. Hume nursed his young friends back to health, and for a week they sat and walked in the sun, slowly regaining strength; and then came the first forerunner of the rains in a day of pelting showers.

“It is the beginning,” said Muata, who was proud of his newly healed scars. “You must come down into the valley.”

“There was something said about the full moon,” said Mr. Hume, suspiciously.

The chief laughed. “It was the wish of the Inkosikase; but now she is gone, it is in my heart to take the wives to myself. But there are others, Ngonyama.”

“No, chief,” said the Hunter, quickly. “How do you live in the rains, chief? Is there much discomfort?”

“Wow! it is the red pig’s life—mud all about; and there is much sickness, for the people crowd together in the huts.”

“I suppose we must stay and make the best of it; but the huts are small.”

“They are the best we can make.”

“I don’t know,” said Venning, thoughtfully, with his eyes on the opposite cliff. “I see there are trees up there. Is there a way up?”

“There is a goats’-track. What is in your mind, young wise one?”

“We will climb up that goats’-path, chief,” said Venning, “with all the men, cut down many of those trees, and roll them over the cliff into the valley. Then will we build a great house, and the women will gather grass and reeds for the thatching of it.”

“It would be a good plan, if it could be done.”

“We’ll do it,” said the Hunter; “but if we are to stay here, we must bring up the boat, and you must let us have some of your men.”

“All,” said the chief; and that day the Okapi was brought up in sections.

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Then Venning's scheme was taken in hand, the cliff scaled, a hundred trees felled, and rolled over as they fell, with all the branches on. Then they returned to the valley, drew the fallen trees out, lopped off the branches, shaped the poles, dug holes, and got the uprights into position. Then followed the ridge-poles and the sideposts, and the roof took shape, to the wonder of the women, a noble span covering some thousands of square feet, with a length of one hundred and fifty feet, and a height of fifty feet. As the supporting rafters were laid, the women climbed up and set to work at the thatching, using long bands of bark for the binding. And while the women worked at the roof, the men built up stone walls, under directions of the architects. The great house built, a smaller one was made for the women, to serve as a general kitchen, with great stacks of wood piled up all round for the fires. The entire population was kept hard at it for a week, and when the work was done, there was a grand ceremony over the wedding of Muata; and then one morning they awoke to find a low grey canopy drawn over the valley, from which fell a steady drizzle of rain. The next day was like the first, and so on for nearly three months there was a perpetual mist in the valley, a long dismal succession of leaden skies hanging low. One of these days the three white friends, in company with Muata, paid a visit to the underground world to obtain a supply of sulphur to serve as a disinfectant and purifier—another idea of Venning's. They found the dark passages thundering to the fall of the water, but they found no signs whatever of living creatures. With their loads of sulphur they very soon left the forbidding place, and for some days after the unhappy people of the village had to submit to the terrors of fumigation. As the "medicine" was undoubtedly strong, and as it certainly stopped the progress of sickness that had broken out, the "Spider" rose in the estimation of the people as a great wizard.

At last the curtains were drawn, the blue of the sky appeared, and the valley glittered in the brilliant sunlight.

Then the women went singing to their gardens, the men prepared for the hunt, and the white chiefs got out their shining canoe from its wrappings, rubbed it with fat, and polished it with wood-ashes till it shone like a looking-glass.

"Ton will go, then?" said Muata.

"If your men will carry the pieces down to the larger river below the gates, we will thank you."

The men went off singing, six men to each section, and in the afternoon the Okapi was once more in her proper element.

"And which way will you go, Ngonyama?"

"We have thought it over during the rains, chief. We will go back through the open water, back past the place where we landed in the forest, back into the great river, and

then south, even to the farthest reaches of the Congo, when we shall be among people I know. There we will get carriers to take the boat to the waters of another great river, the Zambesi."

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“Towards the setting sun,” said Muata. “And you will want a man?”

“Two men, we would ask; and one of them, the Angoni warrior, who did so well in the fight, for his country is to the south.”

“Only one man you can have,” said the chief, shortly.

They had said their good-bye to the people in the valley, who had wept at their departure, for the white men had done much for them, and never before had they borne the visitation of the rains with so little discomfort.

Now they said good-bye to the chief, the man who had shared so much of danger with them, whose shield had been their shield, whose spear had been theirs to command.

It was difficult to say good-bye, for he seemed moody, answered them in monosyllables, and at last, after a curt nod, left them long before they were ready to go. And when at last they were heading down the broad river to the old pleasant music of the clanging levers, the edge of their joy was blunted by the thought of the warrior’s lowering looks.

“I’m sorry,” said Mr. Hume, for the third time.

“I believe he has had something on his mind for days past,” said Venning; “and yesterday I saw him arguing with the headmen.”

“Yet he never opposed our going. I have never seen him like that before. Hang it all, I can’t bear to think we have left him looking so down;” and Compton banged the lever over.

They went on in silence for a mile, still thinking over Muata, when the Angoni, who was on watch, cried out—

“Congela!”

“What do you see?”

The man pointed a black finger at the river, and on it they saw two black spots. The man’s teeth gleamed in a smile and his black eyes sparkled.

They stood up to look, and then Mr. Hume motioned to the boys.

“Let her have it,” he said; and they made those levers smoke in the slots, for they saw in those black spots the long face of the jackal and the head of Muata!

They were helped dripping on board, the chief with nothing else than his Ghoorka blade.

Mr. Hume waited for an explanation, and the chief gave it in his calm way, without a smile.

“You wanted two men, great one. I am the second.”

“But we go far, while the moon is many times at the full.”

“You go towards the setting sun, Ngonyama, and there also goes the son of the Inkosikase.”

“But your people?”

“I have said my say with them. They are in peace, and they can live in peace; but is Muata a goat that he should live in a kraal? Wow! I am a Hunter, like this little one;” and he patted the jackal on the head.

“We are only too glad to have you, chief, if your mind is fully made up?”

“See, Ngonyama, I thought to live in ease and grow fat, but the spirit of my mother called out upon me—ay, it fought within me—and I go for the hills and the open plains. Behold, I am no longer chief.” He took the long blue feather from his head, and let it glance to the water. “My shield is your shield.”

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He sat down in the bows with his face toward the river, and the boys laughed as they worked the levers.

“Ripping!” said Compton, feeling quite happy, as he touched his precious journal.

“As good as finding a new butterfly,” said Venning.

Mr. Hume nodded his head gravely several times, and then a smile came into his eyes.

“I guess,” he said, “we’ll have some good hunting.”

And good hunting they had after they had passed the Stanley Falls and were in the game country, stretching for hundreds of miles to the Zambesi. Some day, perhaps, we may hear of the adventures they had in their long voyage before at last, a thousand miles off, they touched bottom in the shallows where the mighty Congo narrowed down to a stream that could be crossed at a jump. From the Congo they marched to a tributary of the Zambesi, and at the Victoria Falls, after having gathered a store of ivory, they found an ox-wagon, which took them to Bulawayo; and near Bulawayo the two boys, now stalwart young men, took possession of a farm owned by Mr. Hume, to wait for the return of the Hunter from England, whither he had gone. On his return they would go north, in order to keep their promise to pick up Muata, whom they left at an Angoni kraal, on another hunting expedition.

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