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By
LEWIS BIRD



A
STRANGE
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(See page 10.)

NO. 4.

VOL. 1.

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GAZED SPELLBOUND.



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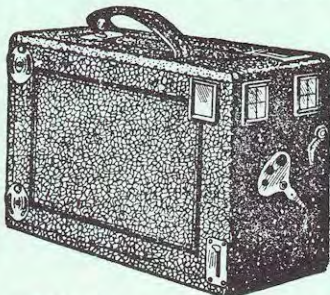
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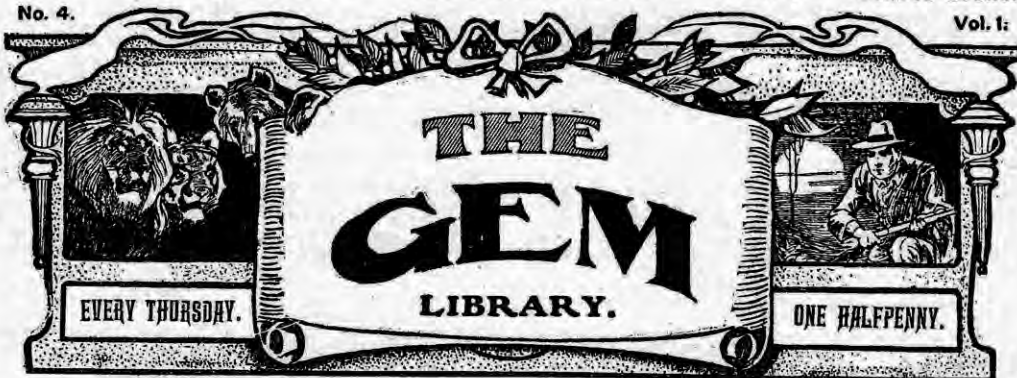
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A SECRET QUEST.

A Grand Long, Complete Tale of Adventure.

By LEWIS BIRD

Author of

"Scuttled."

CHAPTER 1.

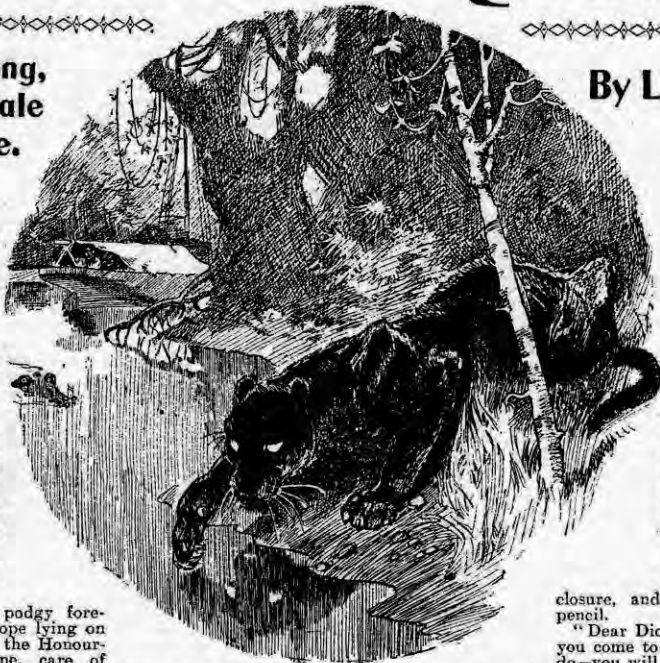
A Strange Inheritance.

DON'T under stand," Mr. Truscott, the family solicitor—poorly, pompous, and obviously short of patience—shrugged his shoulders and patted his white waistcoat.

"Frankly, neither do I," he replied testily. "It's most irregular—stupidly unbusinesslike—and I shall be glad to be quit of the whole affair. Possibly the letter explains. You haven't opened it yet."

And he dabbed a podgy forefinger at a long envelope lying on the table addressed to the Honourable Richard Lorraine, care of Messrs. Truscott & Co.; to be opened by him in the event of my not returning to England in the course of the next five years, and demanding its delivery to myself.

"Your Uncle James has not returned," continued Mr. Truscott. "The period mentioned expired three days ago. Therefore, obeying instructions, I sent for you, and place the sum left in my charge—eighteen hundred pounds—at your disposal, subject to your written promise that you will use that sum for the purpose which is, I believe, indicated in the letter. More than that I can't say, except that when you have read the letter, if you will sign this memorandum which I have drawn up undertaking the conditions, I will give you an open cheque for eighteen hundred pounds; and, my time being valuable, I hope you



"Dick, me boy," whispered Micky, "Or've done a bit of trout-ticklin' in me toime, but O'd be pleased to 'av some lessons from the gentleman wid the black overcoat." (See page 6.)

will settle the matter as quick as possible."

Dick Lorraine flushed. He was barely eighteen, and had little knowledge of business men and their ways; but he had already mentally summed up Mr. Truscott as a pompous, ill-mannered ass, and felt that if he really gave his mind to it he could loathe the man very cordially.

He took up his letter, however, and broke the seal. There was only a single enclosure, and that was written in pencil.

"Dear Dick," it began.—"When you come to read this—if you ever do—you will be as near as I can remember, eighteen years old, and if a youngster can't decide for himself at that age he won't be of much use at any other. I am writing this, by the way, from Manaos, a place half

way up the Amazon, and am sending it down to the Brazil coast by runner."

"That is exactly the casual way in which your Uncle James always has treated business matters," interjected Mr. Truscott.

Dick smiled, and continued reading: "I am also sending a draft for eighteen hundred pounds, to be taken care of by—"

Dick hesitated, and mumbled indistinctly, evidently confused.

"Go on, sir—go on!" said Mr. Truscott. "I can't hear."

"To be taken care of," read Dick deliberately, with an angry flush, "by that fat old fool Truscott, the family lawyer. It's half of my worldly wealth, and if you accept it you accept it on a condition. Briefly, the thing is this. All we Lorraines are as poor as rats, and one of my few ambitions has been to get hold of some loot—a big pile of it—sufficient to buy back Lorraine Court. It's a beastly shame that the place ever had to be sold.

Now, for many years past I have heard yarns—very steep ones, some of them—of the buried cities of Brazil, and of the richness of certain old diamond-workings, the whereabouts of which are known only to the Guajara and Zinho Indians. Two years ago I determined to have a shot at discovering them myself. I found the buried cities, and rummy sort of places they are, too; and I found a nice little cache of diamonds—the true Brazilian black fellows. But before I could get hold of them the Indians swooped down on us, cut up my bearers, and made an awful mess all round, and I had to bolt for it with a poisoned arrow in the calf of my leg.

"I am just off for another try, and the chances are that, if ever you come to read these lines, I shall be done for. Those Guajaras are ugly brutes to tackle, and as cunning as an old grey badger. But even if I fail, the diamonds are there. I know, for I've seen them; and the story of them is not the ordinary kind of yarn which men swap lies about over iced drinks down at the coast.

"Now for my conditions. If you take the eighteen hundred pounds you take them on the understanding that you are to use the money in the endeavour to find those diamond-workings, and grab enough to set up the family fortunes again, and buy back the old house. Of course, I cannot give you details here, as there is no knowing into whose hands this letter may fall; but if you come—and I think you will—call at my agents, Messrs. Goyaz, at Bahia, and they will hand you certain papers for your further guidance.

"The task is by no means likely to be all jam and honey, Dick; and there's no denying the risks, though I never yet knew a Lorraine who was a coward. You'll have to keep an eye lifting for the Brazilian Government, too, or they'll be down on you like a cartload of bricks. Your best plan will be to ship straight to Bahia, and let anyone who is interested know that you're on a sporting trip up country; and, whatever you do, bring plenty of ammunition, with a good, useful stopping power. You'll need it before you're through.

"Good-bye, and good luck, old man! Show this letter and the Lorraine crest to Goyaz, and they will give you the packet of directions; and all I can hope is that you will succeed where I have failed, and that you will square accounts for me with the Guajara ruffians.—Your affectionate uncle,
JIM LORRAINE.

"P.S.—You promised to turn out well when I saw you last, many years ago, and I am sure you will take up the search. If, however, I am wrong, old Truscott is to give the eighteen hundred to a hospital fund or other charity, for I'll be hanged if you shall have a penny of it.—J. L."

Dick looked up and folded the letter.

"Queer sort of business, isn't it?" he said, smiling.

Mr. Truscott sniffed.

"Considering your uncle's extremely offensive reference to myself, I don't feel called upon to offer any opinion on the matter. I will say, however, that for so long as I have known him he has always been an idler, a ne'er-do-well, without any capacity for business, and—er—and lacking in all proper respect. If you choose to go on this wild-goose chase it's no concern of mine."

"Naturally not," retorted Dick Lorraine quickly. "I was speaking not to you, but to my friend Mr. Cavan here. What do you make of it, Mike?"

The individual addressed, and who had not yet spoken, was a genial-looking Patlander of about Dick's own age, with a snub-nose, a short, square-built figure, merry, twinkling eyes, and enormously long arms.

He had sat staring with strong disapproval at Mr. Truscott, fidgeting with his hat, ever since he had entered the office half an hour before.

By nationality he was "agin the law," and had insisted on coming with Dick, presumably to look after his interests, having a firm conviction that all lawyers were knaves of varying degree—a conviction largely based on interviews concerning unpaid bills.

"Phwat do I think av ut?" he said. "Shure, I think ye've a fool av an uncle, an' be the same token there's a boat for San Salvador an' Rio leaves ivery Wednesday."

Dick laughed.

"Oh, it's settled that way, is it? Well, I mean to go, so, as Mr. Pycroft says, 'We'll buy an 'am, an' see life,' and the eighteen hundred will come in deuced handy for the 'am. If you can lend me a pen, Mr. Truscott, I'll just sign that paper, and get it over."

He scribbled his signature at the foot of the agreement, and Mr. Truscott filled in a cheque, and handed it to him.

"But this is a mistake!" cried Dick. "You have made this out for two thousand and some hundred pounds."

"That is the original sum, together with five years' interest, less my charges," said Mr. Truscott stiffly; "and now, since you seem to have come to a decision, I wash my hands of the whole affair. I may be—or a 'fat old fool, but I happen to be busy; in fact, a most respectable client has already been waiting a full ten minutes. Good-morning!"

Dick and his friend took the hint of the opened door, and hurried out.

"Me boy," said Mr. Cavan, as soon as they were in the street, "that bit av a Truscott man needs ironing out an' mangling. Dick, now, I tell yez just phwat ye've got to do. I'm a half-fledged doctor already, am I not, and I've a feine notion av settin' arrums an' legs an' sich things, an' I've a fair notion of an 'inner' at anythin' up to eight hundred yards, besides bein' an expert on malarial cases an' poisons, an'— Listen here now, me boy. Phwat ye've got to do is just to lend me wan—just wan—of thim hundreds of pounds, so that I can pay me share, as a gentleman should, an' I'm wid ye off on a visit to thim Indians wid the phwat-ye-may-call-it koid av a name.

"I've a wee bit av an' aunt down Kilkenny ways, an' phwen she dies, bless her ould soul, O'll be comin' in to a bit av real Oirish landed estate, the which will make yez shure av—"

His eloquence was cut short by a yell of laughter from Dick Lorraine, which startled an eminently corpulent and respectable stockbroker, and roused an old cab-horse from his midday snooze.

"Oh, Micky—Micky, for mercy's sake shut up! I've heard you tell that yarn about your aunt to six different tunes within the last week, you irresponsible old idiot! Let the old lady die in peace. Of course you are coming with me. Is a gentleman, as you call him, of wealth and position—that's me—to travel without his medical attendant? Supposing I was seaseik, for instance, wouldn't you be able to prescribe for my little insides? Get into this cab, you middle-headed Patlander, and we'll drive to the bank."

The next few days were spent in one long rush, purchasing stores and equipment, making inquiries as to outgoing steamers, and reading up all information obtainable about the Amazon.

The firearms were in themselves a matter of much discussion and heated argument. Mike had taken a great fancy to a sporting Lee-Enfield, but Dick Lorraine, who knew a good deal about rifles one way and another shook his head.

"They're fine things in their way, old man, but they lack just the very thing which we need—stopping-power. They'll bore a hole through pretty well anything, but it's such a small, neat hole that over and over again a man has gone on fighting with three or four of those slender bullets through him, and scarcely known he was hit—unless, of course, he had a bone touched; and even then a chap I knew who was in the Matabele campaign was shot clean through the leg-bone, yet he ran over a hundred yards to his horse, and rode clear away. He told me that when he was hit he merely thought that it was someone chucking stones. Now, if that's all the effect a bullet like that has on a white man, you can bet your boots an Indian could take twice the punishment, and feel less."

"Phwat is ut ye're wantin', then?" said Cavan.

"A good, heavy calibre, with a soft bullet. None of your nickel-cased affairs. A good, sound rifle to be relied on up to, say, eight hundred yards, and I know the very thing."

"For our job there's nothing like a Marlin—a good, serviceable weapon—magazine, simple action, chambered for long or short cartridge, and, above all, with a side ejector, so that if you do get in a tight corner, and have to fire quickly, you don't get your aim spoilt by the empty shells floppin' back into your face."

"We can get, say, four of those, in case of accidents, and a brace of good, long-barrelled Smith and Wesson revolvers, which will take the same cartridge as the Marlin short. You've got your old gaspige gun, which will do quite well for shooting for the pot. Those, a plentiful supply of ammunition, a few spares, and reloading tools ought to do us well."

The gun outfit being settled, they arranged for their stores to be done up in neat forty-pound cases, each case holding a complete and assorted selection for two for a fortnight apiece.

Then there were tents, lanterns, charts, and a hundred and one other things to be seen to, not forgetting several cases of beads and coloured calicoes, penny looking-glasses, and so forth, for presents or bribes. By almost superhuman energy they got everything put through inside five days.

The evening of the sixth found them dog-tired on the promenade-deck of the s.s. Korman, outward bound for Bahia and Rio, via Pernambuco.

They picked up a heavy gale in the Bay, during which it became very much a case of "physician, heal thyself." For, whilst Dick thoroughly enjoyed himself, and developed a fine, rousing appetite, Micky lay groaning on the sofa in his state-room, making uncouth noises, too feeble even to growl at Dick when the latter, bringing him down some hot soup, lunched wildly to an extra heavy roll, and upset soup, plate and all, over the hapless Micky's head.

By the time they sighted the Cape Verdes the gale had blown itself out, and, skirting the edge of the Sargasso weed, they reached Bahia just after dawn one bright, cloudless morning.

The s.s. Korman had cargo to discharge, so she ran into the inner harbour and warped alongside. The two friends had their baggage stored, and went to an hotel to which the purser had recommended them, and as soon as the offices were opened repaired to Messrs. Goyaz.

Dick asked to see one of the principals, produced his letter, and showed his watch, on the back of which was engraved the Lorraine crest.

The head partner examined both with grave courtesy; then, unlocking a big safe, he handed to Dick a small packet wrapped in oiled silk, and carefully sealed. It was addressed to him, and beneath the address was written, "To be opened in private," the words being heavily underlined three or four times.

He asked if any news had been heard of his uncle, was answered politely in the negative, and there the interview ended.

Mike and Dick went straight back to the hotel, bolted themselves in their room, and broke the seal.

"Now then," said the latter, "I hope we shall learn something a bit more definite. We'll start with this first"—picking up a letter which had slipped down.

"Dear Dick," it ran—"You will by this time, of course, have seen old Truscott, and collared the money I left for you. In that letter, of course, I could not be very explicit.

"But now I can tell you all I know, for Goyaz is to be trusted implicitly. There I spoke to you of certain buried cities, and of diamond-workings, and of certain Indian tribes known as the Guajara and Zinho. Well, all that was true talk so far as it went, but it was not a quarter of the whole truth.

"I had best begin at the beginning. A year or so after I left England for the last time I was about as broke as a man can well be, and I went about poking my nose in here, there, and everywhere, looking for a job, and many very queer places did I poke it into. Amongst others, one was a sort of low-down native hotel, not unlike what we should call a doss-house. There I found a poor wretch, a half-caste Portuguese, going fast with malignant malaria.

"The doctor was practically dying. I knew a little rough and ready doctoring, and I filled him up with cigarette-papers full of quinine and coast gin. I don't say the remedy was orthodox, but it helped him a bit, and he was grateful."

"Shure, it's a great thing to have the services of a medical man," broke in Micky. "Now, phwat he shu'd have done was to—"

"Oh, dry up, you old pill-box!" said Dick, and continued reading.

"He grew better for a time, but he knew that he must die, and in return for what he was pleased to call my kindness he told me a long yarn about a buried city, all built of white marble in great blocks, and of a sect of Guajara priests who still lived in one of the temples, and of a vast store of diamonds.

"He told me where it was with considerable detail, but of that more later. Shortly afterwards he grew delirious, and raved of many things, but mostly of diamonds. Two days later he died. Now, all up and down the coast a somewhat similar yarn is current, and no one pays much attention to it. The men who tell it you spend hours explaining how they and you could become millionaires, and end up by borrowing a dollar—two if they can get them.

"Nevertheless, the man's story impressed me; also I knew a chap, an engineer, at Manaos, who had a bit of money, and who also firmly believed in the yarn being founded on fact, though, in spite of several trials, he had never been able to locate the spot.

"I took my story to him, details and all. He financed the show, and we set out. We found the place with almost surprising ease. We actually found some of the diamonds in the lap of an image in the temple. From their appearance they had been there for some time, as they were almost hidden by twining creepers.

"Not satisfied with that, we must needs penetrate further, and there we found a secret which would make us the richest men on earth, and my poor friend McClane found his death, for we were caught spying. McClane was killed outright, our camp was cut to pieces, and I, badly wounded in the leg, barely escaped by swimming. Three months later, after indescribable hardships, I reached Manaos.

"Now for the secret. There are no diamond-workings in the strict sense of the word, but the Guajaran priests make diamonds. Startling enough, isn't it? But it's true, for all that—as true as that the diamonds which I carried away with me fetched close on five thousand pounds in the open market, and they were only small compared with some we saw.

"How they do it I don't know, though both McClane and I watched them at work. This much, however, I can tell you. In the lower part of the temple there is an intensely fierce fire always burning, and of natural source. Whether it is the flame of some hidden oil-wells or an outbreak of some volcanic furnace we could not venture near enough to ascertain. I should say the latter myself. All I do know is this. The priests or medicine men of the tribes make huge cylinders of a peculiar greenish clay which is found in the district. Into these they pour carefully by means of a long ladle a molten liquid drawn from the fire itself, and glowing at a white-heat. The open end of the clay cylinder is then hermetically sealed with more clay, and the whole thing once more gently lowered into the furnace by two men holding long tongs, which twist and crumple in the heat.

There it is left for a period of as near as we could judge three days. It is then removed, and plunged into icy-cold water in a huge stone receptacle, where it bursts with a loud report.

"When the water has cooled down it is carefully strained off through a piece of native cloth, and the priests pick out sometimes two, sometimes half a dozen stones of good size and perfect quality, in addition to which are hundreds of splinters and small fragments, which are thrown back into the furnace to go through the process again.

"Mind you, though, I am giving you an account of what we gathered from time to time. It took us three long months of the most careful scouting to find out even so much.

"For the priests are very jealous of their secret. Even their own tribesmen are ignorant of what they do, and are used by the priests merely as hunters and guards against attack. Moreover, the priests only make the stones at certain intervals. So far as I could make out, they haven't the vaguest idea of any commercial value attaching to their discovery. It seems to be rather a religious rite, for the stones once made are collected and taken away to some secret place, securely hidden amidst the foundations of the temple, and are referred to as 'the tears of Tuan,' Tuan being a species of snake-god. For both the Guajara and Zinho tribes go in for snake-worship, and the priests have a snake tattooed in some kind of green pigment round their waists.

"That is all that I have to tell you, save this. I am about to start once more to endeavour to discover the secret which will make me of no account, or the richest man in the world. Poor McClane, the only other man who has seen that which I have seen, paid the penalty with his life. I have a superstition that something of the sort will be my own fate. Therefore I am writing this and the letter to England, which you will have had by now.

"If you know any man whom you can trust thoroughly, and on whose discretion you can rely, wire for him to join you before you start. Keep always to the left bank, and when you come to the forest belt watch for three trees in a line by the water's edge—sawn, not broken down.

"This, I fancy, is the last you will hear of your affectionate uncle. Jm.

"P.S.—Permanganate and a hypodermic syringe are the best remedy for a wound from a Guajaran arrow. The poison used is some form of snake venom. You can buy these at Bahia in a nickel case, as made for our Army in India.

"Also for travelling up the main river there is, or was, at Bahia a certain Pedro Ramirez, owner of a coasting schooner Maria. Engage him if you can; he is reliable. J. L."

Dick laid the letter down, and gazed at Mike in blank bewilderment.

"Well, old man," he said, "there's one thing, I sha'n't have to wire for you, because you're here, but for the rest I'm hanged if I can make head or tail of it. 'Keep to the left bank.' In the name of all that's wonderful, what left bank? The maps we have are very pretty, and I should say they show anywhere round a couple of hundred rivers, and from what the purser told us half of those are down by guesswork just to look nice. I'm beginning to believe old Truscott was right, after all, and that poor Uncle Jim was about as unmethodical a chap as ever breathed."

"Hould on there, now!" said Micky. "There's more av ut in this bit av a wrapper."

As he spoke he drew out first of all what looked like a piece of blank paper, and next a small packet containing something small and hard.

"Open it," said Dick.

Micky did so, and gave a low whistle of astonishment. Inside were five fair-sized diamonds—three uncut, two cut, and glistening evilly in the light. Even to an inexperienced eye they were wonderfully fine specimens.

On the crumpled piece of paper which contained them a few words had been hastily scribbled.

"These stones were made in my presence by the Guajaran priests as described in the letter, and it was in obtaining these that poor McClane lost his life,—JAMES LORRAINE."

"I suppose they must be real," said Dick doubtfully. "It all sounds like a fairy-tale, though. I don't seem to get the hang of things. Poor old Uncle Jim, he was always jolly good to me, anyhow! What's that other thing?"

"Shure, it's just a piece of blank paper, me bhoy, an', begobs, now look at that!"

That was a faintly-written note in pencil, squeezed into one corner of the bottom of the otherwise untouched page—a few sentences only: "Remember the last time I spent Christmas with you. And something I showed you by the billiard-room fire before the smash came."

"Bedad, that uncle av yours must be made up out av the missin' bits av the Sphinx! An' phwat w'd he be maning by that now?"

Dick shook his head.

"Great Scott! How do I know? I must have been a kid of eleven—no, ten—as far as I can remember. The billiard-room! Oh, I know! He means down at the old place. I can't—By George!" He sprang to his feet. "And I called Uncle Jim unmethodical! Here, you old ass, gimme a match! A match! Tandsticker! Allumette! Feul! What the deuce is Spanish for a match?"

"Shure, I'm blest if I know; but I've a box av good ould English yestas in the pocket av me, if that's phwat ye're wantin'."

"Chuck 'em over. Don't they keep fires in this benighted place? I know, we've got a spirit stove. Roust it out like a good chap!"

Mike rummaged, and produced a small methylated affair for boiling kettles, and Dick lighted it.

"This is what he meant!" he exclaimed, and held the paper over the flame just far enough away to prevent it scorching.

Mike looked puzzled, then grinned.

"I'm wid yez. 'Tis an ould school trick, wid invisible ink."

Dick nodded.

"A cobalt salt—forget the name—nitrate, or something, isn't it? He showed it me as a dodge for sending notes in class. I remember now."

"It's comin' up foine," said Mike, bending down and squinting at it. "It's some kind av a map thing. Begobs, Dick, he wasn't trustin' ould Goyaz more'n he cu'd help, anyways. Here she comes! Aisy now, or ye'll burn it."

Slowly but surely the invisible ink showed up under the influence of the heat in faint blue lines, and in a few minutes it stood out faded, but clear in every detail.

Dick blew out the stove, and the two leant eagerly over the table scanning the roughly-drawn chart.

To the north it showed a portion of the mighty Amazon, and in the top extreme left-hand corner Manaos, and the straggly line of the Madeira river. But the greater part of the map was taken up with the course of the Tapajós, a tributary running southward from the main stream. At a place called Haituba was a note: "Government fort, best passed at night." And lower down again, just where an unnamed river flowed into the Tapajós: "Channel close to left bank."

"Forest land—very dense," then came, lower down still, a thick mark: "Blazed trees," and scratches to indicate mountains, amidst the foothills of which there was a cross with the note added: "Buried city. The temple lies on the west side. Guajara scouts all through forest belt between river and city. Bush path gives direction. Snakes very bad in swamp near temple. Best access to latter on south side."

Dick at length folded the paper carefully and placed it in his pocket.

"Old man," he said, "we know now something of the kind of job we're up against, and, strange though the yarn may sound, I know Uncle Jim, and I believe every word of it. Whether we shall pull through or not is another matter. Now let's shake hands on it, and go and look up old man Ramirez, or whatever his name is, and try and charter his boat."

CHAPTER 2.

The Hour of Parting.

"LUFF her up! Luff, can't you? So! Down foresail, sharply now! Down peak!"

The schooner Maria, with wildly-slating sails, shot up into the teeth of a staggering white squall which an instant before had threatened to drive her bodily under.

It had come down on her like a flash of lightning—a vivid streak of tumbled water four miles away over the broad, placid surface of the Amazon—a moaning and quivering of the rigging—a warning shout from Micky Cavan, and the next minute she was buried in a smother of water to her lee clear leads.

She righted herself in the nick of time, but not without the loss of half a dozen hen coops and some other deck litter.

The half-caste at the tiller, his eyeballs glittering with fright, swung her up, throwing the whole of his weight backward with a jerk. The other deck hand and Dick Lorraine, half drowned by the rush of water, flung themselves on halliards and downhaul, working desperately to get the canvas off her.

Half the foresail lay bellying out overside, but they had to let it take its chance, whilst they rushed aft to let go the main peak halliard.

Micky, who was an expert racing hand, took control, driving the half-caste from the tiller, and signing to him to get forward and bear a head.

The wind shrieked and howled like thousands of demons let loose, and the tops of the short, steep waves were torn off by the roots and driven in level sheets of cutting water over the deck.

The rain drove down as only equatorial rain can. No one who has not seen a tropical rainfall can form even a vague idea of its terrific volume. In an instant everything more than a few feet away was blotted out in a watery veil—so great was its force that it beat down the rising sea, and filled the Maria's deck knee deep to the top of her low rail, over and over again.

Ramirez, the wizened little owner and skipper, who had been down below in the tiny saloon, was unable to force open the companion-hatch doors, by reason of the weight of water on deck. Had he been able to do so, the schooner would have been half filled in less than no time.

There came a resounding crack and a yell from somewhere forward. The wildly-slating foresail gaff had carried away a backstay, and some of the canvas, caught by the weight of water, were ripping along their seams.

Then suddenly—as suddenly as it had come, the squall swept by them—astern they could see it racing oceanward, a thin, white streak of smothering foam and tortured water, till it vanished in the distance with almost incredible speed, and the blazing sun shone out once more, making everything steam—even Mike and Dick's wringing pyjamas.

With the passing of the squall the sea rose again, and, hampered as she was, the Maria, for the next two hours, was a very wet ship indeed, being unable to rise to the steep, vicious waves by reason of the gear overside.

By the end of that time, however, working like galley-slaves, they had managed to get things shipshape once more. A new backstay had been rigged. The half-caste was tinkering up the guff of the foresail, and Captain Ramirez who, whatever his other faults, was a first-class all-round seaman, was busily at work with needle and palm on the ripped and tattered canvas.

Mike at the tiller, got the schooner on her course again, and she lay over on a long slant, nosing her way across the slack, yellow waters of the mighty Amazon under a blazing sun and a brazen, cloudless sky.

For all that there was to be seen of land, the Maria might have been in mid-Atlantic, for the Amazon is to other rivers of the world what the great American lakes are to, say, Windermere.

For the first six or seven hundred miles of its course it is more like a sea than a river, and the low-lying coast-line is quite invisible, the only land seen from time to time being some of the numerous islands.

For fourteen days the Maria had been smelling her way up towards the interior, hunting easy water here and there to avoid the stream, searching for channels through out-lying islands, and taking advantage of every back eddy and flaw of wind. For Ramirez knew the river well; he had been up and down it many times in his small schooner, smuggling forbidden goods into the interior, and if any man lived who knew how to dodge or bribe a Brazilian guardia or customs man, it was Captain Ramirez. Twice, indeed, he had ventured up the Tapajós itself past Haituba; the first time when he had carried James Lorraine and his ill-fated friend, the second five years previously, when he had conveyed Lorraine alone on the expedition from which he had never returned.

DAILY MAIL

NEXT THURSDAY: "A Tale of Tom Merry's Schooldays."

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He was, in fact, the last white man known to have seen Dick's uncle alive, and the latter plied him with questions incessantly, to all of which the wizened little man could only shake his head and give vague answers. It was his belief that James Lorraine had gone on a big game shooting trip amongst the higher plateaux, and had either been killed or had managed to work his way through the forest belt into Bolivia or Peru.

"Did he know anything of the interior?"

"Si, senhor, as much as another man, which was nothing at all. The Senhor Lorraine was undoubtedly a fine caballero, but mad—oh, yes, quite mad, as were all the English caballeros, else why should he have chosen to go to such outlandish, unknown places? It was right and proper that Senhor Dick and his friend should go to search for their relative—that was the story which they had told him; but, alas, no good would come of it, and they also being English, were naturally a little mad."

Then he would sigh complacently, and roll himself another cigarette, deftly manipulating the tiller with his free hand.

On the sixteenth day they left the main stream and turned up the Tapajos river, and on the night of the nineteenth they slid past the outlying Government fort at Haituba. From there onwards, obeying the chart, they kept over to the left bank of the stream.

Captain Ramirez's contract was to carry them to the junction of the unnamed river with the Tapajos, and there await them for a period of three months. If they had not returned by that time his contract terminated, and he could do as he pleased.

It was there, too, that he had waited in vain for James Lorraine. They reached the junction on the twenty-third day out, and immediately all hands were turned to to roust out stores. The Maria had brought with her on deck a good, roomy, thirty-foot whaleboat, which Dick had purchased at Bahia.

She was beautifully light, with good lines, carried a mast and spritsail, which formed an awning at night, and had a centre-plate and a good locker-room.

She was got overside, and the stores and paraphernalia carefully stowed. Then, after a spell during the midday heat, came the hour of parting, for they were anxious to take full advantage of the up-stream draught, which usually set in towards the cool of the evening.

At the last moment Dick, with Ramirez's consent, had induced one of the deck-hands to accompany them. He was a big, powerful man, a very fair cook, and very willing. Curiously enough, the fellow was a Krooboy from the West Coast of Africa; but whether he had come over in some trading-ship, and deserted, or whether he had grown, like Topsy, they could never discover, all questions being answered by a broad and expansive grin.

The whaleboat slid away under her big sail through the gathering shadows, and just as the last of the afterglow lit up the westerly sky the Maria was hidden from sight behind a low-lying promontory.

CHAPTER 3.

The Panther's Duel.

THE tributary stream up which they were now making their way was, comparatively speaking, quite narrow—rarely more than half a mile broad. The breeze held until the moor was well above the black line of forest fringe, and then dropped away to a perfect calm.

"May as well camp and turn in, old man," said Dick, with a yawn. "It's no use rushing things too much at the start. We'll pull in under the tree-bank there, make fast, and rig up the sail awning. Confound those mosquitoes! That's the third one that has bitten me on the nose."

"The third, did yez say? Begobs, Oi'm wan large boite all over! Shure, Oi can't tell which is me and which is mosquito!"

Micky and the Krooboy, whose name was Henry, paddled leisurely in shore, Dick steering. Suddenly the latter leant forward.

"Hist!" he whispered. "Easy, Micky! What, in Heaven's name, are those things? There's something uncanny under the shadow of the bank there. Here, grab this!" And he handed him a rifle from the stern-sheets, and picked up another himself. "Take a good look, old man, and be ready to back off if I give the word. We're trespassing on the Guajara gentlemen's preserves by now, I fancy. By Jove, there's another, and another! Looks to me as if we're in for trouble."

Micky looked ahead over his shoulder, and in the deep, black shadows of the bank, on a line with the water edge, as near as he could guess, he saw what at first he took for the glowing end of a cigar stump, a round, gleaming point, which showed dully red. Even as he looked it vanished slowly, and

another one appeared a little distance off. Beyond were a score or so more.

"Dick," he whispered, "Oi've read av Malays an' sich-like using small fire-stick things, and Oi'm believing these beggars have some koinid av a trick av the same sort. Shall I just take a droppin' shot into the midst av them now to show 'em we're feelin' good an' useful?"

Dick shook his head.

"Ask Henry what he thinks. He knows these regions better than we do."

Micky bent forward and muttered a few words to the Krooboy, whereupon the latter chuckled:

"Him no fire-stick, sar. Indian, he no lib for dar. Him or'nerly low-down alligator-eye, sar; heap big 'gator lib for dis side, sar. Him no good."

"Phwat's that ye say, ye black haythen—alligators? An' phwat koinid av a country d'yez call it where alligators wear electric loights in their eyes? Tell me that, now."

"Him alligator palaver, sar. You lib for shoot 'gator. You carry number one lamp topside—so!" And he patted his forehead. "Gator see him light, and eye show red all same dis palaver."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" said Dick, and burst out laughing. "Henry's right, Micky. There's one of 'em lying out in the moonlight. Look, you can just see his snout moving! That's a nice kind of a Guajara for you. Come along! If we go in they'll get scared, and move off."

The Krooboy was quite right, though neither of the youngsters knew it. The alligator dozes with one eye open just above the water, and a light carried on a band round the hunter's forehead flashing on the eye, makes it glow a deep, vivid red colour, affording a mark to aim at.

But though the alligators either sank lazily or darted away at their approach, they were fated to see more of them before the night was over. About an hour after they had turned in Dick, who had been industriously smacking at mosquitoes, fell into an uneasy sleep.

The atmosphere under the improvised awning was insufferable, and he had raised a portion of the canvas, leaving an opening to admit such air as there was.

There came a stealthy rustling from the dense undergrowth not thirty yards away, followed by a low, purring whine. Dick, half-way into dreamland, heard it vaguely, and rolled over. It was repeated, and startled him into full wakefulness. He sat up cautiously, and peered over the gunwale through the opening.

At first he could distinguish nothing but a flood of moonlight and a writhing belt of silvery mist, which crept and swirled in eddies over the water. Presently, however, his quick eye detected a movement amongst the shadows—a darker blur against the darkness, which took shape by slow degrees, until with a sudden jump of his pulses he realised that he was staring at one of the fiercest and most cunning of all animals—a tremendous panther.

Very warily he raised himself on his elbow and slid out an arm till his hand rested on the trigger-guard of a Marlin. At the same time he stirred Micky gently with his foot. Micky grunted, but a second cautious prod roused him thoroughly.

"Phwat is it now?" he whispered.

"Panther! Look!" breathed Dick under his breath. "For goodness' sake take care how you move, or we shall scare him off! See him in the shadow there?"

"Begobs, an' that's a panther, is it? Shure, it looks more like a blown-up version av the lan'lady's cat that used to ate me bacon and eggs, and any small change that was lyin' round about. It's not meself that's wonderin' how the poor baste has grown. Tell me now, where do Oi sight for? At the back of the shoulder, is it? 'Tis a foine scheme, this ivory-tipped foresight, for shootin' in the dark."

"Shut up, you old idiot! Watch; there's something happenin'! Look—just look at that!" answered Dick, in an excited whisper.

The panther, an enormous fellow, nearly all jet-black, as far as they could see, had stopped his purring note of suspicion, and slowly crouched down on the low bank, his broad head overhanging the edge, one velvety paw and forearm dangling lazily in the water, just moving to and fro, no more.

The moon's rays penetrated through an opening of the leaves, and glistened on his magnificent coat. For the better part of five minutes he crouched almost motionless, and apparently asleep. Then came a splashing, a quick, lightning-like stroke of the powerful claws, and a big, silvery fish was swung high out of the water and dashed on to the bank.

It had barely time to touch the ground before another blow from the great paws had killed it, and the ivory-white fangs had torn half its side out; whilst to the watchers' ears there came a deep, purring hymn of satisfaction.

"Dick, me bhoy," whispered Micky, his eyes shining, "Oi've done a bit av poachin' an' trout-ticklin' in me time

back at home, but O'd he pleased to 'av some lessons from the gentleman wid the black overcoat. Did yez ever see anythin' neater? An' him no more than a grown-up pussy-cat, too! Just look at the loikes av him, now!"

Again the panther dangled his bait—the soft, velvet paw, which wriggled gently in the stream—and again a fish paid the penalty of his curiosity with his life.

They could hear the strong teeth rending and tearing and munching, and a strong, civet-like odour drifted towards them.

A third and a fourth fish were caught in like manner, and the panther, his appetite satisfied, began to doze amidst the remains of his supper. They could have shot him easily, but, impelled by a curiosity to see what would happen, they refrained.

As he dozed he instinctively kept one paw dangling in the water. Five minutes passed—ten—and Dick was about to turn in, when right across the moonlit surface came two dark, swelling ripples, which spread out fanwise.

Something broke through the darkly-mirrored shadows of the bank; a huge, black, evil-looking snout darted upward from below, with evil, dripping jaws agleam.

There followed a snake-like dart, a crunch, and a snap, and in an instant the forest rang and throbbed with a harsh, snarling roar of rage and pain, which brought all three of them to their feet on the jump.

They just had time to glimpse the panther's outline as he sprang into the air, the right foreleg hideously cut short at the wrist. Beneath him, half in and half out of the water, was a sixteen-foot alligator on its side.

The huge cat came down sideways, heedless of the agony of its wound, conscious only of a desire to kill. The terrible hind claws buried themselves deep in the soft, yellow-white skin of the reptile's throat, ripping and tearing horrible, gaping wounds with every stroke, the alligator bellowing and grunting under the blows.

The gigantic jaws snapped wildly at empty air, coming to with a sound like the crack of a revolver; but the panther, agile in spite of his injuries, and wide awake, was not to be caught a second time.

With a blood-curdling howl he bunched himself together and buried his fangs into the alligator's under jaw-bone just where the muscles were strongest.

Thwack—thwack, in heavy, snapping blows, came the bony, ridged tail, and a dull thud and a growl told that one at least had got home, breaking one of the panther's ribs.

Then for a second or two all was a smother of torn water and half-muffled growling and grunting. A dark, shapeless lump floated up in the midst of the rippling eddies, and a limp, dragged form crawled painfully back to the bank. Another form floated to the surface, and lay just awash. It was the alligator—stone dead. Whilst from the bank just above him the panther's death-song thrilled and vibrated through the inky-black forest, dying away into a painful and very human whimper as the broken ribs grated against the lungs.

"Poor brute! I can't stand that," said Dick. "It's too ghastly. I'm going to put the poor chap out of his misery. Come along, Micky, and bring a lantern with you."

They crept cautiously on to the bank amidst the long grasses. The light of the moon was so bright that they had no difficulty in picking a path, Dick leading the way, with his rifle ready for instant use.

It was lucky, however, that they had brought a lantern, for out of the direct path of the moonlight the shadows were dense velvet-black, and most confusing to the sight.

In fact, their errand of mercy came near to having an unexpectedly tragic ending, for just as Dick was groping his way through a more than usually dark patch, Micky uncovered the lantern to guide him, and they both sprang quickly back, for there, within five feet of them, lay the panther, with eyes staring and teeth bared.

Had Dick taken another couple of steps, the strong, white fangs would have crushed his leg to pulp. As it was, however, springing aside, he threw up his rifle, took a careful sight on a spot just behind the ear, and sent a heavy bullet crashing into the big cat's brain. The animal gave a gasping sigh, and rolled over without so much as a struggle.

They bent down and examined the body carefully. It was cruelly torn and mangled, and the thick black fur was muddy and dragged. From tip of tail to muzzle it measured nearly as much as a young tigress, and the magnificent pelt, if uninjured, would have been well-nigh priceless; but, torn as it was, it would not have been worth the trouble of removing even if they had cared to add to their already heavy load of stores and equipment.

The rest of the night passed as uneventfully as the mosquitoes would allow, and with the first of the dawn breeze they pushed onwards once more.

CHAPTER 4.

The Silent Swimmers.

FROM this point the river narrowed rapidly, and was interspersed with shoals and mudbanks, on which lay hundreds of alligators basking in the sun, and looking for all the world like logs of driftwood. Once or twice, too, they sighted hippopotami. For the rest, the stream seemed absolutely deserted. Not a canoe or fishing village was to be seen, nor was there any sign of man, save the woods closely though they did.

Only the mosquito and the sandfly were, like the poor, ever with them, till poor Micky, who suffered most, buried his head in the folds of a blanket, apparently preferring suffocation to being devoured alive.

The blazing sun poured directly down on them, and, in spite of the faint breeze which drove the whaleboat lazily through the water, the heat was terrific.

Even Mistah Henry suffered from it, and his woolly head, carelessly dropped in fantastic patches, fairly sizzled.

Strangely enough, too, it was the incessant attacks of the clouds of mosquitoes which came near to bringing the expedition to an untimely end.

It happened in this way. Just after the midday halt Dick was at the tiller, and Micky curled up on a thwart in the strip of shadow cast by the sail. Suddenly the latter slid off his perch, and crouched down, pointing at the same time with outstretched finger.

Dick stooped, peering under the sail, and there, sure enough, not eighty yards away, was a magnificent deer, with a pair of long, spiral horns, standing knee-deep in a shallow by the bank, drinking, and quite unsuspecting of any danger.

"Gimme the rifle, Dick!" whispered Micky. "Quick now, for the love av Heaven!"

Dick slid the Marlin towards him, and picked up his own, keeping control of the tiller with his right elbow.

"Your first shot, old man!" he said under his breath. "If you miss, I'll have a go. Bet you sixpence it's a first blood to me!"

"Miss?" snorted Micky scornfully. "To blazes wid yez! I'll not miss ut wid a brick."

Truth to tell, it was an easy shot enough. The deer was nearly broadside on, and nearly sixty yards away as he spoke. He was a good shot, too, and Dick, to give him every possible advantage, swung the whaleboat's nose off shore a bit, so that he need not fire dead ahead.

Micky cuddled down to his rifle, took a fine sight, steadied himself, and tightened his trigger-finger. At that precise instant a couple of buzzing, hungry mosquitoes settled to work on his closed left eyelid.

Crack went the Marlin; but Micky, irritated by the insects, lost his aim, and the bullet flew high.

The deer sprang for safety with one lightning-like bound, and gained the shelving bank. Dick let go the tiller, threw up his rifle, and fired. It was a snapshot, and a miss might have been excusable, but the heavy bullet caught the hind-quarters a bit far back, staggering the animal, and before it could recover itself a second shot from the magazine crashed home just behind the shoulder, piercing the heart, just as the whaleboat, no longer under control, flew up into the wind, the big sail flapping lazily.

"Wiped your eye that time, old man!" sang out Dick.

Micky grunted, furious at having missed, and, as Fate would have it, just at that instant a big hippopotamus rose snuffling within ten yards of the boat.

"Get away wid yez, ye ugly baste!" said Micky; and, raising his rifle without thought of what he was doing, or in a fit of irritation, fired at the heavy, cumbersome head point-blank.

There was a warning yell from Henry, a shout, and a bellow of rage and pain from the hippopotamus, as he turned one pink-rimmed, beady eye on the boat, and spotted his antagonist.

The next instant, with a foaming rush of water, he was almost on them, jaws agape, so that they could see right down the pink cavern of his throat.

Dick flung himself on the tiller. The boat had lost steerage-way, and for a couple of seconds destruction seemed inevitable. The huge jaws were actually overlapping the gunwale, when a lucky puff filled the big sail, and the slim craft heeled over and shot past so close that her timbers grazed the big brute's unwieldy sides.

Round again she came, and sped down-stream on the other tack, the hippopotamus in hot pursuit, though losing enormous quantities of blood. He gained on them yard by yard, and Dick, watching over his shoulder, gauged the distance to a nicety.

"Give it him again when I shout," he called to Micky, "and then as we come about let him have it all you can. It's our skins or his. Are you ready? Now!"

Down went the tiller again, and bang, bang! went the rifle. Both bullets told heavily, and again the previous tactics were repeated. The hippopotamus, carried on by the rush of his own charge, was unable to turn quickly. The graceful whaler, however, came round like a racing craft, and shot past him once more, heading up-stream. She heeled over steeply to a gust, and the wake of the hippopotamus flowed inboard generously, half filling her.

"Give it him, Micky!" roared Dick; and as pursued and pursuer slid past one another in opposite directions, Micky, up to his knees in water, loosed off three more shells at such close quarters that the powder would have scorched a skin less tough.

The hippopotamus bellowed and quivered at each impact; then, with a last spasmodic effort, flung up his enormous, foam-flecked snout, gave a dying struggle, endeavouring once more to turn and renew the fight, and, failing, plunged sullenly down to the river-bed. They never sighted him again.

Micky and Henry baled for all they were worth, for the boat had a bare three inches of freeboard, and there was quite a ruffle on the water. When she was free of her load, and not till then, Micky looked up and wiped his forehead.

"Oi beg yez pardon, Dick, me boy! Oi didn't mane to hurt the poor baste; but I was tuk mad like at missin' the other shot, and it sarved me right that ye sh'd have had the best av ut. Begobs, though, me foolin' came near makin' an ind av all av us. I'll not meddle wid a hippopotamus again till we've been properly introjuced. Shure, it's nasty, tricky ways they have wid them, and the geography books of me youth always called them 'harmless, docile creatures.'

"Docile, is ut? Gimme a Tipperary pig, an' I'll show yez somethin' docile; but hippos are struck av the menoo." They ran in, dropped the sail, and went ashore for the deer—a fine fat buck, Henry, who was an adept in such matters, being told off to cut away the tenderest and choicest pieces of meat for future use.

Having penetrated by now well into the region marked on the chart as overrun by Guajara and Zinbo Indian scouts and hunting-parties, they took it in turn to keep watch through the night, the Krooboy taking the first watch, and the other two dividing the rest of the period till dawn between them.

Ever since the halt at midday Dick, though he said nothing to his companions, had been haunted by a sense of uneasiness, a vague and ill-defined feeling that something was amiss.

So strong was this, that whilst Henry was preparing dinner he quietly opened a box of ammunition, and moved it to a more handy place under the stern-sheets.

All through the merciless heat of the afternoon he kept his eyes fixed on the heavily-wooded banks. The deep, shadowy recesses of the trees seemed to him filled with sinister possibilities, and at every rustle or dead wood fall he was ready to take alarm.

At last his preoccupation became so noticeable that Micky, who had been watching him with some concern, asked him if anything was wrong.

Dick shook his head.

"No, old man; I'm all right—at least, I think I've got a touch of liver, or may be a small dose of fever from the mist last night. I've an idea we get it worse in shore than we should if we were to moor in mid-stream. I'll take a cigarette-paper of quinine, and see if that will put me right."

Micky gave him a quick look, and dropped his voice, so that Henry, who was busy with the portable stove in the bows, shouldn't overhear.

"And is ut becoss ye've a touch of fever, me son, that ye've a bran'-new ammunition-case lyin' betwixt the feet av yez? Oi've heard av bullets curin' many kind av complaints. Yet Oi'd have yez remember O'm a half-fledged dhootor, man, an' niver in me vast experience did Oi hear av 'em bein' prescribed for a fever."

Dick flushed a little. He hadn't reckoned on Micky's sharp eyes spotting the case. Moreover, having nothing desirable to go on, he was half ashamed to own up to his feeling of uneasiness.

"Give me a dose of quinine then—pill, old man," he said, pretending to stifle a yawn, "and as regards mooring in mid-stream, I do think that there's less mist there than in by the bank—maybe, the current has something to do with it. Also, we sha'n't be bothered by the moccasins snakes falling off the branches into the boat as they did a night or two ago. You may like 'em as pets, but I don't."

"Go aisy now," said Micky, still in a low tone. "I'm just wonderin' if your complaint has anythin' to do wid a feelin' that ye're bein' watched all the time by scores and scores av eyes, till yez can fairly feel the marrow crawl in up and down the spine av yez. If so, me boy, we're sufferin' from the same complaint, an' illness, an' all; and 'tis not

quinine will cure it, nor talkin' of wriggly black snakes phwat know no better, an' whose backs yez can break wid a bit av a stick. It's nerves, that's phwat is the long an' the short av it, an' there's some yellow divils at the back of thim trees yonder, the which, professionally spakin', are the root av the disease. And I'm tollin' yez I've a bad attack of that same meself. Wid complications in the way av flickerin' bits av flashes av sunlight on steel."

"What do you mean, Mick? Have you seen anything?" asked Dick.

"Oi have that. Twice an' again Oi've seen a glimmerin' av loight in the dark shadows av the trees beyant there, an' for hours past I've had the kind av feelin' av a man shut up in a dark room, the which is supposed to be haunted, wantin' to turn me eyes all ways to wanst." He broke off suddenly, with a glance at the bank. "Don't move now, but just take a squint out av the corner av yer eye at the bush clump yonder; ye can see the tops av ut movin', yet there's no wind can reach ut." Then, raising his voice: "Henry, ye black limb, dem grub palaver done? He lib?"

"Cook palaver done set, sar," answered Henry, with a grin.

"We pull dem boat out deep water—savvy? You throw over mudhook one time, Dinner palaver he lib mighty smart. Me fit for chop."

"One time, sar," chortled the Krooboy.

Micky and Dick took an oar apiece, and pulled out a couple of hundred yards into the stream; there Henry, in obedience to an order, dropped their small anchor.

The whaler swung down with the current, and snubbed up to her cable. The moon was due to rise at half-past nine, and Dick, who was taking the first watch, sat smoking his pipe on the stern thwart, his rifle across his knees.

Micky and the boy were snoring soundly, taking all the rest they could against any emergency which might arise.

Presently, what with the droning hum of the insects, the gurgling of the water against the whaler's stern, and the general peacefulness of the scene, Dick, too, began to drowse. The heat of the day had worn him out, and the more he struggled against it, the more an overwhelming desire for sleep overcame him.

The silvery moon glided up over the forest belt in slow majesty, and from the far bank he could hear the grunt of an occasional alligator dozing on his mud shoal. His head began to nod spasmodically, and every now and again he recovered himself with a start.

They had arranged to parcel the night out in three-hour watches apiece, but Dick had privately made up his mind to watch just so long as he could keep awake, without disturbing the others.

The irresistible desire for rest was tying up his brain in cobwebs, and, quite unrealising, he fell from time to time into a state of semi-consciousness.

Towards midnight he awoke from a troubled, broken dream with all the sensations of a nightmare like panic. His hand instinctively clutched the heavily-bedewed trigger-guard of his rifle, and the chill feel of the metal roused him to a new consciousness.

All around him were wreaths of swirling white mist drifting slowly over the surface of the water, yet on the instant he became aware of something unusual, something uncanny in that dead stillness.

He strained his ears to listen, and presently, in spite of the low rhythmic gurgle of the current on the whaler's stern, and the thrumming of the myriad insects, he fancied he could detect a steady splashing sweep as of a paddle or a strong swimmer. Without moving his body, he turned his head with one ear down-stream; the sounds came nearer, were swallowed up in the mist, deadened, and approached once more.

Presently he heard a guttural exclamation, and a gasp for breath from far astern, and in an instant was startled into a very vivid wakefulness, for, clearing the white vapour bank not two fathoms away, he saw a dark, outstretched paw, glistening with water, and clutching a particularly useful-looking knife with a neatly copper-bound hilt of snake-skin.

It didn't take him long to grasp the situation. He sat perfectly still, and held his breath. The owner of the knife—he of the outstretched paw—was swimming on his side, and, as luck would have it, the back of his head was turned towards the whaleboat's stern, and he passed without seeing in half a dozen powerful strokes, and the mist had swallowed him up once more.

Still maintaining perfect silence, Dick continued to listen, and from the mist all around him came muffled sounds as of men swimming strongly but with caution.

Astern, inshore, and even from out in mid-stream, came an occasional puffing of a man rising to breathe, with now and again a low grunting sentence or two to a comrade.

There was no doubt that both he and Micky had been

right in their suspicions, and that the Guajarans had been stealthily dogging them along the bank all day, watching their every movement, and in all probability waiting for them to moor against the bank as they had done on previous nights.

Dick's sudden resolve to let go the anchor in mid-stream had upset their plans, and in attempting to swim for it they had lost their bearings in the mist reek.

The current, too, was running fairly strongly, and many of them had not made a sufficient allowance for its pace, and had been swept far astern.

Very carefully Dick felt his way forward under the awning, and, placing his hand over Micky's mouth to prevent any sudden outcry, roused him by prodding him in the ribs with the rifle-butt.

Micky, who was a light sleeper, was wide awake in an instant. Dick bent over him with a warning "H-shh!" and rustled out Mistah Henry in turn.

The Krooboy was a plucky chap at a pinch, and shrewd beyond the average. He just blinked his dark eyes as Dick explained the situation, and drew a very business-like case-knife from his hip-pocket.

Moving as noiselessly as possible, they got down the sail awning, and at Dick's suggestion muffled the oars by winding cotton-waste round the rowlocks and leathers.

Presently Micky touched Dick on the arm.

"Listen at that now," he said, in a tense whisper. "Begobs, they're all round us on ivery side. Phwat do yez say to lettin' her drift down apiece wid the stream, the which will upset their bearin's, an' then before they know where they are, pullin' like the deuce fer the far bank ay the river. That'll koind av tear holes in their calculations, an' then—"

He snapped off short as a sudden shudder ran through the length of the craft.

One of the swimmers, more lucky or keener sighted than the rest, had grabbed their thin rope anchor-line.

Dick started forward, but Mistah Henry was there before him, crouched right up in the bows, one long arm fingering the cable itself, the other swung back with a ready knife.

The swimmer twitched the line again tentatively, and began to haul himself up with caution.

The Krooboy watched him as a terror watches a rat till head and shoulders were clear, and the man had already gripped the gunwale with his left hand.

Then Dick, bending over the centre thwart, saw a black arm lunged out against the grey-white background of mist—a downward stroke so quick his eyes could scarcely follow it. He felt rather than heard the thud of the blow as steel met flesh, and the whaler quivered slightly, as, without a sigh or groan, the dead man's hold relaxed, and he was borne swiftly astern by the current.

Dick got a glimpse of a yellow-skinned face with a foolish, distorted grin, bobbing up and down on the water as it shot by, and suddenly felt a sinking sensation at the pit of the stomach. It had all happened so quickly, and the sight of a dead man was something of a novelty. The Krooboy, however, was troubled with no such qualms. Slipping his knife back into its accustomed place, he gave a quick jerk at the rope, freeing their small anchor, and sweated it in in fine style hand over hand, so fast, indeed, that the anchor was clear of the surface before he expected, and bumped against the boat's planking. Instantly from all around there came a gurgle and swish of water as the Guajarans, guided by the sound, closed in. But they overshot their mark, for the whaler, caught by the stream, was swept swiftly down, and by the time the first swimmer had gained the spot, she was a long hundred yards away.

The danger was by no means over, though, for she was now being swept in amongst those who had themselves been carried down by the current.

Dick realised this, and also realised the risk of using a rifle, for the flash would make a sure guide.

"Micky," he said, in a low tone, as the white mist banks were reeling past them, "there are a couple of small axes in the starboard locker. Get 'em out if you can—they'll be handier than the rifles."

Micky did so, and passed him one in silence. Not an instant too soon, either, for all in a second the boat was grabbed on either side by half a dozen Indians.

The Krooboy's knife rose and fell twice, and at each stroke a low moan told that the blow had done its work.

Micky took the starboard side, Dick the port. It was wild work in that eerie half light, but they plied the axes with a will.

Dick's first stroke caught an arm betwixt wrist and elbow, and the owner of the limb slid from view just as a second head and shoulders topped the gunwale. Without waiting, almost in a continuation of the same stroke, he swung the axe sideways, and the heavy, blunt head of it caught the

invaders' woolly skull behind the ear. There was a dull thud, and the head sank back out of sight, the broad shoulders suddenly limp and inert. A third man had managed to swing a leg over the stern, and the busy axe fell again. A sudden swirl, a rush of water, a smothered shriek, and then ominous silence completed the tale as a big alligator, maddened by the scent of blood, seized its helpless victim and dived with him beneath the surface.

He was the last man dealt with. As suddenly as the attack had begun it ceased, and the whaler went drifting down-stream through silent mist-laden space.

CHAPTER 5.

The Deserted City.

STRANGELY enough, the Guajarans made no attempt to renew the attack. Whether they were disheartened by their losses, or whether they missed the boat and mistook their bearings, there is no saying. The fact remains that the trio were enabled to paddle her back upstream with muffled oars unmolested.

For the first couple of miles they hugged the far bank; then, hearing no sounds of pursuit, and the mist thinning a little, they returned to the channel on a long slant; not venturing to moor, however, but taking it in turns to keep the boat just moving against the stream with the oars till dawn broke.

That day they came to the three blazed trees—or, rather, the trees sawn off at about a man's height from the ground. They stood apart by themselves on a little shelving strip of beach and were unmistakable.

A couple of hundred yards higher up the stream they found a mangrove-covered creek, into which, by a free use of the axes, they managed to force a passage, and here they left the boat securely hidden from prying eyes.

The next question was a division of the stores. They reckoned that the distance from creek to city would be a march and a half, allowing three days for reconnoitring and to prepare their plans, and another day and a half for return, they found that they would require at least four days' provisions on short rations for three men, or a week's full provision for two. Ammunition, too, was another absolute necessity, and though it does not bulk large, it weighs a lot. Rifles and revolvers also make a tremendous difference when quick travelling is the order of the day and every additional ounce weight tells its tale.

Finally, cutting things down to the uttermost limit, they dare venture upon, each man was carrying close on forty pounds, allowing seven and a half for the Martinis. The fourth rifle, and the bulk of the ammunition they left in the boat's lockers.

All this preparation took some time, and the day was half gone before they had settled things to rights; moreover, having had a sleepless night, they were dog tired.

A spell was called after the final noon meal on board, and, having little fear that their hiding-place would be discovered, they all indulged in a two hours' sleep.

In the last hours of the afternoon heat they set out on the initial stage of the march, the ground sloping sharply upwards from the water level. Three hours' sharp walking along a bush path brought them to the edge of a high plateau. The trees were so dense that at no time was it possible to see what lay a hundred yards in front of them, and only the steep inclination of the ground afforded them a clue to their direction.

They kept a sharp look-out on either hand, but, in spite of the path, which proved clearly that the Guajarans had been in the habit of passing and repassing that way, they saw no sign of human presence.

It was not long before they found the reason of this. Beyond the plateau edge the path ran at a steep angle for, maybe, the half of a mile, and then ended abruptly, for at some quite recent period the face of the cliff which they found confronting them had fallen, owing to a volcanic or subterranean action, and blocked the passage with a huge mass of tumbled boulders.

The lengthening shadows made the climb both difficult and dangerous, but Henry, who was active as a monkey, scrambled on ahead, Dick and Micky sharing his lead between them for the time, and as soon as he had surmounted one of the larger and more impassable masses of stone, he let down the hide thong with which he had carried his pack, and, using it as a rope, Alpine fashion, helped them up.

More than once they had to dodge round a projecting spur or overhanging sheer of cliff, and by the time they reached the summit darkness overtook them, and they were again compelled to call a halt and wait for the moon.

Dick, meanwhile, had been growing more and more uneasy, and, taking advantage of their enforced stop, he pulled



"Ugh! The ugly basties!" said Micky, with a gulp. "Look out! Now they're comin'!" The three, standing shoulder to shoulder, their backs against the solid marble wall, waited for the rush. (See page 12).

out the sketch map and studied it by the light of a candle-end sheltered in a hollow of rock.

"Look here, Micky," he said at length, pointing, "I've been feeling for some time past that we've missed the trail, and now I'm certain of it. Uncle Jim, if you remember, says nothing about cliffs or climbing in his account. On the contrary, he gives an impression of a more or less level bush-path through woodlands infested by Guajara outposts, and speaks of swamps. Well, one doesn't get swamps on the top of a cliff.

"Look here again at this dotted line, showing the bush-path, it runs fairly parallel to the river as a main direction. We, on the other hand, must have struck off pretty well at right angles to the stream. How we missed the path I don't know; but it's pretty clear to me that we've butted up against the outlying spur of this mountain here, in which case, by bearing off to the left, we ought to come out somewhere at a point directly above the city."

"Shure, that's true enough, accordin' to that piece av a map, an' it's no bad mistake we've made at all, me son. For look yez now, if so be we'd followed the little bit av a track wid the dots, we should, as loike as not, have marched buttin' on to wan av their scoutin'-parties, and then, wid a bit av a scrap, maybe, we should have had the whole hornit's nest buzzin' round us wid their tails up. As ut is, we can just drop in on 'em unpretentious-like widout any fuss or bother."

"There's something in that, old man. Henry, you limb, what time dem moon lib?"

The Krooboy snuffed, glanced at the sky, and scratched his garden tuft head.

"Moon lib for soon, sar. Two piecee hour moon lib one time."

"Oh, does it! Then we may as well have some grub, for goodness knows when we shall have our next meal."

Dick was working his way through a solid junk of "canned

horse" chopped out with his case-knife, when a startled "Ba jabbers!" from Micky, and a sudden scuffling made him nearly bolt it whole.

"What the deuce—" he began, choking and spluttering, and then he, too stopped, awestruck and wondering.

He and Henry were seated under the lee of a boulder, Micky had perched himself on a lump of rock some six foot away and slightly above them. They had scrambled to their positions just as the intense darkness which precedes the rise of the moon in the tropics, had swept down upon them. Had they gone on another ten paces nothing could have saved them, for by the merest chance they had come to a halt on the very brink of a precipice.

So near a shave was it that the lump of rock on which Micky had perched himself actually overhung space at its outer edge. It was a chance movement of his which had called forth his startled exclamation and caused him to scramble hurriedly off his precarious seat.

Having dug out the last piece of meat, he had tossed the empty and useless can over his shoulder; not hearing it drop, as he expected, he turned to see the reason. There was a gleam of light, precursor of the coming moon, low down on the horizon, sufficient to show him a sight which made him feel cold all over, and horribly giddy, for behind him was nothing—nothing at all but empty space and a bottomless abyss hidden in deep shadow.

Dick, too, glancing up, saw for the first time the rocky edge outlined against the brightening sky, and was nearly as horrified as the luckless Micky himself.

"Be the powers," whispered Micky, dry-lipped, "give me a drop av somethin' for me insides. I'm shakin' all over. Begorrah, but Oi thought Oi was gone! Feel the hands of me now."

Dick gripped him by the arm. He was shivering violently, and was covered with cold, clammy perspiration, and his teeth clattered on the mug like a pair of castanets as Dick

handed him a liberal dose of their scanty supply of spirits, which they carried for medicinal use.

After a while he got better, and they sat waiting for the moon to rise, hardly daring to move. Slowly, very slowly, the sky became flooded with light, the brilliant tropical moonlight which showed up every crevice and cranny as clearly as though a myriad arc lamps had suddenly been turned on.

Then, and not till then, they crawled cautiously to the edge and peered over. They could see sheer down for a couple of hundred feet, but the bottom of the valley was still in shadow, and wrapped in swirling, ghost-like mist wreaths.

"H'ah! Listen!" said Dick; and, picking up a big fragment of rock, he hurled it out into space. It curved high in the air, swooped downwards, with ever-increasing velocity, and, plunging into the mist as into water, was lost to view. Four full seconds later a dull thud came faintly up from below, echoing and re-echoing from cliff to cliff, followed by an uncertain screech, which froze the blood in their veins and made them draw their breaths in a sharp gasp snapped off in the middle, as it were.

The screech tailed off into whimperings, and then once more all was silent.

"Phwat was ut? For the love of Hiven phwat was ut?" muttered Micky hoarsely.

Dick raised a white, scared face.

"There were rocks," he mumbled, in a dazed fashion—"there were rocks; I heard the stone strike, and—and—what a ghastly place!" he added lamely.

Henry the Krooboy crouched behind them, his eyes glaring, half dead with fright. Something very like panic and unreasoning fear seemed to have gripped them all. Dick realised this, and, with an effort, dragged himself to his feet.

"This'll never do!" he said. "What are we all squatting here for? There's a cliff and a deep drop, and we've got to get down it somehow, so the best thing we can do is to hunt for a track of some kind. There must be—"

Once more he stopped short in the middle of a sentence, words failing him in sheer wonder and surprise, almost awe.

The huge circle of the moon had risen clear of the distant mountain-ridge and was now shining directly down into the valley, dispersing the mists, as the sun's heat disperses freshly-fallen snow, and showing up the valley floor to the minutest detail.

"Look—oh, look!" he cried, and flung out an arm. The others, forgetting their fears in the marvel of the scene, gazed spellbound.

They were standing on the brink of one horn of a vast semi-circular arena—an arena surrounded by a stupendous barrier of cliff—three hundred feet at least—glistening, smooth, and white, in the rays of the moon, and in the centre of the semi-circle, hewn from the living rock, assuredly the most marvellous work of human hands since the beginning of the oldest civilisation the world has ever known, was a titanic statue—titanic in size, that is, but in beauty and delicacy, in exquisite cunning of workmanship, a veritable miracle of skill.

It stood a full two hundred feet from base to topmost slender tracery, perfectly proportioned, wrought and hewn with miraculous craftsmanship, a wondrous triumph of art.

The figure was that of a woman, the head held low, and shadowed by a half-bent arm. From where they were the features were indistinguishable. Yet so clever was the sculptor's work that the whole pose suggested an infinite sweetness and tenderness.

Round the lissom form an enormous python wound its sinewy length, the muscles and curves so realistically modelled that they gave an impression of tremendous overburdening weight—a weight too gross, too heavy for that drooping form to support.

The snake's broad, flat skull was rested on a shoulder of the finest white marble, and the woman's head, inclining down to it, seemed to be listening to the reptile's secretive whispering—"the wisdom of the serpent."

Her other arm, with delicate, tapering fingers, caressed the entwining coils, whilst the weighty masses of her long hair, flung backwards in rippling waves, helped to cast a deep shadow over the face.

By some freak of Nature the outer marble of the cliff was grained and mottled; but the inner core was as pure a white as any dug from the Italian quarries, and of this the artist had made full use, for, whilst the python was wrought from the marked and mottled stone, the figure itself was without blemish from head to foot.

At the base, where the heavy, snake-like coils ended, and at one other point, where a flying tress of hair was wafted backward, the statue and the parent rock joined. Otherwise it was isolated, and, for all its stupendous size, gave an impression of slenderness and yielding.

"Mother av Hiven," gasped Micky, "'tis Eve an' the serpent all over again!"

And really the remark was not far out, for the statue might well have been conceived from some such story. The serpent whispering and tempting; Eve longing and listening to the voice of the charmer.

It was with difficulty they turned their eyes away from that most weird and miraculous piece of work, and gazed straight down into the moon-bathed valley beneath.

There, stretched at their feet and no longer hidden by the mists, lay the mighty relics of a civilisation which in all probability had been lost sight of before the building of the Pyramids, and had passed away into nothingness before ever the Aztec races trod the soil of Mexico.

From cliff edge as far as the eye could see lay stretched the remains of a vast city, built, as Dick's uncle had said, from blocks of pure white marble.

Huge, roofless palaces, with courtyards and porticoes, standing amidst what had once been the pleasure-gardens of the rich, paved streets fifty yards broad, up and down which their chariots had passed and repassed, the big flagstones, now broken and decayed, covered here and there with dense tropical weed, yet still holding their own against the inroads of the jungle. Crowded quarters, with meager roads and paths, where the traders and lesser folk had hawked their wares. Whilst far away in the distance a huge, shimmering, white amphitheatre, surrounded by a triple colonnade, marked the site of what must obviously have been the temple, the object of their search, the goal which they had travelled so many weary miles to attain.

Beyond this again a bank of grey, white, shadowy mist clung to the ground, betraying the whereabouts of the swamp spoken of by James Lorraine, with the additional note, "Snakes very bad."

More than half the city had been reclaimed by the wild beasts, and far out towards the river here and there a glint of white marble showed where once had stood a stately mansion.

From a huge barrack-like building a little way to their right the main road of the city led straight as a ruled line to the temple itself, broad, undeviating, and unbroken, save here and there where the luxuriant weeds had forced a heavy stone out of place.

This building, as they subsequently ascertained, had been a monastery for the priests—or, at least, half monastery, half barrack, for, so far as they could discover, the priests were all-powerful, and supplied the fighting-men of the race as well as the religious element.

Once upon a time, doubtless, orderly squads of men had tramped from monastery to temple and temple to monastery in orderly processions, with banners and symbols and pomp. Now all was deserted and decayed.

A strange, uncanny silence hung over the city like a pall. Higher and higher the moon rose over that weird scene as they watched, fascinated and speechless for very want of adequate words.

Then Dick, realising that precious hours were slipping away, turned and gave a curt order to Henry to remake the packs.

The words acted on all of them like a cold douche or a tonic, and brought them back from the realm of dreams to a world of hard reality and fact.

"We must find a way down, Micky," he said. "You and I had better go and prospect, and leave Henry here to get ready the loads."

This, however, was not so easily done as said, for Henry protested with all the stubborn obstinacy of a thoroughly scared Krooboy, and that's saying a good deal.

Neither threats nor persuasion could induce him to be left to himself for a single instant with "dem ghost palaver," and all their words and remonstrances being met with a sullen, "Me lib longa you, sar. Me no lib here by my lone. Heap bad spirit lib for dis side." They finally gave in, and the three of them started off together.

"If there is a way down," said Dick, "and I'm pretty sure there is, I'll bet you it's not far from that monastery place. The chaps who lived here weren't the only pebbles in Brazil, and you can bet they had to fight now and again to keep their ends up. From the riverside, the most natural point of attack, of course they would be safe enough, but if they didn't throw out scouts along the cliff edge here to give warning of an enemy's approach, I'm a Dutchman."

They worked cautiously along to the right, scanning the cliff face every few yards, and sure enough just as they got to a jutting point directly over the big building a cry from Mistah Henry called them to a spot a few yards inward from the edge.

There were the foundations of what had evidently been a watch-tower or clock-house big enough to accommodate a dozen men, and in the centre of the flagged floor was a dark opening with some steps, nearly perfect, being protected from the action of wind and weather, leading downwards at a sharp angle.

It was the moon glistening on a clean-cut marble foundation-stone which had first caught the Krooboy's keen eye.

They tested the air with Dick's piece of candle and a raw-hide thong, in case the passage might be closed at the lower end and the atmosphere become foul.

The flame blew upward, however, with a steady draught, and they started down, Dick leading, with the thong lashed round his waist, Micky four or five paces behind, and Henry last, carrying the rifles.

The steps, however, though irregular, seemed sound and firm, and had been cut apparently out of a natural tunnel, for they wound this way and that. Within some thirty feet of the bottom they ended abruptly in a long, very steep and slippery slope of loose rubble.

Dick put his foot on this, and immediately the rubble began to slide away from under him. He stumbled, slipped, and to prevent himself going head over heels flung himself backward. The jerk on the thong brought Micky almost on top of him, and the boy losing his presence of mind and scared by the clatter, having his hands full up with the rifles, moreover, promptly sat down and began to slide.

Luckily the distance was short, for tobogganing on an ice slope was child's play compared with this, and the rubble was most uncomfortably sharp.

They reached the bottom in a huddled mass, and lay there a moment or two groaning, for the wind was pretty well knocked out of them.

By the time they had recovered sufficiently to scramble to their feet and gaze at one another in the moonlight, Dick, who was the least knocked about, burst into a weak fit of laughter, for, sore and bruised though he was, the others were in a much worse plight, neither Micky nor Mistah Henry having anything but a most fragmentary tail left to their trousers.

Micky regarded himself dolefully, and summed up the situation with a "Shure, Oi might as well be back at the school by the feelin' av me sittin' down. 'Tis takin' me meals off av me mantelpiece will suit me best for a day or two, Oi'm thinkin'."

Mistah Henry said nothing, but rubbed himself tenderly, and from the expression on his face, which was comically absurd, like the sailor's parrot, he was doing a deuce of a lot of "powerful thinking."

With a short halt for temporary repairs, they pushed on through the silent ruins, with a glance back at the cliff behind them.

Suddenly Micky checked and gripped Dick's arm. "Hist! Phwat in the powers is that, now?" he whispered. "D'yez remember that horrible bit av a screech! Cast yer eye over there, an' tell me phwat ye make av it at all."

Dick looked in the direction of Micky's outstretched finger, and there in the midst of an open, flagged space, not fifty feet from the cliff edge, lay a strange, distorted, almost human form. Smaller than the average man—that much he could see from where he stood—yet surely a human being.

It lay on its back, the left leg drawn up and bent at the knee as though in a sudden spasm of pain; the other limp and fully stretched, the arms outflung on either side.

There was something pitiful and at the same time sinister in the pose, and by common consent they drew nearer to inspect it, for moonlight, though clear and bright, is tricky and deceiving by reason of the deep shadows which it throws.

It was the body of a full-grown monkey of powerful build. In life he must have stood four feet to four feet and a half, as large as a very large baboon, heavy in muzzle, and very strongly built.

The cause of his death and of that horrible cry which they had heard was not far to seek.

Ten feet from where he lay a heavy flagstone was newly starred and splintered, and scattered all around were fragments of rock.

Beside the body was a dark patch of blood, which still oozed slowly from a gaping wound under the left breast.

When Dick had hurled the heavy lump of rock from the cliff edge it had struck the pavement with terrific force, bursting into fragments on the impact, and one jagged piece, weighing perhaps four or five pounds, had caught the unfortunate beast under the ribs, driving the bones inwards, and causing almost instant death.

Micky lifted the lips, baring the powerful, yellow teeth, and examined the eyes.

"'Tis a koinad av a monk Oi've niver seen the loikes av before, but from the build av him he might be a most powerful, ugly customer to tackle. Take a look at thim fangs, now. They could crush a man's arm as easy as atin' pie."

"Oh, let the poor brute be!" said Dick impatiently. "We've only got another couple of hours' moonlight, and this infernal place gets on my nerves. I can't stand the silence of it."

They headed down the main, broad road, their footsteps ringing most uncannily on the stones, and echoing empty

and hollow from the once stately buildings on either side. These were for the most part built after a similar design. A portico or colonnade in front, and open courtyard, square or oblong, in the midst of which was a basin or fountain, now filled with rain-water covered with green slime, and opening off the courtyard small sleeping-chambers and guest-chambers.

Here once more that strange feeling of panic stole over them. They had, so far as they knew, no immediate danger to fear. The light was good, and they were on a broad, open highway, down which they had a clear view for the better part of half a mile at a time.

Yet such a freakish thing is the human mind, and so prone to be influenced by its surroundings, that they walked with bated breath and trigger fingers quivering nervously on the chill steel.

Nor must this be set down to cowardice. Pluck and common-sense they had in plenty, but there is a something—no one but a man who has travelled for month after month through the vast spaces of this small world of ours can explain it—a reasonless something which at times seizes on the strongest and bravest, and which will turn the best of them all into a hysterical bundle of nerves, ready to loose off at anything or everything like a raw recruit doing sentry-go at night with an enemy ten miles away.

Again and again they tried to fight against it, yet they could read the horror in each other's furtive glances. It may have been the uncanny silence, or the feeling that they were walking through a city of dead peoples; but most of all it was due to a faint stirring—one could hardly call it a sound, so slight was it—a strange, insistent, and never-ceasing sense of movement somewhere close at hand.

It stole upon them gradually, and the further they advanced the more noticeable it became and the more it played upon their nerves till at last they could stand it no longer.

Micky was the first to speak.

"Oi can't help it me boy, but there's somethin' twiddlin the spine av me till me nerves an' banjo-strings are pretty near at the same stretch."

Dick glanced at him askance. He, too, had been feeling very much the same, but had stubbornly set his teeth and refused to own up.

The sight of Micky's face, however, finished him. He knew that Mike Cavan was as gritty as any Patlander alive, yet now his face was drawn and haggard with the strain, the gums bared like a snarling dog's, and the cheeks wrinkled and hollowed.

"This won't do, old man," he said thickly. "We aren't children to be scared by a bogey. I vote we turn into the nearest courtyard, get our backs up against a wall, and wait for daylight. I own up that I feel every bit as bad as you do."

"Man dear," said Micky, "three days ago, if anyone had called me a coward, Oi'd—Oi'd have knocked his teeth down his ugly throat wid me fist; but now Oi'm no better than a wastrel dark yard rat. This grave av a place fairly gives me the shivers. Take a look at our black friend now, Oi'm askin' yez."

The Krooboy's teeth were chattering, and the yellow whites of his eyes were gleaming like a madman's. One glance was enough for Dick.

"Oh, come on!" he said. "We can't stick this kind of game;" and swung off the main road into a spacious arched courtyard on the right.

The others followed him, clattering noisily to drown their own fears, and the clatter seemed to be answered by a strange rustling from the dark chambers surrounding the open space.

They took up a position on the top of a shallow flight of three steps which had at one time apparently led to an altar of some kind, and waited.

The rustling increased. It came from in front of them, from either side, even from the wall against which their backs were set.

"Dead men's bones," said Micky, in a hoarse whisper, and at the same instant the Krooboy cried out in fear.

From one of the dark doors opposite a black, uncouth form straddled out on all fours, then another and another and yet more, in a strange, obscene procession. As though at a given signal, from each gaping black door, yet other processions emerged—big, anthropoid apes with twice the bulk and twice the strength of the African baboon, discoloured, yellow fangs bared for action, long prehensile forepaws clutching at the smooth flagstones as they stretched themselves, newly roused from their sleep, their blinking eyes filled with malignant cunning.

Swarm on swarm they came out of their shelters, and yet others came pouring through the great archway, closing in on the three men in a deep ring, as if they were all actuated

by a common purpose, and, to add to the horror of it, there was an unmistakable look of hunger in the nervously-twitching eyes.

Micky, his face grey in the moonlight, raised his rifle impulsively, but Dick knocked up the barrel.

"Wait," he said hoarsely. "And in any case we mustn't fire. The sound of a rifle-shot would carry for miles in this still air. If they attack, we must use cold steel and the butt.

As he spoke, he whipped out his case-knife, fixed it with the hilt well wedged home on the top of the magazine, which travelled to within four inches of the muzzle, and bound it tightly with his handkerchief, wrapping the binding over and under the foresight, to get a purchase. The others followed his example silently, but working with desperate energy.

"Makes a pretty tolerable bayonet at a pinch," he said, with a grim attempt at gaiety. "I'm not going to let myself be scared out of my seven senses by a bloomin' monkey zoo."

And more to keep up his courage than for any other reason, he picked up a fragment of stone, and hurled it straight in the face of the nearest.

It flew true to the mark, and caught the brute on the skull with a horrid, sickening crunch. The animal reeled, blood spouting from its nostrils, and in a flash the others were on it, tearing, rending, clawing in a snarling, yelping heap.

"Ugh! The ugly bastards!" said Micky, with a gulp. "Look out! Now they're comin'!"

The three, standing shoulder to shoulder, their backs against the solid marble wall, waited for the rush, and met it with their improvised bayonets.

The leaders fell, and the second line and the third, writhing in unseemly heaps on the flagstones to be torn and mangled by their comrades.

One, stabbed in the abdomen, wriggled its way painfully up the steps and plunged its fangs in the calf of Dick's leg till a rifle-butt crushed the life out of it. Another grabbed Micky's weapon as he lunged forward and jerked it with such terrific force that the gun was nearly torn out of his hands, whilst two more darting in, snatched at his ankles.

He came down heavily, but his first assailant went off howling with a broken shoulder, and the others he managed to kick free. The heap of coarse-haired bodies grew apace, and the hard-pressed men gasped and panted with their exertions, whilst all around them the survivors worried and tore at their fallen comrades.

It was a sickening, eerie sight, and the outcome of the fray hung in the balance, for the monkeys, each as powerful as a strong man, outnumbered them by hundreds to one, and though they had no weapons but their vicious jaws, a determined and combined rush must have had but one ending.

Luckily, however, the brutes, though cunning and daring, lacked the power of combined action after their first repulse. They were horribly human, yet still more horribly inhuman. The cries and whimperings of the stricken might have been the cries of men in bullet-swept trenches. Yet their actions were grotesque and without fixed purpose.

Suddenly Micky had an inspiration. Slung on to his pack was a small can of paraffin for cooking purposes.

"Hould thim off for a minute!" he yelled above the din; and, dropping his rifle, slashed wildly at the string which passed through the handle of the can, poured some of the contents on to his scarf, and set a match to it. Then, stuffing the blazing rag into the mouth of the can, he hurled the whole thing into the thick of the apes. The oil, catching fire as it whirled through the air, scattered burning drops of liquid broadcast, and burst into a blaze of flame where the can fell.

A horrid screech went up from the terrified monkeys, and they fled helter-skelter in all directions, some of them badly scorched, and many with singed coats.

In a couple of minutes none were left in sight but the dead or dying.

CHAPTER 6.

The Inmate of the Temple.

WITH the dawn, quite unmolested, they resumed their march down the broad highway, and, fearing to approach the temple in daylight, not knowing what keen eyes might be on the watch, halted once more during the midday heat in a house of smaller pretensions, not seeing so much as a sign of the monkeys.

It was growing dusk, and they were on the point of moving away when the Krooby, who, like all of his race, had abnormal hearing sense, held up a black paw for silence.

"Man lib fer dis side, sar," he whispered to Dick. "You listen one time, you hear him foot sound."

Dick and Micky both craned their necks forward, straining their ears, and, sure enough, they heard footsteps coming haltingly down the flag-paved way. Yet, strangely enough, they came towards the temple, not from it.

The soft pad, pad of unshod feet drew nearer, and checked suddenly as if the man, whoever he was, had heard something to arouse his suspicions. Yet there had been no sound of any kind.

Again the footsteps came nearer, stealthily. The newcomer was evidently approaching on tiptoes. He was so close that they could hear the rustle of his clothes, and a faint scraping of the outer wall as he placed a hand against it to steady himself.

They themselves were crouched in a dark chamber no more than twelve feet by twelve; but outside the small low doorway the lingering light cast long shadows across the marble.

A hand, long and sinewy, with thin, muscular fingers, groped at the entrance, silhouetted dark against the lighter background.

Micky touched Dick on the shoulder, and in perfect silence each of them glided to the doorway and took up their positions on either side, ready to spring. The half of a naked, sun-blistered shoulder swung into view. There was a glimmer of steel as an arm thrust forward in a quick lunge, a hoarse ejaculation, and then before any of them could make out precisely how it had happened, they were all whirling round the small chamber in a confused heap.

The intruder was as strong and wiry as a professional athlete, and fought with the untamed fury of a wild cat.

Micky had grabbed his knife hand in a grip like a vice, and clung on for all he was worth; but in spite of that, and the fact that Dick had his arms locked round the fellow's throat from behind to prevent his calling for help, and Mistah Henry was busily engaged in trying to secure his legs, it took the three of them a solid five minutes' rough-and-tumble before they could down him, and they, themselves were much the worse off for skin and rasped knuckles, to say nothing of being very thoroughly bruised from head to foot.

Even then it was doubtful if they would have come off victorious, had not Dick tightened his grip on the fellow's throat to suffocation point, and battered his captive's head against the hard stone wall till he dropped insensible.

Micky wrenched away the knife, and let go his hold with a grunt and a gasp.

"Faith, if that's a specimen of the Guajara praist, Oi'm goin' home to raise a bit av a subscription for 'em! Man dear, did yez ever see sich a born fighter? 'Twas beautiful—just beautiful! An' the way he used the legs av him, an' all! The darlint, he threw me twice, for all that yez was hangin' on to his neck lovin'-loike, an' me pershuadin' him not to be careless wid that pig-sticker. It's himself must have bin goin' in for a course av thim Sandow's exercises wid a monkey's tail for the elastic an'—Begobs, it spakes English! Listen to that, now!"

Micky jumped back with a very genuine start, and Dick did the same, for out of the darkest corner, where their captive had finally collapsed, came a drawing voice, speaking in clear-cut Anglo Saxon:

"If you boys have finished with me, you might be kind enough to tell me if one of you happens to answer to the name of Lorraine—Dick Lorraine, to be exact?"

"My sainted aunt!" said Dick.

"Your quite unsanctified uncle, I would suggest," drawled the voice. "Dick, you young scaramouch, is that really you? I've lost count of time, but you should be due about now, if you got my message. Introduce me to your friend from the distressful isle, and compliment him on his wrist power. I thought I was pretty useful, but I fancy he can go one better."

Micky, meanwhile, had been foraging round for a light. The sun had dipped behind the mountain-ridge with true tropical suddenness, and darkness had fallen swiftly. A match crackled, and a candle-stump flickered up in a corner, casting strange shadows.

It glinted also on a prostrate form in the corner—a naked man to the waist, with a strangely-scarred, bronzed skin, beneath which the muscles rippled suggestively with the slightest movement. The lower part of him was clad in roughly-sewn breeches of monkey skins.

The firm set chin bore a three weeks' old bristly stubble of beard, and the hair of the head, also grizzled, was roughly hacked short at the nape of the neck.

"I beg your pardon," drawled the visitor, "but if you don't mind, you might put that light out—er—the fact is, those—I should say my eyes are troublesome, and anything like a direct light hurts a bit. By the way, talking of eyes, in our little scrap just now I dropped an eyeglass. It's no

use, you understand, but it sort of keeps up one's self-respect, so I've clung on to it."

"Uncle Jim," said Dick hoarsely, "I—what have they done to you?"

"Oh, you noticed those marks on my chest and back, did you? Wait. Come here. You don't mind if I pass my hand over your face, do you? Bend lower. Umph! There's no doubt that you're a true Lorraine right enough. The beggars seared my eyes with white-hot irons, and after that amused themselves by burning a kind of frieze all over me. That's why I can't stand any strong light. You'll excuse my being a bit suspicious, but when you've led the life that I have, which I hope you won't, you'd be a bit doubtful yourself. Now then, speak up straight. You are Dick Lorraine, son of my brother Lord Charles? Go on, speak it out, man! I'm as good as blind, remember!"

"Yes, Uncle Jim, I'm Dick."

"You remembered that little trick of the ink I showed you—of course you did, or you couldn't be here. Sorry, old man, but when you've lived as I have you'll understand. Now trot out the Patlander."

Micky came forward through the gloom and shook hands warmly.

"Sorr, ye are the finest man at a rough-an'-tumble Oi've iver struck, an' iv a wee bit diversion down Kilkenny way wud be any use to yez— By the way, sorr, bein' a docther-man, Oi'd be proud to know how yez ran to earth. I heard ye sniff, but—"

James Lorraine lay back and laughed.

"Boy, you've a lot to learn yet. When a man's been living the life of a savage, as I have, for glory knows how long, soap is a thing to be smelt a mile off. I guess you luxurious youngsters have had a nice soapy tub within this last two days, and I have been condemned to shave with this knife—thank you, I can see very decently in the dark; it's on the floor there—and monkey-fat, or any kind of grease I could get hold of. Ye gods and little fishes, you don't know what a sniff of civilisation means to a man who has lived like a savage!"

"Why, that soap of yours—I can smell it strong—means England, and big, comfortable hotels, and waiters with boiled shirts, coffee and liqueurs, and the rest of the good things. Is that my eyeglass? Thank you! Did you fall foul of the Guajara outposts? How did you manage to avoid being cut up?"

Dick explained that they had missed the path, and told of their climb down the cliff.

Jim Lorraine gave a low whistle.

"By Jove, you've had a lucky escape, then, for the outposts have been doubled lately, and their shooting is not to be despised in close bush fighting. I never knew of the cliff path till a year or so back—long after I had drawn that map for you. For my first visit here was during the rainy season, and then the whole valley is filled with dense mist for weeks at a time, and you can't see more than if you were in a good old London fog. Otherwise, I should have told you of it, for the Guajaras themselves—even the priests—would sooner commit hari-kari than venture into the city. It is taboo—fórbidden—thank goodness, or I should have been cold meat long before this."

"Look here, I'd better tell you my piece of yarn straight off, and then we can fix up a plan. First of all, though, if you've got the makings of a decent meal anywhere, I fit for grub, as your black friend there would say."

Micky and Dick jumped for the sacks, and Mistah Henry began tin opening with a will. Inside of three minutes James Lorraine was surrounded by a box of sardines, a pile of ship's biscuits, canned horse, and other delicacies.

"By Jove, that's good!" he said, with his mouth full. "White man's food! You luxurious young scoundrels! Hallo, what's that?" His quick ear had caught a pleasing, gurgling sound as Mistah Henry emptied a sparklet bottle into their only mug, and handed it across. "Whisky-and-soda? Ye gods, this is bliss! Are you boys a travelling Whiteley's—coming the universal provider racket?"

Dick laughed.

"It's the last of it," he said, "and that was looted out of the medicine-chest. But we can run to a pipe and some baccy."

Jim Lorraine lighted up and puffed for a while in ecstatic silence. At last he said abruptly:

"By Jove, we might try it to-night! See here, boys, you know I came down to this forsaken country five years or more ago—I told you so much in my letter—and as you also know, I'd had some experience of the gentle Guajara before. I worked up the river all night, dodged their outposts by crossing the swamps, where I lost two men from snake-bite—it's terrible bad country that—and finally made my way into the temple, as I thought, unobserved."

"I had a plan, or a sort of a plan. It was this. The priests are the rulers of the Guajara and the Zinho. If once you get in with the priests there's no need to worry about

the rest, who are practically slaves, and treated like dirt. My plan was to play up the priests for all I was worth. I told you that though they can make diamonds they don't value them a cent, except as part of their religious ceremony."

"In the temple there is a copy of that statue which you saw carved out of the cliff, and the beastly great snake is what they worship. It is called Tluán, and once a year they make sacrifices to it. They've a whole lot of other snakes about the place, live ones which are sacred and which they keep as pets. But if anything goes wrong—a priest dies, or the rains flood them out, or the crops fail—they make an offering to Tluán, and the offering consists of a good fistful of diamonds. What originated the custom I'm hanged if I know, and I don't believe they know either. As things go wrong pretty often the supply of diamonds has to be kept going, and to do this half a dozen of the priests take it in turn to attend the manufactory. I can take you where you can see that for yourselves."

"But to return to my plan. I had brought with me a whole sackful of paste stones, the kind they use in theatrical rig-outs—whoppers they were. I smuggled these and myself into the temple, and lay doggo till the next big ceremony should take place. The temple itself is a huge building, and a dozen men might hide there for a year without being spotted, for the priests keep no watch. No native would venture within rifle-shot of the place, and the priests are mostly occupied in meditating, unless there happens to be a prisoner brought in from the river to be tortured."

"I watched and waited the best part of a month, and then my chance came. There was some sort of a festival, and all the priests—there are close on a couple of hundred of them—started kow-towing to Tluán the snake, and going through all sorts of weird dances, with the live snakes twirled around them in a way to make you feel sick."

Then one man, one of the chiefs, a brute with a face like a goat, came forward and offered up some diamonds, placing them in the coils of Tluán's tail on the pedestal.

"Just as he did so I stepped out of my hiding-place, and walked straight into the midst of them. I felt a bit jumpy, I can tell you, though outwardly I was as cool as ice. I had slipped on a long robe with a lot of gold lace and paste stones, which I had brought for the purpose, and which was calculated to impress them. Under it I had buckled on my revolver and a heavy hunting-knife, and in each hand I carried as many of the big paste jewels as I could hold."

"I paid no attention to the priests, but walked straight up to the statue and laid my stones alongside the others. Instantly there was a rush, and I began to feel for my revolver; but they made for the stones, not for me. They picked them up and handled them, jabbering amongst themselves in evident approval. Then they turned to me and began making signs. So far all had gone well, and I began to congratulate myself and fancy I was going to pull things through, till the high priest—the man with the goat-like face—pulled open his robe and showed the sign of the snake tattooed on his bare breast. Now, carefully as I had thought out my plan of campaign, I had clean forgotten about the snake sign, though I knew."

"I tried to bluff them out, but it was no good. They accepted the paste stones without a murmur, but they weren't going to accept me unless I had that tattoo marking. Half a dozen of them ran forward to tear off my things, and, seeing that the game was up, I whipped out my revolver. To cut things short, I put up the best fight I could, but it didn't amount to much against such odds, and five minutes saw the end of it."

"Well, after that, I had to pay. The beggars seared me all over—see, here are the scars, five years old. They heated a great bar of metal white-hot and held it before my eyes, and—I won't go into details; but why I didn't die I can't quite understand."

"When they'd finished with me I was stone blind and could scarcely crawl. They flung me into one of their cells, and there I was kept for close on twelve months. I learnt that I had been assigned the title role in the next annual sacrifice, and I managed to break the thick skull of my gaoler and escape. I think by then I was pretty near mad and like a wild beast. I was blind as a bat still, but my hearing and other senses were abnormal, and I had one fixed idea, and that was to cry quits with the brutes who had man-handled me. I managed to sneak away to the spot where I had cached part of my stores, and, knowing the hopelessness of a blind man attempting the journey down to the coast, I took up my quarters in one of the deserted buildings of the city."

"The monkeys were a nuisance, and once or twice I got mangled, but in the end I taught them to leave me in peace."

"Towards the close of the second year my sight began to come back, though the pain behind the eyes was intolerable

at times. I moved to fresh diggings in the hollowed chambers of the big statue by the cliff. Oh, yes, it's hollow right away up, and there's a secret passage burrowed out leading to the plateau beyond.

"As I got better I used to make excursions to the temple, and now and again when I could I bagged a priest or two to keep things lively. It was fair game, for they had tortured me vilely. Also I've found out where they cache the surplus diamonds—hundreds of thousands of pounds worth. If you fellows hadn't turned up, I had determined to wait another six months, and then make a grab for the loot, and bolt. I can see very fairly in deep shadow already, and my eyes are getting stronger.

"But as you have come, the sooner we act the better. By the feel of things we must have a clear five hours of night left, and that should be enough. What do you say? Are you ready to risk it?"

"Shure now, love, an' for phwat else are we here? A man wid your taste for a pretty bit av a foight wud—"

James Lorraine interrupted him with a grim laugh.

"All right, Patlander; I'll see you get your share of the fun, and there'll be plenty of it, don't fret. I'll make free to borrow your black boy's rifle. I can't see to draw a bead, but I used to shoot rabbits from the hip as a youngster. It's a matter of knack, and a man's a bigger mark than a rabbit. I'll tell you the plan as we go. Follow me. The boy can carry a few spare tins. You'd better chuck the rest, for everything will depend on speed.

CHAPTER 7.

Three Hundred Thousand Pounds!

THEY turned out once more into the broad highway. It was very dark, but Jim Lorraine's sight was like a cat's so long as the light was not too strong; and besides, he knew his way so well he could have found it blindfold.

They went along at a stealthy dog-trot, which covered the ground quickly, till the great outer walls of the temple loomed over them.

Still in darkness and implicitly following the elder man's lead, they dived down a subterranean burrow, which wound and twisted till they fancied they were going down into the bowels of the earth.

Hotter and hotter grew the air, and they gasped for breath feverishly. Suddenly a space of deep blue-black sky became visible, and the night breeze fanned them.

"That's my own pet way," whispered Lorraine. "I don't think even the priests know of it. We are right through the triple wall and in the arena of the temple itself. See those arches? Those lead to the corridors where the priests sleep. Now then, look up straight ahead of you."

They did as he bade, and far away in the distance, gleaming faintly against the night sky, they saw a cone which shone dull red.

"That's the highest peak of the Sasami range—a volcano, not exactly active, but dormant. Now, glance at the far end of the arena, and you will see the sight of your lives—a natural diamond factory, one of Nature's laboratories."

The arena—for indeed the temple's interior was shaped much as an old Roman amphitheatre—was circular in shape, surrounded by huge colonnades and tier upon tier of stone seats, measured some hundred yards across.

At the end immediately opposite them, and in a line with the glowing mountain-peak, was an arched canopy, beneath which stood a replica of the statue of the cliff, some eighteen or twenty feet high, shining redly from a light which seemed to come from below.

In front was what they took to be a large altar, silhouetted black against the furnace-like glow, and dark, ominous figures in flowing robes moved to and fro ghostlike betwixt them and the light. It was a most eerie and impressive picture.

"That altar-like thing is the tank in which they cool off the cylinders," whispered Lorraine. "Move carefully, and keep in the shadow of the balustrade."

Cautiously they advanced, nearer, nearer yet, creeping along the edge of the open space, till they were within ten paces of the statue, and then they understood.

In front yawned an open chasm. Its depth no man could tell, for it was filled to the brim with bubbling, seething lava and molten metal. Originally it had undoubtedly been a safety-valve—a blow-out from the parent volcano—but man's ingenuity had moulded it and shaped it with heavy marble masonry around the edge.

"Watch now!" said Lorraine, again under his breath.

Even as he spoke two priests advanced, staggering under the weight of a heavy clay cylinder. Another man dipped a

long, ladle-shaped vessel into the glowing tank, and poured its contents into the cylinder; whilst a fourth clapped a huge lump of clay on the top, beating it well down with a wooden mallet.

Then the holders of the cylinder poised themselves and swung their arms outward; the clay vessel plunged headlong into the glowing, bubbling, molten mass, sending up a small fountain of sparks.

Again two others came forward, their faces wrapped in damp cloths, each armed with a long pair of tweezer-like tongs.

They bent over the tank, watched for an instant, and plunged their tools below the surface. Dick saw the stout metal gleam and wither under the fierce heat; but before it had time to weaken the strong teeth had clutched at a glowing mass, and the priests turned sharply and flung mass, tools and all, into the ice-cold, glacier-fed water, and threw themselves on their faces beside it.

There was a dense cloud of white steam, a terrific explosion as the cylinder cooled and burst, and then once more silence.

"That's how it's done," whispered Lorraine; "but though I've watched the process year after year I'm no nearer the explanation. The priests, of course, are equally ignorant. I caught one beauty alive, and tried to force him to explain.

"But that's another story. The simple fact remains that the molten lava, put into a cylinder of that particular clay which they dig out of the swamp, subjected to a terrific temperature for three days, and then plunged into ice-cold water, which causes enormous pressure by contraction, produces diamonds. It's clear enough that we can't transplant the volcano nor the clay in bulk, nor if they knew of it would the Brazilian Government allow one to register a claim, so the knowledge ceases to become a commercial asset unless we could persuade our own effete Government to annex the country.

"Now, I'm here for loot, and I've suffered enough during these past years to take many a batful of diamonds to square the account, so as we can't make diamonds for ourselves, we'll just grab what we can. Can you see the base of the pedestal there below the statue? I daren't look myself; the glare of the fire is too strong. In the centre there's a sort of medallion. You can see it? Good! When the time comes, press on that, and the stone will swing round. The pick of the jewels lie in a cavity behind.

"We must hurry, for when the dawn comes all the priests come out of their dens and go through their weird orgies; also I shall be as good as blind when once the sun is up.

"The moment they pick out the next cylinder and plunge it in the water you must make a dash for it under cover of the noise of the explosion. Blackie, here, and I will protect you from a rear attack, and then it's a race for life, for they'll not give up on us if there's a chance of getting us alive or dead.

"Get ready! Those beggars there are beginning to handle their tongs again. Dick, hand Blackie your rifle. You've got a revolver for emergencies, and the gun will only be in your light. Quick, man! They're just going to raise it!"

Micky and Dick braced themselves for the spring, whilst the cloth-swathed priests strained and tugged at the glowing mass; then, as the steam shot up and a terrific explosion rent the air, they leapt. The priests, taken unawares, hardly realised what was happening till Dick had gained the pedestal; then, with a yell of rage, they hurled themselves on the intruders.

Crack, crack! rang out the rifles from behind, and the two leading priests fell writhing on the marble flags.

"Quick!" roared Lorraine. "They're on to us!"

Dick heard vaguely a sound of rushing feet, dived for the stone medallion, and pressed hard. The stone swung round, revealing a dark cavity, in which lay something glistening. He plunged in his hands and filled his pockets; again, and his trouser-pocket bulged, but a fierce blow caught him on the side of the head, and half of the last handful was spilt on the pavement.

"Jump for it!" yelled Micky. "Oi can't hold 'em!"

Dick leapt desperately clean across the open chasm of boiling lava, landing with a crash on the far side.

Half a dozen priests were clawing at Micky, and Dick from where he lay emptied his revolver into them. With a wriggle and a half-arm blow from the elbow Micky freed himself, stooped quickly, and grabbed a few loose stones; then, with a real Irish yell, he, too, leapt, landing on the top of a priest.

The man's head struck the stone with a crash, and the next instant Dick, Micky, Lorraine, and Mistah Henry were racing down the centre of the arena. A flight of arrows from the right droned over them, but the range was difficult

to find in that dull light. Other priests were massing quickly between them and the exit, armed with heavy spears and clubs; but Lorraine saw them in time, and dodged.

"Follow me — to the right!" he yelled, and shot off at an angle, doubling like a hare, and just evading an awkward rush.

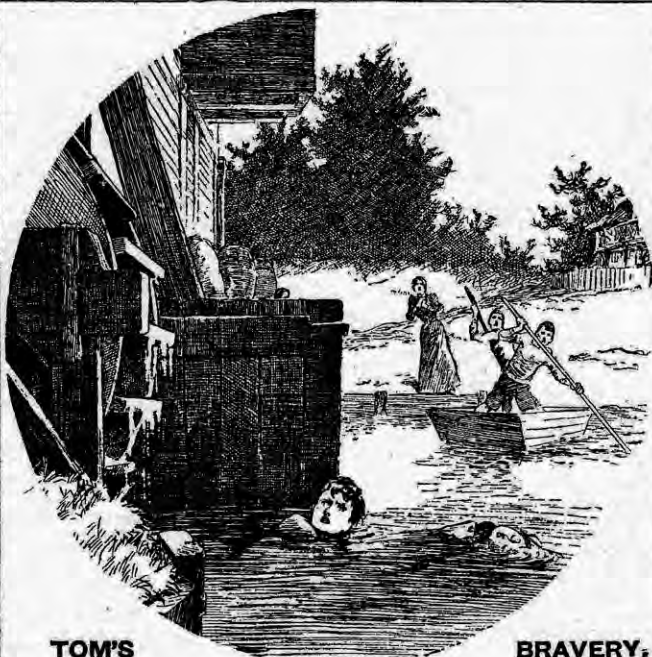
After him the three panted breathlessly, and dived into a pitch-black corridor; turn and twist, twist and turn, and once more they were in the open, their breath coming in sobbing gasps, a crowd of priests racing behind them.

Straight down the broad highway they sped towards the carved statue. They reached the base a couple of hundred yards to the good.

"Up with you!" cried Lorraine. "Give me a hand, and I'll show you the stairway."

Dick grabbed him by the arm whilst Micky turned and fired a parting shot, which checked the

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TOM'S

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pursuers for an instant and enabled them to increase their lead, and the pursuit tailed off.

They gained the plateau by a tunnel dug out of the rock and joined the cliff behind, and there Lorraine had to continue the journey with bandaged eyes till, three days later, they reached the shelter of the Maria's cabin, with jewels worth three hundred thousand sterling.

By the time the Maria had gained the coast and run down to Buenos Ayres, Uncle Jim was able to see from under an improvised shade invented by Micky, and after a couple of weeks' waiting they found a vessel homeward bound. The makers of diamonds kept their secret inviolate, but the adventurers had won all they needed, and were well content.

THE END.

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THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

Rex Allingham, a typical British schoolboy, kicks the winning goal for Stormpoint College in an important match, and so gets in favour of Hal Trehearne, the captain of the school. But Jardon, a Fifth Former noted for his strength, bullies Rex. Rex, with his two chums, Jim and Bob, break bounds one night and row out to sea to fish. They meet with several minor accidents, and reach shore with the boat very much battered about. "Do you think the owner will banker after his boat?" inquired Jim. (Now go on with the story.)

The Return of the Fishing Party.

"It's all right," said Rex. "Jim thinks seriously of the matter. He always starts punning when he gets into a difficulty."

"I don't see where the puns come in," growled Bob, who never did and never would see a joke of any sort. "It's no good bothering ourselves over the boat. It's Ford's duty to do that. Let's get home. I consider that we have had a most successful night."

"Well, yes," murmured Rex, wondering where on earth the success came in. "We have certainly caught and eaten fish of sorts and sizes."

"Well, that's what we went to do," declared Bob. "And if you succeed in doing what you attempt, that spells suc-

cess, and I would rather it spelt it than me, 'cos I'm not at all certain whether there is a k in it or not; all the same, I'm certain there is an s in it. Let's get back."

They did. There was not the slightest difficulty in doing that until they came to the college wall, and they overcame that difficulty by climbing over it; then came the rub. Bob always kept the duplicate key of the clock tower door, from which it is possible to gain the dormitories. That door was never bolted, for the reason that Bob had removed the bolts, and Porker had not noticed this. He always locked the door from the outside, to save him the trouble of ascending a winding flight of stairs. But on the night, of all others, the door was firmly bolted on the inside, and to open it was a matter of utter impossibility.

NEXT THURSDAY: *A Tale of Tom Merry's School days.* **"TROUBLESOME TOM." Order Now!**

"It doesn't matter," said Bob. "We can easily get in the other way. Porker always sleeps with the top of his window open, and we can get in that way."

"Eh?" exclaimed Rex.

"We can get in that way!" howled Bob.

"Well, don't shout at me, or the doc. will hear you. Let's get in that way."

"Come along!" growled Bob.

They went. Porker's window was not open at the top. It was shut, and, what is more, it was fastened. Bob, who stood on the window-sill, and tried, knew all this. He was a resourceful lad, and taking out his knife, he succeeded, after cutting his finger, in shooting the catch back.

The rest was the easiest thing in the world. Bob explained the ease of it in a hoarse whisper to his chums.

"Porker sleeps like any other pig," he murmured. "His bed is on the other side of the room, you know. I shall open the bottom of the window, shut it gently, creep through—"

"You had better do that before you shut it," observed Rex.

"Keereet! Then I shall open the kitchen door for you. Go round."

The comrades did no such thing. They foresaw more difficulties than did Bob, and knowing that they could get round to the back door long before Bob could possibly get it open, they waited to watch him as well as they could in the darkness.

Now, the top of Porker's window opened with ease; the bottom needed steam cranes to shift it. Bob tried, and failed, so he lowered the top sash, and commenced to clamber through. It sounds a very simple thing to do, nevertheless, it is deadly difficult.

Bob gave an upward leap, and got his fifth waistcoat button on the top of the upper sash, merely shoving his toes through the bottom panes, then over he went, and, mirabile dictu, landed headfirst on the fattest portion of Porker's body. For that astute individual had had a wrinkle from Jardon concerning breaking bounds, and he took every precaution. Jardon, having used the same means of entry, knew the ropes, and so Porker fixed that door on the inside, and having done so moved his bed beneath his window, the only available one for entry to the college.

First of all Porker had worked on information received from a traitor in the camp who wanted to ingratiate himself with the bully, and Porker had gone to the dormitory to find the three chums missing. Then he took the other precautions, and was awake from a deep sleep by a fat and heavy boy dropping on his chest; Bob really dropped a trifle lower, but for the sake of euphony we will call it his chest.

A wounded buffalo could scarcely have uttered a louder bellow than did Porker.

"I'm a ghost!" growled Bob, in a most unghostly voice. He thought it best to frighten Porker a little, so he seized him by the ears, and banged his head on the pillow. "I'm a horrid ghost. I've got a face like a redhot frying-pan! Ghoo! Grah! I'm the ghost of Nero! Utter another sound and I'll turn you into a horrid ghost! Ghroohoo!"

Then Bob bolted, let his chums in at the back door, and they all fled to their dormitory. In about sixty seconds they were all in bed; and from two of those beds came sounds of suppressed laughter. Bob was quite serious.

"I say, old chap," exclaimed Rex, when five minutes had elapsed without a sign of their house-master or even a monitor, "how did you work it?"

"Dropped on Porker."

"We knew it! Ha, ha, ha! And—"

"Told him I was a ghost."

"Did he believe you?"

"I should say so. I acted just like a professional ghost. Did the hoofing, and all that."

"We heard you."

"Did it sound ghostly?"

"Well, by a stretch of imagination you might call it so; but he will think you were a heavy ghost, and I doubt if the doc. will believe an ordinary ghost would be likely to smash two panes of glass."

"He may think that's the frost, or the wind. I say, ain't it jolly cold? I don't consider they put enough blankets over our beds," growled Bob. "It's not right for a delicate schoolboy to feel cold at night. I blame the doctor."

"Why not start blaming him for the burnt boat and the broken windows while you are about it?" suggested Jim.

"I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he blames us to-morrow morning," observed Rex. "Good-night, you fellows! I believe Perkins has sneaked again."

"Oh, I never did!" declared that worthy, who kept friendly with Jardon by giving him secret information. "I have been asleep the whole time!"

"Well, go to sleep now, you little sneak," exclaimed Rex; "and next time you want to tell Jardon about anything, tell him that I say there is only one worse cad in the college than yourself, and that is himself, and as for lying you are a well matched pair!"

"Do you want your head punched, Rex Allingham?" demanded Perkins, who was older and bigger.

"Yes. You are fond of money, I know. Well, I will give you half-a-crown to punch it to-morrow morning, and I will pay the money whether you succeed or not. Go to sleep and dream that you are a decent fellow. It will be a horrible nightmare, too."

The following morning the three chums were prompt to time; Bob, as a rule, was late, but he was all right that morning, and all went well until Mr. Salmon took the geography class.

"Tell me what you know about Cape Horn, Bouncer."

"Funny thing he always pitches on me! He would get much more information from Rex or Jim. Cape Horn, sir? It is a cape. A cape is a point of land running into the sea. Stormpoint is a cape, and it is situated on the west coast of England. It is noted principally for its college, and—"

"I am not asking you about Stormpoint, but about Cape Horn."

"Yes. And I know a lot more about Stormpoint," murmured Bob. "Cape Horn, sir, is a cape—"

"You have given me that information before. It does not surprise me that you are aware of the fact."

"Vessels frequently go round Cape Horn, and there is fairly good fishing to be got there. The best thing to bait with—"

"That will do."

"Thank you, sir. Rex will tell you all the rest about the place. He knows everything, though I can't make out how he does, seeing that he never works—"

"Shut up, you silly coon!" muttered Rex, who was on the form in front of him.

"I am questioning you, Bouncer," said Mr. Salmon sternly. And the tone of his voice gave Bob the impression that he would have to answer. "Having informed us that Cape Horn is a cape, perhaps you will tell me where it is situated?"

"Cape Horn, sir, is at the extreme south of Africa."

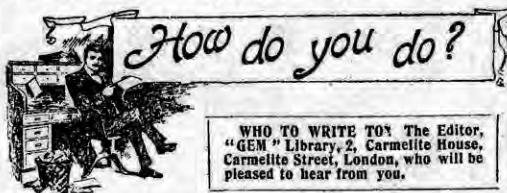
"It is lamentable!" gasped Mr. Salmon.

"Yes, sir; it is rather a gloomy place, one way and another, but—"

"A gentleman wants to see the doctor, immediately!" said Porker, entering the room.

"Well, go and tell Dr. Andale so!" snapped Mr. Salmon. He was very much annoyed at Bob's little error.

(Another long instalment of "Stormpoint" next Thursday. Order your copy of THE GEM LIBRARY in advance.)



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