

 GRAND TALE OF STIRRING ADVENTURE!



FRIEND OR FOE!



The rifles cracked out. But the Englishman was gone. Without even a glance at his enemies, Clare threw his hands together and sprang from the precipice. It was his only chance, and he took it boldly.

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Her ride was almost at random. She knew she was going in the direction of the Niger. That was all she knew.

FRIEND OR FOE?

A Tale of Adventure on the Niger.

By CHARLES HAMILTON.

On the Banks of the Niger—English and French—
Aurore's Appeal—The Silence of Maurice Clare.

"Massa Clare!"

The Yoruba sentinel spoke abruptly. His eyes gleamed. His black face was keenly alert.

"Well, Koko?"

"Me tink me hear boat."

Maurice Clare was leaning upon the bamboo palisade, looking down on the sluggish waters that crept and gurgled amongst the mangroves. The moonlight glimmered upon the creek wending lazily through the jungly woodland to join, some miles further on, the broad flood of the Niger.

Clare had been gazing absently at the silver-lit waters. His brows were wrinkled in thought—painful thought, to judge by his sombre expression. But at the words of the Yoruba he straightened up, instantly roused to keen attention.

A fine specimen of young English manhood he looked as he stood there—athletic, long-limbed, well set-up. His face was frank and pleasing; his dark eyes clear and steady as an eagle's.

"You're right, Koko." He listened intently. "There's a boat on the creek. So they've found us out at last?" His face set grimly; his eyes flashed fire. "Well, let them come! A scrimmage will put new life into us—eh, Koko, old fellow?"

Call the men! There'll be rough work before the moon goes down."

Koko, the stalwart Yoruba corporal, looked a little anxiously at his young English master. Clare was in a reckless mood, and Koko knew the cause. But he said nothing. He passed to the huts within the circle of the palisades to rouse his comrades to arms.

Clare stood looking at the creek. Certainly a boat was coming. The oars were muffled; but Clare's ears, almost as keen as the Yoruba's, were not to be deceived. Soon he saw the craft emerge from the distant shadows. Closer it came to the stockade.

A white man stood in the bows. He wore the uniform of a lieutenant in the French service. In the stern was a second white, dressed in duck, with a wide slouch hat. The rowers were Senegalese blacks, in the half-military garb of the French West African native forces.

The moonlight fell clearly upon the sallow face, the strongly marked features of the French lieutenant. His bold black eyes were searching either side of the creek as the boat advanced.

"Bertrand Comminges, what do you seek here?"

The Frenchman started violently. The next moment he saw the palisade, and Clare's face over the rim of it. His black eyes glittered with triumph.

"So I've found you, Maurice Clare."

Their glances met. In the Frenchman's was hatred, triumph ; in the Englishman's disdainful defiance.

"You are run to earth, then. Villain ! Where is Aurora de Brissac ?"

Clare, with a gesture, indicated the interior of the stockade.

"Will you give her up ?"

Clare shrugged his shoulders.

"Why should I give her up at your demand ?"

"Ah, it is not at my demand alone, as you well know. Her brother demands also. Speak, Lucien !"

The man in the slouch hat rose. His little eyes shot a venomous glance at the fair-haired Englishman.

"Yes, I demand the restoration of my sister," he said. "As her brother I demand it."

"And I refuse it."

Brissac made a gesture of rage. "You refuse to surrender the lady you stole from her home like a thief in the night ?"

Clare's very lips went livid. But his voice was steady as he replied :

"Yes, I refuse."

"Then," broke in Comminges fiercely, "we shall resort to force. Your life shall pay for your villainy. The kidnapper of a girl has no claim to mercy. I will hang you like a thief."

Clare's hands grasped the edge of the palisade with so convulsive a grip that the blood spurted out under his nails. His whole body quivered with rage.

"Go, go !" he said hoarsely. "Go, before I forget that your boat holds the brother of Mademoiselle de Brissac !"

A bitter sneer crossed the sallow face of Comminges.

"What ! You pretend to have scruples about killing the brother of your victim !"

"Koko, rifles here !" shouted Clare, maddened. "Riddle me this scoundrel !"

But at a sign from Comminges, the boat shot down the creek into the cover of the mangroves.

Maurice Clare's chest was heaving. His breath came thick and fast. The words of Comminges had stirred him terribly. But with an effort he regained his calmness.

"The scoundrels ! The dastards ! By Heaven, if they dare to attack I will show no mercy !"

A light footstep behind made him turn quickly. It was Aurora de Brissac who stood facing him.

A girl, her graceful form half hidden by a cloak, her delicate and sensitive features only partly visible through the veil of gauzy lace.

Clare bowed respectfully, but did not speak. There was a certain uneasiness in his eyes.

"Monsieur"—her voice was low, clear, tuneful—"it seems my brother has at last found me."

"You heard the talk, then ?"

"I heard it."

"Yes, he has found you. He and Bertrand Comminges, who appears a great deal more eager in the quest than Lucien de Brissac. Don't you think so, mademoiselle ?"

She coloured at the irony of his tone.

"Decidedly not, monsieur. And yet it is very generous of Lieutenant Comminges to aid my brother in this search."

"So generous," replied Clare, with a mocking smile, "that one might easily suspect that M. Comminges has a purpose of his own to serve."

He could see her colour deepen behind the lace. It was some moments before she spoke again.

"Monsieur, I come to you now to make an appeal. Will you listen to me ?"

"Have I ever shown myself so wanting in politeness that you should doubt it ?"

She sighed softly.

"It was not in this mood I hoped to find you, M. Clare. If you mock me I am silent."

"Nay, speak," said Clare earnestly. "Speak, though I do not engage to do as you ask."

"I ask for my freedom. My brother demands it—I demand it ! For what reason you have carried me off I know not. But you cannot pretend to have justice on your side. Deliver me to my brother, then, and save the effusion of blood." She clasped her little hands. Her voice was sweet and pleading. "For your sake as well as my own I ask it."

"It is kind of you to entertain fears for my safety, mademoiselle."

"It is not of your safety I am thinking. I would save you from blood-guiltiness."

He did not reply.

"Monsieur, if you were, as M. Comminges appears to think, a common ruffian, I should not dream of making an appeal to you. But you are brave and generous. You have ever treated me with courtesy, with chivalry. I am astonished that one so noble should descend to become the gaoler of a woman. Cease this persecution, then ; allow me to depart in yonder boat."

"I have told you," said Clare hoarsely, "that I have a reason for doing as I do."

"You have told me so, certainly."

"You do not believe me." There was intense pain in his voice. "And yet, mademoiselle, I have given you no cause to think me a liar, whatever else you may think me."

"You are wrong. I have never doubted your word. But this reason—what is it ?"

"I can only reply as I have replied before. I cannot tell you."

"You cannot expect me to be satisfied with that. You cannot expect my brother to be satisfied."

A look of indescribable irony came upon the pale face of Clare, and the girl, seeing it, was surprised and strangely disquieted.

"No ; decidedly I do not expect M. Lucien de Brissac to be so easily satisfied, nor M. Comminges either."

The girl bit her lip.

"You are determined, then, to persist in this course, M. Clare ?" she said sorrowfully.

"Irrevocably."

"Then I have wasted my words." She lifted her head haughtily. "Monsieur, upon you lies the guilt of the blood that will be shed."

"I am sorry that you should think so, mademoiselle."

She looked at him in wonder. His face was noble and frank—a face that women instinctively trusted. She read in his pallor, in the lines upon his brow, the signs of suffering. What was the explanation of this mystery ? Why the strange silence of Maurice Clare ?

With a sudden impulsive sympathy she came a step nearer to him.

"Monsieur, I can see that this situation is as intolerable to you as to me. If there really exists a reason for it, I beg of you to let me know it."

"I cannot, I cannot !" He almost groaned out the words.

"For your sake I cannot !"

"For my own sake !" Her beautiful eyes widened in amazement. "I do not understand you."

"It is impossible that you should understand."

"I can only believe that you are mocking me, monsieur." She gave him an haughty inclination of the head, and turned to go. "Do as you will then. I have no more to say."

Clare watched her return to the cabin. The sweat was heavy on his brow.

"Oh, I love her, I love her !" he murmured. His heart and brain were throbbing wildly. "What a doubly accursed fate that I should appear to her in the role of a persecutor ! And if she knew that I loved her she would think that was the reason I carried her off from Atakora Point. Well, she shall never know it ! But the real reason I cannot tell her. Besides, would she believe me ? Probably not."

A sharp ringing report, followed by a sobbing cry, broke the night silence.

Koko chuckled gleefully.

"Fast blood to us, Massa."

Clare roused himself. The attack was commencing, and all his energies were required now.

The Attack on the Stockade—A Desperate Defence—The Brother of Aurora.

Within the palisades were wooden benches, upon which the riflemen stood to fire through the loopholes. While Clare talked with Aurora, the Yorubas had manned the walls, under Koko's directions. There were thirty of these stalwart "black Britons," fine soldiers all, and devoted to the young Englishman, who was as much their friend and comrade as their leader.

Clare glanced round the stockade with an eye of pride. The brave fellows, full of confidence in him and in themselves, were eager for the combat.

"My gallant lads"—but his brow clouded—"what right have I to let their blood be spilled ? As for me, I should be grateful to the rifle that cut this cursed tangle with a bullet. But for them—they fight in a cause they know nothing of."

But it was no time for such reflections. The enemy were at hand.

And the enemy came in force. The boat, exploring the creek, had contained only a portion of Bertrand Comminges' troops. Clare soon saw that he had at least sixty foes to deal with. He had said truly when he told Koko that there would be rough work before the moon set.

The boat, crammed with men, was pulling up the creek again. From the land side of the stockade another force advanced, headed by Lucien de Brissac.

Comminges had divided his men, to attack the stockade upon both sides at once. The Yorubas divided for the defence ; half with Koko on the land side, the other half facing the creek with Clare.

As the boat advanced a heavy volley was poured into it. Five Senegalese rolled over with wild shrieks. Thrown into confusion, the rowers let go their oars. But for Comminges' soldierly quickness, all had been lost.

"Follow me, mes enfants !"

He sprang shoreward, the water to his waist, making for the muddy strip of soil lying between the creek's brim and the palisades. The Senegalese, with a furious shout, followed. The boat, bearing only wounded or dead, drifted down-stream with the sluggish current.

A moment more, and the Senegalese were afloat, firing their rifles at the loopholes; some clambering at the bamboo wall, over their comrades' shoulders, nimble as monkeys.

Steel and bullet met them; tearing shot and severing sword-slash. Man after man rolled back, groaning or grimly silent. Hands that grasped the rim of the palisade were lopped at the wrist. Comminges, cursing fiercely, brave as a tiger and as savage, half crossed the palisade, only to be dislodged bodily by a crashing rifle-butt.

Stunned, senseless, the Frenchman fell to the earth. Then wavered the Senegalese. At such a moment hesitation was fatal. The Yorubas, yelling with wild glee, poured a hot fire upon them; and down the creek side they went surging, broken and defeated, carrying their disabled leader in their midst.

Clare smiled grimly. The assault upon that side was finished with. He turned to see how Koko and his division had fared upon the other.

By no means so well. Half a dozen Senegalese were astride the palisade, fighting the Yorubas bayonet to bayonet, or firing into the enclosure. And ever fresh faces rose into view.

"A la morte, a la morte!" Lucien de Brissac was yelling. "Cut the dogs down. The stockade is ours."

With his little face and spiteful eyes aglow he dropped into the stockade, just as Clare came bounding across the enclosure to lead his aid to the failing defence.

"Ah, scoundrel!" cried Brissac, springing at him, and thrusting fiercely. "Die, then!"

Clare parried the thrust, and the Frenchman's sword went whirling six yards away. The point of Clare's weapon was at his throat.

A sudden, shrill cry pierced the air.

"Spare him! Spare my brother!"

Down went Maurice Clare's blade.

"Take your life. I cannot kill the brother of Aurore de Brissac."

"But you shall not escape me," hissed Lucien. His revolver leaped to a level. His finger pressed the trigger. Clare had not looked for such black treachery. He would have fallen at the Frenchman's feet with a bullet in his brain had not a huge black fist crashed into Brissac's face and sent him reeling. The bullet flew into the air; Brissac struggled vainly in the powerful grip of Koko.

"Don't kill him, Koko."

Clare had no time to say more. The Senegalese were coming over the wall.

"Stand firm, brave lads!" rang the Englishman's clarion voice. "Give them the bayonet."

It had looked a sure thing for Brissac's party; but Clare and his men had crossed the enclosure in time to save the situation.

Back the Senegalese reeled before the dripping bayonets. The whole force of the Yorubas opposed them now, and they had no chance.

The few who dropped within the walls were hacked down without mercy. Within or without, twenty had fallen. And as the rest receded, volleys followed them from the palisade till they gained the shelter of the trees.

Maurice Clare had defeated his enemy utterly, and with heavy loss.

But there lay upon the earth four brave fellows who would never level a rifle again, and the young man's eyes moistened as he looked upon them.

"But, after all, they died like soldiers, fighting for the flag, and how can men die better?"

Lucien de Brissac stood sullen in the grip of Koko. The Yoruba corporal had settled his resistance with no gentle hand. Disarmed, exhausted, covered with bruises, Brissac allowed himself to be made a prisoner.

"Massa Clare"—Maurice glanced at Koko—"what I do wish is chap? Koko tink shoot him de best ting."

"No doubt"—Clare smiled faintly—"it is true that only the dead do not trouble us."

Brissac gave him a quick, anxious look.

"Do not be alarmed, monsieur," said Clare disdainfully. "If I consulted my security or your deserts, I should have you shot out of hand. But it is Mademoiselle de Brissac whom I am compelled to consider."

The Frenchman made a mocking bow.

"It is truly chivalrous of you, Monsieur l'Anglais, not to add to the abduction of the sister the murder of the brother." Clare gritted his teeth.

"Take care, sir. It is not safe to taunt a man who holds your life at his disposal."

Brissac shrugged his shoulders. He was pretty sure that Clare's regard for his sister secured him.

"Well, then, you are not going to kill me. Can we come to terms? What do you want for my freedom and my sister's?"

Clare coloured with anger.

"This abduction was not, I presume, a mere mad freak. You had a motive. Let us be frank," said Lucien, with an air of extreme candour. "Is it the ivory you are after?"

The fierce contempt of Clare's look only brought a smile to his lips. It was not easy to abash Lucien de Brissac, one of the most thorough blackguards Paris ever produced.

"It is not? What then do you expect to get for all your trouble?"

"You hound!" Clare broke out; "you know perfectly well why I carried off Mademoiselle de Brissac from Atakora Point."

"Diable!" Lucien shook his head. "I do not know, unless you came there in the character of Don Quixote."

"Call it that if you like. I came as a man of honour, to rescue an innocent girl from the fate prepared for her by a couple of scoundrels."

"In short," said Lucien, lowering his voice, "you know of the plan formed by M. Comminges and myself for obtaining possession of King Baribi's ivory?"

Clare nodded.

"And, as Aurore was necessary to the success of that plan, you carried her off to baffle us!"

Another nod.

"And what business had you, a stranger, to meddle in this affair at all?" said Lucien savagely.

"I have told you my motive."

Lucien gave him a venomous look.

"Yes, you may ride the high horse, for you are in no want of money, perhaps. But for me, monsieur, a host of creditors wait in Paris. I am a ruined man; and, pardieu, I do not intend to pass the remainder of my life in these cursed swamps. King Baribi's ivory will set me on my legs again. Why should not my sister help me on to fortune? And, diable, who are you to criticise my actions?"

Clare made a disdainful gesture.

"I do not criticise your actions. I only interpose to save your victim."

"Ah, you are a true Quixote!" said Lucien ironically. "You tilt at windmills, and save fair ladies from dangers that do not exist. I admit that it is not the extreme of delicacy on my part to use Aurore as a bait to draw from the half-breed his hoard of ivory. But beggars cannot be choosers of methods. I must have the ivory. And, after all, when Aurore is safe again at Atakora Point, she will be none the worse for her adventure."

Clare looked at him as if he would read his very soul.

"If you are not trying to deceive me, M. de Brissac, you are as great a fool as you are a rogue. Is it possible that you do not know that Lieutenant Comminges' scheme does not include the return of mademoiselle to Atakora Point?"

Lucien gave a start.

"Bah! Comminges would never dare! I understand you, M. Clare. This is a story you have invented to tell to Aurore."

"Did you think, then, I should explain to mademoiselle why I carried her off?" asked Clare, with a bitter smile.

The Frenchman looked at him in amazement.

"Have you told her nothing?"

"Nothing."

Lucien was clearly puzzled, but a look of satisfaction dawned upon his face.

There was a long pause. Koko broke the silence.

"Massa Clare, shall I tie dis feller up?"

Clare shook his head.

Lucien laughed.

"Since you have sworn yourself, like a knight of old, to the service of Aurore, you can scarcely carry her brother about in bonds before her eyes, M. Clare."

"If you were not her brother I would hang you over the palisades. As it is, I can only say, 'Go!' He lifted his hand and pointed to the palisade. "Go, and relieve me of the sight of you."

"One word more, monsieur." Lucien came a step closer.

"Will a third part of the ivory tempt you?"

"Go, before I repent of my mercy!"

The Frenchman stepped back. His thin, spiteful face was full of hatred.

"Curse you, Maurice Clare! You have stepped between me and my only chance of making a fortune. But if I lose the ivory, beware! I will move heaven and earth for vengeance!"

"Take care. I may not be so merciful a second time," said Clare grimly.

Lucien went to the palisade. Before he mounted he turned.

"I go, Maurice Clare, but I shall return." His little rat-like eyes were burning. "You shall rue the day you crossed the path of Lucien de Brissac. You cannot deceive me. This talk of honour, of quixotism, is all lies. You love Aurore; that's your motive! But before you wed her I'll kill her with my own hand! Curse you! Look for my return."

Clare's hand went to his revolver. After all, why should he spare the scoundrel? With the position reversed, Lucien de Brissac would not have dreamed of sparing him.

A red mist swam before Clare's eyes. He forgot Aurore. He remembered only that he hated this man. His six-shooter rose, with his finger on the trigger.

Brissac vaulted over the palisade. Alighting outside, he ran for the forest with the fleetness of a deer.

But Clare did not fire. It was only for a moment that his self-control had deserted him.

"Let him go." He thrust the revolver back into his belt. "Good Heaven, what would Aurore have said if I had killed him?"

Koko's black face, which had brightened as he raised the revolver, was a study of impatience and disappointment.

"You be sorry some day, Massa Clare, dat you not finish him," the Yoruba exclaimed. "Dat rascal fuller ob poison dan spotted snake in swamp."

"Doubtless," Clare shrugged his shoulders. "I care little what the future holds."

He walked away with a gloomy brow. The corporal shook his woolly head ominously.

"Please de Lord we soon get rid of white missy," he muttered. "She make a baby of Massa Clare."

And the black corporal's glance turned towards Aurore's cabin with no friendly expression.

Aurore stepped out into the moonlight as Clare passed her cabin. She had seen all, though the talk had not reached her ears.

"It was generous of you to spare my brother, monsieur. From my heart I thank you."

"You have no reason to thank me," He looked at her grimly. "I should have served you better by blowing his brains out."

She drew back, surprised and offended. Clare repented at once of his hasty, bitter words, which it was impossible she should understand.

"Forgive me, mademoiselle." His manner became cold and formal. "Will you make your preparations for a journey? We are going to abandon the stockade."

"I am at your orders," she said coldly.

Hot words rose to his lips, but he did not utter them. He bowed and left her.

Aurore's expression, when he was gone, was a peculiar one. Various feelings mingled in her heart.

"What does it mean?" She passed her hand over her white brow. "I cannot be mistaken in my estimate of his character; everything confirms it. He is brave and noble; he is worth a thousand of M. Comminges. What can be the explanation of this mystery?"

Ah! many a long hour had she thought about it, and ever it baffled her.

That Maurice Clare should be the abductor, and that Bertrand Comminges should appear in the role of rescuer, was what astonished her most. It was the reverse of what might have been looked for in view of the characters of the two men.

And yet, if Maurice Clare had an honourable motive for his strange conduct, why did he not reveal it? If some peril had threatened, from which her brother could not have defended her, why did not Clare say so? These were questions to which she could find no answer.

The Frenchmen's Scheme—The Faith of Comminges.

Comminges looked up with a scowl. His head was a mass of bruises and bandages, and ached terribly.

"So you're back! I thought they had killed you." Lucien de Brissac threw himself upon a log. He was tired out.

"They came near it. I was clutched by a big black scoundrel, who wanted badly to finish me. But Clare could not make up his mind to it. He spared me for the sake of Aurore."

"More fool he! But how did you get away?"

"He released me."

Comminges stared.

"The imbecile! He is in love with Aurore, I suppose."

"I believe so." Lucien was looking narrowly at Comminges.

"It is not simply for the sake of meddling that Monsieur l'Anglais has thrust his nose into our affairs. He has an accusation to make against you, Bertrand."

"That will not trouble me much."

"He says," resumed Lucien, taking no notice of Comminges' remark—"he says, mon ami, that I am your dupe. He says it is your intention to keep to the bargain with the half-breed Baribi, and deliver Aurore into his hands, instead of using her simply as a bait to draw the ivory into our clutches."

Comminges bent his head to hide the light of mockery in his eyes.

"You do not believe him, Lucien?"

"It is unnecessary to ask that. If I believed that such was your intention, you would not be breathing at the present moment," Lucien said grimly. "I should have blown your brains out the instant I entered camp, M. Comminges!"

A dangerous look came over Comminges' face. But his head was still bent, and Lucien did not see it.

'Come, Lucien. These are not words to be used between comrades," said the lieutenant. He raised his head and looked at Lucien with an assumption of great frankness. "It is, of course, the Englishman's game to sow dissension between us if he can contrive it."

Lucien nodded.

"I rely upon you, Bertrand. Let us say no more about it." He bit off the end of a cigar. "What are your plans for the future? We have had a bad check."

"It is only a check," growled Comminges. "I shall crush him with my next blow."

"Then you will have to be quick in striking it. The British expedition is on its way to Gomba. If it arrives there before we get hold of the ivory, good-bye to all our chances. Major Monson will know how to keep what he captures."

"A thousand curses upon that meddling Englishman!" cried Comminges savagely. "But for him all would have gone off without a hitch."

"I echo your curses. I hate him as much as you do, with his quixotic notions. But it looks as if the god of war means to favour him. You have left a third of your men lying around the stockade, and his niggers were hardly touched."

"One swallow does not make a summer. To-morrow will tell a different tale."

"Meanwhile, I'm fagged out, and I think I'll get a little sleep."

Comminges remained in deep thought after Lucien de Brissac had left him.

"The besotted fool!" he muttered. A bitter sneer was upon his sallow face. "So he would have blown my brains out if Clare had succeeded in convincing him! I shall not forget that, Lucien, mon ami."

A little later he called to his servant, a swart-visaged Arab, with cruel-looking black eyes and greasy skin.

"Suleiman, you are a good shot, I believe?"

The Arab salaamed.

"I distrust the good faith of M. de Brissac. You know the penalty of a traitor?"

"Death, your Excellency!"

"Exactly. I may require you to execute the sentence—without any formality, you understand?"

Suleiman did understand. His black eyes twinkled, and he grinned.

"You will watch, then, for a signal. You will always have your rifle ready. When I utter the words, 'By the beard of the Prophet,' you will drive a bullet through the heart of M. de Brissac."

"Upon my head be it."

"I shall not forget you, Suleiman."

Suleiman salaamed, and retired. Comminges cast a glance towards the tent where Lucien slept, and laughed lowly.

"Parbleu, my friend Lucien, it is not prudent to enter the lion's den, and threaten the lion there. You would blow out my brains? It would have been wiser not to tell me so."

Through the Forest—Aurore's Resolve—The Flight—Danger Ahead—Fallen Among Foes.

Dawn was breaking over the Niger.

Through the vast primeval forest a cavalcade wound its way upon the southern side of the great river, within a score of miles of the border where join the English territory and the French.

In a palanquin, swung between two stout horses, Aurore sat, but her attendant—black, good-humoured Lucette—rode with the soldiers, the recipient of many polite attentions from Koko.

Aurore saw with alarm that she was being carried further and further into the recesses of the Nigerian wilderness. Clare gave her no explanation. He seemed to avoid speaking to her. She looked at him frequently. His handsome face was always grave and sombre. At length she called to him. He pulled his horse to the side of the palanquin, and kept pace.

"You wish to speak to me, mademoiselle?" His tone was quite formal. "I am at your service."

"I wish to ask you where we are going, M. Clare."

"To Natango Point, further down the Niger."

"But since you defeated M. Comminges, why this flight?" she asked. There was something of malice in her eyes. "Do you fear, then, that my friends will snatch victory from the jaws of defeat?"

"The stockade was no longer secure. The Yorubas could cut to pieces any troops M. Comminges could bring against it. But a horde of savage Felatahs might have made an end of us if we had remained there."

Aurore looked puzzled.

"But why should the natives fight for my brother and Lieutenant Comminges?"

"Because Comminges is the very good friend of Baribi, the so-called King of Gomba."

"Baribi! I have seen him at the post of Atakora Point."

The girl shuddered. Fear came into her eyes and voice. She



Without even a glance at his enemies, Clare threw his hands together and sprang from the precipice. It was his only chance, and he took it boldly.

remembered how the evil glance of the half-breed—a mongrel of French Arab negro blood—had dwelt upon her; and her cheeks reddened as she recalled it. "My brother would never call in the aid of that hateful, horrible man."

Clare smiled grimly. He wondered what she would say if she knew the truth. How her face would blanch! How her eyes would dilate in horror! Would she ever learn it? Not from his lips. Better to earn her hatred, than to justify himself by inflicting such a terrible blow.

His look strangely disquieted Aurore.

"Ah, monsieur, it is cruel—wicked of you to cause all this," she murmured. "You have much to answer for."

"When I first resolved upon this enterprise, mademoiselle, I knew I had to expect your reproaches. I can bear them. I can only say that I do not deserve them."

He bowed, and spurred on his horse.

Aurore's brows contracted a little. A set look of determination came over her face.

No weak and faltering girl was she. Her heart was dauntless; her courage never failed.

Clare's words had made her come to a resolution which would have surprised him had he known it.

"Lucien shall not call in the hordes of King Baribi. Bon Dieu! if I fell into that monster's hands, would he give me back to my friends?" She trembled. Before her mental vision rose the coarse, brutal face of the mongrel king of the Felatahs of Gomba. "Lucien would be mad to trust him! And this Maurice Clare, after all, takes no precaution against my escape. In the stockade it was impossible. But here—who knows?"

She glanced out of the palanquin. The Yoruba soldiers were alert enough; but their vigilance was for a possible enemy. They did not even glance at the prisoner. Clare was riding ahead, gloomy and preoccupied.

That Aurore would attempt to escape, and plunge alone into the trackless forest, he never dreamed. He had done all in his power to make her captivity light, and, naturally, he thought she would prefer it to the unknown dangers of the African wilderness.

And, besides, deceived by Aurore's gentleness and sweetness.

Next week—THE LAND OF MYSTERY.

he did not give her credit for the courage and resolution she really possessed.

Aurore was made of sterner stuff than he believed. She was a good rider; she believed that she could find her way up the Niger to the French frontier, and so return to her home at the French post of Atakora Point.

It was not without long hesitation that she came to a decision. But the fear of King Baribi, and the wish to prevent further bloodshed, finally determined her to make a bid for liberty.

"Will you change places with me, Lucette? I am tired of remaining still."

The black girl willingly assented. Her vanity was tickled at the thought of being carried along in a palanquin like a "white lady."

Aurore mounted the negress's horse. Clare, whom the momentary stoppage of the palanquin did not escape, looked round.

Whether he suspected her intention or not, Aurore could not tell, nor did she stay to ascertain.

A pull at the rein, a smart blow, and the horse bounded away. The forest was an "open" one; there was plenty of room for riding, and Aurore did not waste a second.

Koko gave a shout. Clare came riding back. There was a bitter smile upon his lips.

"She flies from me. Heaven grant that she fall not into worse hands."

Koko's huge hand fell upon his bridle as he wheeled his horse to pursue.

"Massa, let her go. She bad juju; she bring you bad luck."

Clare turned upon him fiercely.

"Let go!" Then his mood softened; the simple, faithful fellow was moved only by regard for him. "You know I must go, Koko. I have sworn to save her. Keep on to Natango Point. I will rejoin you there. I leave the men in your hands."

And, digging his spurs into his horse's flanks, he dashed away at breakneck speed.

A curse rose to Koko's lips—a curse upon the woman who brought nothing but disaster to his beloved leader.

The Yorubas moved on. In a minute or less both Aurore and Clare had vanished from their view.

When Aurore looked back over her shoulder, and saw herself pursued, a strange tumult filled her breast.

She had a sense of being hunted, and blended with this was a feeling inexplicable—a feeling of gladness that she had not seen the last of Maurice Clare.

She blushed as she realised it. With an effort she banished this weakness, as she deemed it, and brought all her energies to bear upon the task of escaping.

Her ride was almost at random. She knew she was going in the direction of the Niger. That was all she knew.

One, two, three miles or more, vanished under the lashing hoofs. Aurore glanced back. Her heart beat hard. Maurice Clare was close behind.

She urged on her horse. She was angry now. After so bold a flight, it would be ridiculous, as well as exasperating, to be taken back like a truant.

Her hair had fallen loose. It streamed wildly behind her as she rode. A panting cry of defiance left her lips.

"Mademoiselle"—Clare's voice was hard and strained—"stop, I beg of you. I swear I am not your enemy. I am your only friend."

She made no reply. The rush of the wind as she tore along left her no breath for talk.

"Aurore," said Clare, "you run into dangers you know nothing of. I alone can save you."

There rose in her beating heart a longing to obey him, to trust all to him. It was woman's instinct struggling to make itself heard; but she would not regard it.

The Niger at last.

Aurore rode up upon the bank. It was high and steep, rising from the water's edge like a wall. Fifty feet below the great river rolled on its majestic course to the far-off Gulf of Guinea.

Clare was amazed to see Aurore abruptly halt. She wheeled her horse. She threw out her hand in a gesture of warning.

"Halt, monsieur!"

Clare drew rein; but not till he had reached her side.

"You will return with me, mademoiselle?"

She shook her head. Her extended hand pointed down the bank of the Niger.

"Look!"

Clare looked. An oath rose to his lips.

A cavalcade, black and white, were coming up the bank at a canter. Hitherto the trees had parted them off from view.

The chase had led him into a hornets' nest. Before him were Comminges, Brissac, and the soldiers of Senegal.

A Leap for Life—The Triumph of Comminges—Again a Captive.

Comminges gave a shout.

"Clare! Maurice Clare, by Beelzebub! Whip and spur, you rascals; he must not escape us now."

Like swooping hawks, the cavalry dashed towards Clare at a furious gallop.

A few seconds only remained to Clare. His life was at stake; but he did not go.

"Fly, monsieur! Do you not see your danger?"

"I see it, mademoiselle; but it does not alarm me."

Clare was in a desperate mood. It was in his heart to charge recklessly at the French cavalry, and die, sword in hand, in the midst of fallen foes.

But, Aurore—he must live for her sake!

"Fly!" cried the girl in extreme agitation. All her concern was for Clare now. He had carried her off; but he had ever treated her with perfect courtesy, with all the chivalry of an old-time knight. She knew that Comminges would show no mercy, and she trembled at the thought of Clare's death. "Monsieur, fly while there is yet time!"

He looked at her curiously.

"Do you care, then, what becomes of me?"

"I do, I do." Her bosom was heaving wildly. "Do not let them kill you before my eyes."

She had her hand upon his arm, forgetting her reserve in her terror.

"Go! Escape them! I entreat you!"

He smiled grimly.

"Escape them, mademoiselle, on a spent horse?"

She wrung her hands in despair. Clare bent towards her.

"Mademoiselle, you will now soon learn what is the danger I have attempted to save you from. That knowledge I would have kept from you. But when you are in despair, remember that, if I am alive, I shall be at hand to save you, and that in your cause I shall shed the last drop of my blood."

He did not wait for a reply. The bayonets of the Senegalese were too near to allow delay. He sprang from his horse; upon the very verge of the precipice he stood with unshaken nerves.

Aurore uttered a scared cry. She saw his purpose now and her heart ached with fear.

Comminges saw it too, and he yelled a savage order.

"Fire! Fire! Shoot him down!"

The rifles crackled out. But the Englishman was gone. Without even a glance at his enemies, Clare threw his hands together and sprang from the precipice. It was his only chance, and he took it boldly.

The horsemen reined in. Lucien de Brissac spat out an oath. A splash sounded far below.

"By Heaven, he's gone!"

Comminges sprang towards the verge. Kneeling there, revolver in hand, he watched for Clare's head to appear on the surface. The Senegalese soldiers were not slow to follow his example. The order of the lieutenant was short and savage.

"Riddle him when he rises!"

Aurore slipped to the ground, and ran towards the precipice. The arm of Lucien caught her and swung her back. She struggled.

"Let me go! I must see—"

"Bah, he is dead enough."

"Dead!" She broke into a wail. "Mon Dieu! Lucien, he spared your life! Do not let them fire!"

Lucien laughed cynically.

"There's no reason why I should be a fool because he was one."

"Lucien!"

"Bah! What is this confounded Englishman to you, Aurore, that you are so concerned about him?" He looked at her with a scowl. "Why should you care whether he lives or dies?"

She did not reply. The rifles of the Senegalese were crackling. The horror of it was too much for her. She fainted in her brother's arms. But Lucien's look did not soften.

"I know the English brute loves her. Parbleu! Is it possible she cares for him?" He snapped his teeth. "Diable! I am glad he is finished with."

But was the Englishman finished with?

That was not so certain.

Comminges watched in vain for his head to appear. His hat was seen. The soldiers riddled it. But of the Englishman there was no sign.

Had the fall killed him, and had his body gone to the bottom like a plummet?

Had he been sucked away by some undercurrent, and drowned without coming to the surface?

Had a crocodile seized him in the depths of the Niger?

Comminges asked himself these questions without being able to reply to them.

But of one thing he was almost satisfied. The Englishman, whatever had happened, must surely be dead. The Frenchman rose.

"We are done with him. Mount!"

He looked cynically at Aurore.

"The death of Monsieur l'Anglais seems to give your sister a shock, Lucien."

Brissac shrugged his shoulders.

"Diable! It looks like it. I wish we had disposed of him sooner. But how, in the name of wonder, came they here?"

"That is what mademoiselle will tell us. But, pardieu, what a stroke of luck!" Comminges rubbed his hands and chuckled. His sallow face was gleeful. "Clearly Aurore gave him the slip, and he pursued her—fairly into our arms. A long campaign is saved us. Take her on your horse, Lucien."

The cavalcade moved on up the Niger. Aurore had come to herself. She was weeping softly.

She had little doubt of Clare's death. Her heart was heavy with grief.

She did not notice whether they were taking her. Naturally she concluded that Lucien was riding for home.

The horsemen left the Niger some distance further on, and entered a belt of forest.

Here the pace was slow, for the trees grew thickly, and many of them were interlaced with enormous creeping plants and prickly bushes.

"Halt!"

Comminges gave the order as the cavalcade, issuing into a sunny glade, found themselves upon the bank of a shallow muddy creek.

"Why do we stay here, Lucien?" asked Aurore, in wonder, as her brother set her down.

"It is necessary to rest," he replied evasively.

"How far are we from Atakora Point?"

"I—I do not know." He turned away abruptly.

Aurore relapsed into troubled silence. What did this mean? She had escaped from one mystery, only to find herself in the midst of another.

The Senegalese were staking out their horses, and making other preparations for camping. Aurore was a soldier's daughter; she had seen something of African military life, and she could see that Comminges was preparing, not for a few hours' rest, but for a stay of some length.

She could ask no more questions for a time, for Lucien kept studiously out of her way. But later on Comminges came to speak to her, as she stood under the shade of a big banyan, unasily watching the movements of the black soldiers.

"There are your quarters, mademoiselle," Comminges pointed to a cabin of taplings and bark which his men had rapidly constructed under the banyan. "We shall try to make you comfortable here."

"It is not comfort I seek, monsieur. All this points to a camping of days, not of hours. Is it not your intention to take me to Atakora Point?"

"All in good time, mademoiselle. But you know a soldier's time is not his own. I am compelled to remain here for a while."

Aurore entered the hut. She was a prey to the greatest disquietude.

Clare's words returned to her with greater force.

"You will soon learn the danger I have attempted to save you from."

The danger! What danger? How could danger threaten her, circled by French soldiers, defended by her brother?

There could be no danger! She had never trusted Comminges. But could she distrust her brother?

"Can it be that Comminges has some wicked scheme on foot, and that Lucien is his dupe?" she asked herself. "But if it be so, why did not Clare tell me? If he knew, why should he keep it a secret?"

That was a puzzle. But the idea began to grow in her mind.

Always she had had a vague dread of Bertrand Comminges. When her father, Colonel de Brissac, had held command of the garrison at Atakora Point, Comminges had come there as second in command. He had begun by making love to Aurore; but the colonel, who knew his character well, had soon put a stop to that. But Lucien and Comminges had always been great friends.

When the colonel died of coast fever, Comminges had been appointed to the chief command at Atakora. Aurore had expected then to return to France with her brother. She did not know that Lucien dared not set foot in his native land till he had the money to satisfy his creditors.

They stayed on at the Atakora bungalow. Aurore saw little of Comminges. But she disliked him. She looked upon him as her brother's evil genius, as indeed he was. And her dislike was blended with fear.

She had been astonished to find Comminges taking so active a part in the pursuit of Clare. His apparent generosity made her feel that she had misjudged him.

But now—now her distrust was greater than ever. Why did Lucien keep away from her? What was the danger Clare so darkly hinted at? Had she taken an unwise step in fleeing from the Englishman? And yet, was not her brother her natural protector? Was it not her duty to rejoin him?

Looking from the hut, she saw Comminges despatch a horse-man to the north. It was a messenger—but to whom? Without knowing why, she felt more uneasy for what she had seen.

Food was brought to her, but she scarcely tasted it. The sun began to glide down the west.

Her anxiety grew with the dusk. She resolved to seek Lucien, since he would not come to her.

She stepped from the hut. Two grinning blacks stepped forward; two bayonets crossed in front of her.

She started back with a cry.

"Am I a prisoner then?"

No reply was given. But the looks of the soldiers defined the situation clearly enough.

She was a prisoner!

She stood motionless. Anger, indignation, terror, blended in her heart. A prisoner! Where was Lucien then?

As if in answer to the unspoken question, there came ringing through the dusk the sharp crack of a rifle.

Clare on the Track—Black Treachery—"By the Beard of the Prophet!"—Clare's Return—Boot and Saddle.

And where was Maurice Clare?

He had not perished in the depths of the Niger. He had taken the risks of a leap from the precipice with a definite purpose in his mind.

The Niger, like most African rivers, bore upon its broad bosom great masses of driftwood. Logs, broken branches, even whole trees, floated slowly down the sluggish current.

Upon this Clare had counted. The force of his dive carried him almost to the bottom. As he rose, he struck out for the centre of the river. He came to the surface in the midst of the floating débris.

Huge branches and roots, masses of drifting foliage, surrounded and concealed him.

While the Senegalese soldiers blazed away vainly at the place where he had sunk, Clare securely floated down the river along with the driftwood.

It was not until he was out of sight and sound of the soldiers that he struck out for the shore.

Selecting a spot where the bank was low, he waded out of the water, and shook himself like a Newfoundland dog after an immersion.

What steps to take next required some reflection. He was on foot and unarmed, save for his knife. The water had soaked his cartridges. In such a state it was impossible to make any attempt to wrest Aurore from the Frenchmen. Upon the other hand, if he repaired to Natango Point for his Yorubas, in the interval Comminges might totally elude him. The last consideration brought him to a decision.

"I will follow." He set out along the bank with swift, springy strides. "I have sworn to save Aurore, or die in the attempt. If I cannot save her, it only remains for me to die."

His clothing soon dried in the heat of the tropic sun. He was little the worse for his ducking.

The cavalry, of course, left him far behind; but their fresh traces kept him to the route. A bunch of ripe bananas gave him all the refreshment he needed by the way.

It was at sunset he entered the belt of the forest wherein lay the camp of the men he sought.

"Suleiman."

The black-browed Arab salaamed.

"You have not forgotten what I said to you last night?"

"I have not forgotten."

"Look to your rifle, and keep me in sight."

Suleiman grinned.

Five minutes later Comminges was standing with Lucien de Brissac under the trees, separated from the camp in the glade by a patch of tamarinds.

"There are one or two things we require to settle before we deal with King Baribi." Comminges opened his case, and selected a cigar. "There are several points we have not yet discussed, Lucien."

Lucien looked at him in surprise.

"I thought we had our arrangements pretty thoroughly, Bertrand."

Neither suspected that, concealed by a screen of broad-leaved plantains, a pair of keen eyes were bent upon them, and a pair of keen ears drank in every word they uttered. For the eyes and the ears were those of the man they believed to be lying at the bottom of the Niger.

"Not at all, mon ami." Comminges lighted his cigar. "You have taken it for granted that King Baribi is an ass. But—"

"I? I no more than you."

Comminges shrugged his shoulders.

"The fact is, my dear Lucien, that Baribi is quite as cunning as you or I. He has agreed to hand over the ivory in exchange for Aurore. This bargain he will keep. Your idea of getting hold of the ivory, and then retaining possession of Aurore,



A huge black fist crashed into Brissac's face, and sent him reeling. The bullet flew into the air; Brissac struggled vainly in the powerful grip of Koko.

will not work. Baribi is not imbecile enough to be taken in so easily."

Lucien turned deadly pale.

"What do you mean, Bertrand Comminges?"

"What I say." A slight rustle in the tamarinds came to Comminges' ears. He knew that Suleiman's rifle was ready. He smiled. "To-morrow, at dawn, Baribi will be here with the ivory. He will bring enough warriors to see fair play. In short, Lucien, you must look facts in the face."

"Then Maurice Clare spoke the truth. You planned to deliver my sister to the savage."

He spoke very quietly.

Comminges blew out a cloud of smoke.

"It will not be useful to conceal that fact any longer. I told you only part of my agreement with Baribi, because I knew you were not prepared to go so far as was necessary to our success. You are only willing to use Aurore as a bait; while I knew it would be necessary to keep faith with Baribi."

"And you deceived me all along?"

"Because I required your aid. If you had known my real intentions in regard to Aurore, you would have opposed me as bitterly as did Maurice Clare. You are too much given to half-measures."

"And why do you tell me all this now?" Lucien's tone was still dangerously quiet. "It is because, I presume, I am no longer necessary to you?"

"You are right. Since Aurore has placed herself in my hands, I have no further use for you. But do not mistake me; I have no desire to cheat you of your share of the ivory. If you take a sensible view of the matter, we shall not quarrel."

Lucien quivered with suppressed passion.

"You infernal scoundrel! A sensible view! You mean if I consign my sister to the harem of that half-breed villain Baribi."

Comminges nodded calmly.

"Permit me to remark that it is rather late in the day for you to assume the role of the virtuous brother. The part you have already played—"

"It is true I have been a base villain. I have deserved this. But you, Bertrand Comminges—"

Comminges yawned.

"Spare me your opinion of me. Have you come to a decision?"

"I have." Lucien dragged out his revolver, and levelled it. "You doubly-accursed traitor and dastard! I will kill you for your treachery, and if I cannot save my sister, I will kill her also!"

He pulled the trigger while he was yet speaking. No report followed. Again he tried; still there came only a click. Comminges laughed mockingly.

"Did you think I should leave the cartridges in your pistol, mon ami? Don't you remember that I loaded it for you two hours since? You are a simpleton, Lucien de Brissac, by the beard of the prophet!"

The fatal words were scarcely uttered when Suleiman obeyed the secret signal.

From the tamarinds came a flash and a sharp report. Lucien gave a choking cry, and fell to the ground.

He had clutched his knife. As he fell, he drew it with a last effort. But the power to use it was gone.

The Arab came grinning from the tamarinds. His smoking rifle was in his hand.

The man hidden in the plantains had made a motion as if to spring at Comminges.

But the appearance of the Arab, and the sound of the sentries advancing to the spot, recalled him to prudence. He drew back, and remained noiseless and motionless in his recess.

"You did well, Suleiman." Comminges stood looking down at the murdered man. There was relief, and yet something of remorse, in the sallow face. "This was an accident, you understand."



From the tamarinds came a flash, and a sharp report. Lucien gave a choking cry, and fell to the ground

"Coward! Assassin! Oh, Aurore!"

They were the last words of Lucien de Brissac. The whitening lips were for ever still when the Senegalese sentries arrived upon the scene.

The black soldiers grinned at the story of the "accident." The body was carried into camp, for burial in the soft soil by the creek. Comminges followed it with a gloomy brow. Even his conscience was not wholly dead, perhaps.

When they were gone, the hidden watcher of the plantains stole silently away.

Once out of hearing of the French camp, he broke into a swift, steady run.

"King Baribi will be here at dawn with the ivory." The words of Comminges sang in his ears. "At dawn! At dawn! Heaven grant me time to arrive first."

Heedless of prowling leopard and hissing snake, he kept on his way with tireless limbs.

"Koko!"

"Massa Clare!"

The Yoruba stood in amazement at the tattered figure of his master. Clare was panting for breath. Briar and bramble had torn his clothing and gashed his skin.

"Give me to drink!"

With a gourd of palm wine to his lips, Clare drank deeply. It made a new man of him.

"Koko, the French are camped by Nkosa Creek. The lady is in their hands. At dawn she is to be delivered to the half-breed. Before dawn we are to exterminate Comminges and his men. Boot and saddle!"

Koko shook his woolly head in a doubtful way.

"Dat be a hard ride, massa."

"I know it. There's not an instant to be lost."

In five minutes the Yorubas were in the saddle, riding as if for life.

Clare rode at their head. His face was pale and set. His eyes burned. Once a cry of almost agony fell from his lips.

"Heaven grant that I be in time to save my love!"

A Heart Bowed Down—The Surprise—The Defeat of Comminges—Koko's Mission—At Natango Point.

The horror of that night lingered ever in the memory of Aurore.

The shot she had heard in the dusk had fallen upon her ears like a shell. By instinct she knew what had happened.

She was a prisoner. Lucien, of course would never be a party to that. Lucien had been murdered.

Again she essayed to leave the hut. The sentries drove her back with threats, almost with blows. She demanded to see Comminges. But Comminges did not care for an interview with the girl he had so basely entrapped. He did not come.

Aurore threw herself upon the couch of blankets, and, in dumb anguish, the hours of darkness passed.

What fate was intended for her?

She could not even guess.

The black iniquity planned by Comminges she had not even a suspicion of.

But she felt that some terrible doom overshadowed her, and with bitter regret she thought of Maurice Clare.

He had tried to save her. What happiness she would have felt at the sight of his manly, handsome face now! But he was dead, and she had led him to his death.

Grey dawn glimmered over the tree-tops. From beyond the hill-tops of Sokoto came rosy flushes.

Aurore looked from the hut again. The camp was waking. The soldiers stirred. Some began to replenish the almost dead camp-fires. Others filled the camp-kettles for the morning meal.

From the thickets along the glade sounded a sharp report and a shrill cry.

The soldiers started and jabbered. Comminges came out of his blankets with a bound. From the tamarinds came staggering a sentinel, death-stricken.

"To arms!"

But before the startled soldiers could clutch their rifles there burst from the trees a deafening volley, and the next moment the glade was alive with charging Yorubas and flashing bayonets.

Fifteen of the Senegalese had rolled over under the sudden fire. The rest, startled and unnerved, were in no condition to resist the fierce charge that followed.

Comminges yelled orders in vain. The Senegalese did not attempt to make a stand. They fled like sheep, pursued across the glade by the triumphant Yorubas.

The Frenchman raved with rage. But to linger was to die. He fled with the rest.

"Turn, coward!" The voice of Clare struck terror to his very soul. "Assassin, stop!"

A bullet clipped his ear. Then he plunged into the wood amid the mob of fleeing soldiers and stampeding horses.

Clare did not follow. Dearly he would have liked to hunt the villain to his death. But he thought of the coming of Baribi. There was no time for pursuit of Comminges if Aurore was to be saved from the half-breed.

He glanced grimly round the glade. More than thirty Senegalese lay dead or dying. Few had escaped the vengeful steel.

"Maurice Clare!"

Aurore had watched the mêlée like one in a dream, scarcely believing her eyes.

"Then you are glad to see me, mademoiselle?"

Her look told him as much. His heart pulsed with joy. At last she trusted him.

"Glad!" She sobbed with relief. "Oh, monsieur, I thought you were dead!"

Clare smiled.

"So did Comminges, or I should not have surprised his camp so easily." He looked at her questioningly. "But do you know, then—"

"I know that M. Comminges is a traitor. I was a prisoner in this hut. And my brother—mon Dieu!—my brother—"

Clare had almost forgotten the death of Lucien. His face grew sombre.

"Then you know the fate of M. de Brissac?"

"He is dead?"

Clare bowed.

"I knew it"—her tears flowed afresh—"I knew it."

"He was assassinated by Comminges' order. I saw the deed done, but I could not save him. But calm yourself, mademoiselle. There is no time even for grief. King Baribi will soon be here."

"Baribi!" A glimmering of the truth broke upon her then. "Mon Dieu, is it that you have saved me from?"

"There is not a moment to lose," evasively replied Clare. He lifted his hand. "Listen!"

A sound of beating tom-toms came echoing along the creek. There was a shout from Koko.

"De enemy, Massa Clare! We get out one time, or—"

"Mount, lads! Mademoiselle, will you trust yourself to me?"

"But—my brother—his—his body."

"They have buried him," Clare concluded so. "Come!"

The cavalcade moved out of the camp. It was only the day before that Aurore had fled from Clare. But how gladly she now trusted herself to his protection!

Clare cast more than one anxious glance behind. His men were mounted, and Baribi's were pretty sure to be afoot. But the horses were fatigued with the hard gallop from Natango Point to Nkosa Creek, and the savages were wonderfully fleet of foot. The retreat would be a close thing at best.

"Koko!" The corporal looked at his master. There was uneasiness in his black, honest face. "Koko, old fellow, ride beside me, and listen."

"Yes, Massa Clare."

"You can see it's touch-and-go with us. Our horses will hold out to Natango Point. If we go further they'll drop under us."

Koko nodded gloomily.

"We can make a stand at Natango Point," resumed Clare. "But that will be useless unless we have help."

The corporal made a hopeless gesture.

"Where do help to come from, Massa Clare?"

"Do you forget the British expedition advancing upon Gomba? Major Monson is an Englishman, and my friend. If he could be informed—"

"Dat true, Massa Clare; but how—"

"That's what I am coming to. You must leave me, Koko."

"Leab you!" Koko's jaw dropped. "Oh no, Massa Clare!"

"You must leave me," said Clare firmly. "I can hold out for a few days at Natango. But Comminges and Baribi will be equally determined to bring matters to a finish. If major Monson does not come to our aid, I have no hope of escaping them. You must bring him, Koko."

"But—" stammered the corporal.

"I can rely upon no one but you, Koko. Besides, the Major knows you well, and will trust you. Come! You will do this for me?"

"Koko do as Massa Clare wish."

"Thank you, old fellow. Exactly where to look for major Monson I cannot tell you. You know his route, and somewhere upon it you will find him. Tell him that the life of a lady depends upon him. That will be enough for an English officer. Leave me now, Koko. I hope to see you again at the head of the British riflemen."

The horsemen halted for a minute. Clare grasped the hand of the faithful Yoruba.

"And if you're too late, Koko, I shall know that you did your best, and—"

"Oh, Massa Clare!" The stalwart Yoruba's voice broke "If you dead, Koko die too."

"No, Koko. You'll live to fight for King Edward and the old flag. You'll live to hunt down Bertrand Comminges and kill him like a dog."

The Yoruba's black eyes blazed.

"Koko remember."

"Good-bye, then, and Heaven be with you."

Koko disappeared in the forest. The Yorubas pressed on. Clare's face was gloomy. The parting with the brave corporal saddened him. Would he ever look again upon the simple, devoted African?

"M. Clare!" It was Aurore who spoke. Her voice was low and tremulous. "For my sake you have plunged into fearful perils."

"I would die for you, mademoiselle."

"But what have I done to deserve this devotion?"

He did not reply for a moment.

"A woman in danger has a claim upon every man, mademoiselle," he said evasively.

"And that is all your motive?"

"Perhaps I had another motive, mademoiselle. I may tell you so some day."

They rode on. The horses were panting; sweat rolled down their flanks. The pace insensibly slackened.

Forest and jungle and swamp were traversed, and still behind were the sounds of pursuit. Aurore wondered at the ease and certainty with which the Yorubas threaded the wilderness, to her eyes trackless and interminable.

Clare uttered an exclamation of joy.

"The Niger!"

They followed the bank then till Clare called halt. Aurore looked about her.

She saw the noble river, here flowing between low-lying banks clothed in brown bush. Mangroves grew along the water's edge and far out in the stream.

"That is Natango Point, mademoiselle."

It was an island, or almost one, being connected with the shore by a narrow muddy isthmus. The isthmus was bare mud, and covered by the river in the rainy season. But the isle was a mass of luxuriant tropical vegetation. Enormous baobabs and dark tamarinds made a green wall to the view.

With care the horsemen rode across the isthmus. They entered the shade of the wood, and there dismounted and off-saddled.

"Our enemies are not far behind, M. Clare," Aurore said abruptly.

"That is true."

"You expect an immediate attack?"

"It is probable."

"Tell me truly—what chance is there of help coming in time to save us?"

He looked at her intently. She made an imperious gesture. "Do you think I am afraid of the truth? Answer my question."

"I will do so. I believe that we have equal chances of life and death," Clare said frankly.

Her glance did not falter.

"M. Clare, you have said that you are my friend?"

"Your devoted friend, mademoiselle."

"Listen. I have now an inkling of the fate that dastard Comminges planned for me." She coloured. "If the fight goes against you, will you still save me? You understand?"

He bowed gravely.

"It was my intention, mademoiselle, even if you had not asked it."

She shivered a little.

"Then I rely upon you."

"I will not fail you. You shall not fall alive into the hands of the half-breed."

A burst of savage shouting sounded upon the bank of the river. The bloodhounds were at hand!

The Defence of the Isle—The Night Attack—Facing Fearful Odds.

Comminges, standing in the brown bush, looked towards the isle. The sun was high in the blue heavens. The water shone in the gilding rays. From the top of the highest tree a Union Jack fluttered in the breeze. The Frenchman cursed it as he looked.

He was in a savage mood. The wresting of Aurore from his keeping bade fair to spoil everything.

Baribi, wretch as he was, was ready to keep faith with him. They had had many dealings together. They expected to have many more. The "honour-among-thieves" policy was to their mutual interest. But the half-breed refused to part with an ounce of the ivory until his prize was in his hands.

This was not the Frenchman's only matter of concern. Of his Senegalese soldiers five or six only remained to him. How was he to explain to the governor of the colony the destruction of the troops under his command?

Baribi had placed his warriors at Comminges' disposal. He had sent to Gomba for fresh hordes. But to Gomba he had also sent the ivory, there to remain until Aurore was given up to him.

The British expedition, which was advancing against his town, did not give the half-breed much concern. It was still far off. And, with the ignorant insolence of a savage, Baribi believed that he would make short work of the white men when they did arrive.

The Frenchman was far from sharing his view. He knew perfectly well that the Felatahs would scatter like sheep before the machine-guns of the British.

If he had not carried off the ivory into French territory before then, it meant good-bye to the fortune he had counted upon so confidently, and for which he had sold his conscience and his honour. It will be easily understood, then, that very delay was a source of exasperation to him.

"But though Fortune favours the cursed Englishman, he surely cannot escape me now." So ran the reflections of Comminges. "He is in a strong position. But he is cornered. He must conquer or die. And the odds I can hurl against him are tremendous."

He found consolation in the thought. Fortune, indeed, had hitherto singularly favoured his enemy. But in the last throw of the dice the chances certainly seemed upon the Frenchman's side.

Comminges glanced at Baribi. The King of Gomba was forming his men for the attack.

The Felatahs, in spite of the fatigues of the pursuit, were ferociously eager for the strife.

With a sudden explosion of yells, the black demons swarmed upon the isthmus, brandishing their spears.

"They must carry it," muttered Comminges, between his teeth. "Diable, the island's ours!"

From the isle came heavy rifle fire. The Yorubas were ready for the foe.

The volleys crashed into the blacks crowded together on the strip of earth with terrific effect.

The rifles, being magazines, there was scarce a pause between the volleys.

It was as though a hurricane of tearing lead had suddenly swooped down upon the blacks.

Back they reeled before the tremendous discharge, broken at the first onset.

The half-breed yelled and raved. Comminges stamped and cursed; but all in vain.

The blacks were brave. But flesh and blood could not stand the terrible fire concentrated upon the isthmus.

With wild howls the Felatahs fled, leaving their dead and dying thick as autumn leaves.

A thunderous hurrah broke from the Yorubas. Clare had to restrain them from charging at the discomfited enemy.

Fiendish yells answered from the bank. But the Felatahs, infuriated as they were, dared not face again the fatal fire—at all events, not yet.

Aurore, under the baobabs, uttered a cry of joy as Clare came towards her.

"You have beaten them."

"Yes, with fearful loss. They will not try to cross the isthmus again in a hurry," Clare said, with a smile of satisfaction. "It has been a severe lesson."

He was right. The Felatahs remained in the bush, watching the isle. But the day wore away, and no fresh attack was made.

From the isthmus the wounded blacks crawled painfully away. The dead remained; but not for long. From the river, attracted by the scent of blood, the crocodiles crawled to devour their bodies.

Clare was careful that Aurore should not see the scavengers of the Niger at their ghastly work.

A tent had been put up in the midst of the baobabs. There the black girl, Lucette, had stayed during the ride of the Yorubas to Nkosa Creek. There Aurore now remained.

Worn out in body and mind by the events of the past few days, Aurore sank into a heavy slumber, from which she did not awaken till the crack of rifles resounded once more along the banks of the Niger.

Clare saw the sun sink westward not without uneasiness. While his men rested he remained alert. He had seen movements in the brown bush which revealed the arrival of large reinforcements of Felatah fighting-men. Under cover of night, he did not doubt that a second attempt would be made upon the isle.

In the interval he had strengthened his position. Big logs, piled up at the end of the isthmus, with spaces left for firing, made a barrier the Felatahs would find it difficult to pass.

From the side of the water he had little to fear. The crocodiles, after their feast, swarmed about the isle in anticipation of another. Woe betide the bold swimmer who should venture into the stream while these ravenous monsters kept watch and ward!

Darkness fell upon forest and river. Vague sounds from the shore warned Clare that an attack was imminent.

"Stand firm, my lads! Don't waste a shot. Remember it's for life or death!"

From the bank came a sudden blare of tom-toms. A yelling horde surged upon the isthmus.

"Fire!"

The fierce volleys tore through the savage ranks. The blacks went down in heaps. But they seemed innumerable. As fast as they fell others pressed on. Right up to the log barricade the howling demons charged.

Upon the barricade they broke, as breaks the surf upon a rocky shore.

Back they reeled from tearing shot and stabbing steel. The isthmus was piled with dead. The Yorubas cheered wildly.

"Hurrah!" shouted Clare. "They run!"

They were running, panic-stricken.

The night-attack had failed.

From the bank Clare heard the voice of Comminges yelling orders, screaming out furious curses. He smiled grimly.

The slaughter had been fearful. Comminges and Baribi, careless of the waste of life, would have driven the blacks forward again to the attack. But the panic was beyond their control. The Felatahs refused to advance.

The Yorubas were jabbering with glee. Clare's face was more cheerful than it had been. The chance seemed good of holding the isle till Koko could bring aid.

The rest of the night passed quietly, disturbed only by occasional yells from the Felatah camp and cries from the wounded blacks.

But not till dawn did Clare fling himself upon his bed of leaves and seek repose. He was sinking with fatigue; for two nights he had not closed his eyes. Even his constitution of iron could endure no more.

The sunshine fell brightly upon the river. While some of the Yorubas watched at the log barrier, others gathered

yams and the fruit of the baobab. The black soldiers breakfasted with their rifles across their knees.

Clare slept long under the baobabs. He awoke abruptly with the sound of a sob in his ears.

Aurore was looking down upon the lined, careworn face with an expression in her eyes that was new there. She had chanced to pass the spot where he lay; she had paused for a moment there.

She saw the traces of fatigue, of anxiety, of mental suffering, in the worn face of the sleeper, and she could not restrain her tears.

How much he had suffered for her sake, and how ungrateful she had been! She had not understood. She reproached herself for having failed to understand. And he had endured in silence; even while she accused him his lips had remained sealed because he would not give her pain. She understood now; her heart was full of gratitude, of something, perhaps, more than gratitude. Was he not a man worthy of love?

She passed on without knowing that Clare had seen her. She left him with strange ideas in his mind.

Maurice Clare Speaks—"Because I Love You!"— Comminges' Last Blow—A Struggle to the Death— The Return of Koko—Conclusion.

The sunset was red in the west. The day had passed without attack.

"Monsieur Clare!"

Clare was seated upon a log, his eyes on the isthmus. He rose, and bowed to Aurore.

"You wish to speak to me, mademoiselle?"

"I wish to ask you for an explanation."

A shadow crossed his face.

"Listen, Monsieur Clare!" Aurore spoke quickly before he could answer. "I already know so much that it is not kindness but cruelty to keep the truth from me. I am aware that my brother, to some extent, was concerned in the plot of Lieutenant Comminges." She coloured painfully. "I wish to know the worst. I can guess your motive for keeping the secret. It was a noble one. But you must see that the time for frankness has now come."

Clare nodded gloomily.

"Ah, mademoiselle, why did you fly from me? But for that you would never have known."

"Yet, whatever the truth, I prefer to know it."

"Perhaps I should have told you at first," he said thoughtfully. "But how could I deal you such a blow, you whom—" He checked the words upon his lips. A glow of colour rose to his bronzed cheek. "And, besides, I had no proofs to offer you. You would not have trusted such a tale."

"Perhaps not, then; but now—"

"Now you would believe me?"

"Mon Dieu! you have well proved your faith."

"Be seated, mademoiselle." She sank upon the log. "I will conceal nothing."

He reflected for a few moments.

"I will tell you the plot as I learned it. To chance, or Providence, as you will, I owed the discovery."

"King Baribi was accustomed to make raids upon the villages of the Yorubas and Iorins, to obtain human victims for his ju-ju sacrifices. It was decided to send an expedition against him. But of so remote a spot as Gomba little was known, and some reliable information was indispensable to the success of the expedition. I had a knowledge of the Felatah language, and some experience with the natives. Major Monson accepted my offer to visit Gomba in disguise, and bring him news."

Aurore looked in amazement at this man who spoke so calmly of an enterprise fraught with the most fearful risks.

"I blacked my skin, and penetrated to Gomba as a native. I learned all I came to learn. The human sacrifices I saw with my own eyes." He shuddered. "But I learned what I had not suspected before. King Baribi had dealings with the French over the border. In Gomba were Lieutenant Comminges and Lucien de Brissac."

Aurore gave a little shiver.

"You are perhaps aware that the French have sometimes been accused of arming the natives against the British. Something of this kind was what I now conjectured. At first I was far from suspecting the horrible villainy of Bertrand Comminges. I endeavoured to learn something of the counsels of the lieutenant and the half-breed. It was partly by my own observations, partly by the careless talk of the slaves of the king's kraal, that I discovered the plot."

He paused. How could he tell this girl what he had discovered? That the half-breed, after beholding her at Atakora Point, had formed the design of placing her in his harem; that a French officer had coolly agreed to exchange her like a black slave for her price in ivory?

"I understand, monsieur." Aurore spoke in a low, shaken voice. "I know the design of the half-breed; I know that Comminges lent himself to it. The coward's conduct at Nkosa

Creek opened my eyes to that. As soon as I knew the King of Gomba was coming there, the truth flashed upon me. But what was to be the reward of this foul treachery?"

"A hoard of ivory, sufficient to make Comminges a rich man in Europe, was the price of his honour."

"Mon Dieu! And my brother, monsieur? Do not tell me that he was a party to this. I could not believe it."

"At first I believed him to be equally guilty with Comminges. It was not till the night of the attack on the stockade that I discovered him to be the lieutenant's dupe. As I know now, Comminges had led him to believe that the agreement with Baribi was to be broken, that you were to be used simply as a lure to draw into their power the ivory of the half-breed, and then restored to Atakora Point."

A stifled sob broke from the girl.

"Mon Dieu! And Lucien, my brother, was willing to use me thus!"

A defence of Lucien came awkwardly from the lips of Clare, whose fierce contempt of the cynical schemer had been little abated by the latter's death. Yet he said what could be said.

"At least he died like a brave man, mademoiselle. I saw his last hour. It was at Nkosa Creek that Comminges threw off the mask and declared that faith must be kept with Baribi. Had Lucien agreed to that he would have lived a rich man. But he refused, and a concealed assassin shot him down with the refusal on his lips."

There was silence for some minutes.

Clare resumed abruptly:

"If I at first misjudged Lucien, I cannot blame myself. He gave Baribi credit for a simplicity utterly foreign to his nature. He was blind in this, and he was equally blind in his trust of Comminges. At the stockade I told him he was a dupe, and he replied only with insults. He would not believe until belief came too late to save him."

"But to finish. I left Gomba with a full knowledge of Comminges' intended treachery. What to do for a long time, I knew not. You were almost a stranger to me; I had only seen you upon a few occasions when I came to shoot lions in the Atakora forests in your father's time." Clare did not say that upon these few occasions he had learned to love Aurore with a love deep and deathless. "If I had come to warn you, mademoiselle, you would have repudiated the story as a calumny, and I had an invincible repugnance to telling you of the baseness of Lucien."

"I could have gone to the French governor. If he had believed the story he would have hanged Comminges over his own palisades. But he would not have believed a word of it. He would have driven me from his presence as a slanderer."

"What, then, could I do? To save you from this fate I was irrevocably determined."

"It was noble, generous of you, M. Clare, to interest yourself in my fate." Aurore's voice was broken, subdued. "If I live I shall ever remember your generosity."

"After consulting with Major Monson, I took the only course left to me. I knew the date when you were to be handed over to the half-breed. Before that date, I descended upon your bungalow in the night and carried you off like a brigand."

"Ah, how I misjudged you!"

"I have no blame for you. How were you to know? You judged me by my conduct, and my conduct appeared to you that of a scoundrel."

"And you were willing to allow me to remain in this error rather than acquaint me with the wickedness of Lucien." Aurore was deeply moved—"and that while I reproached you."

Clare's brow was moody.

"Could I tell you such a tale? Besides, you would not have given it credit then."

"But sooner or later must not I have learned—"

He shook his head.

"If you had not fled from me you would have learned nothing. Observe, it was the ivory which tempted Comminges. As soon as Major Monson's column reached Gomba the ivory would be seized and confiscated by the British. And, besides, Major Monson had promised me that Baribi should not escape him. It would then have been safe to restore you to your home after Gomba had been taken."

"And you would have told me nothing?"

He nodded.

"Nothing."

"And if I had believed you a villain, you would have allowed me to continue in that belief?"

"Rather than give you pain."

"Why?"

The question was put so abruptly that the answer left his lips almost unconsciously.

"Because I love you."

A deep colour came into the beautiful face.

"You love me?" stammered Aurore.

The secret was out now.

"Yes, I love you," he said simply. "I love you enough to die for you."

Her eyes were on the ground.
 "Pardon me, mademoiselle"—Clare rose—"I have no right to speak of love to you; above all at the present time. But—I know not how it passed my lips."

"But I am glad it passed your lips, monsieur." She met his eager eyes frankly. Her tones were soft and sweet. "Such a love as yours is not common, and if we perish upon this isle I shall be happy to know that you have loved me—as—as I love you."

The next moment she was in his arms. Throbbing heart beat against heart.

Another night of waiting and watching. Still the black fighting men of Gomba lay inactive in their camp in the bush opposite Natango Point.

Clare knew that this delay indicated the preparation of some formidable blow. But he welcomed the respite. Every hour added to the chance of relief. At any moment he might hear the British bugles.

Where was Koko now? Had he reached Major Monson? Perhaps he was even now close at hand with two hundred British bayonets. Clare encouraged his men to believe so.

Comminges, it was clear, had no suspicion of what the Englishman expected. Had he known, he would have staked everything upon some desperate attempt at once.

What was the blow Comminges was preparing? It was revealed at length.

"Massa Clare!" Clare was talking to Aurore when the watchman's voice was heard. "Canoes coming down de ribber." Clare smiled grimly. Aurore gave him an anxious look.

"What does that mean, Maurice?"
 "It is Comminges' last card. If we beat it he has no more to play. But—"

She understood.
 "But we shall not beat it?"

"I don't say so. But the struggle will be terrible, and you know the odds are countless."

Clare had no idea of giving the girl false hopes. She faced the peril with a courage equal to his own. She met his glance with eyes that did not falter.

"If fortune fails us, I do not fear to die, Maurice. Remember your promise."

He caught her to his breast.
 "My darling, I will not fail you. Upon this spot we shall make a last stand, and at the end I shall be by your side."

With a last kiss he left her.
 His glance swept up the river. A flotilla of canoes advanced from the direction of Gomba.

Clare counted thirty. In each were ten blacks. He felt a sinking of the heart. Attacked upon all sides by this overwhelming force, what hope had he of making good the defence of the isle?

But he did not allow the Yorubas to perceive his uneasiness. His face remained calm and cheerful.

"Courage, lads!" His voice was clear and firm. "If they land upon the isle, the camp remains to us."

That was the last hope of the gallant little garrison. Clare had taken advantage of the enemy's inactivity. The camp, formed in the centre of the isle, where the trees were thickest, had been circled by a palisade of stakes, strengthened by logs and trunks of trees. Within this the provisions and gourds of water had been placed. There a last stand could be made.

The Yorubas stood at their posts with gloomy brows, but dogged hearts. As soon as the canoes came within range fire was opened.

The flotilla separated. Some shot past the isle, to attack upon the further side; others paddled directly for it. At the same time the isthmus was invaded by a horde of Felatahs from the bush.

Comminges, from the shore, watched the scene with gleaming eyes.

"At last, at last!" he murmured. "Nothing upon earth can save him now."

The fire grew fast and furious. It was at a terrible cost that the Felatahs effected a landing. But at length they effected it.

Circling the isle, they were repulsed at some points, but pressed on at others. Clare, biting his lips, ordered a retreat to the camp. The Felatahs, with fiendish yells, swarmed amongst the trees. Only the rapid retreat of the Yorubas saved them from being cut to pieces. Under the baobabs more than one brave fellow sank dead beneath the hacking spears.

"Pardieu!" Comminges was wild with glee. "It is the last hour of Maurice Clare."

He bounded along the isthmus, with Baribi at his heels. He was savagely eager to look upon the death of the man he hated.

There was a deafening uproar under the trees. The Felatahs, coming unexpectedly upon a palisaded camp, and an enemy far from beaten, fell back in dismay from the tearing volleys which met them.

Comminges uttered a furious oath. It was not the finish yet.

Pandemonium had broken loose at Natango Point. The savages, infuriated, disorganised, were yelling and shrieking. The Yorubas' horses, wild with fright, were barging madly at random, trampling on wounded and dead, adding their shrill neighs to the stunning clamour.

Calmness only in one place—in the little group of desperate men behind the palisades; men who faced death grimly, with the Union Jack over their heads, with defiance in their faces, and fire in their hearts.

Comminges grasped the shoulder of the half-breed.
 "Drive the cowards forward! Death of the devil! Shall a handful of men defy an army?"

But it was only the surprise which had checked the Felatahs. Their ferocity, roused to the highest pitch, urged them on more than the voice of the half-breed.

They rushed at the palisade. They circled it; they clambered and leaped; and bullet and bayonet seemed powerless to drive them back.

Clare's face was haggard now. The end had come at last! It remained only to keep his fatal promise to Aurore.

"Cut them to pieces!" yelled Comminges. Sword in hand, he was crossing the palisade, in the midst of the yelling spear-men. "Slay, and spare not!"

The Yorubas were failing to stem the onset. Clare sprang to Aurore.

"My love, my love." She stood before him with eyes full of courage. "It is all over."

"Keep your promise, then."
 The revolver trembled in his hand.

"Heaven, can I do it!" His face was wild with anguish.
 "Yes, yes; die then, my beautiful Aurore!"

His finger contracted upon the trigger
 "Hark!" She turned upon him a face transfigured with joy. "Hark!"

Above the clamour rang the clear, piercing note of a bugle. The revolver sank down. Clare almost reeled. His heart beat like a hammer.

"The British column." He stammered the words thickly.
 "Heaven is merciful."

A deafening crash of rifle-fire succeeded.
 The Felatahs, astounded, stricken with dismay, hesitated at the point of victory.

The Yorubas, at the very moment they were sinking beneath overwhelming odds, were reanimated with new strength, new courage. With a hoarse, harsh yell, they flung themselves afresh upon the faltering foe. Like broken billows the savage ranks receded.

Comminges stood petrified.
 The bugle-note had struck him like a bullet. The British were at hand. He had never reckoned upon that. All was over, then!

Already heavy volleys were decimating the blacks. Already bayonets gleamed upon the isthmus. Already the savages, panic-stricken, were flying for their canoes.

The eye of Clare, burning with hatred and vengeance, was fixed upon the Frenchman.

He had crossed the palisades; he was destined never to recross them.

Comminges, foaming with rage, baffled when success was within his grasp, was not in the mood for flight, even if it had been possible.

He met Clare's fierce attack with reckless defiance.
 "A thousand curses upon you!" He hissed out the words, snarling like a wild beast. "You English pig, to you I owe all this; but revenge upon you at least I will have."

"Yes, you owe your defeat to me, and to me you shall also owe your death," Clare said grimly. "Traitor and dastard, die!"

Comminges reeled. The blade of the Englishman was in his breast.

At the feet of his conqueror Bertrand Comminges gasped out his last breath.

A cheer resounded through the baobabs. A well-known face rose over the palisade.

"Massa Clare! Koko in time, den. De good Lord be praised."

Clare grasped the hand of the faithful Yoruba.

Koko's news had brought the British column to the relief of Natango Point with forced marches.

Major Monson was already near when the final attack commenced, and, at the sound of firing, he had pushed ahead with his swiftest horsemen, arriving, as we have seen, in the very nick of time.

The defeat of the Felatahs was crushing. Among the bodies that went floating down the Niger was that of King Baribi. A Haussa bayonet had given the half-breed his due.

From Natango Point Major Monson pushed on to Gomba without delay. The town, feebly defended, was taken with scarce a struggle. The hoard of ivory for which Comminges had sold his honour and lost his life, fell into the hands of the conquerors.

Meanwhile, Clare and his friends had quitted the wilds of the Niger for the coast.

"We shall soon be in Lagos, Aurore," Clare said. He was

riding beside the palanquin. "You do not regret what you confessed to me when we were both in the shadow of death?"

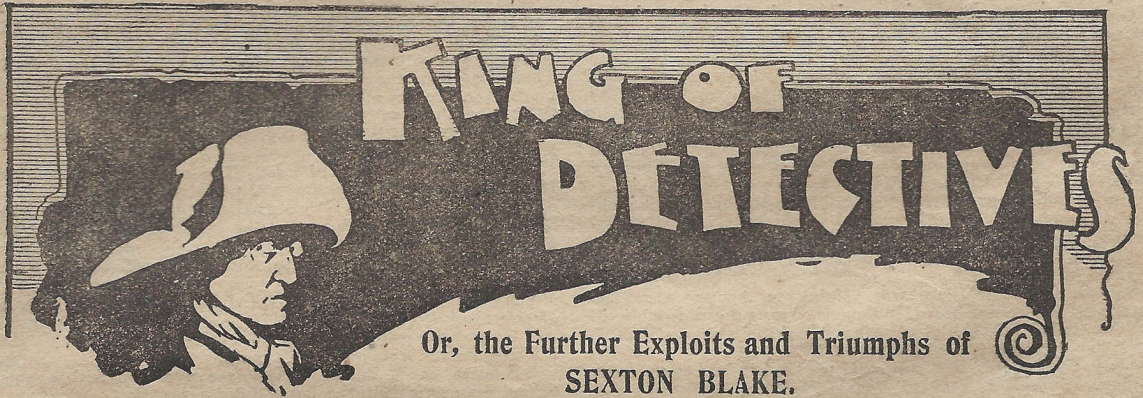
"Regret? Ah, no!"

"Then when we arrive in Lagos I shall claim my bride."

And in Lagos town Aurore became the wife of the young Briton whom she had learned to love, even while she scarce knew whether to regard him as Friend or Foe.

THE END.

Are you following this Grand Story? Read about the Mystery of Dr. Thrashard's School,



By the Author of "The Path of Guilt," "The Real Adventures of Sexton Blake," &c

A FEW LINES OF INTRODUCTION.

Sexton Blake, the renowned crime investigator, receives a letter from Dr. Thrashard, M.A., head-master of the Drearville Academy for the Sons of Gentlemen, requesting him to go or send a representative to the school to investigate a mystery. Blake suggests to Wallace Lorrimer, his pupil and assistant, that he go to the school in the guise of a scholar, and the young man agrees to do so. Lorrimer's name at the school is Timothy Tattlemore, and not even the head-master is aware that the new scholar is a detective in disguise.

Lying awake in bed, "Timothy Tattlemore" sees Dr. Thrashard walking in his sleep. He follows him, but the doctor disappears through a baize door that leads into a disguised wing of the rambling old building. Lorrimer attempts to follow, but finds the door locked! Two days later a whisper runs around the school: "There has been another robbery!" Tattlemore hears from Tom Watkins (the captain of the school) that mysterious robberies are constantly occurring at Drearville. In return, he tells Watkins how he witnessed Dr. Thrashard walking in his sleep. As the boys get up and walk away, a ruffian-looking man, Ned Garstike, rises from his hiding-place in a ditch. He has overheard everything.

Tom Watkins goes on to tell Tattlemore how a small boy named Claude Henshawe mysteriously disappeared from the school a fortnight before.

SOLVING THE MYSTERY.

The Disappearance of Claude Henshawe—Breaking Bounds—A Light in a Window, and an Adventurous Climb.

Despite himself, the pretended schoolboy gasped with astonishment as he listened to Tom Watkins's story of the disappearance of little Claude Henshawe.

"He may be dead; he may be alive," repeated the captain of the school. "I simply don't know." The head-master said something about Claude's people writing a letter to say that the nipper wasn't strong enough to be away at school alone, and so they thought he had better go home.

"Well, what then? I suppose he did go home, didn't he? Where does the kidnapping come in?" demanded Tattlemore.

"Ah, that's the question—did he go home? In the first place, he had no home. Both his parents died when he was a little kid in petticoats, and Claude was left to an old uncle's care. He told me all about it the day before he disappeared."

"But what do you mean by disappeared?" asked the detective, who was now on tenterhooks of curiosity, and determined to get the whole story out of his companion.

"He simply vanished!" said Tom Watkins, and, plucky boy though he was, he shuddered at the recollection. "The day that Dr. Thrashard told us he was sent for, he left the school; but—this is the funny part of it—no one saw him go!"

"No one saw him go?" repeated Wallace Lorrimer mechanically.

"There was no carriage to take him to the station—no one called—no one saw him off—and"—Tom Watkins's voice broke as he spoke—"I don't believe he ever went to the railway-station at all!"

"You—you think there was foul play?" gasped Tattlemore.

"I do, Tim—I do! And he the nicest little kid that ever came to Drearville. But, mind you," Tom Watkins went on, with a fearful glance around him, "I've told nobody but you about this! But I've been to the railway-station and the post-office, and everywhere, and no one saw Claude Henshawe leave Drearville College."

"Great Scott!" murmured the detective to himself. "This schoolboy ought to be in the same business as myself!" Nevertheless, at the first opportunity, Wallace Lorrimer, alias Timothy Tattlemore, went to the village post-office and despatched a wire to Sexton Blake.

"Enough work for two here," he wrote. "Come to Drearville as quickly as possible.—TATTLEMORE."

That night when the scholars turned into bed, and listened as usual to the gentle footsteps of Mr. Sweetly returning downstairs, Tim Tattlemore was the first to break the silence of the dormitory.

"Going to have a banquet to-night, you fellows?" he asked.

"Can't!" grumbled Tom Watkins.

"Wish you meant it!" chimed in little Solomon Hastaway's piping voice.

"Arrah! it's ating a foine fat Ger-r-man sausage I'd like to be!" called out Pat Murphy, with a smack of his lips. "Me appetite's here, bad cess to ut! but pwhere's the sausage?"

From the depths of the bedclothes came Hal Harkins's deep, sonorous voice:

"Alas, my brothers, would we not eat, drink, and be merry did we not lack the wherewithal!"

"Faith, it isn't a wherewithal I'm wanting, but a Ger-r-man sausage!" said Pat, and then dodged between the blankets to avoid the boot that Hal Harkins sent whizzing through the darkness in his direction.

"I wouldn't mind a little walk if there was any grub to be got," said Tim Tattlemore, who was thinking more of his own plans than of getting up a "spread" in the dormitory.

The idea was loudly applauded—so loudly that the assistant master came back to have another glance at the scholars in the dormitory.

"What was all that noise?" Mr. Sweetly demanded. "You boys must be quiet, and go to sleep."

"If ye plaze, sir, I think it was Harkins screamin' out wid the toothache!" cried the irrepressible Irish boy.

"Oh, indeed! I'm sorry to hear you have the toothache, Harkins." And the assistant master advanced to Hal's bedside, and by the light of the candle he carried one could see

Next week—THE LAND OF MYSTERY.

that Mr. Sweetly's face wore an expression of sympathetic concern.

"Is there anything you could do or take for it, Harkins?" he asked; and for a moment, as Harkins hesitated in replying, the silence in the dormitory was so intense that one could have heard a pin drop.

Harkins, full of wrath against Pat Murphy, was at first inclined to declare that he had no toothache at all. But school-boy honour forbade it. He could not go back on a school-chum just because he had cracked a joke.

"I—I think it's getting a little better now, sir," he faltered. "If I can get to sleep I dare say it will have quite gone by the morning."

"Ah, that's right!" said Mr. Sweetly—"get to sleep as quick as you can; but if it should trouble you again, come and tap at my door, Harkins—come and tap at my door."

"Thank you, sir, I will."

"Good-night, boys!"

"Good-night, sir!"

"Fellows," cried Tim Tattlemore, in a hoarse whisper, as the door closed behind the assistant master, "we'll have three cheers for Mr. Sweetly—No, not now—hush!—not now! In the morning. He's not such a bad little sort, is he?"

"Of course he isn't!" snapped Hal Harkins. "He's English—that's why! Now, if he had been an Irishman—"

He finished the sentence with a snort of disgust.

The shaft sped home to its mark, and Pat Murphy arose in his wrath—a trembling, angry figure in a nightshirt that was torn all up one side from hem to armpit.

"Fellers, ye heard that!" he cried. "There's another insult to Ould Ireland!" And in a moment Pat Murphy had leapt from his bed, and was making direct for that occupied by Hal Harkins.

"Big as ye are, I'll make ye swaller that!" he hissed. But ere he could reach Harkins's bed Tom Watkins slipped out from between the sheets and intercepted him.

Pat Murphy was strong and active, and a plucky Irish boy to his finger-tips; but he was like a baby in Tom Watkins's arms.

The captain of the school bore him, kicking and struggling, back to his own end of the dormitory, and thrust him back into his bed.

"Stop there, Murphy," he said sternly, "or it will be the worse for you! I'm not going to have any fighting in the dormitory. I've told you that before!"

"Well, well, be aisy, Tom darlint!" said the Irish boy, quickly recovering his good-humour. "Shure, to-morrow's as good as to-day. Just you wait, Hal Harkins, and as sure as I've disced from a hundred Irish kings—"

"Fish Fenians!" cried Harkins.

"O'er! order!"

"Go and order that grub!" cried little Solomon Hastaway; and a chorus of muffled "Hear, hears!" came from all corners of the room.

"What do you say, Tom?" said Tattlemore to the captain.

"Will you join me?"

"Like a bird!" responded Watkins. "But we must 'gang warily,' as old Mac Tavish says down there at the Red Lion Inn, because if 'Old Daniel' caught us out at night—by jingo! there'd be something broken—eh, you chaps?"

"There would be considerable damage," said Hal Harkins solemnly; "and I fancy that certain portions of the anatomy of certain of the scholars of Drearville Academy would ache for some time after—"

"Och! dhry up, ould sayrious!" cried Pat Murphy scornfully. "Faith! if they'd only bound you in half-morocky ye'd make an iligant lesson-book, so you would!"

Again Tom Watkins had to intercede to restore order.

"An' is there only the two av yer goin', Tom, me darlint?" asked the Irish boy.

Tom Watkins, by the feeble glare of a candle he had just lighted, looked quickly at Timothy Tattlemore, who gave a short nod in answer.

"Well, suppose you come, too, Pat?" said the captain.

"Yes, we'd better take him," said Tim Tattlemore, laughing, "for if we don't, there'll be murder done while we're away."

"Hush! Don't talk like that, old chap, even in joke," whispered Tom Watkins; and the disguised detective saw that his chum's eyes were full of the same look of horror they had worn when he had been telling the story of Claude Henshaw's disappearance.

The dormitory seethed with excitement as the three who were going to venture out at forbidden hours huddled on their clothes, and prepared to depart.

To go boldly downstairs, and out by the front door was too risky. Besides, it was too tame. The ancient ivy that covered the walls of the school would offer a far more romantic means of descent.

Tom Watkins clambered out of the window first, while two of the others hung on to him by his hands.

"Right!" cried the captain of the school as he secured his footing in the ivy. Then followed two or three minutes of strained suspense, and finally the faint sound of a subdued whistle from the grounds below.

Tim Tattlemore followed, and, lastly, the Irish boy; and the three started out on their foraging expedition.

They made their way towards the village cautiously, keeping as much as possible in the shade of the trees, lest in the bright moonlight they should be seen from the windows of Dr. Thrashard's own rooms.

Tom Watkins and Pat Murphy were brimming over with excitement, and Timothy Tattlemore had to pretend to share their enthusiasm.

The village general store was long since closed, but the boys contrived to get the door opened, and to coax the motherly old soul who kept it to supply them with all the "tuck" they wanted. While Tom Watkins and the Irish boy were thus employed, Tim Tattlemore, buttoning his coat-collar around his throat, entered the bar-parlour of the Red Lion and boldly called for a dozen bottles of ginger-beer.

"Good sakes—a dozen!" cried the stout Mrs. Mac Tavish.

"Not a' for yersel, laddie—a dozen bottles of ginger-beer?"

Tim hastened to explain that he wanted to take them away with him; and Mrs. Mac Tavish produced the twelve bottles of "pop."

"But how will ye carry them awa' the noo, laddie?" she began.

"Oh, that'll be all right!" said the schoolboy cheerily. "I'll fix 'em with this bit of string, you see."

Forthwith he began to connect the necks of all the bottles by means of a string, so that the whole dozen could easily be carried in one hand. Dame Mac Tavish, after watching the "laddie" a few moments, bustled away to serve another customer.

Tim had nearly got his bottles of ginger-beer fixed to his string, when the sound of a voice came to his ear from the other side of a low partition that stretched the whole length of the room, dividing the bar-parlour from the common tap-room.

The detective-schoolboy listened instinctively, and the words he heard made him leave his ginger-beer bottles and creep closer to the partition, thrilling with excitement.

"Yes," he heard a gruff, beery voice exclaim, "it seems the old 'un up yonder at the school's took to sleepwalking. A pretty turn for things to take, ain't it? You take my word for it, that spells trouble for us if we ain't mighty careful."

"Bah!" hissed the other. "What can interfere with our plans now? Everything's snug and secure, I tell yer! It ain't like you to squeal like a frightened kitten, Ned Garstike. Drink up yer liquor, and 'ave another along o' me. We sha'n't want for anything in the way o' good things a month from now, I'll lay a sovereign!"

"Bill," said the man addressed as Ned Garstike, speaking in so low a tone that the listener had to press closer to the wooden partition to follow his words—"Bill, it's jest because of that I'm worritin' about it. It's a big stake as we're a-playin' for; and when I think there's a chance of our bein' bowled over by some—"

"Curse you, Ned, there's no such chance, I tell you!" retorted the other fiercely. "Why, you're no better nor a baby! Drink your liquor, man, and then we'll have another, and be off. It's like sleeping atween wet blankets to sit here along o' you!"

"All right—all right," grumbled Ned Garstike; "but I'll be mighty thankful when it's all over and done with, and the merry quids safe in our breeches pockets—eh?"

There came a moment's silence as the men drained their glasses, and then heavy footsteps lurched forward to the bar in quest of more drink.

Now, or never, thought the detective, was his chance to get a look at the men whose talk was full of such a sinister meaning.

Tattlemore gave a glance around him. He was quite alone in the bar-parlour. Mounting on a three-legged stool, he peered cautiously over the top of the wooden partition, and took a careful stock of the ruffianly faces of Ned Garstike and his comrade Bill.

"Good! I shall know you two gentlemen again, I fancy!" the pretended schoolboy muttered to himself, and then took up his burden of ginger-beer and hurried out of the Red Lion.

Two figures came across the narrow village street to meet him.

"You've been a goodish long time, Tim!" grumbled Watkins; while the Irish boy, saying nothing, began gravely counting the bottles of ginger-beer, to see how many remained out of the dozen.

Tattlemore nudged Tom Watkins meaningly, and whispered: "I'll tell you all about it later on."

"Well, it's quick march now, you fellows," said Tom.

And the three made off at a good swinging pace on their way back to the college.

"I'll bet those fellows are waiting eagerly for us—eh?" asked Tim Tattlemore; and then he stopped short, as they began the ascent of the hill leading to the school, and clutched Tom Watkins by the arm.

"Look, Tom—look!" he cried excitedly. "What is it? Where? I can see nothing."

"Och! it's moonstruck he is, intoirly!" cried Pat Murphy. "Niver did I know you could get tight on ginger-beer!"

"There, Tom—can't you see?—a light in the east wing!" cried Tattlemore, extending his arm before his chum's face, so that he might follow the direction of his finger.

"Great Jupiter! so there is!" cried Tom Watkins. "Is—is it 'Old Daniel' sleepwalking again, think you?" he asked, in a low tone, so that Pat Murphy should not catch what he said.

The boys had walked on again, and now that they were in full view of the schoolhouse they adopted the same precautions as when they had set out on their expedition, keeping as much as possible in the shadow of the trees, and creeping along as noiselessly as a trio of burglars.

At last they stood beneath the windows of the dormitory, and a low whistle from one of the boys up above assured them that all was serene—their absence had not been discovered.

Tom and Tim exchanged a meaning glance, and the latter turned to Pat Murphy.

"You go up first, Pat, and take the tuck, there's a good chap, and carry the end of this string up with you, so that you can haul the ginger-beer up after you. Tom and I are not coming up just yet."

"Not coming up, is it?" cried Pat. "Then phwat the dickens are ye—"

"Never you mind, Pat. We want to enjoy another short stroll in the moonlight—that's all," Tom Watkins explained. "You go along up, and stuff yourself with cakes, for the glory of old Ireland! Go on—up you go!"

He gave the Irish boy a "leg up" to where the great branches of the century-old ivy radiated in all directions from the parent stem, completely covering the walls of the old building with a fast-linging coat of verdure.

The two waited till Pat had reached the window of the dormitory in safety, then they turned, and, keeping well within the shadow, made their way to the east wing of the building.

"What could that light mean?" whispered Tom Watkins. "The east wing of the house is supposed to have been disused for twenty years or more. It's that part of the place that's supposed to be haunted, you know, Tim."

"Haunted—eh? I fancy we shall find it's haunted by real flesh and blood, old man! There!—there's the light again. Why, it's moved to another room now. His lordship the ghost is making a tour of inspection, it seems."

Both looked upwards, their eyes fastened on one of the second-floor windows, where could be seen the dim, flickering light of a candle.

"I'm going up," said Tim Tattlemore suddenly; and his voice had such a ring of determination that the captain of the school did not attempt to deter him.

Hand over hand the pretended schoolboy rapidly clambered up the ivy, which here grew thicker and more luxuriant than at any other point of the building.

Now he had reached the window whence shone the light, and the sight that met his eyes was such as to startle even Wallace Lorrimer, the pupil and assistant of the ablest detective in the three kingdoms.

Leaning out into space as far as he dared, Tim Tattlemore beckoned to his chum below, and the gesture was clearly seen against the lightened window by the boy below. "Come up," it said distinctly; and in a moment the creaking and quivering of the ivy told the detective that Watkins was mounting to his side.

Now he was up, and together the two looked through the window of that deserted room in the east wing.

And what an extraordinary sight they saw! Against the wall, and fastened to it by an iron chain, was a boy, of not more than ten years of age; and facing him, in the doorway of the room, lighted candle in hand, was a man in his night attire.

"Dr. Thrashard!" said Tim Tattlemore, in a low, tense voice. "And the boy? Who is the boy, Tom?"

"Good heavens! it's Henshawe—little Claude Henshawe!" was the answer that burst from Tom Watkins's pale, set lips.

(To be continued.)

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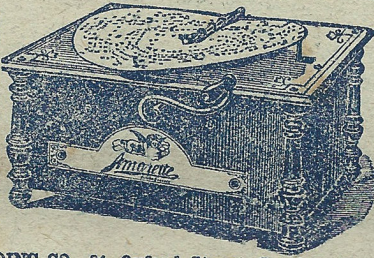
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