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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DEAD MAN'S LAND ***

George Manville Fenn

"Dead Man's Land"

Chapter One.

Just before Dinner.

Mark jumped up.

"You there, father! I did not hear you come in."

Doctor Robertson, tutor, half rose from his seat by the glowing library fire.

"No, my boy, and I did not hear you come in."

"Why, uncle, you have been sitting there listening!" cried Dean.

"To be sure I have. How could I help it, sir? I came in tired, and thought I would have a nap in my own chair till it was time to change for dinner, and you woke me up out of a pleasant dream which somehow shaped itself into climbing with an ice axe and nearly losing it. It was some time before I could make out whether I was really awake or dreaming still, and I lay listening and getting more and more interested in what the doctor described to you two stupid boys."

"Oh, father, you shouldn't have listened!" said Mark.

"What, sir!" cried Sir James Roche hotly. "And pray why shouldn't I have listened?"

"Because—because—"

"Because—because! Well, go on, sir."

"Well, Dr Robertson said something to us boys one day about what he called eavesdropping."

"Tut, tut, sir!" cried the boy's father irascibly. "You dare to tell me I was eavesdropping, when you three come in from your walk, and plump yourselves down at the end of the room and go on talking till you wake me up? How could I help being interested and sitting back listening to the doctor's travels? Don't I pay him to teach you boys a lot of his knowledge, and if by accident I hear some of what he says, haven't I a right to it?"

"And you have heard all I have said, sir?" said the doctor, speaking as if he were moved.

"Yes, my dear sir, everything when once I was well awake, and very fine it was. Why, Mark—Dean—didn't I suggest that I should like to hear some more?"

"Yes, uncle, you did," said Dean; "but—"

"What, sir? Are you siding with Mark, and going to accuse your uncle of being an eavesdropper?"

"No, uncle, but—"

"Hang your butts, you impudent young dog! But—but—"

"You said hang butts, uncle."

"Bah! Pooh! Well, really, doctor, I suppose I ought to have spoken when I woke up, and put you all on your guard in case you might have— Here, what does the old proverb say? 'Listeners never hear any good of themselves.' Of course you might have said—you, Mark, boy, I mean—said that I was a stingy old fellow and didn't allow you enough pocket money."

"Well, I don't think you do, father," cried Mark; "but I shouldn't have said so."

"Good boy! But I do allow you, sir, twice as much as my father used to allow me when I was your age. And then Dean might have followed it up by talking about my temper."

"I shouldn't, uncle."

"Ah, I don't know, sir. I am what Mrs Blinks calls a bit trying when my gout's bad. And then I might have heard the doctor say—oh, no, he would say nothing but what would come from a gentleman."

"Thank you, sir," said the doctor, as he stood erect now, and his words were followed by a low sigh as if of satisfaction.

"Yes, I ought to have spoken, boys," continued the baronet, "but you mustn't set it down as being dishonourable. Why, you ought to have heard me chuckling softly as I lay back there in the darkness, listening. Why, Robertson, this isn't flattery; you have a most astounding memory, and I must compliment you upon the way in which you retain things and then give them out again so that they seem to be life-like and real. And so you have always had a great desire to be a traveller?"

"Always, sir," said the doctor gravely.

"Hah! And fate has so arranged it that you were to be a student instead, and doomed you to pass your existence drumming learning into the brains of a couple of the stupidest, wooden-headed boys I know."

"Oh, I say, dad, only one! I am sharp enough; you said so yourself; and poor old Dozey can't help being such a sleepy-headed fellow."

"Eh? What's that?" cried Sir James. "You will show him whether you are sleepy-headed when you get up into your room!"

"Then he shouldn't say such things, uncle."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Sir James. "But really, my dear Robertson, you have taken me quite by surprise. You would like to travel?"

"I must confess I should, Sir James; but pray don't give me the credit of being discontented with my lot. The three years that I have passed at the manor, gladdened as they have been by your consideration and perfect trust, have been happy ones to me."

"Oh, tut, nonsense, my dear sir! When you came here I laid down the law to myself that for the first month I would lie low, as the Yankees call it, and see what sort of a fellow you were; and at the end of that time I was perfectly satisfied with my good fortune in obtaining your services. I said to myself, 'The doctor's a high-class University man, and he can turn those two boys into English gentlemen—manly gentlemen—far better than I can. He will have a terribly hard job to lick the young cubs and shape them properly, so don't interfere.' And I haven't, have I, doctor? No—no, don't say anything. I know what it would be, so hold your tongue. I will say, though, here in the darkness so as to spare the boys, doctor, that I think it's a pity that besides the metaphorical licking that the old bears are said to use to shape their cubs, I did not begin by giving you the power to give them now and then what schoolboys call 'the real' licking."

"You don't, father," said Mark, laughing merrily. "You have always said that boys can be well brought up without blows."

"Hear, hear," said the doctor softly.

"But I am afraid it was very weak of me," said Sir James. "A good thrashing, sir, now and then, would have made you less impudent."

"You mean Dean, father," said the boy mischievously.

"No, I do not, sir."

"Hear, hear! Hooray!" shouted Dean.

"But I believe," continued Sir James, "that it would have woke him up a bit, for he's nearly as bad as the Fat Boy in Pickwick."

"Oh, what a shame!" cried the boy.

"And one word more," continued Sir James, speaking earnestly now. "Do you know, Robertson, this is very odd?"

"What is, sir?" said the doctor, for Sir James had ceased speaking.

"Why, that several times lately I have sat there in that chair thinking about these two fellows and their education, and that though I don't believe in what people call the Grand Tour, it would be a fine thing for them if they were to

travel and see a bit of the world. I mean real travelling, into out-of-the-way places where they could shoot, and hunt, and fish, and collect. I don't mean to go murdering about, seeing how many poor animals they could slaughter, and calling it sport, but to go out into the wilds getting their livings by their guns or rifles, and learning at the same time the wonders of animated nature, and seeing generally what there is to be found in life. Of course I know that you could impart all this to the boys by means of books of travel, but how would it be if you were to pick out some interesting country and teach them by genuine travel? Much better than nailing you down to a table with a pile of books. Why, doctor—boys—Bah! Bless my heart! There's the dinner-bell! No dressing to-day. Come along. We must talk more of this another time."

Chapter Two.

How Mark Roche gained the Day.

The idea of travelling was not allowed to cool. A few days passed, during which the project was discussed, and one morning during breakfast the baronet broke out with, "I don't want to get rid of you boys, but I lie awake of a night now, thinking of you going on such an expedition with the doctor, then growl and grumble at myself with envy."

"Then you really mean us to go, father?"

"Mean it, yes. But it comes hard that you two should have father and uncle who is ready to lay down the money—the bank notes to pay for it all, and here am I going to be left at home longing for letters that can only possibly come at very long intervals."

"Oh, father, but we shall write regularly," cried Mark.

"Of course!" said Sir James sarcastically. "Sit down at the end of a day's tramp, when you are tired out, at a comfortable library table, with a light of a shaded lamp, and write me a good long letter? Rubbish, sir! You will neither of you be in the humour for writing right away there in some forest."

"Oh, of course, uncle," cried Dean, "we shan't have a chance to sit down at a table to write, but we shall take each of us a writing case."

"Humph! Will you? I doubt it, boy; and even if you did you wouldn't be able to get at it when you were in the humour to write; and then if you did scrawl something with a pencil on a scrap of paper, where would you post your letter? In some hollow tree, or tuck it in a bladder and send it floating down a river with a direction scratched on a tin label? Bah! The doctor will take you right away into some wilds, and I shall get no letter for months, and months, and months."

"Oh, father," said Mark sadly, "I never thought of that! It would be hard, dad; and it seems selfish. It's all over. I shan't go."

"Oh!" said Sir James, trying to frown very severely, and forcing a very peculiar husky cough. "Dear, dear, how tiresome!" he cried. "Haven't got a lozenge in your pocket, have you, Dean?"

"No, uncle. Shall I get you a glass of water?"

"No, sir," almost shouted his uncle. "You know I hate cold water. Dear, dear! Barking like this, just as if something has gone the wrong way!" And the baronet pulled out a big silk handkerchief and began blowing his nose violently. "Ah, that's better now. Can't be cold coming on. Ah, much better now."

Then next moment he had clapped his hand smartly down on Mark's shoulder, and the doctor noticed that he kept it there, while there was an artificial ring in his voice as he continued, "Oh, you won't go, sir, won't you?"

"No, father," cried the boy firmly, and he gave his prisoned shoulder a hitch as if to free himself from the pressure, which immediately grew tighter.

"Oh, that's it, is it, sir? Now that I have made up my mind to it and am going to start you all off with a first class equipment, you tell me you are going to play the disobedient young dog, and plump out in a most insolent way—you heard him doctor?—that you won't go!"

"Oh, I must say on his behalf, Sir James," cried the doctor, "that he did not strike me as being insolent."

"Then you could not have been listening, sir, attentively," retorted Sir James. "I look upon it as disobedient and undutiful and—and cowardly."

"Oh, father! cowardly!" cried Mark, making another unsuccessful attempt to set his shoulder free. "How could it be cowardly?"

"Why, sir, if there's any selfishness in it you want to shuffle it off your shoulders on to mine."

"Oh, no, father; don't say that."

"But I have said it, sir," cried Sir James.

"But he doesn't mean it, Mark," cried Dean.

"What, sir! What! What! What's that, sir? How dare you!" thundered Sir James. "Are you going to be insolent and

disobedient too?"

"Excuse me, Sir James," said the doctor. "Let me say a few words."

"No, sir," cried Sir James fiercely, "not one word! This is my affair. I never interfere with you over your teaching of my boys."

"I beg your pardon, Sir James."

"No, don't," cried the baronet. "I beg yours. I am very much put out, doctor—very angry—very angry indeed. I always am when I am opposed in anything which I consider to be right. I oughtn't to have spoken to you as I did, so pray leave this to me or I may forget myself and say words to you, my good old friend, for which I shall be sorry afterwards."

The doctor bowed his head.

"I say, uncle," cried Dean.

"Well, sir, and pray what do you say?" snapped out Sir James.

"I was only going to say don't be cross with us, uncle."

"I am not cross, sir—cross, indeed!—only angry and hurt at this opposition. Well, sir, what were you going to say?"

"Only, nunkey—"

"Nunkey, sir! Bah!" That bah! was a regular bark. "You know how I hate that silly, childish word."

"That you don't," thought the boy. "You know you always like it when you are not out of temper."

"Well, there, sir; go on."

"I was going to say, uncle, that I know how it can all be managed."

"Yes, sir, of course! Like all stupid people you want to put your spoke in the wheel and stir everything up and make the mess worse than it was before.—I say, doctor,"—and there was a peculiar twinkle in Sir James's eye—"that's what you would call a mixed metaphor, isn't it?"

"Well, Sir James," said the doctor, smiling, "it does sound something like it."

"Sound!" said Sir James, who was cooling fast. "It would look very much like it in print. Now, Dean, fire away. How were you going to put it right?"

"You come too, uncle."

"Come too!" cried the boy's uncle, growing fierce again. "How can I come too, sir? Why, sir, I should want a Sam Weller, like poor old Pickwick at Dingley Dell, when he could not go to the partridge shooting. Do you think I want to go in a wheelbarrow with someone to push me, in a country where there are no roads? Bah! Pish! Tush! Rrrrr-r-r-rubbish! Here, doctor, did you ever hear such a piece of lunacy in your life?"

"Well, I don't know, Sir James. Lunacy?"

"Yes, sir; lunacy. Now, look here, doctor, don't you begin apologising for these boys and taking their part, because if you do, sir, we are no longer friends."

"Well, Sir James, it has always been an understood thing between us that I was to be quite independent and have liberty to express my opinion in matters connected with you and your boys."

"There, I knew it! You are going over to their side!" raged out Sir James. "And I know how it will be: I shall be so upset that I shall have a fearful fit of the gout after this, and be obliged to have in that doctor with his wretched mixtures for the next fortnight. Well, sir, I must listen to you, I suppose."

"Yes, Sir James, I think you had better," said the doctor, smiling; and he glanced at Mark.

"Well, go on, then," cried Sir James.

"Oh, I say, father, don't," cried Mark sharply.

"Don't what, sir?" pretty well roared his father.

"I don't mind a nip or two, but you did give it to me then. It was like a vice."

"Pooh, boy, pooh! You are not a baby, are you?"

"No, father, but—" began Mark, wriggling his shoulder.

"Hold your tongue, sir, and don't interrupt the doctor. Now, doctor, what were you going to say?"

"I was going to say, Sir James, that I fully believe that a fit of the gout must be very painful—"

"Oh, you think so, do you?"

"Yes, Sir James, and I think also that you are not troubled with many. Of course we are not going to imitate Mr Pickwick, and a wheelbarrow is quite out of the question."

"Now, look here, sir," cried Sir James angrily—but somehow there was a want of reality in his tones—"don't you begin to suggest impossibilities. I think I know what you are aiming at."

"I should not be surprised, sir, if you do. Now, of course if we went on this expedition, or expeditions, we should be going through forests often nearly impassable; but I think I have read—"

"Oh, yes, I know," said Sir James shortly, and the boys watched the doctor with eager eyes, and as they caught his eye gave to each a keen encouraging look; "you have read everything—a deal too much, I think," he grumbled, almost inaudibly.

"—that," continued the doctor, making believe that he had not heard the baronet's tetchy words, "great use is made of the blacks in Africa and India, who are quite accustomed to using a litter for the sportsmen in hunting expeditions, for the benefit of their employers."

Sir James set his son's shoulder free by giving him a fierce thrust, and his own hand too, so as to bring down his doubled fist upon the library table.

"Look here, sir," he roared, "do you for a moment think that I would consent to be carried stretched out on a couple of poles raised shoulder high by a pack of niggers? Because if you do—"

"And sometimes," continued the doctor calmly, "the sure-footed ponies of a country are very much used by travellers and hunting parties, for it is necessary that the sportsman or naturalist should not be over fatigued and should keep his nerves steady, as at times his life or that of his companions may rest upon the ability to be true in his aim at some dangerous beast about to charge and strike him down."

"Humph! Yes. That's quite true, boys. A man can't shoot straight when he's pumped out with too much exertion. I have missed horribly sometimes after a long day's tramp seeing nothing worth shooting at; and then just at the end the birds have risen, or a hare has started up and given me an easy chance, and then got away. There, go on, doctor, and don't let me check you with my chatter."

"Oh, I have not much more to say, sir," was the reply.

"Not much more to say!" cried Sir James, in a disappointed tone. "There, go on, sir; go on. The boys are very anxious to hear you—there, I won't be a sham—so am I too."

"Well, to be brief, sir—" began the doctor.

"But I don't want you to be brief," cried Sir James, thumping the table again, but this time more softly, and no coffee sprang out into the saucers.

"Oh, do go on; do go on!" said Mark's lips inaudibly, and Dean sat swinging himself softly to and fro as he rubbed his hands over his knees.

"Well, Sir James," continued the doctor, "I must say that it seems to me perfectly feasible for you to make up your mind to be one of the party."

"An old man like me, sir?" cried Sir James.

"I beg your pardon, sir; you are not an old man. I believe I number as many years as you, and saving for a slight indisposition now and then you certainly enjoy robust health."

"Oh, no, no, no, no!" cried Sir James. "That's adulation, sir, and I won't have it."

"'Tisn't father; is it, Dean?"

"Not a bit of it," was the reply. "The doctor never flatters."

"Will you boys be quiet?" shouted Sir James, and Mark clapped his hand over his cousin's lips, receiving a similar compliment from Dean in return, while Sir James threw himself back in his chair, frowned severely as he stared straight out of the wide open window, and then twitched himself about, changing his position again and again as if his seat were not comfortable.

A strange silence had fallen on the group, and it was as if three of the four individuals present were suffering from a desire to turn a questioning look upon their companions, but dared not for fear of interrupting Sir James in the deep thoughts which were evidently playing about in his brain and filling his frank, florid, John-Bull-like countenance with wrinkles.

During the space of perhaps two minutes the silence deepened, till all at once from somewhere in the stableyard there was a loud, whack, whack, whack, whack as of wings beating together, and then sharp and clear, defiant and victorious, as if a battle had been won—*Cock-a-doodle-do!*

"Hah!" ejaculated Sir James, starting upright in his chair, as if awakened out of a dream, and turning towards the doctor as if to speak, but only to check himself again. "Oh, absurd!" he quite shouted. "No, no, no, no; impossible;

impossible! It could not be. No, no, doctor. You set me thinking and asking myself questions about why not, and all that sort of rubbish. Why, sir, for the first time since our acquaintance began, you have been playing the tempter, and nearly won, what with your litters and palanquins and ponies. No, sir; it's impossible."

"I say, Mark," said Dean, in a loud whisper, "didn't uncle once say that there was hardly such a word as impossible for a man or boy with a will?"

"Silence, sir!" cried Sir James angrily.

"I say, dad," said Mark, closing up to his father's chair and leaning upon his shoulder, "I said I wouldn't go unless you did."

"Yes, sir," cried his father fiercely, "and if you dare to let me hear you utter such insubordinate words again I'll—"

The boy leaned over to look him full in the eyes, and gazed at him firmly, and the others saw him move his lips in a slow, deliberate way as if he were saying something emphatically; and then he drew himself up and seemed to intensify his gaze.

"Well, baby," cried Sir James, "what do you mean by those dumb motions? Speak out."

Mark shook his head and tightened his lips, compressing them into a long line across the bottom of his face, the curve disappearing and a couple of dot-like dimples forming at either end.

"What do you mean by that, sir?" cried Sir James. "Tell me what you mean?"

The boy shook his head once more, and then the line disappeared, the curves came back, and he silently shaped the words as before.

"Do you want to aggravate me, sir? Such foolery! Speak out, sir, at once."

Mark drew back, walked sharply across the room and half opened the door, before turning to face his father again, the others gazing at him in wonder.

"What's come to him, doctor?" cried Sir James. "Here, Mark, I command you, sir: speak out!"

"If you don't come with us, father," said the boy, slowly and deliberately—"oh, Dean, I am sorry for you—there will be no expedition, for I won't go."

There was a moment or two's silence, and then Sir James raged out, "Well, of all the daring—here, doctor, is this the result of your moral teaching of my boys? Now, sir, frankly, what am I to do in a case like this?"

The doctor was silent for a moment or two. Then after drawing a deep breath he turned to Sir James.

"You want my advice, sir, as frankly as I can give it, between man and man?"

"Of course I do, sir," snapped out Sir James.

"Well, sir, my advice is this. Dismiss us now."

"What for—to conspire against me?"

"No, sir," said the doctor, rising; "to give you time to calmly and dispassionately weigh this matter over—I even go so far as to say, to sleep on it."

"No, I can decide now. You don't want me with you."

It is a curious fact, but three voices at the same moment gave vent to the same ejaculation, which blended together and formed one big round "O!"

"I should be an encumbrance upon you."

"You would be a great help and counsel to me, Sir James, and of course take all the responsibility off my shoulders."

"Humph! Yes. Well, that's true," said Sir James. "But you, Dean—now, sir, be honest—I want the simple truth."

"I always do tell the truth, uncle," said the boy, rather surlily; "at least, I always try to."

"Then let's have it out now, sir, without a shadow of a doubt. Let there be no trying. Wouldn't you rather that I stayed at home?"

"No, uncle," came sharply, and almost before the question was uttered.

"Now you, Mark," cried Sir James.

There was silence again for what seemed a minute, but probably was not half.

"Well, sir, I'm waiting."

There was another pause, and then as the baronet jerked himself forward in his chair, gazing at his son fiercely as if to drag a reply from his lips, the boy seemed to swallow something, and, as Dean afterwards said to his cousin when

talking the matter over, "I could see it go down your throat just as if you were a big bull calf gulping down the cud."

"I can't help it, father; something seems to make me say it: I won't go unless you come too."

Sir James sank back in his chair, fixing his eyes first upon the doctor, then upon Dean, and lastly upon his son, and it was quite a minute now before he opened his lips to emit a long pent up breath. Then he said, "I must give in, doctor; I'm beaten."

"And you will come too, father?" cried Mark, and his utterance was full of joyous excitement.

"Yes, my boy; I'll come."

Chapter Three.

Fits of Temper.

"Don't go to sleep, Dozey."

"Who's going to sleep?"

"Your eyes were nearly shut."

"Well, who's to keep them open in this glaring sun?" cried Dean, half angrily.

"Well, don't jump down a fellow's throat."

"It's enough to make one. I just put my eyes half to, because there's no shade, and you begin at me directly because once or twice I wouldn't keep awake to listen to your prosing about something or another after we had gone to bed, and I did not want to hear."

"I beg pardon," cried Mark, with mock politeness.

"Don't!" cried Dean pettishly. "Now then, what was it you wanted to say?"

"Well, I was going to say, what do you think of it now we have got here?"

"Not much; and if it's going to be all like this I shall soon be wishing we had stayed at home."

"Same here. I say, what a lot of gammon they do write in books! I always thought Africa was quite a grand country; very hot—"

"Oh, it's hot enough," said Dean sharply. "Yes, it's hot enough to make everyone seem lazy. Look at those black fellows there, fast asleep in the sun with their mouths open and the flies buzzing about. But I say, I don't think much of these soldiers. What little under-sized fellows!"

"Haven't done growing, perhaps," said Dean.

"Oh, yes; they are old 'uns. But they do look like sunburnt boys. But I say, I expected something very different from this. What stuff people do write in books! I mean to say it's too bad."

"Yes; just over a month since we started from Southampton, and here we are dropped in this miserable place along with all our luggage and boxes, and been caged up in that hotel. Do you know what I felt when I first looked ashore?"

"No, but I know what I did—as if I should have liked to tell uncle that we had better stop aboard the steamer, for I was sure we had made a mistake and come to the wrong place."

"No, no, I say, play fair; that's what I felt," said Mark.

"You felt? You couldn't, because that's what I felt."

"Well, I could, for I did feel it exactly. I say, though; where are Bob and Pretty Dance?"

"Pretty Dance," said Dean dreamily. "Yes, we have been in a pretty dance, and no mistake. I don't know where they are. Wandering about somewhere having a look at what shipping there is, for there isn't much to see in the town."

"I say, I hope those two fellows are keeping an eye on the cases. It would be a nice job if someone opened our luggage and got at the guns."

"Oh, the landlord said that would be all right. Phew! It is hot! Here, let's go and talk to the doctor."

"No, don't disturb him; he's lying down and having a nap. Let's go and talk to uncle."

"He's gone to lie down and have a nap too."

"Bother! I thought as soon as we got ashore it was all going to be interesting and beautiful, and that we should be having glorious adventures. I don't know how we are going to get through it."

"Get through what?"

"Those three days before we can start up the country."

"Oh, there they are," said Dean sharply.

"Who?"

"Our two keepers."

"Let's go and talk to them, then. Poor old Bacon. If it's going to be like this Bob will be frizzled."

"Well, don't walk so fast. I say, it must be hot."

"Why?"

"Because I feel as if I had got too many clothes on."

"Ah, it will be hotter than this; but it's the only thing that makes me think we are in a foreign country. Here, who's this? Why, it's that sailor again."

"Yes," said Dean. "What does he want? He was following us about all day yesterday when we were trying to look at the town."

"What does he want? Coppers, of course. He's a beggar."

"Well, he doesn't look like one. No, that isn't it. He's got a boat somewhere, and wants to take us up the river for a row. Shall we go?"

"No; it's too hot. Think we could buy an umbrella somewhere?"

"What for? It looks as if it had not rained here for a twelvemonth."

"Keep the sun off."

"Oh, I see. Come along, then, till we get to those stores, and we can buy one there, I daresay; but I shan't walk with you if you put it up. Bother you and your umbrella! Are you afraid you'll melt?"

"I am melting."

As Dean spoke very surlily, "that sailor," as Mark called him, a little stumpy fellow who looked as though he should have been plump and rosy, but who was ghastly pale instead, sauntered up slowly, looking very hard at Mark, and opened his lips as if to say something, but closed them again as if with an effort.

He was dressed in a sailor's canvas frock and loose trousers, both of which articles of attire were old and shabby but scrupulously clean, while his hat, a very old straw, showed an ugly rent which its owner had apparently tried to hide by means of the silken band just above its brim. But the band had slipped upwards so that a good-sized patch of crisp, curly, black hair had escaped and thrust its way out into the sun.

As the man came abreast, he opened his lips and closed them twice before passing on, and in the sultry stillness of the sleepy place they heard him give a faint sigh.

"Doesn't look much like a beggar," said Dean. "He's had a fever, or something."

"Well, I shouldn't like to have a fever here," said Mark. "I don't mean to be ill. If I am it's because I have come to a place where there's nothing to do and nothing to see. Oh, I am disappointed! Here he comes back again. He must be a beggar, and he's ashamed to ask us to give him something. No, it can't be that. For foreign beggars are not ashamed to beg. I shall ask him if he has been ill."

"No, don't. He mightn't like it," said Dean.

"Then he will have to dislike it."

"Don't talk so loud," whispered Dean, for the sailor passed close to them again, looking from one to the other wistfully.

"Poor beggar!" said Mark, as the man passed on. "I am sure he is a beggar, and he's too stupid and drowsy to beg."

"Tisn't that," said Dean. "He wants a job."

"Well, that means he wants money. *Hola!*"

The man stopped and looked round eagerly, and the boys could see that his lips were quivering as he made a movement with his hand as if in salute.

"*Dinheiro,*" continued Mark, slapping his pocket.

"Ah, gentlemen, then you are English?"

"Rather!" said Mark. "Are you hard up in this sleepy place?"

"Yes, sir—no, sir," cried the man hastily.

"What is it, then? Do you want a job?" And Mark drew out a shilling.

"Yes, sir; badly, sir."

"Well, have you got a boat?"

"No, sir; I wish I had. No, sir; thank you, sir. I did not mean that;" and the man thrust his hands deeply into his pockets, while Mark thrust his out of sight as well, shilling and all, and somehow his cheeks felt a little hotter than before, as he felt that he had made a mistake.

"I thought you wanted to take us for a row."

"Oh no, sir."

"Then what are you doing here in this out-of-the-way place?"

"Ask him where his ship is," whispered Dean.

"Yes, that's it. Do you belong to some ship in the harbour?"

"No, sir. She sailed away three months ago. I was too bad to go away with her. Fever, gentlemen."

"Oh, that's bad," said Mark. "Sick in a strange place."

"Oh, I haven't got anything to grumble at, sir. The consul's been very good to me; but I am as weak as a rat, sir, and—and—"

The poor fellow's voice during the last few words had trailed off, and ended in silence, while the two boys looked at him sympathetically and felt very uncomfortable.

"I shall be better directly, gentlemen," he said at last, with quite a gasp; and then with an effort he went on, "I beg pardon, but I heard of you. Someone told me about a party of English gentlemen going up the country towards the mountains where a fellow could shake off the fever. I can't get on, gentlemen—so weak. Better directly."

"All right," said Mark. "Take your time."

"Thank you, sir. I thought you were going away. It ain't catching, sir."

"Nobody thought it was," said Mark. "Here, let's walk on down towards the waterside."

"Thank you, sir. There, I can get on now. I heard about you gentlemen, and I thought I would make bold enough to ask you to take me with you. Sailor, sir," he continued, turning to Dean. "Turn my hand to anything, sir. Make myself useful. Consul said that a turn up in the mountains would put me right in no time. Make me strong to get a ship again. I arn't begging, sir. Look here, gentlemen," and he pulled one of his hands out of his pocket half full of silver.

"I say, Dean," said Mark, "what are we to do?"

Dean shook his head helplessly. "We can't take him: we've got two men already."

"I say, look here," said Mark; "I can't do as I like, but I will ask my father, and I daresay he will pay your passage home to England."

"Thank you, sir," said the man, with a sigh, and he shook his head sadly, "but I don't think I should live to get there."

"Oh, don't talk like that!" cried Dean, and he looked so appealingly at the man that the poor fellow smiled.

"All right, sir, I won't. They say drowning men catch at straws. I'm kind of drowning like, and when I hears as you gentlemen were going up the country, something seemed to say to me, try 'em, mate; it can't do no harm. And when I see you two young gents I tried to speak, but somehow I couldn't, and now I have—well, I have asked you, and you can't, and I might have made sure of it before."

"But you see—" began Dean.

"Yes, sir, I understand," said the man. "Thank you all the same, and good luck to you both."

He turned quickly and walked feebly away, the two boys watching him, both feeling that they must call him back; but somehow no words came.

"Oh, Dean," cried Mark, at last, "how I do hate this place! Just as if it wasn't miserable and disappointing enough before! If that poor fellow were not so bad I feel as if I should like to kick him for coming and telling us about how ill he had been. Just as if it was our fault! It is enough to make one turn ill oneself. Here, let's go in out of this broiling heat or you will be going and catching sunstroke just out of spite."

"Likely!" said Dean bitterly.

"Now, don't you turn disagreeable. I know what you are thinking."

"What?" cried Dean, in surprise.

"You are thinking that I might ask father to go to the expense of taking that poor fellow up the country. Why, he'd think I was mad."

"I'd take him if I had got the money," said Dean.

"So would I if I had got the money," retorted Mark, "but I haven't. Oh, there are our two chaps again," cried the boy eagerly, as if glad to get away from the unpleasant subject. "They can see us, and are coming."

The two gamekeepers came strolling up, and Dance saluted them with, "Nice day, gentlemen! Pity we arn't got some of it at home. Shouldn't want no coke for the old vinery."

"No," said Mark shortly. "Well, what do you think of an African port?"

"Don't think nothing on it, sir. Do you, mate?"

"Think it's a fine place to get away from," replied his companion grinning uncomfortably. "Say, Mr Mark, don't you wish you was at home?"

"Oh, don't talk nonsense!" cried Mark angrily. "What's the use of saying things like that? We wanted to come, and we have come."

"But we are not going to stop here long, are we, Mr Mark, sir?"

"No, not long. Certainly not a week."

"That's a comfort, sir, because Peter Dance and me have been thinking that we should like to go and ask the gov'nor if he would send us back."

"Then you ought to be ashamed of yourselves!" snapped out Dean, upon whom the scorching sun seemed to have the effect of taking the skin off his temper.

"Well, I don't know about Bob here, sir, but I do feel that I was a fool for wanting to come," said the keeper.

"Then you would both go," cried Mark angrily, "and leave us in the lurch just because you don't like this place?"

"Well, I put it to you, Mr Mark, sir," said Bob, "speaking as gamekeepers, we thought we was coming out here to a beautiful country where it was going to be shooting all day long. And just look about you! Don't it look as if it was the last place that was ever made?"

"I don't know," said Mark shortly, "but I didn't expect that you two would have played the sneak as soon as there was a little trouble."

"Who's a-going to, Mr Mark, sir?" said Bob gruffly. "You asked us how we liked Africa, and we only as good as said we didn't like it a tiny bit. We arn't a-going to play the sneak; are we, Peter?"

"Not us," grunted Dance. "I shouldn't like to go and tell Sir James that; should you, Bob?"

"No-o!"

"Come along, Dean," said Mark, turning from the men; and the boys walked away. "Let's get indoors. I don't know what's come to me; I feel as if I could quarrel with everybody. Let's go in and see if father's awake yet."

"Why, you can't quarrel with him," said Dean, staring in wonder at his cousin.

"Well, who said I could, stupid? Do you want to make me quarrel with you?"

"Yes, if you like. I feel as if a nice row would do me good. I'm miserable. It's been a wretched voyage, bad weather all the time, and uncle cross, and the doctor wishing—I could see he was—nearly all the time, that he had never said a word about travelling; and now after longing to get to land we have been set down here."

"Well," said Mark, "you are a nice fellow to try and cheer one up! I had just said a word or two about how wretched I was and how I felt, and then you begin quarrelling."

Chapter Four.

All in to begin.

The first words which saluted the boys were from Sir James:

"Why don't you start your sun helmets?"

"Not unpacked, father. You said—"

"Oh, never mind what I said, boy, but get them out as soon as you can; a straw hat, as the doctor has just been saying, is no protection here; is it, doctor?"

"Certainly not, sir; but we shall not feel the heat so much as soon as we leave here, for the country rises."

"Pretty country!" said Sir James sarcastically. "But you boys, who was that rough looking sailor you picked up with?"

"We didn't pick up with him, father," said Mark sourly.

"What, sir! Don't tell me that! I distinctly saw you with him out of the window."

"He picked up with us, father—" began Mark; and then he caught the doctor's eye and changed his tone, saying hastily, "He was a poor fellow in distress, father."

Here Mark stopped short, for he had returned to the hotel with the full intention of pleading the poor invalid's cause, and he felt that he had commenced by speaking in a way that must increase his father's irritation, for Sir James had been quite upset by the heat of the place and the discomforts of the miserable hotel to which he had been directed when on board the liner as being the best in the port.

He literally glared at his son, and Mark shrank and turned to look at the doctor.

Sir James waited till he saw his son lower his eyes, when he too turned to the doctor and looked at him fiercely, the two men exchanging a long questioning glance.

It was a painful silence, but there was virtue in it, for when it was broken it was by Sir James, who said after drawing a deep breath, "See if you can open that window a little farther, Mark. This place feels like an oven."

Mark sprang to his feet and drew the window a little forward, and then pushed it outward again, but only back in its former place.

"Hah! That's better, my boy," said his father, quite cheerfully. "Why, doctor, what a blessing a bucketful of ice would be here—if it wasn't lukewarm, Dean, eh?"

The boy addressed tried to laugh at his uncle's joke, but the production sounded hollow, and the silence recommenced, the doctor cudgelling his brains the while for something to say that should thoroughly change the conversation; but he cudgelled in vain.

At last, though, to his great relief, feeling as he did at the time that all the responsibility of the unpleasant voyage rested on his shoulders, Sir James cleared his throat as he sat back in a wicker chair mopping his forehead, and said quietly, "A beggar, Mark?"

"No, father," cried Mark eagerly jumping at the chance of saying something to divert his father's smouldering anger; "a poor English sailor."

"Well, the same thing, my boy, and I hope you relieved him—that is, if he was genuine."

"Oh, he was genuine enough, father," cried Mark, and his words almost tumbled over one another as he related something of the poor fellow's plight.

"Tut, tut, tut, tut!" ejaculated Sir James. "Very sad. Very hard for a man to be ill away from home. It would be a charity, doctor, if you saw the poor fellow in the morning to see if you could do anything for him."

"My dear Sir James, you forget that I am not a professional medico. Of course I am willing enough, and will see the poor fellow, but I gather from what Mark here says that he has passed through all the stages of a jungle fever caught in some part of the Malay Peninsula, that he has been left here by the captain of his ship, and as far as my knowledge goes, the only thing I could recommend would be a sea voyage—say home."

"He said he didn't believe he'd live to reach home," cried Dean quickly.

"Or," continued the doctor, "a journey inland right up into the cool country away from this tropic malarial port."

"Ah!" cried Mark excitedly. "That's what he said, father, and he came to us to—"

Mark stopped short, gazing hard at his father, for a sudden shrinking as to how Sir James would take his words made him for the time being mute.

"Well, my boy, what did he say? Why don't you go on?"

"I didn't like to, father," faltered the boy.

"Why not, sir?"

"Because—because—"

"Well, because—because?"

"Because, father, I was afraid that you would think it so unreasonable."

"Humph! How much do you want, then, eh? I am afraid your distressed sailor is a bit of a beggar after all."

"Oh, no, father," cried Mark excitedly, and he had quite recovered his confidence now. "The poor fellow spoke as if he were appealing for his life."

"Was all this genuine, Mark, or the cunning of a practised mendicant—stop—what do you say, Dean?"

"Oh, uncle, I am sure it was genuine."

"Humph! Yes," said Sir James. "You are like what your mother was, boy—easily moved. Sounds bad, doctor. What do you say?"

"Let us first hear the whole of Mark's story, sir," replied the doctor.

"Right. Phew! I don't think it's quite so hot as it was. Now, Mark, what more have you to say?"

The boy addressed was strung up now, and he spoke out firmly and quickly.

"He said, father, that he had heard we were going up the country and to the mountains to where it would be life to him; that he was a sailor, a handy man; that he should get better quickly, and would work and put his hand to anything, if we—if we—you, I mean, father—would take him with you—us, I mean—and—those are not quite the words he said, but that's what he meant, and I—I—"

The boy glanced in his father's lowering face and stopped short.

"And you—" began Sir James, and Mark's heart sank, for he felt that his appeal was vain.

In fact, his words sank almost to a whisper as he went on, "I said I'd ask you, father, if you would take him."

"Bah!" burst out Sir James angrily. "Unreasonable! Absurd! Impossible! Do you mean to tell me that you wish me to saddle myself upon this disastrous journey with a sick man, perhaps a dying man? Why, boy, have you lost your senses? Do you mean to tell me that you would like to take him with us when we are already provided—even supposing that he was going to get better—provided, I say, with two excellent servants, strong, healthy, and ready to help us through our troubles? Answer me, sir. Don't sit staring at me in that idiotic way. Now then, tell me—you first, Dean; you were in this hobble with your cousin. Would you like to take him?"

"Yes, uncle," said Dean quietly.

"Pooh! That's your mother speaking, boy. Now you, Mark, if you are not afraid to speak, as you said just now. Would you really like to take him?"

"Yes, father; and I am sure if you saw the poor fellow you would feel the same."

"Well," cried Sir James excitedly, "of all the—the—Here, doctor, I have come, and I suppose I am to submit to—pooh!—there—it's this hot weather—let's get away as soon as we can, doctor, and—here, I feel sure that the boys have encountered some cunning impostor," and Sir James stopped short, and wiped his forehead before continuing, "Here, I say, Robertson, what about charity and one's fellow-creatures? And don't we read somewhere about helping a lame dog over a stile?"

"Yes, Sir James," said the doctor, very quietly.

"To be sure, and I am quite certain that this heat makes me feel horribly irritable. These boys take it all as coolly as—what do they say?—as cucumbers. Nothing affects them."

The two lads stared at each other as they recalled their walk, and burst into a half hysterical laugh.

"Why, uncle," cried Dean, "Mark's been horrid all day, and I haven't been a bit better."

"I am glad to hear it, boy. Then there's some excuse for me. Well, doctor, I suppose you had better go and see this fellow. I will trust to your common sense. Here, stop. You boys, has this fellow anybody here who will give him a character?"

"Yes," they exclaimed together; "the British Consul."

"Humph! Come, that sounds respectable. Well, I don't mean to stir out till we start up country. I'd go to-night if I could. And I leave it to you to see into this matter. It wouldn't be Christian-like, would it, not to lend the poor fellow a hand. There, as I said before, I trust to you, *carte blanche*, in that sort of thing to do what you think best."

"Thank you, Sir James," said the doctor gravely.

"Oh, you thoroughly approve of what I have said, then?"

"Thoroughly, sir, and I feel very proud of our boys."

And so it came to pass that Daniel Mann—after the doctor had seen him and had had an interview with the British Consul—was prescribed for with the news that he would be taken upon the expedition. Thanks to this intelligence, he looked at the end of two days quite a different man, even after hearing from the two keepers the anything but cheering words that they thought the governor must be mad.

Two days later the party, bag and baggage, were on their way up country to the extreme point, the rail head, so to speak, of civilisation—the spot where the advance guard of British troops kept back the black wave of savagedom, and where waggons and bullocks were to be purchased and the career of wild adventure was to begin.

Dan's Doubts.

It had been a long slow journey, but every day as they ascended, the weather, though hot, was tempered by crisp breezes which the doctor declared to be a joy to breathe.

"Health, boys," he said. "Why, can't you feel that you are growing and enjoying life? If you want any proof of the healthiness of the country, look at that sailor."

"Yes; isn't it wonderful!" cried Mark.

"Yes," said Dean; "uncle was talking about it only this morning. He asked me if I didn't see how his colour was altering."

"Oh, that's only the sun," said Mark.

"Think so?" said the doctor, smiling. "I think it's more than that."

"But it was getting out of that nasty damp oven of a port," said Mark. "I felt horrible there, and as if I should be ill if we stopped."

"So did I," added Dean; "and didn't it make—" The boy paused for a moment as if hesitating.

"Well, didn't it make what?"

"—Mark disagreeable," said the boy, with a merry, mischievous look.

"Oh, come, I like that!" cried Mark. "Why, you must have noticed, doctor. Dean was nearly always half asleep, and when he was awake he did nothing but find fault."

A short time after, when the boys were alone, Mark suddenly turned sharply upon his cousin with, "I say, why did you stop short when we were talking to the doctor?"

Dean turned rather red.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"What do I mean? You know."

"I know?"

"Yes; you were going to say that father was dreadfully cross all the time. Come, confess."

"Well," said Dean hesitating, "I am afraid I did think something of the kind."

"Afraid! Why, you did, you beggar, and then packed it all on to my shoulders. Hullo, here comes Mann—man—handy man—Daniel Mann—Dan Mann. What a rum name! Hasn't been very handy yet, though."

"I say, don't! You will have him hear what you say."

"I don't care. Let him! I wasn't saying any harm about him, poor chap. He's coming to us—wants to say something, I suppose."

The conversation was taking place just outside the so-called hotel, though the boys had dubbed it the tin tabernacle—a rough, hastily-built house that had been fitted up by an enterprising trader, where the party found temporary accommodation.

"Well, Daniel? Feel better?"

"Dan, please, sir. My mates never put any 'yel' at the end of my name."

"That isn't the end," said Mark sharply. "That's the middle. Well, do you feel better?"

"Feel better, sir?" said the man, whose miserably pallid face was overspread for the moment by a warm glow, while the tears of gratitude stood in his eyes. "Why, every morning since we came up I have seemed to be coming to life again."

"Well, don't cry about it," said Mark shortly.

"Oh, that's nothing, sir," said the man, using the back of both fists to brush away the signs of his emotion. "That's only being so weak, sir. Don't you take any notice of that. You see, I have been going backwards and getting quite like a kid again. And oh, gentlemen, it was a lucky day for me when I run against you two."

"Stop!" cried Mark angrily. "This is the third time you have begun talking to us like this, and we won't stand it; will we, Dean?"

"No, that we won't," cried his cousin. "Here, Daniel—Dan, I mean—"

"Thank you, sir. That's better."

"You wait a bit. I had not finished," continued Mark. "If ever you say another word to us, whether we are together or whether we are alone, about being grateful, and that sort of thing, I shall say you are a canting humbug—at least, my cousin will; I shouldn't like to be so harsh."

Dean dug his elbow into his cousin's ribs at this.

"And we don't want to think that of you," continued Mark. "I say, though, you do look a lot better."

"I am, sir," said the man, smiling. "And now we have got up here, sir, I want you to ask Sir James and the doctor to set me to work."

"Why, you are too weak yet."

"Weak, sir? Not so weak as that. 'Sides, doing a bit of hauling or something of that kind will help to get me in sailing trim once more. Why, arter all these long weeks lying by and feeling that I should never be a man again—why, the very sound of doing something sets one longing."

"Well, you go on getting better."

"Better, sir! I am better," cried the man sharply. "I know I don't look thin and like a fellow on the sick list, but the time I overhauled you down there at the port I felt like a walking shadder."

"Ah, that's the doctor's physic," said Dean.

"Physic, sir? Why, he never give me none—nothing but some white stuff—ten drips as he let drop carefully out of a little bottle. No, sir, it warn't that, but getting up here where one could breathe, and now instead of lying awake in the dark with the mysture running off one's face in drops, I just put my head down of a night feeling the cold air blowing over one, and the next minute I am fast asleep."

"Yes, one can sleep here," said Mark, "sound as a top."

"Yes, sir; same here, sir. Oh, I shall be all right in a day or two, sir, if I can get to work. I don't hold with hanging about with them two men of yourn looking at me as if I warn't worth my salt."

"Do they?" said Mark sharply.

"Well, perhaps it arn't that, sir, but that's what I feel."

"But look here," cried Mark; "aren't they civil to you? Because we are not going to stand that; are we, Dean?"

"Certainly not."

"Beg pardon, sir; please don't you go a-thinking that I'm a-finding fault."

"You look here," said Mark. "If they—"

"Oh, I beg your pardon, sir," said the man. "You see, it's like this; you picked me up, quite a stranger, and it's quite nat'ral that they shouldn't like a chap on the sick list stuck along with them all at once."

"It's no business of theirs," said Mark shortly. "They have come out here with us to do their duty; and just now it's their duty to do what's right by you, and if my father or the doctor knew that—what?"

"Well, sir, I daresay I'm wrong, but I've got it into my head that one of them feels a bit jealous like that I'm going to step into his shoes and that he'll be dismissed his ship."

"Pshaw!" ejaculated Mark angrily. "He has no right to think anything of the kind. You three have got to work together and be like messmates, as you sailors call it."

"That's right, sir; messmates is the word; but—" The man stopped.

"Well, out with it," said Mark. "What were you going to say?"

"Well, sir," said the man, hesitating, and he turned now to look half appealingly at Dean, "you see, sir, I am a bit weak still in the head."

"Of course you are! Then go on getting strong."

"Thankye, sir; that's what I am doing," said the man; "but I can't help every now and then thinking that all this 'ere is too good to be true, and that as soon as Sir James and the doctor thinks that I'm all right again they will say, 'There, my lad, you are about fit to shift for yourself, and you can go.'"

"Oh, I see," said Mark sarcastically.

"Yes, sir, that's it," said the man, with a sigh.

"Now, let's see," said Mark, and he gave his cousin a peculiar look; "I suppose, fairly speaking, it will take about a month before you are quite right again."

"Bless your heart, sir, not it! Fortnight, more likely; I should say about a week."

"Well, I hope that in a month's time—for that's what I'll give you; eh, Dean?"

"Oh, quite," said his cousin decisively.

"Well, I will put it at three weeks," said Mark, "and by that time I hope we shall be a couple of hundred miles farther up the country, with the ponies and the waggons and the teams of oxen all with us in travelling trim, right away in the wild country, where there's no settlement—not a house—nothing but here and there one of the blacks' camps—kraals, as they call them; eh, Dean?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Well, then, at the end of that time—oh, I shall make it a month—"

The man drew a deep breath.

"And then my father will have a quiet chat with the doctor and take his opinion. He always goes by Dr Robertson's opinion, doesn't he, Dean?"

"Always," said his cousin.

"And then he'll what slang people call sack you. You sailors don't say sack, do you?"

"No, sir," said the man sadly. "When I was in the Royal Navy we used to call it being paid off."

"Well, it doesn't matter," said Mark. "Then of course when we are hundreds of miles from everywhere my father will pay you off."

"Oh, no, sir," said the man earnestly, "I don't expect no pay."

"Never mind what you expect. My father, I say, will tell you to be off and shift for yourself and get back to that moist oven of a port the best way you can. Won't he, Dean?"

Dean caught his cousin's eye, and said decisively, "Yes, of course. That's just like uncle;" and by means of an effort he kept his face straight, looking, as Mark afterwards told him, like a badly carved piece of solid mahogany.

"Yes, sir," said the man sadly; "and I daresay I shall be able to steer my way right enough, and for all his kindness I shall be very thankful, and—"

"Yah!" shouted Mark. "Didn't I tell you that if ever you spoke again like that I'd—I'd—"

"I beg your pardon, sir."

"This chap's very weak still in his head, Dean, or else he would not dare to think that an English gentleman would behave like a cad. There, man Dan—no, I mean Dan Mann—just make up your mind that you are in for this trip with all its troubles and hard work."

"Do you mean it, sir?" cried the man, and he looked from one to the other.

"Mean it? Why, of course we do. So never say anything about it again. Ah, here come father and the doctor. Would you like to ask them if what we say is true?"

"Not now, sir," said the man. "I am a bit weak still, more shaky than I thought."

The poor fellow's voice sounded very husky during the last few words, and he hurried away, watched by the boys.

"I say, Dean, he's better," said Mark. "He could not walk like that a fortnight ago. Do you know, I begin to like that chap. He's rather comic looking, but he is such a regular sailor."

"Yes," said Dean, "with quite a sailor's frank boyish sort of way."

"Like you, eh?" said Mark.

"Get out! Don't chaff. Present company always excepted. I wasn't thinking about you. But I say, didn't he take it all in as innocent as could be about uncle setting him adrift out in the wilds?"

"Yes.—Well, father, how many bullocks have you bought?"

"Forty-eight, my boy. Fine ones."

"Forty-eight!" cried the boys, in a breath. "Twenty-four in a span."

"Precious long span, uncle," said Dean, laughing, as he stretched from thumb tip to little finger measuring along his arm.

"Yes, rather," said the doctor. "They are long spans; but we are obliged to provide against loss. Like to come and see them, boys?"

"Of course!" they cried, in a breath.

Chapter Six.

How to handle a Whip.

Sir James turned back with the doctor, and soon after the boys were intently examining the drove of nearly fifty beautiful, sleek, well-bred oxen in their kraal, where they were in charge of their drivers, one a big, bluff, manly-looking fellow, well bronzed by the sun, and with Englishman stamped upon every feature, forming a striking contrast to his companion, a flat-nosed, half-bred Hottentot, who grinned at them stupidly.

"We just want another look round, my lad," said the doctor.

"All right, sir," said the big driver, endorsing his appearance by his speech; and taking the lead, he showed the little party and expatiated upon the qualities of the leading and pole oxen, upon how sleek and well they looked, and gave to each its name, while the Hottentot driver, who confined himself to Dutch, helped to call up bullock after bullock, all of which answered sluggishly to their names.

Then the boys were made acquainted with the novelties, to them, of dissel-boom, trek-tow, and yokes.

"But I say," cried Mark, "you don't call that a whip, do you?" And he pointed to one that might have been used in Brobdingnag.

"Yes, sir; that's the whip," said the Englishman, laughing. "You see, one wants a long one to touch up an ox who may be the leader twelve bullocks' lengths away from where you are sitting on the box."

"Let's try," said Mark.

The man smiled as he took down and handed the gigantic thong.

"Mind what you are doing, sir," he said. "A waggon whip is rather an awkward thing, until you are used to it; but when you are you know it is a nice, neat, handy little tool. You see, it's a two-handed weapon."

"That's plain enough," said Dean, laughing. "Let's have a try after you, Mark."

"Yes," said his cousin, giving the whip a wave round, its heavy lash whistling through the air.

"Here, stop!" cried Sir James angrily. "What do you think you are doing? Salmon fishing? It's a good thing, doctor, that there's no hook at the end."

"Oh, I'm very sorry, father," said the boy, colouring.

"Very sorry, indeed! Why, you nearly cut my ear off. Here, doctor, we had better go."

"No, no, don't go, father. I won't try any more;" and Mark hastily handed the great whip back to the driver.

"Here, but I want to try," said Dean.

"Well, you are not going to try now," said his uncle, half irritably. "You will have plenty of chances, both of you, when you have got a field to yourselves. You will be scaring the bullocks."

"All right, sir," said the big fellow, replacing the whip by the great tilted waggon. "I'll teach you how to handle it when we get out on the veldt. Like me to show you, perhaps, now?"

"No, no," said Sir James; "not while we are here."

"It's quite safe, sir," said the man good-humouredly. "I could give a flip to any one of the bullocks you like to point out without the thong coming near anybody."

"Oh, let him, please, father."

"Very well," said Sir James, rather grumpily. "Shall we stand farther off?"

"Oh, no, sir," replied the man.

"Let's pick out that one with the white nose," whispered Dean. "I don't believe he can hit it;" and he pointed to one fat beast that was standing almost alone blinking its eyes and ruminating over its cud.

"Yes; hit that one," said Mark.

The man seemed to give the long whip an easy wave in the air, and the point of the lash alighted on the bullock's smooth neck, making the animal start and toss its head; and then in response to a command which sounded like *Barrk*, it slowly sidled close up to the nearest of its fellows, and then went on chewing the cud again.

"Ay, ay, Jacob!" shouted the driver, and he uttered a few words in a patois that was probably a composition of Dutch and Hottentot, which made the little yellow flat-nosed driver come shambling up, grinning, to take the big whip pitched to him and go off to a distance of some five-and-twenty yards, where, after uttering a few incomprehensible cries which had the effect of making such of the bullocks as were crouching in the sand rise slowly to their feet and sidle up together, the strange looking driver gave the whip a wave or two where he stood, and began to crack it, at every *whish* producing what sounded like a series of rifle shots, watching the English driver the while until he was

told to desist.

“Bravo!” cried Mark, and Dean clapped his hands.

“I say, can you crack a whip like that?” cried Dean.

“Oh, yes, sir. Teach you too, if you like.”

“Well, I do like,” said the boy; “but when uncle isn’t here.”

When the interiors of the two great tilted waggons that were close at hand had been examined with some curiosity, as they were to be storehouses and dwelling-places combined, the little party went off in another direction, Mark eagerly enquiring what was to be their destination now.

“Oh, I was going to show you the little cobs the doctor has bought—ponies, I suppose I ought to call them.”

“What, has he got them already?” cried Mark.

“Oh, yes; it has been very short work,” said the doctor. “The officer who has charge of the little garrison here introduced me to a dealer, and I think we have been very fortunate to meet a gentleman who was well acquainted with the ways of the settlers here, for he has given me some very good hints, and in addition promised to have a guide found who was hanging about the camp and is now waiting here after being up the country with a hunting party who left for Beira about a fortnight ago. He is one of the Illakas, Sir James,” continued the doctor, “and it seems that he has been expelled from his tribe for being friendly to the English.”

“Quite a savage, then,” said Sir James.

“Oh, yes; I suppose he is a pure-blooded black, and knows the country well. Let me see, we must turn down in this direction, I think. Yes—pass that corrugated iron shed-like house—to be sure, that’s it—and there’s the man the ponies belong to.”

He nodded in the direction of a little keen-looking man who appeared rather mushroom-like, thanks to the well-worn, broad-leafed felt hat he wore. He was leaning over a rough enclosure in which four ponies were browsing, and keenly watching the approaching party as he smoked.

As soon as he realised that they were coming in his direction he took his pipe from his mouth, tapped the ashes out upon a post, took off his hat and stuck the short pipe in the band.

“Come to have a look at the ponies, gentlemen?” he said.

“Yes,” said Sir James; “I want my son and nephew to have a look at them and try them.”

“I see,” said the man, scanning the boys attentively. “My man isn’t here. Like them saddled and bridled?”

Sir James looked at the two boys, as the man continued, “Can the young gentlemen ride?”

He glanced at the doctor as he spoke.

“Yes,” said the latter quietly; “after our fashion in England. Well broken horses. But they can’t ride wild beasts.”

“Well, no, captain; nobody expects that; but I shall have to keep you waiting a bit while I have my man found, and send him to borrow a saddle and bridle. I have only got two, and one of the officers from up at the barracks and his friend have got them for the day. I have plenty of halters, and I can clap a rug on one of the ponies. What do you say to that, young gentlemen?”

“I’d rather have one without the rug,” said Mark, “if they are quiet.”

“Quiet as lambs, sir, as long as you don’t play any larks with them.”

“Oh, we shan’t play any tricks,” said Mark.

“That’s right, sir. Out here we like to treat a pony well. They are scarce, and worth their money. I am afraid, sir,” continued the man, turning to the doctor, “that I did not charge enough for them.”

“But you don’t want to draw back from your bargain?” said the doctor sternly. “I paid you the price you asked.”

“Yes, sir. The captain up yonder brought you to me as English friends, and him and his officers are good customers to me. No, I am not going to ask more. Only I will go as far as this: if you bring them back to me sound and in a fair condition I will take them again at the price. Here, one of you,” he shouted to a group of idlers who had sauntered up to the fence of the enclosure, “go to the house and ask the missis to give you a couple of halters and a horse rug. My chap, Browne, has gone to meet the officers.”

One of the men sauntered off quietly, leaving the party of strangers to walk across the kraal, the boys keenly examining the little browsing animals.

“Well, doctor,” said Sir James, “I must say I admire your choice. They are beautiful little creatures, and I hope that they have no vice.”

“Vice! Not they, sir,” said their late owner, as the ponies upon being approached lifted their heads to stare at the

visitors for a few moments and then go on browsing at the low-growing bushes that formed their feed. "This don't look like vice, does it, sir?" said the man, thrusting his hand into his pocket and drawing it out full of maize.

One of the ponies raised its head, stretched out its neck in the direction of the extended hand, and trotted up.

"These mealies are rather a hard bite for them, sir, but this lot are very fond of a taste, and I let them have one now and then; but of course you will always have a few sacks handy.—Now, young gentlemen, try this one," and he poured some of the golden grain into Mark's hand. "You too, sir," he continued, and he brought out some more to trickle into Dean's.

There was no doubt so far in the tameness of the two ponies, which fed quietly enough from the boys' hands and submitted to being handled, patted and held by their thick forelocks or manes.

By this time the dealer's messenger had returned with a couple of halters.

"Missis can't find a horse rug," said the man surlily.

"Never mind; we can do without, I daresay. But just be on the lookout, and if you see my Browne send him to me. Now then, gentlemen, like to try barebacked?"

"Yes," said Mark; and as soon as a halter had been thrown over one of the ponies' heads the dealer handed the end to him.

"Oh, come," he said, "not the first time you have been on a pony;" for Mark held up one leg, which the man took in his hand and gave him a hoist; and the boy making a spring at the same time dropped on the pony's glossy back, but like vaulting ambition overleaped himself and rolled over on the other side, startling the pony into making off. But the dealer made a snatch at the halter, just in time, and it stopped short, snorting.

"Hurt, my boy?" cried Sir James, anxiously.

"No, father; only vexed," said the boy, dusting the sand from his flannels. "Now then," he continued, to the dealer, "you hoisted me too hard."

"Going to have another try?"

"Why, of course," cried the boy angrily. "Think I was frightened by a thing like that?"

"You'll do; you'll do," said the dealer, with a little chuckle. "Now then; it was half my fault, and half yours."

The next moment Mark was in his seat, holding his mount with a tight hand as it began to paw up the sand, eager to start.

"Wait for me," cried Dean, for the dealer was clapping the halter on another of the ponies, whose back Dean reached without mishap; and then as if thoroughly accustomed to run together, the attractive looking little pair moved off at an easy canter, closely followed by the other two, and going soon after at a quiet hand gallop twice round the large kraal, and stopping short close up to the dealer at the end of their career.

The boys jumped down, and the two unmounted ponies waited patiently while the halters were shifted and the performance repeated.

"Well, gentlemen, are you satisfied?" said the man, patting the ponies' necks as he spoke.

"Yes, quite," said Sir James. "What do you say, doctor?"

"I should say more than satisfied, only I am afraid that they won't be up to our weight."

"Don't you make any mistake, sir. These little fellows can do more than you expect—that is, if you treat them well. You won't ride them till they founder, I'll be bound. Just you take care that they have enough, and you will find that they will do all you want. You would like me to keep them till you start, I suppose?"

"Certainly," said the doctor; and soon after the little party returned to their inn, the boys talking eagerly about their new acquaintance.

"But I say, father," said Mark, "why, what a party we are going to be—five men, our four selves, four ponies, and all those oxen. Let's see; that's all, isn't it?"

"No," said Sir James; "you forget the guide."

"Black, isn't he, uncle?"

"Yes; I suppose he's a regular Kaffir, a sort of Zulu. What did the captain say he was, doctor?"

"An Illaka, he called him, I believe, something of the same sort of black, as the Matabeles. But you have forgotten two more."

"Two more, sir?" said Dean. "No, we have counted them all."

"What about the two black forelopers?"

"Why, what are they?" cried Mark.

"The two blacks who go in front of the foremost bullocks."

"Oh," said Mark. "I say, we are beginning to grow."

"Yes," said Sir James; "we are getting to be a pretty good hunting party. What with ourselves, men and cattle, we shall have a good many mouths to feed."

"But you don't want to go back, father?"

"I did, thoroughly," replied Sir James, "when we were down at that dreadful port."

"But not now, uncle," cried Dean.

"Certainly not, my boy. I am as eager to go forward as you boys, and I believe the doctor too. I think we are going to have a most delightful trip. But I say, this doesn't look to me a very good specimen of the health of the country;" and he nodded his head in the direction of a very tall, extremely thin, bilious-looking individual who passed them, and whom they saw make his way right up to the dealer's house.

"Talk about moustachios," cried Mark. "Why, they look like those of a china figure in a tea-shop. I wonder what he calls himself."

"And this one too," said Dean, for they met a fine-looking, well built black with well-cut features, nose almost aquiline, and a haughty look of disdain in his frowning eyes, as, spear over shoulder, he stalked by the English party, not even deigning to turn to glance back.

"I should think he's a chief," said Mark; "a sort of king in his way."

"Doesn't cost him much a year for his clothes," said Dean, laughing, for the big fellow's costume was the simplest of the simple.

"Ah, not much," said Sir James, looking after the man; "one of Nature's noblemen, who looks as if he had never done a stroke of work in his life. I wonder whether he would ever dare to make use of that spear."

"I don't think there's any doubt about it, sir," said the doctor, "if he were offended; and if we meet men like that we shall have to be friends, for that's an ugly looking weapon that he carries over his shoulder with such a jaunty air."

"What are you thinking about, doctor?"

"I was thinking about the full-blooded black that the captain yonder promised to get us for our guide, and I was wondering whether that was likely to be he."

The doctor's words made the rest turn to gaze after the fine-looking, lithe and active black, who stalked on, haughty of mien, without even seeming to give a thought to the English intruders upon his soil.

Chapter Seven.

'Mak' is sent in.

The barracks of Illakaree did not form an attractive object in the lovely landscape surrounded by hills, in and out amongst which the Reptile River ran, for a building hastily raised of corrugated iron never was and never will be beautiful.

"I say ugly," said Mark to his cousin, "but all the same I should like to be inside one when there was a bad hailstorm. My word, what a shindy there would be with the big stones—lumps of ice, I suppose, they would be in a place like this—hammering down upon the zinc roof."

"The soldiers look cheery enough."

"And healthy," said the doctor.

"Thoroughly," said Sir James. "It is a pity they cannot make arrangements down at the port to give their men a holiday up here."

They were close up to the captain's quarters, and he, catching sight of the party, came out hastily to shake hands.

"Well," he said, in a light cheery way, "what can I do for you? How are you getting on?"

"Excellently," said the doctor, "thanks to you. We have secured the ponies, two waggons, and two span of oxen with their drivers."

"That's right. Have you got your forelopers too?"

"Not yet, but I suppose there will be no difficulty about them."

"Not the slightest. We generally have one or two black fellows eager to get a job with someone going up country. I

will undertake to find them. The oxen are all right, for I have seen them. You couldn't have had a better lot, and you are quite right too over the ponies. Now, is there anything else I can do?"

Before the doctor could speak, the frank, good looking young captain turned to the boys.

"Nice lucky pair of young dogs you are—going on a natural history and hunting trip like this! What wouldn't I give to come with you!"

"Well, come, then," said Sir James. "I should be delighted to strengthen our party with such a companion. You know a good deal about the country, don't you?"

"Well—yes. I have had two or three little excursions in the direction you are going through the great forests and away on to where the old stones are said to be, Dr Robertson," continued the speaker, turning to that visitor.

"But I understood you to say that you had never seen them."

"No; I had to turn back, for my leave had nearly expired, and I came away with the belief that there were no ruins, and that those who had reported about them had seen nothing but some of the castle-like kopjes that look sometimes at a distance like built fortresses of huge granite stones. Still I have heard on the other hand that there are such ruins, and that after their fashion the black tribes keep it a secret and look upon the spot as a sort of Mecca—a sacred place which it is dangerous to approach and which they will not allow the white man to come near for fear he should be hurt, and from fear on their own part of the old bogeys which haunt the ruins. I don't answer for this. It may be all talk, and if I had time there is nothing I should like to do better than to prove it."

"Then you think there is risk in going there."

"No," said the captain, "I really do not. If there were I don't think that the guide would be so ready to undertake his task."

"But the ruins may exist," said the doctor; and the boys listened with their ears wide open or well on the gape for news.

"Certainly; there is plenty of room," said the captain, laughing; "and the black fellow I told you about, as far as I can make out from his jumble of the Ulaka language and broken English, declares that he has seen them—big stone kraals, he calls them."

"Well, why can't you come with us to see?" said the doctor. "It is bound to be very interesting."

"Awfully," said the captain, "and there must be plenty of good sport out there. I'll vouch for that."

"What shall we get?" asked Mark eagerly.

"Lions," said the captain, smiling—"plenty of them. Do you like lion shooting?"

"How can I?" said Mark testily. "How could I? I never shot anything bigger than a pheasant in my life. You are laughing at me."

"Oh, no," said the captain, patting him on the shoulder; "and I daresay next time we meet you will have bagged one or more, and have the skins to show me. Then you will get leopards, which by all means shoot, for they are very mischievous. You will find plenty of hippos in the river, and crocs too. That's why they call it Reptile River; and if you go on far enough, as you ought to if you have plenty of time, you may get a shot or two at giraffes. Ah, and as I say if you go on far enough you may run against okapis."

"O—what, sir?" cried the boys eagerly.

"Oh, a curious new animal that they are reporting. They say it looks half way between a giraffe and a zebra, and it's found in the great central forests. Ah, boys, you have got a fine time before you, and as I said before, I envy you both."

"Then why not think better of Sir James's invitation?" said the doctor. "I am sure you would be able to assist us wonderfully. Say you will come."

"Can't," said the captain firmly. "Duty. The people about here are very peaceable now, but they may break out at any time; and suppose there was an *emeute* amongst these blacks while I was away shooting. I thank you, Sir James, most heartily, but it is impossible. You will have a capital guide, though, who will show you the way far better than I could."

"Yes, the guide," said Mark hastily. "That's why we have come up this morning."

"Well, you couldn't have come at a better time," said the officer. "He has been far away, for some reason best known to himself, but he marched into camp last evening, looking as if he were monarch of all he surveyed."

"Then that's the man we saw!" cried Dean excitedly.

"Tall, black, fine-looking fellow, well built, and a savage chief every inch of him?"

"Yes," said Mark eagerly; "and hardly any clothes."

"That's the man. There, I will send one of my men to fetch him here;" and stepping to the window he called to the

sentry on duty to pass the word for someone to hunt out Mak and bring him there.

"Mak!" said the doctor, laughing. "What, have you got Scotch blacks here?"

"Oh, no. We call him Mak because he is like one of the Makalaka. Properly he belongs to a great tribe called the Ulakas, who used at one time to occupy the kopjes about here. I suppose that is why this place has come to be known as Illakaree."

Only a few minutes later the tall, stately-looking black of the preceding evening was seen crossing the barrack enclosure, carrying his spear over his shoulder and looking down with a sort of contempt at the young bugler by his side, to which the boy retorted by looking up as contemptuously at the stalwart black, thinking of him as a naked nigger.

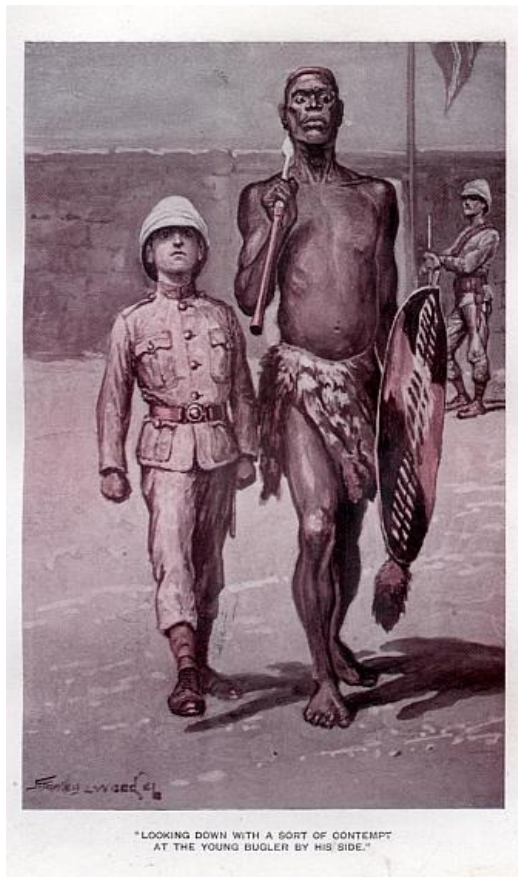
"Now I don't wish to interfere," said the captain. "I only want to be of service to you gentlemen out in this wild place, if I can. It is no presumption to say, I suppose, that you can't understand the Illaka dialect?"

"Certainly not," said the doctor. "I daresay I could get on if the man addressed me in ancient Greek."

"Which he will not do," said the captain, laughing. "He will say very little, and what he does say will consist of the most curious jumble of English that ever man gave utterance to. So will you trust me to make terms with him as to what he is to do and what he is to be paid? I purpose offering him the same terms as were given to him by his last employers. He wants very little—and no current coin. A good knife or two and some brass rings will satisfy him. And as to his work that he is to do for you, I tell you frankly that he will not do a stroke, but he will tramp with you upon hunting expeditions till he will tire you out; he will be as keen-scented as a dog, a splendid tracker of every kind of wild beast, and if needs be he will fight for you bravely to the death."

"Well, you couldn't give him a better character," said the doctor, "for our purpose. But what bad qualities have you to put against this?"

"Oh, he is a very wolf at eating."



"Well, it's only fair that he should be," said Mark, "if he hunts for and finds the meat."

"I quite agree with you," said the captain. "Then let me see; I did tell you that he won't do a stroke of work. He is too great a swell—for he really is a chief, and was beaten by a stronger party and had to retreat for his life."

"But I say," said Mark, "how are we going to get on with him if he is going to carry on in that stuck-up, haughty way?"

"Oh, that's nothing," said the captain, laughing. "He puts that on when he comes into camp, to show his contempt for my men. A few of the larky spirits teased him a bit some time ago, and he wouldn't stand it. But I have seen a good deal of him, and he likes me because I wiggled the men and gave them to understand before him that I would have none of that nonsense. Why, when he is away out in the forest or veldt with a hunting party—and people treat him well—he is like a merry boy, a regular child of nature. But treat him with contempt, and it raises his bile directly. We are too fond of treating these natives as niggers, but some of them are fine fellows, and as brave as lions— Pooh! Nonsense! As brave as men can be. Yes," he continued, as an orderly appeared, "send in Mak."

The fine-looking black stepped in, to stand in dignified silence, looking keenly round at the party, while the captain spoke to him in broken English which sounded somewhat like that of a weak old nurse prattling to a child, and in answer to which the black responded with the single word, "Good."

"There," said the captain, "I have explained everything to him, gentlemen, and his word 'Good' means that he will serve you faithfully, and show you plenty of game, to find which he will take you to the mineral forest where the trees are so high that it is nearly always twilight, and after that guide you on to the great city where the old people lived, and show you the mighty stones with which they built. That's all, gentlemen. Metaphorically signed and sealed and witnessed by your humble servant, Frank Lawton, of Her Majesty's 200th Light Infantry."

"Thank you," said the doctor. "I never knew there was so much in the one word good before."

Mark glanced at the black, who had been listening intently to the doctor, and catching the boy's movement he fixed him with his eyes so that they two were for some moments apparently trying to read each other's thoughts.

"Well, you look all right," said the boy to himself, and his frank, open countenance expanded into a pleasant smile.

At this the haughty face before him changed suddenly, as if so much natural sunshine had flashed out, and stepping up to the boy he turned his spear upside down so that the point of the keen, leaf-like blade rested on the plain boarded floor of the captain's room, and bending forward he laid the back of his right hand upon Mark's breast.

"Baas," he said, in a deep musical voice; and then moving slowly and with dignity he passed round to each, to repeat the action and the word, his eyes beaming upon everyone in turn, and then finishing off by uttering once more the one word, "Good."

He then glanced at the captain and asked him some question, to which the captain nodded.

The next minute he had glided bare-footed and silent out of the room, while as the party watched they saw him march haughtily past the window and away across the barrack yard.

"There, gentlemen, that's settled, then," said the captain.

"Settled?" said Sir James. "But I ought to give him what the country people call a fastening penny, ought I not?"

"Oh, no, nothing of the kind."

"But about finding him when we want to start? For I want to get away from here as soon as possible."

"You will not have to find him," said the captain, laughing. "He will find you. You may see him hanging about, or you may not. But you may depend upon one thing, that from henceforth he will be like your shadow. Oh, but one word," the captain added. "Your men seem quiet, respectable fellows, but it might be advisable for you to say a few words to them about their treatment of your guide. You know what I mean—about their looking upon him as a nigger. I don't think you need speak to Buck Denham, the big bullock driver, nor to the Hottentot. There."

Sir James and the doctor offered plenty of words of thanks, at which the captain laughed.

"My dear sirs," he said, "not a word more. Put yourselves in my place and suppose I came up country as you did. Wouldn't you have been as pleased as I and our mess are to meet a brother Englishman so far away from home? So not a word more but these: If ever I can serve you in any way, here I am, and you know my name. There, boys, we will see you off when you start, and fire a salute, just as if we had had a visit from the Prince."

Chapter Eight.

Mark's First Watch.

"Now, look here," said Sir James, "we have talked all this matter over quite enough, and it is high time that we started in a business-like way, so as to avoid all confusion."

"Hear, hear," said the boys together, and Sir James went on.

"First of all, I am nobody."

"Oh! Oh, I say, father!" cried Mark laughing.

"You hold your tongue, and don't interrupt. I repeat that I am nobody, only a visitor who looks on and joins in the sport when I feel so disposed, and one whom you and your men must take care of."

"But we must have a captain, sir, to give all orders."

"Of course," said Sir James. "I constitute you captain; you, Mark, first lieutenant; Dean, second lieutenant."

"But, Sir James—"

"Dr Robertson, I have planned all this, and I presume that I have a right to do as I please."

"Certainly, sir," said the doctor.

"And perhaps I may think it right to interfere when things are going on not to satisfy me."

"Of course, sir;" and the boys looked at one another.

"Well," continued Sir James, "we have arrived at this pitch, that we are quite independent of the inn. I have paid everybody, and for the last two nights we have been practising camping out, and are going to sleep again to-night in our waggons as we intend to do during our campaign. You, Robertson, have reported to me that everything is properly packed, the waggons loaded with our stores. You have trained our men to occupy their places; we make this waggon our tent or fort to sleep in or sleep under, according to the weather; in short, there is nothing to prevent our starting to-morrow morning."

"So soon, father?" said Mark.

"So soon, sir! Yes. Haven't we been busy here for a fortnight, making our preparations? And a very busy time it has been. I consider that we have finished our stay here with bidding good-bye to the officers and thanking them. You saw how I stopped back at the barracks this evening. Do you know what it was for, doctor?"

"No, sir."

"To tell Captain Lawton that I would rather not have any nonsense and procession or firing of farewell salute, and that I had made up my mind that we would start early to-morrow morning."

"Then we really are to go to-morrow, father?"

"Of course."

"But, uncle," protested Dean, "there are several more things that might be useful and that I should like to get."

"Of course there are, sir," said his uncle shortly, "and so there would be if we stopped about here for another month. Now, no more words. You have got your marching orders, captain—I mean, doctor; and you will go round with your officers and see the blacks, the two drivers, and our own three men, so that there may be no excuse for their not being ready."

"Exactly so, Sir James. I am very glad that we have come to this climax."

"So am I," said Sir James. "Eh? What's that, Mark?" for the boy was whispering to his cousin. "What's that you are saying?"

"Oh, I was only talking to Dean, father," said the boy, rather confusedly, and his face turned scarlet, lit up as it was by the swinging lantern beneath which he was seated.

"Yes, sir; I saw you were; and you were protesting against my orders for what I presume you call this hurried start."

"That I am sure I was not, father. I was only joking to Dean."

"And what was the joke, sir? You, Dean, what did he say?"

"I don't like to tell you, uncle."

"I insist that you tell me at once, sir," said Sir James angrily.

The boy gave a deprecating look at his cousin, and then went on hesitatingly, "Mark said that it was comic—"

"Well, sir? Go on."

Dean coughed to clear his voice.

"He said it was comic that you had just made us all officers and then ended by taking it all out of the doctor's hands and playing captain yourself."

"Humph! Well," grunted Sir James, "it does sound a little odd. But this was the final instructions as I was making resignation. But stop a minute. I had just made the reservation that I should interfere if I thought proper. Now I have done. Give your final orders, captain; and then if it was my case I should say, lights out and let's all have a good rest till daylight to-morrow morning. By the way, whose turn is it to take the watch to-night, doctor?"

"Yours, Sir James, and I relieve you two hours after midnight."

"And to-morrow night?"

"Mark first watch, Dean the second."

"Next night?"

"Not settled yet."

"Good; and I think it was a very excellent arrangement of yours, doctor, to begin as we did on the first night of our moving into camp."

That night seemed all too short, and Mark could hardly believe that it was close on daylight when the doctor roused

him to see the fierce-looking black, spear-armed, dimly showing by the light of the lantern the former carried, while Dean would not believe it at all, but treated it as part of a dream, and turned over, fast asleep again.

"Oh, I say," cried Mark, "did you ever see such an old dozey, doctor?"

"Catch hold of one arm," said the doctor. "I'll take the other. Here, Mak, take hold."

He handed the lantern to the black, who took it and stood looking on while the sleeper was regularly set upon his legs, to stand staring in alarm at the glistening eyes and the white grinning ivory of the man's teeth.

"Oh," he cried, in a half startled tone, "I thought—it can't be morning!"

"Can't it?" said Mark, laughing. "Let go, doctor, I think he's awake now."

"Awake! Of course I am. But I say, is breakfast ready?"

"No, Dean," replied the doctor, "and will not be till we are a couple of hours on our track."

The bustle attending starting had already begun; the waggon drivers were busy with the oxen, the keepers were saddling up two of the ponies, the sailor was proving his right to be called a handy man, and stowing the necessaries of the night in the fore and aft chests of the second waggon, and in an almost incredible space of time everything was ready for the start, and the order was given by the doctor.

Then came the cracking of the whips and the lowing of a couple of uneasy bullocks; there was a strain on the long trek-tow, and the great lumbering waggons moved off into the early dawn, the ponies being led, for the heads of the expedition all agreed that it would be pleasanter to walk till after sunrise through the crisp, cool air and not let their blood stagnate by riding behind the slow, sluggish pacing of the oxen.

At the end of two hours there was a halt for breakfast at a spot selected by the black Illaka, and he looked on while Dan started a fire with a small supply of wood. Dance fetched water from a little stream that ran gurgling by the place, which was evidently in regular use for camping. Bob, after picketing the ponies so that they could browse, went off and brought back more wood, and there with everything looking bright and picturesque in the morning sun, so well had the doctor arranged matters that Mark declared that only one thing was wanting to have made it the most delicious breakfast they had ever had in their lives.

"Why, what did you want, boy?" said Sir James.

"We ought to have shot some birds of some kind, father, to have cooked."

"Oh, never mind the birds. We will have them for dinner," said Sir James merrily.

"If we shoot them," said the doctor. "Here, Dan, give me another mug of coffee, and then look thoroughly well after yourself."

Only about an hour was spent before a fresh start was made, and then the journey was resumed in the most orderly way and kept on till noon, when water was reached at a curve of the little river along which the track led through a dense grove of umbrageous trees. Here there was ample pasture for the cattle, which fed and rested in the shade for a good three hours in the hottest part of the day, while an abundant meal was prepared, after which a deliberate start was made by the well refreshed party.

Then followed a long, slow bullock march till quite early evening, and again the black led them to a beautiful woodland patch at a place where the river whose banks they were following showed a good shallow crossing, another display of traces proving that it was a customary halting-place on the way to some kraal.

Here the great creaking waggons were drawn up, a fire was made and the men busied themselves looking after the cattle and the ponies, a capital meal was prepared, but without any addition being made by rifle or gun; and just at dark, by the light of the twinkling lanterns, preparations began for passing the night.

"I say, Mark, you have to keep the watch," said Dean. "Don't you feel proud?"

"Not a bit," said Mark. "Our black chap seems to be doing that. Look at him parading up and down there with his spear over his shoulder just as if he was the grand boss of it all and we were his men."

Just then he strode up to where the boys were talking.

"Lions?" said Mark, in a questioning tone.

The man smiled pleasantly, and the boy repeated his question; but it was plain that the black did not understand.

"Oomph! Oomph! Oomph!" growled Mark, in as near an imitation of the monarch of the forest's roar as he could contrive after a couple of visits to the Zoo; but it had no effect whatever on their surroundings till the black, who now fully grasped his meaning, crouched down and uttered a startling, barking roar which made two or three of the nearest bullocks start up and stare in their direction.

"Here, you, sir, stop that!" shouted Buck Denham, the driver of their waggon, the first being in charge of the Hottentot.

The black turned to him, smiling, and nodded, before meeting the boys' eyes again and shaking his head.

Just then the doctor approached, to ask the reason of their guide's imitation.

"Oh," he said, on being informed, "don't encourage him in anything of that sort again, or we shall have a stampede of the ponies and bullocks. Well, Mark, recollect that it's your first watch to-night."

"Oh, I shan't forget," was the reply. "But you don't think we have come out far enough yet to meet with dangerous wild beasts, do you?"

"Oh, indeed, but I do," replied the doctor. "We have left the last post of civilisation behind, and we may come upon danger at any time. Of course you will mount guard with one of the double rifles charged with bullet, and if there really is any suggestion of danger you will fire, so as to give the alarm. We shall come to your help directly."

"Oh, yes, I understand," said Mark confidently, and he passed the intervening time before he received his orders going round their little camp with his cousin, watching the final preparations made by the drivers and forelopers, a couple of ordinary thick-lipped blacks, and then having a chat with the two keepers about what a change it was from the park and grounds of the old manor.

As the time approached, Mark, in spite of his assumed cheerfulness, could not master a slight feeling of discomfort. It was evidently going to be a cool, dark night. The very sound of it was startling to the lad—the announcement that he was to keep the full watch over their little camp of two waggons in a country where lions were common, and on one of the banks of the river which might very well be haunted by hippopotami and loathsome crocodiles.

The captain had spoken of its being called Reptile River, and of course that was what it meant. The very thought of it was alarming. He had read enough to know that hippopotami came out to feed by night, crushing up the succulent weeds and softer canes, grinding all up in their huge portmanteau-like jaws, while it was a well known fact that the ponderous beasts would rush at and trample down anyone who came in their way.

All that was bad enough, but nothing to compare for horror with the thought of a huge lizard or newt-shaped creature lying in wait ready to seize upon human being or ordinary animal, and drag its prey down into some hole beneath the bank, ready to be devoured at the monster's leisure.

Mark tried very hard to chase away such thoughts, but they kept coming on, right up to the time when he finished his supper and met the doctor's eyes.

"Ready, Mark?" he said.

"Yes, sir," said the boy firmly.

"That's right," said his father. "Keep a sharp look out, my boy. We are all trusting you to take care of us for the next few hours. Good-night."

"Good-night, father."

The boy shouldered the double rifle and followed the doctor.

"I should keep moving, Mark, my boy," said the latter. "It will occupy your attention and make the time seem to pass more quickly. It will keep you warm too, for it's sure to be very chilly later on. Stop here a minute or two. I just want to go to the forward waggon and say a word or two to the men. I will join you again directly."

Mark drew himself up stiffly as the doctor walked away, and then his heart seemed to give a bound, for there was a faint rustle just in front, and the boy brought his piece down to the present and made the locks click. "It's only me, sir," said a familiar voice. "You, Dan!" cried the boy, pressing one hand on the region of his heart, which was beating fast.

"Yes, sir; just me. You need not shoot. I have been waiting till the doctor had gone. I thought as it was rather a new job for a youngster like you, I'd come and ask you whether you would like me to come and keep the watch with you. You see, it's all fresh to you, but it's the sort of thing I have been brought up to aboard ship."

"It is very good of you," said Mark, warming up at the man's thoughtfulness, "but you had better go and lie down and go to sleep."

"I don't want to go to sleep, sir."

"But you will lose your night's rest."

"Not me, sir. I shall just shut one eye in the morning and let that have a snooze for a couple of hours while I get on with my work or keep on tramp. Then when that one's rested I can make him open and let the other have a snooze."

"No, no, it won't do," said Mark firmly, much as he would have liked to have the man's company. "It's my duty to take the watch, and I must take it."

"Mean it, sir?"

"Certainly," replied Mark. "I wouldn't have it thought that—there, go away; the doctor's coming back."

The sailor slipped away, and the doctor rejoined the boy, and pointed out a beat for him which should take him right round the waggons and the two spans of oxen.

"There," he said, "you know what you have got to do—to fire if there is any cause for anxiety."

“And I suppose I had better not go too near the river?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said the doctor. “It’s a mere stream just about here, though I daresay it’s pretty big after rain. Good-night. You will wake up your cousin at about two. Good-night.”

“Good-night,” replied Mark, and he felt that his words must have sounded short to the doctor and full of annoyance, for somehow he thought that it was not fair for him to go away and leave such a boy as he was; and besides, it seemed unkind after he had made such a plain allusion to the river, for the doctor to treat it so lightly. Of course he knew that it was only a little river, a mere stream; but then it was big lower down, and what was to prevent any dangerous beast or reptile from crawling up to lie in wait for anyone that was near?

“Never mind,” muttered the boy, “I suppose it’s natural to feel a bit nervous; but I am not going to show the white feather.”

He stood still, listening and trying to make out the doctor’s step, but he could not hear a sound.

It was very dark, not a star showing, for a faint mist hung above the trees, and for a long time the only thing he heard was a stamp that sounded startling until he made up his mind that it must have been a fidgety movement on the part of one of the ponies, and shouldering his rifle, he stepped out slowly so as to pass right round the little camp.

But even that was difficult, for it was not until he was close upon the waggons that he could make them out, and as he went on the big bullocks were only represented to him by what seemed to be so many clumps of bush or heaps of soil.

He walked as slowly as he could so as to make his rounds take up as much time as possible, and as he came to the end of each traverse he tried to think out how many minutes it must have taken. This slow march was completed four times, and then he came to the conclusion that about an hour of his watch must have passed away, but only to alter his mind after a little thought and mentally see more clearly, that it could not be a quarter or even an eighth of what he realised now was going to be a very long and dreary watch.

“Well, it’s no use to be impatient,” he thought. “It’s no worse for me than it will be for all the rest. One doesn’t like it, but then the pleasure of the travelling and what we shall see right up in the hilly part where the great kopjes rise must make up for a bit of trouble.”

He moved on again slowly, keeping a sharp look out in the direction of the stream and feeling convinced that he had heard a splash.

Then as he listened intently he was just about to come to the conclusion that it was fancy, when there was another, this time a regular heavy, wallowing sound. What it was he could not tell, but he felt sure that it must be some huge beast making its way through the shallow water and mud.

Mark’s next thought was that the brute, whatever it might be, had left the river and was now stealing slowly towards him.

“Can’t be a hippo,” he thought, “or I should hear him crashing through the reeds and bushes. No, it must be one of those loathsome great efts, the scaly slimy brutes, crawling softly;” and at the very thought of it he pressed thumb and finger upon cock and trigger of his piece twice over so as to prepare for action without the premonitory click that accompanied the setting of each lock.

It was hard work to keep from turning sharply and running, but the boy set his teeth and mastered the desire. But he held his piece in front with two fingers on the triggers ready to fire, when all at once from a short distance behind him, and right in the direction in which he would have run, there came a deep, elongated puff as of some big animal, and he felt that his first idea was right, and that one of the huge hippos had caused the wallowing sound in leaving the stream and then made its way right behind him so as to cut him off from his friends.

“The doctor might well tell me to load with ball,” he said. “Why, a shot gun would not have sent the pellets through the monster’s hide.”

There was a repetition of the heavy breath, apparently much nearer, which set the boy’s heart thumping rapidly within his chest, and then the heavy beating began to subside as rapidly as it had commenced, for he said to himself, “Oh, you cowardly fool! Why, I am standing close to the bullocks;” and he stepped boldly out in the direction from which the heavy breathing had come, and began to speak softly to the great sleek animals, a couple of them responding with what sounded like so many sighs.

Mark’s tramp around the camp became a little faster now as he stepped out and began musing about how easy it was to frighten one’s self by imagining all sorts of horrors hidden by the darkness.

“Why, the doctor’s right,” he said; “I don’t believe that there’s anything one might mind in the little river, and of course, if there were lions near, the ponies and the bullocks would know it before I should. There, who’s afraid of its being dark? Not I.”

And walking and pausing by turns, the boy kept his watch, working hard to convince himself that he ought to be very proud of the confidence placed in him.

“There’s something so real about it,” he thought. “It’s quite grand marching round and round here with a loaded double-barrelled rifle over my shoulder. I wonder how old Dean will feel. I’ll be bound to say he’ll be just as squirmy as I was. He won’t go to sleep the first time he’s on the watch.”

The hours seemed to pass very slowly, though it was at their usual rate, and at last to his great satisfaction not only could he feel sure that half of his watch must have passed, but that it was growing lighter.

It could not be the approach of dawn, for he could see a few stars peeping out here and there, and he realised that this was caused by the lifting of the mist under the influence of a light breeze that felt almost chilly.

Mark was standing some little distance from the second waggon where the ponies were picketed, when all at once his heart set up its heavy beating again, for coming in his direction along the edge of the patch of forest he could plainly see a big, dark animal creeping cautiously towards where the ponies were tethered.

Mark watched it for a few moments, till he felt that it must have passed behind the trunk of one of the larger trees, and then it was gone.

"Could it be a lion?" he thought. "No, it had not the big, shaggy head. But it might have been a lioness, or perhaps some big leopard. Ah!" he panted, "there it is again! It's after the ponies. It must be!" and calling to mind that he had cocked his rifle, he covered the dimly-seen animal, which was coming very slowly nearer, and he could make out that it had moved on a few feet and then stopped, as if crouching down waiting to make a spring.

"What did the doctor say?" thought Mark. "I was not to fire unless there was real necessity. There must be real necessity here, for that beast is creeping closer and closer so as to be within easy distance for its spring."

The boy hesitated no longer, but raising his rifle to his shoulder he covered the object that was advancing, and was about to draw trigger when he realised the fact that he was aiming at what seemed to be a bush, while the lioness, or whatever it was, had disappeared.

Mark stared in wonder, for he could not understand how it was that an object which had seemed so clear in the transparent darkness had disappeared so easily, and he was staring almost wildly in the direction where he had seen it last when there was a faint, rustling sound a little to his left, convincing him that the nocturnal marauder had passed a pensile bough of a tree that must be sweeping the ground, and must be close upon the ponies, one of which uttered a low, tremulous, whinnying sound, and gazing sharply in the direction Mark saw as he drew trigger the big animal assuming a rampant position in springing upon the pony.

The silence of the night was broken by a roar, and Mark felt that a cloud was interposed between himself and the camp visitant which hurled him violently to the ground.

Chapter Nine.

"Seen any more Lions?"

Feeling half stunned, Mark rolled over and over, holding on to his piece the while, and struggled to his feet from amongst the bushes in which he had involuntarily sought refuge. His movements took him through a low, clinging cloud of the smoke of gunpowder, and he heard the rustling of trampled bushes as what he assumed to be his assailant dashed away. And now he grasped the fact that his shot had thoroughly roused the whole camp. The ponies were plunging and dragging at their raw hide lariats, and the oxen were upon their feet, alarmed in the darkness and about to break away; but Buck Denham, the English driver, and the Hottentot were yelling at them, and the black forelopers were adding their shrill cry as they aided in trying to pacify the beasts.

In the midst of the noise and confusion Mark heard his name loudly uttered, followed by the words, "Where are you, my lad? Speak up!"

"Here—here," he panted.

"Oh, that's right."

"Not hurt, are you?" cried the doctor, as he grasped him by one arm, and he awoke to the fact that his breathless father had seized him by the other.

"Speak, my boy," he cried. "Why don't you speak? Where are you hurt?"

"I don't quite know, father? Not much; but it sprang right at me and knocked me back amongst the bushes as it tore away."

"What tore away?" cried the doctor. "What did you fire at?"

"I am not quite sure," replied the boy excitedly, "but I think it was a lion. I saw it creeping up towards the ponies, and as it reared up to spring upon them I fired."

"Yes," said his father sharply, "and then?"

"I think I must have wounded it, for I heard it dashing away amongst the bushes."

"Well done, boy," cried his father, patting him on the shoulder. "But you are sure you are not hurt much?"

"Oh, yes, I am not hurt much, father," said the boy quietly. "The beast struck me on the shoulder and knocked me right backwards."

"Then he will be clawed, doctor. Let's get him into the waggon, and have a light."

"Yes, by all means. Who's there?" cried the doctor, in the darkness and confusion.

"Ay, ay, sir! Me, sir. Off for a lantern," cried the little sailor.

"Here we are sir," cried Bob Bacon. "Me, sir, and Peter Dance."

"That's right, my lads. Take hold of Mr Mark and carry him into the waggon."

"Oh, Mark," cried another voice, "don't say you are hurt!"

"Well, but I am, old chap," said Mark coolly. "No, I say, don't do that. Don't be frightened, father, I can walk."

"Are you sure, boy?" said the doctor, who had handed the rifle with which he had come out armed to the keeper; and as he spoke he passed his hands over Mark's shoulders, fully expecting to feel the moisture of blood oozing through his clothes.

"Oh!" shouted the boy, and Sir James winced, uttering a low hissing sound the while.

"It's got him there," said the doctor, between his teeth.

"Yes, it pricks," said the boy. "It was only when you touched it."

At that moment a light appeared from the direction of the first waggon, and the big bullock driver joined the party, ready to open his lantern and cast its rays upon the excited little throng, one of the first faces seen being that of the black guide, who, spear in hand, seemed to become one of the most animated, as he stood with his eyes flashing and his white teeth bared.

"Ahoy! Light's here, sir!" shouted the sailor.

"Bring it here," cried the doctor, and the rays of a second lantern came dancing through the darkness to help light up the scene.

"Now, my boy," said the doctor, "do you feel faint?"

"No," said Mark sturdily.

"I only want to see how much you are hurt."

"It's getting better now," said the boy cheerfully. "It only aches."

"But I must see where—" began the doctor, only to be checked by a shout from Mark.

"I say, don't! You are hurting me again. It's a big thorn, and you pressed it farther in."

"Is it the beast's claw?" whispered Sir James.

"It can't be," replied the doctor. "It's right on the back of his shoulder where I placed my hand—yes, here it is."

"Oh!" ejaculated Mark again, for the doctor thrust his hand inside the door of one of the lanterns, to display a great thorn about two inches long.

"Ah, there's lots more here, sir," cried Bob Bacon. "Mr Mark must have been knocked right into these bushes."

"Why, Mark," continued the doctor, "hold up your hands. They are all covered with blood. Scratches. I don't find anything else the matter with you."

"No," said Mark; "I don't think there is. I say, don't make such a fuss about it. It makes one look so stupid. I say, father, I'm very sorry I fired."

"Sorry!" said his father warmly. "Thank heaven, my boy, you are hurt no worse. The brute, whatever it was, must have been tremendously strong, and struck you down in its leap."

"Well, it did come at me with a good bang, father, just the same moment that I fired. Here, who's got my gun?"

"Gun," said a voice, and the Illaka reached over to thrust it into the boy's hand.

"Oh, thank you," said Mark. "Mustn't lose that. Here, you catch hold, Dean. Then you think I did right in firing, father?"

"Why, of course, my boy."

"Here, that will do, doctor. I think I am all right."

"Well, really, my boy, I am beginning to think so too. But I will keep watch the rest of the night with one of the men. You had better go and lie down now."

"Oh, no," said Mark. "It's my watch, and I am going to finish it."

"And I will come and finish it with you, my boy," said his father.

"But he has finished it," said the doctor, who had hastily pulled out his watch. "Two o'clock!"

"Then it's my turn," said Dean quickly.

"But I can't let you undertake that task now," said Sir James.

"Let me come, sir, along with Mr Dean, sir," cried the sailor.

"No," said Sir James. "Thank you all the same, my man, I have my rifle ready loaded. What has become of yours, Mark?"

"I have got it, uncle," cried Dean. "Give me your pouch and the cartridges, Mark. I want to load."

"But where's your piece, Dean?" said Sir James.

"Mine, uncle—mine? I came out in such a hurry that I forgot all about it."

"Bah! Well, here's Mark's pouch. Take it and load."

"Yes, uncle," replied the boy hastily. "Why, Mark, I only heard one shot. Did you fire both barrels?"

"Eh? I don't know. Perhaps I did."

"Well," said the doctor, a few minutes later, as he stood with Sir James and Dean, "I don't think that there is any occasion to be uneasy about Mark. He can't be injured, or he wouldn't be so calm. The animals seem to be settling down again, and that's a sure sign that there is nothing near to alarm them. What I wonder at is that we heard no sign from the bullocks—"

"Or from the ponies," said Sir James.

"—Before Mark fired."

"Then I suppose," said Sir James, "that we may all go and lie down till you rouse us up again, doctor."

"Which I certainly shall if there is any cause."

The alarm had not proved serious enough to interfere with the sleep of the camp, with one exception, and Mark formed that exception, for during the second watch either Dean or Mark's father went to the waggon as quietly as possible to look after the injured lad, and oddly enough had the same report to give, that Mark was sleeping easily and well, while as soon as each visit had been paid the boy turned over, exclaiming, "Bother! Anyone would think the lion had half eaten me. I wish they would not make such a fuss."

The last time, when Dean was coming off duty, it was to find his cousin's eyes wide open.

"Oh, you are awake now," he cried. "How are you?"

"Oh, all right. Seen any more lions?"

"No; it's been quite still all the rest of the night."

"Father all right?"

"Yes; he will be here directly. I say, Mark, let's look where you were hurt before he comes."

But this was not achieved, Sir James darkening the opening of the waggon tilt just as the neck of his son's shirt was thrown open, to display a big blackening bruise upon the boy's right shoulder, and further examination revealed a small hole where a thorn had penetrated, and some scratches upon the boy's hands.

"Are those claw marks?" said Dean excitedly.

"Pooh! Nonsense!" said a voice which made all look up, to see the doctor climbing into the waggon.

He too examined the injuries, and exclaimed, "You are sure you saw some animal about to attack the ponies?"

"Yes, certain," said Mark.

"And you fired at it?"

"Well, yes," said Mark; "you heard me, and came."

"Exactly," said the doctor drily; "but are you sure that the beast, whatever it was, sprang at you?"

"I saw it rear up as I fired," replied Mark, "and I felt a tremendous blow on the shoulder. Yes: here's the bruise."

"Yes, my boy," said the doctor quietly, "but that is just such a bruise as would have been made if you had pulled both triggers of a heavy rifle at once."

"Well," said Mark quietly, "I have been lying awake almost ever since, and that's just what I've been fancying. Do you think it was that, doctor?"

"I feel sure of it, Mark; and what's more, I have been all round the camp with the Illaka and the two keepers, and even in the moistest place we can find, there isn't the sign of a lion's spoor."

"Well, that's queer," said Mark, scratching his head. "I don't understand it. Now I want some breakfast, and I am going to get up."

Chapter Ten.

Sham.

The doctor suggested that after such a broken night it would be as well to have an early breakfast before they started.

"Yes, capital," cried Mark. "I feel that that is just what I want to put me right."

"See to it at once, then, Dan," said the doctor. "Tell some of the men to get you some wood, and I will talk to the bullock drivers. Oh, there are the two keepers. They will help you to get wood and fetch water. Mind they get it from a clear part of the river."

"Ay, ay, sir!" said the sailor.

"How wonderfully well that poor fellow begins to look," said the doctor.

"Yes," replied Sir James, laughing; "and he thoroughly deserves the name of the Handy Mann. He is never happy unless he is doing something—regularly valeting me and the boys. What do you say to a walk round while they are preparing breakfast?"

"I am willing," replied the doctor, "and we will take Denham and his men as we go."

They started off, and before they reached the two long spans of oxen where they had been turned to graze, Buck Denham's voice was heard storming at somebody.

"Quarrel, seemingly, captain," said Sir James, smiling.

"Or a fit of bad temper," said the doctor, "because the big fellow's night, was disturbed. Here, what's the matter, Denham?" he continued, as they reached the shady pasture where the sleek bullocks were knee deep in rich grass, evidently laying in a store for emergencies when fodder might be scarce. "Don't say that any of the cattle have strayed?"

"Strayed, sir? Not they! They are all right—eight-and-forty of them. I counted them over twice to make sure, after the night's scare. My bullocks are all right. I only wish I could trust my men as well as I can them."

"What has happened, then?"

"You ask him, sir," replied Denham, pointing to the miserable looking little Hottentot—"a pretty sort of a half-bred animal! Look at him squatting there grinning like one of them there dog-nosed baboons."

"Don't insult the man," said the doctor sharply. "What has he done?"

"Man, sir! I don't call him a man," said Buck Denham. "Got nothing to do but a bit of driving now and then and to give a shout at his span, and naturally I trusted him as I was keeping my eye on the oxen to keep his on the two forelopers. I let him do it because he understands their lingo better than I do."

"Well?" said the doctor. "What then?"

"What then, sir? Here are we just two days out from the town, and he's lost one of them already."

"Lost? Nonsense!"

"Well, where is he, then, sir? He has gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes, sir. Sniffed at his job, I suppose, and gone off. I saw him safe enough last night; this morning he is nowhere. My foreloper he was, and now we shall have to stop here three or four days, perhaps a week, while I go back and hunt up another; and I can tell you, sir, they are precious scarce."

"That's vexatious," said the doctor. "Don't be put out, Denham, I think I see how it is. The poor fellow was no doubt scared by the alarm of the lion in the night, and very likely we shall see him come creeping in before it is time to start."

"Oh, thank you, sir," said the big fellow. "I am very glad you take it so easy. Some gen'lemen would be ready to jump down a poor man's throat for half this."

"Indeed!" said the doctor, smiling. "Well, I don't think you will find Sir James and me so unreasonable as to bully a good servant for an unavoidable mishap."

"Thank you, sir," said the big fellow, smiling. "That's done me good. I was afraid to meet you this morning, and I hope you are right, because we must have two of us to each waggon, and I don't suppose either of your servants would like to be asked to do such nigger's work. Hadn't I better start back at once and get another? It would save time if I took one of them ponies."

Sir James winced as he looked at the big fellow's proportions, and glanced uneasily at the doctor, who said, smiling, "No, we will wait to see if the man turns up, and if not our two boys shall mount the ponies and canter back to the station with a note to Captain Lawton asking him to help us to a fresh foreloper."

The man chuckled heartily.

"Why do you laugh?" said the doctor. "Do you think the captain cannot be trusted?"

"Oh, him, sir," replied the man. "Cap'n Lawton's a regular gen'leman. He'd do anything to serve a fellow-countryman. I was grinning, sir, because you thought I should be too much for the pony. Well, I am a big 'un, out and outer; but I growed so. You are quite right, sir, it would be rather hard on one of the brave little beasts, and I hope that black 'un will show up again, but I'm afraid of it. That lion last night scared him, but he'd be more scared to come and face you gen'lemen again."

Meanwhile, Mark had proposed that they should go to look at the spot where he stood to fire at his disturber. This was agreed to, and as they had to pass Dan Mann, Mark put in a word or two about hurrying on the breakfast, and told him to be sure to frizzle the bacon well.

"Ay, ay, sir!" cried the little fellow, beaming upon them; and they went on, looked at the ground by daylight, and saw no trace of footprints, only finding the spot where the unpleasant thorn bush had been crushed by Mark's fall.

"Yes," said the boy, giving a bit of a writhe and rubbing his back softly, "that's where I went down, sure enough, and I believe I have got another thorn in there now. My word, how stiff my shoulder is! I shan't be in a hurry to fire two barrels of a rifle together again. Yes, I stood just there when I fired, just as the beast had reared himself up—itsself, I suppose I ought to say, for I don't know whether it was a cock or a hen—but hallo, where are the ponies?"

"Oh, Peter and Bob have taken them down to water, I suppose," said Dean.

"That they haven't. There they are, over yonder."

"Well, then, Buck Denham must have driven them over there with the bullocks to have a feed before we start."

"Let's ask Dan. Here, cooky, where are the ponies?"

"Dunno, sir. They were gone when I came to see to the fire. I expect Denham has taken them along with the bullocks."

"Come on, Dean. Let's go and see how the little fellows look."

The boys hurried amongst the trees to where Denham, the Hottentot and the foreloper were watching the grazing cattle, with the Illaka seated upon a fallen tree nursing his spear and looking on, while in the distance, each with his gun over his arm, they could see Sir James and the doctor, evidently making a circuit of the camp.

"Ponies, gen'lemen?" said the big fellow. "No, I ain't seen them; I have been so busy over my bullocks. Somebody must have taken them down to the riverside to get a good feed a-piece of that strong reedy grass that they are so fond of. You will find them down there."

"Come along," cried Mark, and the two boys hurried off in the direction of the river, threading their way amongst the trees till they caught sight of the running water sparkling in the rays of the morning sun.

"There they are," cried Mark, "munching away and regularly enjoying themselves. Oh, you beauties! But hallo! Who's that chap watching them?" and he drew his cousin's attention to a tall, thin, peculiar looking fellow who was standing close to the water's edge watching the ponies as if to keep them from going farther along the stream.

The man turned his head as he heard the boys approach, and then looked back at the ponies and drove one a short distance nearer the camp.

"Hullo, you!" cried Mark sharply. "What are you doing here?"

The man shrugged his shoulders, and made a comprehensive sign which included the four little animals.

"Yes, I see that," said Mark, "but what do you want here?"

The man shook his head sadly, and the boys saw that he was very yellow, as if dried in the sun, and had a particularly thin and peculiar face, with two long, pendant, yellowish moustachios which reached far beneath his chin. His beard was closely clipped, and they noted that he held a pair of small scissors, and as he drew back one of his twisted moustachios, he was occupied the while carefully snipping off the greyish stubble that just showed slightly upon his chin.

"But how did you come here?" asked Mark.

"Walked," said the man sadly.

"When?"

"Last—night," sighed the stranger, uttering the first word in quite a high-pitched tone, the second sounding almost like a groan.

He was very shabbily dressed—just an old flannel shirt and a pair of fustian trousers, while his head was covered by one of the regular, broad-brimmed, flop felt hats so common amongst Englishmen for protection from the sun.

"Well, you are a cheerful looking gentleman," thought Mark, and he had hard work on meeting his cousin's eye to keep from bursting into a fit of laughter. Then a sudden thought struck him.

"When did you say you came here?"

"Last—night?"

"What time?"

"No watch," said the man. "Quite dark."

"But what did you come for?"

The man pointed to the ponies, and Mark gazed at his cousin and whispered, "I say, I think I have seen this fellow before."

"Hanging about that dealer's yard?"

"Yes."

"I am sure I did," whispered Dean, as the man turned from them to check the wandering of another of the ponies.

"Dean," said Mark, "I have got an idea."

"Let's have it."

"That chap has come to steal our ponies."

"Bother!" cried Dean contemptuously. "When did you say you came?"

"Last—night," said the man.

"Here, I say, you, sir," cried Mark. "Did you say you came here last night to look after our ponies?"

"Yes," said the man, and they saw that he was working with his left hand now, snipping at the stubby beard with the scissors, while with the other he held his moustache back to keep it from being cut.

"Look here," said Mark; "was it you who came close up to me in the dark when I was on the watch?"

"Yes," said the man sadly. "Thought you was asleep."

"It was lucky for you that I did not shoot you."

"Yes," said the man dismally, as he slowly took off his hat and poked one long thin finger through a hole that the boys had not previously noticed, shook his head at it sadly, put his hat on again, and went on snipping as before.

"There, Dean! Now, then, was it a false alarm?"

"Well, no; but I should never have taken this chap for a lion," replied his cousin. "Here, I say, you, sir, why do you speak as if you were sorry that my cousin did not hit you?"

"Wasn't," said the man, mournfully snipping away.

"Well, what do you want?"

"Breakfast," said the man. "Had none since you come away."

"That's cool," said Mark, as he looked at the man suspiciously. "Oh, here come Buck Denham and Dan. They have smelt that something's wrong about the ponies. Here," he continued, turning to the two fresh arrivals, "what are you two laughing at?"

"At 'im, sir," whispered Dan, as the oddity moved away after a pony.

"Yes, he's rather a rum 'un to look at, gen'lemen," said Buck, in the same low tone. "I have seen him before. Sort of hang-about as has to do with him as sold you those ponies. I think he's a bit touched in his head—dotty, you know."

"That's what I think too, gentlemen," whispered Dan. "I have been to 'Stralia—Sydney, you know, where chaps go out shepherding and don't see anything but the woolly ones sometimes for three months together, and I have heard as some of them quite goes off their heads, miserable and lonely like, for they have nobody to talk to but the sheep."

"But this isn't Australia," said Mark.

"And this fellow hasn't been with sheep," added Dean, "but ponies."

"No, sir," said Dan; "but horses do just as well."

"That they wouldn't," cried Mark. "A man who had horses with him could make companions of them."

"Yes," cried Dean, "and have a good long ride every now and then."

"To be sure," added Mark. "A man who had a horse or a dog for companion could not go off his head. Look at Robinson Crusoe; he was jolly enough with a poll parrot."

"Oh, yes, sir; but then a poll parrot could talk."

"Yes, but he had to teach it first," said Dean.

"Yes, sir," said Dan, "but you couldn't teach a sheep. Why, if you had one of them for years you would never get anything out of him but Baa!"

"Bah, then, to what you are saying," cried Mark. "Here, I say, you, sir," he cried, looking in an amused way at their visitor, who had finished his clipping, pocketed his scissors, and had taken hold of his moustachios as if they were reins and stroked them down with a twist, looking dolefully at those about him the while; "I'll answer for it that we give you some breakfast, and then you had better be off."

The man shook his head.

"Eh? What do you mean by that?" said Mark.

The man shook his head again and took out his scissors as if about to begin clipping once more, but bethought himself and put them back.

Dan chuckled as if he thought it was very good fun, and Buck bent down and whispered something in the little fellow's ear.

"Here, what's that?" cried Mark sharply.

"He means he's going to stop to dinner, sir."

It was said quite in a whisper, but the man proved that he was keen enough of ear.

"That's so," he said mournfully, as if the dinner would be a punishment.

"What, you mean to stay to dinner?"

The man nodded, paused for a few moments, and then with a heavy sigh—

"Yes."

"Well, you are a cucumber," said Mark, "upon my word!"

"Not in season," said the man.

"Cheek!" said Dean laughing.

The man looked up sharply.

"Bacon," he said sadly; and there was an explosion of laughter.

"Bob isn't here; but you are a queer fellow," said Mark.

"Yes," said the man; and he looked from one to the other, and sighed again.

"Here, I say," continued Mark, "where does it hurt you?"

"Hurt me?" replied the man.

"Yes. Inside? Are you in pain?"

The man shook his head.

"My way," he said, and he sighed again.

"Well, don't talk like that."

"Eh? No," said the man; and he reached out his hand to pass it over the muzzle of one of the ponies that had raised its head from where it had been cropping the green shoots of a dwarf shrub.

"The ponies seem to be very good friends with you."

"Yes, sir," said Buck; "they follow him like dogs."

"Know me," said the man sadly.

"Well, you needn't cry about it," said Dean.

"Oh, that's it," cried Mark; "I see. Poor chap! He came to see them again, to say good-bye."

The man shook his head.

"No," he said; "going with them."

"Oh, are you?" cried Mark. "I am glad you told me. But somebody else will have a word or two about that."

"Who?" said the man.

"Why, my father."

"But he bought the ponies," said the man.

"Yes," cried Mark, "but he didn't buy you."

"No," said the man. "Same thing. I belong to them."

"I say, Dozey," cried Mark, "you are wide awake enough now: did you ever hear anything like this before?"

"Never," was the prompt reply.

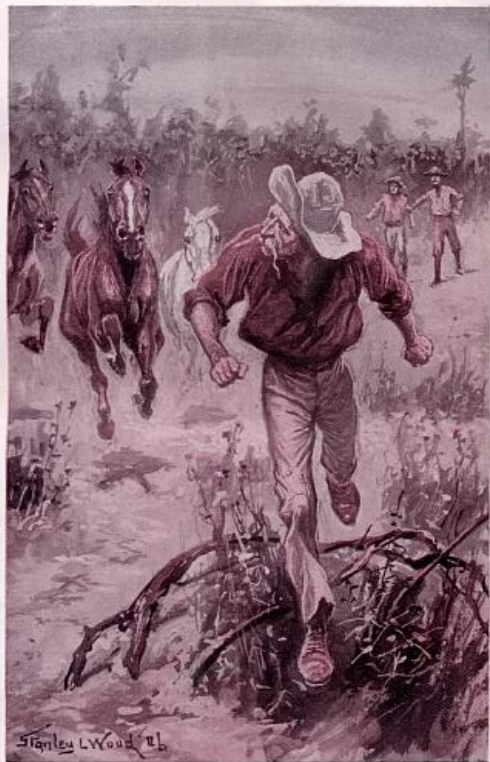
"Ponies no good without me," said the man.

"Why?" cried the boys, in a breath.

"Won't stop with you. Run back to the town to look for me," he said, speaking with some animation now.

"Nonsense!" cried Mark. "We will picket them."

The man laughed, and then as Mark tried to frown him down with a very severe look, he put his hand in his pocket,



"GOING SWIFTLY OVER THE GROUND, LEAPING ALMOST LIKE AN ANTELOPE OVER EVERY BUSH THAT CAME IN HIS WAY."

took out his scissors again, and put them back after a snip, and then looked round at his four companions in turn.

"See here," he said, thrusting two of his fingers into his mouth as he turned sharply away and started off, going swiftly over the ground and leaping almost like an antelope over every bush that came in his way, while he gave vent to a shrill whistle, which he modulated from time to time.

At the first note the ponies raised their heads from where they were cropping the sedge, and at the second, one of the sturdy little fellows uttered a shrill neigh, while at the third note, which turned into a trill, the little animals dashed off at a canter, scattering the sandy earth behind them as they tore after the utterer of the cheery sounds.

Chapter Eleven.

Making a Foreloper.

Dean's jaw fell, and he stood staring after the strange visitor with so vacant an expression of countenance that in spite of his annoyance Mark burst into a hearty laugh.

"What are you grinning at?" cried Dean angrily.

"Your phiz. Why, whatever does that fellow call himself?"

"A horse stealer!" cried Dean excitedly. "That's what he meant by coming last night."

"Yes," cried Mark. "Come on and fetch them back."

"All right, sir," said Buck; "but how? You'd want a rifle to fetch him down."

"Hullo! What does this mean?" cried Sir James, as he joined them, with the doctor. "Why are the ponies being driven away?"

"That fellow!" cried Mark wildly. "A thief, father!"

"To be sure," said Sir James. "But this is a trick. We have been imposed upon."

"Yes, father. This is the chap that crawled up in the dark, and I took for a lion. He's a horse stealer."

"Well, the law will soon set that right."

"Yes," said the doctor, "but it means a long tramp back to the town."

"Say, Dan, old chap, this 'ere's a rum game," whispered Buck. "What do you think of it?"

"Think I should like to get hold of that long-legged 'un. I'd make him sing to a different tune instead of giving us another specimen of his whistlin'."

By this time the ponies were far down the track, headed by their strange visitor, whom the boys had fully expected from moment to moment to see leap upon one of his companion's backs.

"Well," said Mark, "this is getting up for a refresher before breakfast!"

"Yes, sir," said Buck. "It's about spoilt mine. Why didn't you bring him down last night, Mr Mark? I am sure he deserved it."

"No, he didn't," cried the lad addressed. "Look at that! I say, father, hooray! He's come back."

The boy was quite right, for it was plain enough now, distant as the objects were, to see in the clear bright morning their nocturnal visitor describe a curve upon the open country side and, slackening his pace, begin trotting back, the little drove of ponies dropping from their canter into a steady trot, coming nearer and nearer till their leader brought them to where the party had camped for the night; and here they drew up short and began to crop the tender green shoots again, while the strange visitor, who did not seem in the slightest degree out of breath, drew his long pendent moustachios through his hands.

"Well, sir," said Sir James sharply, "pray, what does this mean?"

"Mean?" said the man sadly. "Ponies—know me."

"So it seems," said Sir James; "but I've bought them."

"Yes," said the man, in his most melancholy tone.

"Well, what were you going to say by way of explanation?"

"Nothing."

"Well, what do you want?"

"Breakfast."

"That's what he said before," cried Dean.

"Hungry," said the man, quite reproachfully.

The doctor laughed, and the rest joined in chorus, Dan beginning to stamp about in the exuberance of his delight.

"Beg pardon, gentleman," he said, checking himself suddenly, "but he do set me off."

"But the worst of it is, my man," said the doctor, "that this is resolving itself into no laughing matter."

"No, sir," said Buck respectfully. "There's more cry about him than laugh."

"Yes," said Mark sharply. "If you had been here and heard him talk it would have sounded to you as if he had come for help because he was ill."

"Well, whatever is done," said Sir James, "we must give the poor fellow some breakfast, and follow it up with a few

shillings, or we shall be having him putting a stop to our expedition.”

“Mind he doesn’t hear what you say, father,” whispered Mark.

“To be sure,” said the doctor. “We mustn’t let him realise what a power he has in his hands.”

“In his fingers, I think,” said Mark.

“And it seems to me,” said Sir James, “that he already knows it. Here, what about breakfast? We will talk about it over our morning meal.”

They did, with the result that their party was afterwards increased by one who had already proved how he could manage the fresh purchases. And if further inducement were needed it was afforded by Mark, who suddenly exclaimed, “I’ve got it, doctor!”

“Got what?”

“This fellow can manage ponies splendidly.”

“Well, we know that,” said the doctor drily.

“Yes,” continued Mark; “but why couldn’t a man who can manage dumb animals like that be quite at home with bullocks?”

“Good boy,” said Sir James. “There is something in that. You mean, for him to take the place of the bullock leader—fore—what you call him.”

“Loper, father.”

“Yes. Is there any connection between loper and leaper, doctor?” continued Sir James.

“I cannot say on the instant. It wants thinking out, sir. Antelope—loper—leaper.”

“Well, never mind that,” said Sir James. “But if he can manage the bullocks too that is an additional reason why he should stay.”

“But he is such a dismal, unhappy sort of fellow,” protested Mark.

“Yes, boy, but he can be very useful to us though not very ornamental,” said the doctor.

“No, sir,” said Dean, “I believe that the oxen would take fright at him.”

“Use is second nature, Dean,” said Mark.

“What do you think little Dan said about him just now?” said Dean.

“Can’t say, of course,” said his uncle. “What did he say?”

“That he was all shadow and flam.”

“Yes,” cried Mark; “and Buck Denham compared him to a human skeleton on stilts. I don’t like him; but I suppose we shall get used to him in time.”

“Tut, tut, tut!” ejaculated Sir James. “Don’t trifle, boys; this is a serious matter. Here, Mark, go and tell Buck Denham that I want to speak to him.”

The man came up, looking very serious, and shaking his head.

“Very sorry, sir,” he said, before Sir James could speak, “but I have just been having it over with that other little black, and he tells me that his mate came to him after the scare about the lion, and said he would not go any further, and went off at once.”

“Oh,” said Sir James. “Well, this is your business, doctor. I said I wouldn’t interfere. You are captain. You had better tell Denham what we have been talking about.”

“Yes. Look here, my man; we have come to the conclusion that this fellow would be very useful with the ponies.”

“Yes, sir?”

“And I want to ask you whether you think he could take the foreloper’s place as well?”

“Well, sir,” said the man, with a grim smile, “he doesn’t look much like one, certainly, and I don’t believe he knows anything about it.”

“But couldn’t you train him?”

“Oh, yes, I could train him, sir. I don’t think the beasts would take to him all at once, but it seems to me the queshtun is would he do it?”

“I shall make that the condition as to his staying,” said the doctor firmly.

Chapter Twelve.

In Mid-Veldt.

"I know what I shall do," said Dean, as they prepared for their morning start, during which he had been thoughtfully watching the helpful way in which their new attendant loaded the ponies, over which he seemed to have the most perfect command.

"Well, what shall you do?" said his cousin.

"Learn that whistle, and manage the ponies myself."

"Humph!" grunted Mark. "That will be no good as long as that dreary fellow is near them."

"I say," said Dean, as he and his cousin were tramping along in the rear, gazing eagerly about to the right and left of the track, thoroughly enjoying the beauty of the scenery, and looking out the while for something that might be a pleasant addition to their next meal.

"Well, what do you say? That you don't see any game?"

"No," said Dean. "I want you to look at black Mak."

"Well, what of him? I think he's as dingy black a nigger as ever I saw. Not a bit like those flat-nosed woolly-headed fellows that we used to see at home."

"I don't mean that."

"What do you mean, then?" said Mark impatiently.

"That he seems so sour and surly, as different as can be from what he was yesterday. We didn't do anything to give him offence. Let's see; what did we do yesterday and the day before to hurt his feelings?"

"I don't know," said Mark. "I did nothing. What did you do?"

"Nothing," replied Dean. "He was as jolly and smiling as could be till last night; and see how he helped about the scare. Now, I tell you what I think."

"Oh, I wish you wouldn't think so much," cried Mark. "It makes you seem so slow and sleepy! Well, what do you think?"

"I think he is jealous of the new man."

"Right. He doesn't like the look of him—thinks he's a bad colour, neither black nor white. You are right, Dean. I saw him scowling at him, now you mention it. Well, we shall have to look out and tell Buck Denham that there must be no quarrelling. If they don't agree he must take them both by the scruff and knock their heads together."

"Oh, but that will all blow over," said Dean, "I daresay. There's nothing for them to disagree over, because this Brown will have his own work to do."

"And black Mak has nothing to do but look on," put in Mark, laughing.

"You forget one thing," said Dean; "he has to carry his spear."

"Yes, spear," said Mark eagerly; "and that sets one thinking. That spear is precious sharp."

"How do you know?"

"He showed it to me, and seemed as proud of it as could be."

"Well, what then?"

"Why, it would be very nasty if they quarrelled and came to a fight. What chance would Mr Staches have, only armed with a small pair of scissors?"

The days wore on, one strongly resembling another, and though the black guide stalked about like a superintendent and was rather given to scowl at the forelopers, he every now and then unbent from his savage dignity, and was always the best of friends with the boys. In fact, upon occasions when he was marching along with them beside the bullocks, or by them when they were mounted on a couple of ponies, he would even unbend so far as to allow one of them to carry his spear, evidently as a great favour and a mark of honour.

"Treats it," said Mark merrily, "as if it were his sceptre."

But there was no suggestion of quarrelling, and the man was seen at his best and full of smiles when, as the bullocks plodded sluggishly along, hunting excursions were made off to the right or left of the trail—a trail which the party formed for themselves, for the old ones soon died out—the new one being formed as to direction by their guide himself. He selected the most open country, and pointed out with his spear some distant object for which Buck Denham was to make, and when it was reached in the evening it was invariably found to be a spot where there was a

good supply of water and food for the cattle.

So far from there being any quarrelling on the side of Brown—Dunn Brown, as to their great amusement he told the boys was his full name, Dunn from his mother, and Brown from his father—the long, thin, peculiar looking fellow settled down as calmly as if he had been in Sir James's service half his life.

He was a kind and careful tender of the ponies, and after a few displays of awkwardness which Buck Denham corrected in the most friendly way, he was soon quite at home with the bullocks.

"Why, the great lumbering, fat, stupid brutes are beginning quite to know him, gentlemen, and I should not be at all surprised if one of these days we find him whistling to them and making them come to him like the ponies."

As the party journeyed on day after day farther and farther from civilisation, the expedition was all that could be desired. Game was plentiful and the two keepers were quite in their element, so that the larder was well stocked, and they took care that there was plenty of sport for the two lads whenever the waggons' course was marked down and the little party, trusting to the drivers to make their way to the given point, struck off in a different direction so as to make a *détour* and meet at their appointed centre before night.

The ponies enabled their riders to get many a shot at the several varieties of antelope—boks, as they were generally called—while as game was so abundantly plentiful, the boys were asked by the doctor what they would seek for that day when they would sometimes decide on devoting one barrel of their double guns to small shot, the other in case of danger being loaded with a bullet. Then they would make the Illaka understand what they required, and he would lead them to where there was abundance of a large kind of partridge, or francolin, which was delicious eating; or take them to some place at the edge of the forest where he knew from experience that the harsh, metallic-voiced, speckled guinea-fowl would be coming home to roost.

This would always be when the supply of the larder was very low, and then, with the two keepers to load, a heavy bag would invariably be made, and a pretty good odour of burning feathers pervade the camp.

Camp was formed one night with all the precautions made such as were customary in the part of the world through which they were travelling, so as to carefully secure the draught animals and the ponies, for however peaceful and free from danger the country might seem, the black always marched about shouldering his spear and watching that this was done, while after noting how careful the man was, the doctor gave him a few words of praise and left these precautions to him, while these safeguards always included the collecting of a supply of wood sufficient to keep up a good blazing fire till morning.

"I suppose this is all right," said Mark, who was extra tired and had several times yawned widely after partaking of an ample supper, "but all these days we have been travelling farther and farther into the depth of the country we haven't seen a single big beast, let alone a lion."

"Only the one you shot at, Mark," said his cousin.

"You don't seem as if you could forget about my mistake, Dean," said Mark peevishly. "Here, I think I shall lie down and go to sleep."

"And forget all about its being your turn to take first watch?" said the doctor, smiling.

"What, again?" cried the boy peevishly, "Oh, how soon the nights do come round! Well, I don't have to go on duty for hours yet, so I shall have my nap first. But I say, doctor, I thought that we should always be seeing lions and elephants and giraffes, besides rhinoceroses, which would come charging at the waggons whenever they saw them."

"I daresay you did," said the doctor quietly.

"And here we haven't seen one—nothing but those little—well, some of them were big—bucks."

"Why, we saw a drove of zebras the other day."

"Yes, we did see them," replied Mark. "But I wanted to have a shot at an elephant or a giraffe."

"Yes; I suppose you expected to find South Africa a sort of over-abundant Zoological Gardens."

"No, I didn't," said Mark; "but I did expect that as soon as we began burning fires to keep off the wild beasts, there would be some to keep off."

"Patience, my dear boy; patience. We have only come a little way into the country as yet."

"A little way!" cried Mark. "Why, you forget, doctor, how many weary days we have been tramping since we left the soldiers' station."

"Oh, no, I do not, my dear boy. It is a very little way compared with the vastness of this great solid continent. We have not seen a lion yet, but that does not show that we may not have been passing through open country where they are abundant; and very likely if we had omitted to start this blazing fire to-night we might have had a visit from several."

"I vote, then," cried Mark, whose sleepy fit seemed to have passed over, "that we put the fire out with a few buckets of water and then sit up and watch."

"No," said Sir James drowsily; "I forbid it. You are not going to allow that, doctor?"

"Certainly not, sir; and even if I felt so disposed the black would not allow it. You must be patient, Mark. I dare say we shall meet with more wild beasts than we care for before long, and wild men too."

"I am ready," said Mark, rather bumptiously; "but I am disappointed, all the same."

"Yes," said the doctor, "no doubt you are; but you must curb your impatience till we reach the part of the country where the lions are. I thought you were going to have your nap."

"No," said Mark; "Dean and I are going to have a chat with the men. Dance says he wouldn't have believed there could have been so many 'come backs' in all the world—I say, what's that?" he cried. "That wasn't a lion?"

"No," said the doctor, for a long, low, dismal and penetrating howl had gone out upon the night.

"What is it, then? There it goes again."

"I form my own idea of what it is," said the doctor. "You two can go and tell the men to throw some more wood on the fire."

He had hardly spoken when the low and doleful howl rang out again from the distance, and the fire blazed up under the influence of an armful of dead boughs which the Hottentot and the black foreloper had just thrown on, the clear, bright flame showing out the big, heavy figure of Buck Denham and lighting up his face as he turned round to tell the men to bring up more wood for the night supply.

The boys sprang up from where they were seated, and hurried round to the other side of the blazing heap where their men had gathered together to sit and have their evening smoke.

"Hear that howling?" cried Mark. "You, Pete—Bob—"

"Yes, sir; we couldn't help it," said the latter. "I was asking Buck Denham what it was, thinking it was one of them great tom cats; but he says it's only a hy-he—something."

"Hyhaena, my lad—hyhaena."

"Yes, that's it. Well, it made noise enough for t'other, didn't it?"

"Made noise enough for t'other!" growled the driver. "You wait till you hear the real thing, and you won't ask questions again like that."

Dance took his pipe out of his mouth and opened his eyes, for he too had grown drowsy in the warmth of the fire, after his long day's tramp.

"I 'eerd it too, and thought it must be a big howl a-howling. You have got howls out here, haven't you, mate?"

"Oh, yes; plenty. But that's what I said."

The big driver having noted that the men had brought up a plentiful supply of wood sufficient to keep up the beast-scaring beacon, subsided heavily in the full light of the fire and began to fill his pipe.

"Now you two," he said to the Hottentot and the foreloper, "just take a quiet walk round the bullocks, and then you can come back and smoke your pipe of peace."

The Hottentot's voice sounded very unpleasant and very clicky as he replied sharply, and though it was almost unintelligible Mark made out from it and the driver's answers that Dunn Brown was already performing that duty.

"Oh," said Buck, "then you needn't go. That will be all right. Well, Illaka, aren't you coming to sit down?" For the boys suddenly noticed the black shadowy figure of the guide glide into the firelight, his appearance being emphasised by a flash where the flame played upon the polished leaf-shaped blade of his spear.

The man nodded, shook his head, and disappeared again.

"What sort of fish do you think there are out in the river here?" asked Bob Bacon.

"I don't know their names," said Buck Denham quietly, as he went on filling his pipe very slowly; and the two boys sat down one on either side, pricking up their ears at the words "river" and "fish."

The big driver leaned forward, drew out an incandescent piece of wood and quite ceremoniously held it to the bowl of his pipe.

"I don't think you will find any trout," he said, "like you have at home, but there's plenty of fish there, I should say, just as there is lower down near Illakaree, and up here I should reckon there's plenty to fish for."

"Ah!" cried Mark eagerly, as he glanced round at the picturesque group seated in the full blaze of the fire, while the reflections played upon the dark edge of the forest, piercing the great overhanging branches from among which a few startled birds dashed out, winged their way round the circle of light and disappeared again.

"Look, Dean; isn't it beautiful now!"

"Thought you wanted to go to sleep," said his cousin.

"Not I! I leave that to you."

"Yes," continued the big driver, repeating his words, "and I should say there's plenty up here to fish for."

"I say, Buck, are there so many blacks about here, then?"

"Sometimes, sir."

"And do they go fishing?"

"No, sir; they may do, but I don't know as I ever saw a black go fishing. You've been to 'Stralia, Dan; do the black fellows out there fish much?"

"Much?" said Dan, showing his white teeth. "Yes, and hunt and knock the big kangaroos over with their nulla-nullas and boomerangs. Wittles are precious scarce there, and they have had a hard time of it to get enough grub, and I suppose that's why they pick holes in the softy wood trees to get the big fat grubs out of them."

"Ugh! Horrid!" said Dean.

"No, sir," said Dean, smiling. "It don't sound nice, but I know a little about cooking, and when them 'Stralian grubs are nicely cooked over the fire they are not to be sneezed at. There's another thing too that's very nice eating, baked or roasted, and that's a locus', and I shouldn't wonder if you could find them out here, for they come in clouds up in the north and eat everything they find."

"Well, don't cook any for us, Dan," said Mark.

"There's no need, sir, with such a good supply of venison, as you gents call it, and game birds."

"But I should like you to try your hand with the frying-pan and some fish."

"You catch the fish, Mr Mark, sir, and leave it to me, and I'll promise to fry it to rights, egged and crumbed and all."

"What!" cried Dean.

"Well, no, that arn't right, sir. Allers speak the truth, Dan, my boy, my grandmother used to say; and I will if I can. I could clean and scale and egg the fish to rights. We can get plenty of them comebacks' eggs, but the crumbing of them would rather bother me, and I should have to do it with mealie flour."

There was a short silence as the men sat smoking, and then Mark broke out with, "We will have a try for some fish; but who is it does the fishing up here, then, Buck?"

The big driver chuckled, and his eyes twinkled in the firelight.

"The whoppers, sir."

"The whoppers!"

"Yes, sir; the crocs. I daresay if you went down by the river and listened just at daybreak you would hear them at it, flapping the river with their tails to stun the fish."

"But that wouldn't stun the fish," cried Dean. "Oh, come, I say, what a traveller's tale!" And Mark laughed as if agreeing with his cousin.

"Well, it may be a traveller's tale, sir, but if you was there you'd see the fish come to the top upside down, I mean, white side up'ards, and the crocs shovelling them down as fast as you like. That's all I know about it."

"But is that true, Buck?"

"Yes, sir; true enough, for I have seen it. I wouldn't tell you a tale like that without letting you know it was a bam-bam afterwards."

"Ah, well, I'll believe you, Buck. Ugh! Listen! What's that? Did you ever hear anything so horrible in your life! Somebody's being killed. There it is again! There!"

Chapter Thirteen.

"Don't wake the Wrong Man."

"What are you laughing at, Buck?"

"You, sir," cried the man. "You'll get more used to our noises in time."

"Then it's that horrible brute of a hyaena again. What a doleful howl! Sounds just as if it was crying after its mother."

"But that isn't it, sir. He's howling after his supper."

A short time after Mark caught sight of the doctor approaching, grasped the sign he gave him, sprang up, and went to the waggon for his rifle, which he carefully loaded, and then began his solitary watch, which seemed less

wearisome on this occasion as he paraded to and fro and round and round in the silence of the sleeping camp. Every now and then he heard some startling sound, and ever and anon he listened to the hyaena's wail, turning at times into what sounded like a mocking laugh. Now and again too there was a cracked trumpet-like cry from the river, but neither was this startling, as he had learned to know it as the call of some night-hunting stork or crane.

Once or twice his finger went to the trigger of his piece involuntarily, for it seemed to him that the loathsome animal that had hung about the camp was creeping closer in search of food; but the fire just then sprang up as the result of more fuel being thrown upon it, scaring away the foul beast, for after a few words with the Hottentot and the foreloper before they went back to their shelter beneath the leading waggon, he heard the hyaena no more.

The next event that enlivened the wearisome watch was a visit from the doctor, to whom the lad made his report, which was followed by a short chat.

"You won't be sorry to be relieved, Mark, my boy," he said. "You remember, of course, that Peter Dance is to relieve you, so don't wake the wrong man."

"I shan't make any mistake," replied Mark confidently; and then he was alone once more, taking a turn or two about the camp, listening to the night cries again, and enjoying the confidence given to him by the knowledge that there was nothing in them that he need fear.

For the most part he kept to one particular spot, where he could stand and listen, at the same time keeping his eyes fixed upon the glowing fire, comforted as it were by its social, friendly look as of a companion which he could trust to ward off danger; and when he felt disposed he could walk up to it near enough to let its light fall upon the strong silver hunting watch whose case flew open at the pressure upon the spring, perhaps not so often as might have happened under the circumstances.

Somehow a sleeper accustomed to a certain duty is ruled by some natural impulse to awaken almost to a minute if in the habit of rising to perform that task, and here Mark roused himself from a train of dreamy thought to make another journey towards the fire and bend down to look at his watch.

"Hurrah!" he said to himself. "Ten minutes to two. Just time to throw on some wood, and rouse up old Peter."

He stood to listen for a minute or two, and then caught up one of the rough armfuls of wood laid ready for the purpose, threw it on the fire, and then hurried to the men's waggon and roused the keeper.

"Who is it? You, Mr Mark, sir?"

"Yes. Jump up."

"Where did you hear 'em?" said the man. "In the long coppice, or down by the ten acres?"

"Hear whom?" said Mark.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, sir. I was dreaming that I was at home and that you had come to tell me that you had heard poachers. All right, sir," said the man, creeping into the shadow after getting his rifle. "You've got the fire going, then?"

"Yes, but you had better throw on another armful soon."

"Oh, yes, sir; all right. All been quiet?"

"Yes, except that howling brute; but I haven't heard him for the last hour. You are quite awake, aren't you?"

"Awake, sir? Oh, yes," said the man, shouldering his piece and walking beside his young master to the other waggon.

"Good-night," said Mark. "I can hardly keep my eyes open now."

"Same here," muttered the man, as Mark climbed to his resting-place, so heavily assailed by sleep that he was hardly conscious of his words.

Then all was silent but for the heavy breathing of the sleepers and an occasional stamp from one of the picketed ponies.

Chapter Fourteen.

A Pretty Dance.

It was not a feather-bed; there was neither bolster nor pillow; and a single blanket laid across three sacks of Indian corn did not counteract the hard nubby feeling. But a couple more blankets drawn over the lad right up to his chin thoroughly kept off the crisp coolness of the air on the high plateau of a country where the sun was broiling by day. Youth, health, exercise and an open-air life did the rest to make that sleeping place a perfect Elysium.

Add to the above a long watch in the darkness, and it is not surprising that as Mark Roche stretched out his legs to the fullest extent as he lay upon his back, he uttered a low, long, soft "Hah-h-h!" and the next instant was fast asleep.

How long that lasted he could not tell, but he half awoke; better still, one may say he only one quarter awoke bodily;

mentally he was so to speak soaked, saturated with sleep, and his waking was only into a kind of confusion out of which he could not rouse himself.

All he knew was that something was dreadfully wrong—when—how—where—he could not make out.

There was a great noise going on, and the darkness was something horrible. This seemed to last for a long time—seemed only, and he began to struggle as if a heavy body was lying on him and pressing him down.

It was like some terrible nightmare, and as he struggled against it he threw out his arms, half fancying that he was fighting to save himself from being suffocated in a flood that was not liquid but solid and hard. Then one hand came in contact with something soft, which he realised to be a human face, and then just a faint ray of understanding flashed through his muddled brain and he knew where he was, and that the face must be his cousin's.

Then the mental darkness closed in again and he was as confused as ever. The noise went on, and he could not tell what it was till after a short interval another ray of light dawned upon him and he caught at and shook his companion, who was sharing the sacks, and sleeping so hard that Mark's attempts to rouse him were in vain.

And then speech came, and the boy found himself muttering aloud, though it seemed to be somebody else talking. But now the power to put that and that together to some extent grew stronger.

"Oh, Dean, how you do sleep!" came from somewhere. "Here, wake up!" And he grew a little better, for he felt that his lips were touching his cousin's warm ear, while now it was another voice that said drowsily, "What's the matter?"

"Ah! that's better," the other voice ejaculated, and he heard it plainly, though it was partially smothered by the awful confusion of strange sounds that came as it were from a distance. "Oh, how dark!"

And he knew now that it was his own voice, for he was rapidly shaking off the strange feeling of mental torpidity.

"Father! Dr Robertson! Are you there?"

His words came back to him as if his face was covered with something thick, while he fully grasped the idea now that the noise that smote his ears was somewhere far away.

"I don't know what's the matter," he muttered. "Am I ill? It can't be a dream. Here, Dean, wake up!"

"What's the matter?" came again drowsily.

"I want you to listen."

"Bother! Will in the morning."

"Oh, how can you be so stupid!"

Mark was rapidly recovering now.

Snore!

"Will you wake up?" And this was accompanied by a shake.

"Be quiet! Want me to hit you on the nose?"

"Yes, and I want you to shake me. I'm—I'm—oh, I don't know how I feel—yes, I do," added the boy, as the power of thinking and acting now grew stronger. "Dean!"

"Oh, bother!" cried his cousin. "Now then, what is it?" And in the darkness Mark felt his hand shaken off, and from the movement knew that his cousin had risen up into a sitting position sharply and banged himself down again, the noise he made being followed instantly by a loud snore.

"Dean!" cried Mark again, renewing his attack, and this time giving the sleeper a violent shake, which roused him again.

"Now then, what is it?"

"Listen! Do you hear that dreadful noise?"

"No-o!" came sleepily. "What is it?"

The question was asked through two folds of blanket, and naturally sounded woolly.

"Lions, I think."

"Tell them to lie down."

"Oh, don't be such a fool!"

"Nogoinabe. Wha' time is it? Goo' night."

"Dozey! Oh, you sleepy old dormouse! I am sure there is something dreadful going on. We are in danger."

"Lem dange. Here, tell the doctor. Don' wake uncle, nor me."

"Oh, dear, what shall I do!" said Mark, half aloud. "Oh, my head! My head! This must be—yes, I remember; I am in the waggon—here, Dean! Dean!" And he began shaking his cousin again.

"Don't! Don't!" And there was the sound of the boy's bare feet kicking, and a snatch made as if to draw back the blankets that had been sent flying. "Oh, I will serve you out for—here, what do you want?"

"You to wake up. Can't you see how dark it is?"

"Dark?"

"Yes; quite black."

Dean was wide awake now.

"Yes, everything's as black as black."

"Well, did you expect it to be white?"

"Can't you hear that dreadful noise?"

"Yes. What is it? Oh, I am so sleepy! Uncle snoring."

"There it is again!" cried Mark wildly.

"Well, I don't care," cried Dean angrily, and he dragged his blankets over his head. "Hullo! I say! There's something the matter;" and the boy now rose to his knees. "Here, where are the guns?"

"I don't know. Yes, I do," cried Mark, feeling about. "I have got one—yes—here's yours. Let's get to the door."

"No, stop. Listen!" and Dean caught his cousin by the arm. "It's a lion. I'm sure of it."

"So am I," cried Mark—"a dozen of them. Oh, Dean, Dean! Hark at the poor bullocks! They are pulling them down, and they'll be killing those ponies. Here, let go."

"What are you going to do?"

"Going outside to shoot."

"No, no; don't do that, or we shall have them springing in here."

"But—"

"There, you needn't go now. There's somebody else shooting." For a couple of reports came from somewhere in the direction of where the fire kept burning, and then another, followed by a confused noise of bellowing oxen, trampling feet, and the deep-toned, barking roar of a lion, which dominated everything else.

"Here, Mark," cried Dean in a hoarse whisper, clinging to his cousin now tightly, "we are attacked by lions."

"Seems like it," was the reply. "Where are father and the doctor?"

"I don't know. I would say let's shout, only it would be like asking the savage animals to come."

"But we must do something. Are you loaded?" And as Mark spoke there was the sound of his raising the cocks of his piece.

"No. My hand shakes so. That's better. I could hardly do it. I say, don't you feel frightened, Mark?"

"Horribly. But look sharp. Are you ready? Let's jump out together, and then fire."

"All right. Ready now. I wish I didn't feel in such a shiver. Here, I'm ready. Perhaps it will scare the brutes."

"Hope so," said Mark, as he drew aside the folds of the tilt and crouched by the waggon chest ready to spring. "Hooray! There's somebody shouting. Now then; take hold of my hand. Let's jump together."

There was a double thud, as the boys sprang out into the darkness.

"Now then—ready?"

"Yes," cried Dean, firmly now, as soon as he had made his desperate plunge into danger.

"Fire!"

Bang! Bang!

"Again!" cried Mark, and directly after there was the repetition of the reports and the rustling sound of replacing the empty cartridges.

"Hi, there!" came in a voice from out of the darkness, sounding distant. "Is that you boys?"

"Yes, doctor," cried Mark. "Where's father?"

"Here, my boy. Where's your cousin?"

"I'm here, uncle."

"Good. But you two fellows ought to have stopped in the waggon."

Directly after Sir James and the doctor joined them, and a couple more shots came from a distance, in the direction where the thundering beat of hoofs was beginning to die away, and then shots again, followed by a hideous snarling and roaring, as if very near at hand several lions were quarrelling like angry cats over their prey.

"Ahoy, there!" shouted the doctor.

"Ahoy!" came from two places in the distance.

"Rally here," cried the doctor, as loud as he could shout. "Up here by the waggon!"

This was followed by the beating of feet upon the thick grass, and all the time the trampling of oxen grew more distant, while the savage snarling went on and was punctuated in the darkness every now and then by a deep-toned bark.

"This way," cried the doctor. "Come on!"

The boys' hearts beat hard at this, for the doctor's words were answered by a chorus of snarls from what Mark judged now to be a portion of the forest not many yards away; and involuntarily the boys raised their rifles to their shoulders as they glanced to right and left, trying to make out through the darkness whether the way was clear for a shot.

"Hadn't we better fire again, father?"

"No," said the doctor sharply, from close at hand. "The men are rallying, and we may hit somebody."

"Yes," said Sir James quickly.

"And besides," continued the doctor, "if we fire at where that snarling comes from it will be answered by a rush. The brutes can see in this horrid darkness."

"What are they doing?" asked Dean.

"They have pulled down a bullock, boys, and they are quarrelling over it. Can't you hear? Oh, this darkness!" cried the speaker, and he gave—so the sound indicated—a stamp of one foot.

"Is the boss there?" cried a gruff voice.

"Yes, this way, Denham," said the doctor. "Mind the lions."

"Oh, I hear them, sir. Anyone hurt?"

"I hope not," replied the doctor, as the man came nearer, rustling through the grass. "Where are your men?"

Oomph! Oomph! Oomph! came in a deep-toned roar, followed by a chorus of snarls.

"Old 'uns and young 'uns," said Denham, subduing his voice a little. "They don't like our being so near. I expect my chaps have shinned up the trees somewhere. That's what they would do, gentlemen; and old Brown has used those long legs of his to put him miles away by this time."

"But have you heard anything of my two men?" asked Sir James—"Dance and Bacon?"

"I've 'eard them letting go with their rifles, sir."

"And what about Dan?"

"Oh, I haven't heard anything of him, sir."

"Ahoy!" came in the little sailor's well known voice, from somewhere in the darkness.

"Ahoy!" cried the boys together.

Roo—oomph! Roo—oomph! Roo—oomph! issued from the spot that had now grown familiar.

"Steady, gentlemen—steady! All cats have got the savage on strong when they are at work at their grub. Wait a bit. Let's get the others together, and then we'll give the brutes a volley as near as we can."

"Cooley! Cooley!" came out of the darkness.

"This way! Here!" shouted Buck Denham.

Roo—oomph! Roo—oomph! Roo—oomph! came now, with a fiercer roar than ever, which roused the lion's companions to utter a furious burst of snarls.

"Cooley! Cooley!" came again.

"All right, mate," said the big driver, in a low voice. "You must find your own way now. That last bit of tongue meant, look out for squalls."

"Anybody hurt?" came in a well known voice now from close at hand, and Dan hurried up.

"I think not, Dan," whispered Mark, and then he stretched out his hand and felt for the little sailor. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, sir. I fired off all my cartridges."

"Here's someone else coming, gentlemen," said Denham, in a low, deep tone. "They are your two lads, I think."

"Yes," cried Dean eagerly. "Nobody else would have cried cooey, unless it was little Dan."

"Yes, I might, but I didn't to-night; I have been too busy."

"That you, Peter. Where's Bob Bacon?"

"Me, Mr Mark, sir?" said the latter. "Here I am, as large as life. We have been at it pretty warm. But I want it to grow light, to see if we can retrieve any of the game."

"Yah! Ain't 'it anything," growled Buck Denham.

"But where's Peter? I heard two cooeys," said Mark.

"Yes; that was me, sir. I ain't seen him."

"Well, now then, gentlemen," said Buck Denham; "all loaded?"

"'Cept me," said Dan.

"Take these. Here are some cartridges," said Sir James.

"Now then—ready?" said Denham, quite loudly, and there was another burst of roars and snarls. "Thank ye," said Denham; "that's just let us know whereabouts to fire. Now, all of you let them have it, as near as you can guess; and fire low. I'd kneel down. I'll just give them a rouse up with a shout. That will make them roar again. Then you, doctor, give the word, and let 'em have it."

"Right," said the doctor.

"Ready, my lads?" whispered Buck.

There was a low murmur of assent, and the driver put one hand to his cheek. "Hullo, there, you!"

Er—rr—oomph! came in a roar, followed by a snarl; and this time there was a sharp crackling of bushes, as one of the savage beasts made a bound towards them.

It was all guess work, but the volley fired at the advancing brute was followed by a roar from several feline throats and a struggling plunge and trampling amidst the undergrowth, with a fiercer snarling than ever.

"Load again quickly," said the doctor, "and stand firm, my lads."

"Ay, we've got to," added Denham. "I was in hopes that those shots would have scared them; but one of them has got it pretty warm." For the violent kicking and tearing amidst the bushes went on, supplemented by the snarling and growling of the hidden beasts.

"How long is it to morning?" asked the doctor in a whisper.

"Good two hours, I should say, sir."

"Then we had better retreat to the waggons before the savage brutes take courage and come on at us."

"They won't attack, sir, as long as they have got that bullock there, unless we go near. Now, if we had only got a light we could rouse up that fire—hullo!"

For all at once, as if the man's words had been heard, there was a soft crackling amidst the embers where the fire should have been blazing, and faintly illuminated by a glow from the earth, the watchers caught sight of the face of the Illaka, looking strange and ruddy, while as the black stirred up the ashes with the haft of his spear there was enough life in them to emit a bluish golden flame which caught the twigs he threw on. The light cast upon him increased, and in a few minutes he had augmented the fire by throwing on armfuls of wood, till there was a fierce blaze which lit up the edge of the forest and made the waggons and their tilts show up as if of gold.

"Well done, Mak!" cried Denham. "That will do more than all our shooting. More wood—all you can."

The black understood him, and as snarl after snarl came from out of the forest the dry wood blazed up and the growling grew less and less.

"They're a-sneaking off, sir," said the big driver, "and I think you might give them another shot or two to hurry them."

"All together," said the doctor sharply. "Ready! Fire!"

The flashes from the mouths of the rifles looked slight in the glow of the flames, and the reports rang out loudly, to be followed by a fierce yell and a snarling roar, as, feeling awestricken by what was taking place, the boys pictured to themselves amidst the low growth the huge lion tearing about in its rage and pain.

"I'd keep quiet, gentlemen," whispered Buck. "One of us has hit another, and if he made out where we were he might charge."

The man ceased speaking as the tearing and raging about of the wounded beasts went on, but evidently growing more distant, till their snapping and snarling were almost drowned by the fierce, loud crackling of the burning fire.

"It's crawling away," whispered Mark excitedly.

"Yes, sir. He's got it," replied the driver; "but I would keep quiet, or we may bring him back to pay us."

For some minutes no one spoke, while the fire was freshly fed by the black, who looked almost diabolical as he danced about it in a strange way, ending by approaching the group, who crouched behind some bushes, which would have made but a frail breastwork had one of the lions charged.

A quarter of an hour must have elapsed before anyone spoke again, and during that time the crackling of the burning wood, which now lit up a wide circle, was the only sound that was heard.

"Do you think we may move now, Denham?" said the doctor. "Or would you fire a few more charges?"

"I don't want to waste powder and shot, sir, and I think they are all gone. Here, Mak, my lad, lions gone?"

The black made no reply, but came cautiously close up and listened.

"Come," he said, and in obedience to his brief command Buck, the doctor, and Bob Bacon ranged themselves with presented rifles on either side, and, not to be outdone, the two boys ran forward to join the advancing party as well.



"THE BRUTE COUGHED, SNARLING FIERCELY, WITH THE BOY LYING BENEATH THE OUTSTRETCHED PAWS."

The spot where the feline marauders had been busy over their prey was not above sixty yards from the last waggon, and as the little party advanced, gaining confidence from the silence that reigned, and reducing the distance to about half, gazing searchingly the while at what looked like a breastwork of leaves lit up by the fire, the silence seemed to be awful, and as if moved by one impulse all stopped short at the end of another ten yards.

"Must be gone, I think, gentlemen," whispered Buck; "but be ready to fire, for they are treacherous beasts, and one may be lying there badly wounded but with life enough in him to do mischief after all."

"Hadn't we better wait till daylight?" whispered the doctor.

"It will mean so long, sir," said the driver, rather gruffly. "I think we might risk it now, Mak," he cried, and he added a few words in the black's dialect. "He's willing, gentlemen," said the driver quietly. "Let's all go on again."

Then slowly and cautiously the little line advanced, till all at once the black stopped, holding his spear point low and the haft pressed into the ground, for there was a savage roar, and a huge lion, which looked golden, made a

tremendous bound right out into the light.

Dean uttered a cry, and the brute couched, snarling fiercely, with the boy lying beneath the monster's outstretched paws.

Chapter Fifteen.

Who watched the Fire?

"Back, Mark! Back, boy!" cried Sir James wildly. "No, no; don't shoot," he continued.

The words were unnecessary, for the advancing men, stunned as it were by the catastrophe, stood fast, rifle to shoulder, not daring to draw trigger for fear of injuring the lion's prisoner; but as if deaf to his father's command, Mark continued to advance on one side, the black on the other, till they were close up to the great furious beast, whose eyes were glowing like the fire reflected in them, while its horrent mane stood up as if every hair were a separate wire of gold.

The savage brute, as if contented with having captured its prey, couched there perfectly still, glaring at its approaching enemies as if waiting before making its next spring, and then, exactly together, from one side the black plunged the keen blade of his long spear into its shoulder, while from the other Mark, thrusting forward his rifle, drew trigger not a yard away, sending a bullet right into the monster's skull.

There was a hoarse yell, a sharp crack, the lion threw itself over backward, rolled over twice, slowly stretching itself out with extended paws tearing at the earth, and then lay still.

"Dean!" cried Mark, dropping on one knee. "Oh, don't say you are hurt!"

The boy slowly rose to his knees, staring confusedly at his cousin, while the doctor dashed forward in company with Sir James to examine the boy's injuries.

"Dean, my boy," cried Sir James, "pray, pray speak!" And he caught at the boy's arms.

Dean heard him and turned to look at him in a curious, half dazed way, but in spite of appeal after appeal he made no reply, but began to draw his handkerchief from his breast and to wipe his face, which was covered with blood and foam from the lion's lips. Then giving a strange, half hysterical cry, he exclaimed, "Oh, uncle, it was horrid—horrid!"

"But where were you hurt?" cried Mark excitedly, adding half angrily, "Why don't you speak?"

The boy looked at him wonderingly, as if too much confused to reply; then uttering a long-drawn sigh he said quietly, "Hurt? No, I don't think so. I say, Mark, do go and fetch my boots."

"Oh, Dean, my boy," cried Sir James, half angrily, "you made us think you were half killed!"

"Did I, uncle?" said the boy quietly. "I couldn't help it."

"Help it, no," cried Sir James. "And you, Mark, how dared you do such a rash thing?"

"I don't know, father. I was horribly frightened all the time, but I felt I must; and," he added quickly, "I say, I killed the lion—didn't I, doctor?"

"Yes, and we must have that skin. Ah, take care, Mak!"

For the black was advancing towards the dangerous enemy, and he looked back at the doctor, laughed, showing his glistening teeth, and then seizing the broken haft of his spear, he planted one bare foot upon the creature's shoulder, gave a tug or two, and drew it away, to stand looking dolefully at the two pieces of the weapon, which he held together as if to see whether it was possible to mend them again.

"Now, doctor," said Sir James, as the two boys stood together, whispering, "we must run no more of these horrible risks. It is quite likely that another of the furious beasts may be lying not far away. What do you say, Denham?"

"Yes, sir; there's another one of them, I expect—dead or alive—not far off, and perhaps we had better wait till daylight. Suppose we go right up to the fire, for nothing will follow us there."

"The fire!" said the doctor sharply. "How was it we were surprised like this? You should have made it up, Mark. It was your duty to do so at the end of your watch."

"I did, sir," protested Mark, in an injured tone, "and told Peter Dance to keep it well up when I left him."

"Dance!—Ah, yes, Dance," cried the doctor. "Where is he? Has anyone see him?"

There was no reply, but eyes were turned in all directions, as if it were possible that he might be lying there.

"Poor fellow!" said Sir James sadly. "Something must have happened to him. Here, someone, hail. He may be lying wounded, and looking to us for help."

"Cooley! Cooley! Cooley!" cried Bob Bacon, and then "Cooley!" again, while in dread of fresh calamity all listened for the reply that did not come.

"Oh," cried Mark at last, "a lion must have leaped upon him and pulled him down while he was going his rounds."

"Not likely, sir," said Buck Denham, "with the ponies and all them bullocks about."

"Then where can he be?" cried Mark. "Don't you think a lion may have leaped upon him when he was making up the fire?"

"Might, sir," said the man, "but lions are not likely to go near a fire. I want the day to break, so that we may follow the spoor. What I am hoping is that Peter may have been scared, and will turn up as soon as it is day and he feels safe."

"That's what we all hope," said Mark, speaking for the rest.

"Yes, sir; but the worst of it is that when you want the sun to rise it takes such a long time before it will."

"Yes," said the doctor, who had been silently listening for a few minutes; "let's call the roll, and learn the extent of our losses."

"Oh, I can pretty well tell you that, sir," said Denham: "the four ponies, and eight-and-forty of my draught oxen."

"No, no, man!" said the doctor. "Not so bad as that?"

"Well, not quite, sir, for I hope we may pick up some of them here and there;" and he gave Mark, who was close at hand, a nudge with his elbow.

As the man ceased speaking the doctor began his roll call, as he termed it: four men did not answer to their names.

"This is bad—very bad," said the doctor, in a pained voice. "I should be loth to think that Dance neglected his duty in keeping up the fire, and rendered us exposed to this attack of lions."

"Well, sir, it do seem rather hard to lay it on to a man who may have got it badly, but I am afraid he let that fire out, for first thing after I come, when I looked torst where it should have been all was black as black."

"Oh, tut, tut, tut!" ejaculated Sir James.

"Then there's that man Brown."

"He lay down to sleep close beside me, sir. I don't feel much fear about him."

"And the Hottentot?"

"Well, he was lying just behind Dunn Brown, and my black close to him. They'll turn up, sir, soon as it is daylight. I'm most skeart about Keeper Dance. You see, he's quite new to the country, sir.—Hah-h-h!" continued the man, drawing a deep breath. "That's better! Here's this morning coming, and welcome as the flowers of May, as the country folks say in old England. Here, Dan, my lad, we have had a bad night of it, but we shall want some breakfast all the same. What do you say to putting the billy on to boil?"

"Ay, ay, mate!" cried the man addressed; and he made for the end of the nearest waggon to fetch a bucket and the great tin kettle, while the Illaka joined him on the instant.

"Breakfast!" said Mark, with a look of disgust. "After such a night as this?"

"Well, sir, it's not to be sneezed at," said the big driver good-humouredly, "and we shall work all the better at following up the spoor after a good mug or two of tea. Say, Mr Dean, sir, don't you feel as if a drop would do you good?"

"Yes; but what a horrid night!"

"Oh, not so very bad, sir. You will soon get used to lions."

"But the poor bullocks?" said Mark.

"Ah, that is a bit of a loss, sir, but it's only nature. Bullocks is animals as was made to be eaten, and the lions are always on the look out for their share. Well, gentlemen, I am ready. It's getting broad daylight now. We are all loaded up. What do you say to a start?"

"No," said the doctor; "no one shall stir until the sun is well up."

"All right, sir; you are boss; but I am getting a bit anxious to make a start. No bullocks, no more trekking, for a waggon ain't much use stuck here under the trees."

Meanwhile Mak had been with Dan to fill the water vessels from the stream, an affluent of the now big river by which they were camped. Mak had helped to draw together the glowing embers, and had then gone off again unnoticed, till all at once he was heard to utter a peculiar cry and come rushing towards them at full speed, as if pursued by one of the savage beasts that had attacked them in the dark hours of the night.

"Hi—hi—hi—hi!" he yelled, as he came swiftly threading his way amongst the trees, waving his hands, each armed with a half of the broken spear, and pointing with them now and then in the direction from which he had come.

Rifles were held ready, and all stood waiting for the next onslaught, till the black rushed, wildly gesticulating, into their midst.

Chapter Sixteen.

Anybody Killed?

"Hello, mate! What's wrong with you? Don't say as you have found Dunn Brown?" cried Buck.

"Pete, Pete, Peter!" said the black, in a high state of excitement, and he pointed with his broken spear in the opposite direction to that which the lions seemed to have taken.

"Peter Dance!" said Sir James excitedly.

"Oh, poor old Dance!" said Mark, in a low, hoarse voice.

"Not dead! Not dead!" cried Dean.

The black shook his head violently, pointed again with his spear, and then bending down began to slap his right leg.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Buck. "I thought he had come to say, gentleman, as he had found all that the lions had left of him."

"Well," said the doctor, "what does he mean?"

"Something wrong with his leg, sir, and I hope one of the great cats ain't mauled him, because their bites are likely to go bad."

"Here, show us where he is," cried Mark excitedly; and closely followed by Dean he caught the black by the arm and pointed.

That was enough. Mak pointed and smiled, and the whole party followed him at the double, Buck Denham grunting now and then as he ran, and pointing out where the undoubted footprints of a lion were plainly marked where the ground was soft.

It was quite a quarter of a mile from the waggons, and in the midst of some dense undergrowth, that their guide stopped short and stood pointing in a way that showed there was no danger in the approach, when Mark whispered, with his heart sinking, "Oh, Dean, I'm afraid he's badly hurt!"

But at the same moment Bob Bacon sprang in amongst the bushes, trampling them down, side by side with the black.

"Where are you, mate?" cried Bacon, in a hoarse voice.

"Here, lad, here!" And then with a deep groan the poor fellow of whom they were in search said reproachfully, "Thought you were going to leave me here to die."

"Not likely," said Mark angrily. "Where are you hurt?"

"That you, Mr Mark?" groaned the keeper. "Oh, all over, and I'm afraid my leg's broke."

"Let me come," said the doctor. "Knives here: cut back some of these thorns. Now then, try to bear it, my lad," he continued, as he knelt beside the injured man, who was half invisible amongst the thick growth.

"Oh!" groaned the keeper.

"There, I will not hurt you more than I can help, but I must find where you are injured."

"Oh!" groaned the man again.

"Come, your leg's not broken. Yes, no doubt it hurts you, but it's only a sprain. Keep up your spirits. You are not going to die this time."

"But I am hurt all over, sir. The bullocks trampled me: came all in a rush."

"But how came you here, mate?" asked Dan, pausing from his busy task of slashing away at the undergrowth with the big sheath knife which he used for skinning and cutting up.

"I dunno, mate. It all seems like a dream."

"Like a dream?" said Mark, as he recalled his own awakening.

"Yes, Mr Mark, sir. I was sitting on the watch there with my rifle across my knees, wondering how long it would be before daybreak, when all at once there was a big lion as had come up without a sound, looking straight at me."

"Could you see him, mate?" asked Buck.

"Only his eyes."

"Why didn't you fire?"

"Fire? Oh, I was too much skeart. I'll tell the truth about it. I was so frightened that I jumped up and ran, not knowing where I was going, for ever so far, and then I found by the trampling and bellowing that it was right into the way of the bullocks. Then before I knew where I was they knocked me down and the whole drove had gone over me, and when I got my senses again I crawled on here in the dark, and I suppose I swooned away. That's all I know. Am I very bad, doctor?"

"A man can't be trampled on by a drove of bullocks without being a good deal hurt," said the doctor. "We must carry him somehow to the waggons, or better still bring one of them past here. What do you think, Denham? Do you think you could inspan some of the bullocks and drag one of the waggons here?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I daresay we can get together enough for that. I'll go back and see."

"Yes, do, my man," said Sir James. "I will stay with the doctor, and with your help, Bacon, we will see what we can do."

"That's right, sir," said Buck Denham. "Perhaps you two young gents wouldn't mind coming with me?"

"I—" began Mark, and he stopped short, for the man gave him a peculiar look. "Yes, Buck, I'll come," he said, "and Dean will come too."

They started off, and the big driver said, loudly enough for those they were leaving to hear, "Thank you, gentlemen; I daresay you two will be able to help me a bit."

They started off together on the back trail, Buck Denham pointing out how they had trampled down the herbage, brushing off the dew and here and there breaking down twigs.

"Ah!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Here's poor old Peter's trail. See that? He must have crawled along here. But I don't see the spoor of any of my beasts—yes, I do," he cried, a few yards farther. "They went along here in a drove. Then we had better turn off and follow them up. I don't suppose they will have gone so very far. Say, Mr Mark, sir; do you know why I wanted you two to come with me?"

"To help find the bullocks," said Dean sharply.

The man chuckled as he trotted on along the marks made by the animals.

"No," he said. "It's all plain enough. I didn't want any help. Why, you two could find them if you went far enough. I wanted to get summut off my mind."

"Something off your mind?" said Mark.

"Yes, sir; I don't like to speak out and get another fellow into trouble, but I felt as you two ought to know, and then you could talk it over between yourselves and settle whether you ought to tell the boss."

"Tell my father?" said Mark.

"Yes, sir, or the doctor; and perhaps he will think the poor fellow's got it bad enough without facing more trouble."

"What do you mean, Buck?" cried Dean.

"What I was going to say," said Mark.

"Well, gen'lemen, only this; we oughtn't to have had a surprise like that. It was Peter Dance's watch, warn't it?"

"Yes," cried Mark excitedly, as strange thoughts began to hurry through his brain.

"Well, sir, he as good as said as he was sitting down with his shooter across his knees."

"Yes, yes," cried Dean.

"Well, sir, why didn't he shoot?"

"He was too much startled," said Dean. "Poor fellow! I should have been quite as scared, with a lion creeping right up to me like that."

"I suppose so, sir. But I don't quite believe that tale. I never 'eerd of a lion creeping up to look at a man who was sitting by a fire."

"No," said Mark, in a whisper, as if to himself, and he trotted on the newly made trampled trail of the oxen.

"Why should you doubt it?" said Dean sharply. "I have known Peter Dance ever since I was a quite a little fellow. He can be very disagreeable sometimes, but I never found him out in a lie."

"No, sir?" said Buck. "Well, I think you have found him out now."

"What do you mean?" cried Dean. "Here, Mark, why don't you say something?"

"Because I'm listening," said his cousin drily. "Tell him what you think, Buck."

"Yes, sir; I will, sir. Well, I think—bah! I am sure—that there was no fire."

"What!" cried Dean angrily.

"Gone to sleep, sir, and let it out."

"How do you know that?" cried Dean, indignant in his defence of his uncle's old servant.

"How do I know that, sir? How come the lions to crawl up and stampede my bullocks? Where was the fire when we all jumped up and began shooting? Why, there was only just enough ashes for old Mak to stir up and get to blaze again after he had thrown on some twigs."

"Oh, but—" began Dean hotly.

"Hold your tongue, Dean," said Mark. "Buck Denham's right. He must be. I believe Peter did go to sleep, and woke up to find the fire out and the lions at the poor ponies and bullocks."

"Oh!" cried Dean excitedly. "Why, if he did that, neglecting his duty—going to sleep—"

Just then he caught his cousin's eyes looking at him in a peculiar way, and he stopped short.

"Drop it," said Mark, and he was going to add, "Dozey;" but he made his meaning look do instead.

"There, gen'lemen," said Buck, "I shan't say no more about it, and I don't believe the poor chap will ever do it again. There, I feel better now, Mr Mark. It's off my mind; but I did feel wild. Why, some of us might have been mauled by the lions; and there's my poor beasts: two of them's killed for sartain, and lying yonder half eaten. Oh, and there's the ponies!"

"And we don't know yet," said Mark, "what may have happened to your two men and Brown."

"Oh, they will be all right, sir."

"I don't know," said Mark. "But there, poor Peter is badly hurt, and we will think about whether we should tell my father and the doctor, or have it out with him ourselves, when he's better. I'll make him confess."

"There, what did I tell you, gentlemen?" cried the big driver. "Whoop! Whoop! Whoop! Ahoy!"

"Whoop! Whoop! Whoop! Ahoy! Ahoy!" came from not far away.

"There's two of them, gen'lemen."

"Where?" cried Dean eagerly.

"Oh, not far off, sir. Didn't you hear them shouting? There, you can hear now, surely. I heard them. There!" That to which he drew attention was the low bellowing of oxen being driven in their direction.

"Why, they are coming this way," cried Mark. "Yes, sir. That's Hot Tot and the little black. They've found the bullocks."

"Some of them," suggested Dean.

"All on 'em, sir, as is left alive. They'd hang together when they bolted.—Hullo! Here's Mak come after us;" and the boys turned eagerly, to find the big black had been following their trail, showing his teeth joyously as he pointed with his broken spear and uttered a low bellowing like a bullock.

"Oh, I am glad," cried Mark. "Now if we could only find the ponies—"

Mak thrust two fingers into his mouth and whistled loudly, in perfect imitation of Dunn Brown, sending forth the call, which was instantly answered from the distance.

"Hark at that!" cried Mark. "Why, that must be Dunn! Here, Mak."

The boy thrust his fingers between his lips, withdrew them, and cried, "Whistle! Whistle!"

The black smiled and nodded, and sent forth the piercing call again.

There was an answer from much nearer. "Oh, I wonder how many he has found!" In less than a minute the boy's wondering ceased, for he caught sight of their tall thin follower running swiftly through the low brush, with all four ponies cantering after him, to pull up in a group as the man stopped short close to where the keeper and the two lads were waiting.

"Not hurt, Dunn?" cried Mark joyously.

"No," said the man sadly. "Anybody killed?"

"No. Don't cry about it," cried Mark.

"But Peter Dance is hurt," said Dean sharply.

"Oh," said the man, almost piteously, and then shook his head, looking from one to the other mournfully. "Let the fire

out.”

Big Buck Denham bent down to slap his thighs and burst into a roar of laughter.

“Oh, don’t laugh, Buck,” cried Mark. “Think of your poor bullocks.”

“Yes,” said Dunn, in no way discomposed by the man’s laughter; “two killed.”

“Well, arn’t that enough to make a fellow laugh?” said Buck. “Only two pulled down. Might have been worse. You have seen them, then?”

“Yes; they followed the ponies. Just came by.”

“That’s all right, then. Come and help, Dunn. I want to inspan and take one of the waggons to fetch Peter Dance.”

“Ah!” said Dunn, and he shook his head. “Let the fire out.”

“Well, don’t go howling about it and get the poor fellow into trouble.”

“No?” sighed Buck’s amateur foreloper.

“No!” thundered Buck. “And there’s worse disasters at sea. Bad jobs turn out trumps sometimes, young gen’lemen. Two bullocks pulled down, and when we have got Peter Dance back to camp, gentlemen, I daresay you would like to come along of me to have a look at the dead lions. I say, Dunn, can you skin a lion?”

“Yes,” said the man, and he pulled a long knife out of its sheath and tried its edge.

“Yes, that will do. I’ll help you, mate. We will get little Dan at work to cut up the bullocks; but I’m rather scared about their skins.”

“Then why cut the poor things up?” said Mark sharply.

“Why cut them up, sir?” replied the big driver, staring at the boy wonderingly. “Best bits—beef.”

Chapter Seventeen.

A Deed of Mercy.

“Come, I call this good luck,” cried the big driver, as, following the black foreloper and with the Hottentot behind, the long line of bullocks two and two came placidly into sight, looking none the worse for the night attack, and in no wise troubled for the loss of two of their brethren.

“Luck!” cried Mark. “It’s glorious! I shall be glad when father knows.”

“Ah, we will soon let him know,” said Buck good-humouredly; “leastways, as soon as I can; but it takes longer to inspan than it does to fill one’s pipe. But poor old Peter won’t hurt much. He’s a bit sore, of course. A span of bullocks arn’t a nice thing to dance over a fellow, even if he is by natur’ like a bit of Indy-rubber. I say—now you listen.”

For as the little Hottentot came into sight Buck hailed him with some incomprehensible question, the response to which was that he and the foreloper had climbed a big tree that was close to the first waggon.

“There, what did I tell you?” said the big fellow, with a chuckle, as he interpreted the Hottentot’s reply. “My chaps know how to take care of themselves when them great cats are on the way. Here, you have it out with old Dunn Brown.”

“Yes,” cried Mark eagerly. “Here, Brown,” cried the boy, “what did you do when you heard the lions?”

“Do?” said the man, rather piteously. “Cut ’em loose—ran—whistled.”

“Bravo!” cried Dean, joining with his cousin in a merry laugh.

“We all ran,” sighed their queer follower. “None scratched.”

“Hurry on,” shouted Buck to his men; but the bullocks kept to their slow, deliberate trudge, munching away at the store of fresh green grass that had been collecting since their escape. “Perhaps you young gents,” continued Buck, “would like to mount two of the ponies and canter back with the news.”

“No saddles or bridles,” said Mark.

“Tchah! You don’t want saddles or bridles. Those little beggars will go which way you like with a touch of the hand; and I am not going to believe that you can’t get along barebacked. Not me!”

“Oh, I daresay we could manage,” said Mark; “but our orders were to see the bullocks inspanned and go back with them.”

“Can’t you trust me?” growled Buck.

“Trust you! Of course!” cried Mark, laying his hand on the big fellow’s shoulder. “I’d trust you anywhere, but—”

"Here, I know," said the driver good-humouredly. "Good boy! Always obey orders."

But all the same the deliberate crawl of the bullocks made both the lads terribly impatient.

"I wish you had got your whip, Buck," said Dean. "Oh, I don't know, sir. Let 'em alone. It's their way. They are going willing enough, and they have had a nasty night. I never give them a touch up only when I see one lazy and won't pull. Then it's crick crack, and I let go at a fly on his back."

At last, though, the span belonging to the second waggon had taken their places, and Dunn Brown was at the front waiting for the sonorous "Trek!" which Buck Denham roared out, accompanied by a rifle-like report of his tremendous whip, when Dunn threw up his hands, stepped right before the team, and stopped them.

"What game do you call that?" roared Buck, from where he was seated on the waggon chest.

"Too—late," sighed the white foreloper, and he drew out his scissors to begin his morning apology for a shave.

"Can't you see, Buck?" cried Mark. "Come along, Dean. Just think of that!"

For, slowly trudging along, Bob Bacon appeared, bending low under his burden, giving his fellow-keeper a comfortable pick-a-back, having carried him all the way from where he had been found lying helpless, and apparently now not much the worse for his novel ride.

"Bravo, Bob!" cried Mark, as he and his cousin ran up to meet them. "Why, you haven't carried Peter all this way?"

"Phew! Arn't it hot, sir! Not carried him? Well, what do you call this?"

"How are you, Peter?" asked Dean.

"Very bad, sir."

"Oh, don't say very," cried Mark. "You will be better when you have had some breakfast."

"Hope so, sir," said the man, with a groan; and he was carefully carried to the first waggon, in front of which Dan had already begun to busy himself raking the fire together and getting water on to boil, while as soon as the doctor had seen to his patient and had had him laid upon a blanket, he joined Sir James and the boys to look round while breakfast was being prepared, and examine the traces of the night's encounter.

There lay one huge lion, stretched out and stiffening fast, showing the blood-stained marks of its wound, and a short distance beyond were the torn and horribly mutilated bodies of two of the bullocks, not very far apart, one of them quite dead, the other gazing up appealingly in the faces of those who approached him, and ready to salute them with a piteous bellow.

"Poor brute," said the doctor, taking a revolver from his belt, and walking close up to the wounded bullock, he placed the muzzle right in the centre of its forehead as the poor beast raised its head feebly, and fired.

"Oh!" ejaculated the boys, as if with one breath, and while the poor animal's head was beginning to subside back to the blood-stained grass upon which it had lain the doctor fired again, and the mutilated animal sank back motionless with a deep, heavy sigh.

"An act of mercy," said the doctor quietly.

"Yes," said Sir James gravely. "It seems cruel, boys, but it would have been far worse to have left him there to be tortured by the flies and attacked by vultures and hyaenas."

By this time Buck Denham had come up, and while the two boys were still mentally hesitating as to the mercy of the act, which seemed terribly repellent, he said, "That's right, boss. I just ketched sight of a couple of those owry birds coming along, and if it hadn't been for the trees they would have been at work before now. I'd bet a pipe of tobacco that a pack of those laughing beauties the hyaenas are following the crows and will be hard at work as soon as we are on the trek."

Farther in the forest Mak soon found the body of the other lion, which had left its trail as it crawled away to die; but it was still warm, and had hardly had time to stiffen, looking still so life-like with its unglazed eyes that it was approached rather nervously, every rifle in the party being directed at the huge brute. But no trigger was drawn, for proof was given at once of its power to do mischief having lapsed by the action of the black, who leaped upon it with a shout and indulged himself with a sort of dance of triumph.

"Here, you come off," cried Buck. "Spoor. Spoor."

The black nodded, and stooping low he began to quarter the ground and point out footprint after footprint, till the driver gave it as his opinion that they had been attacked by quite a large party of the savage beasts.

"You see, gen'lemen, there's the big pads and some about half the size. I should say that there was a couple of families been scenting my bullocks. Seems to me like two lionesses and their half-grown cubs."

"But the two big lions?" said Mark eagerly.

"Oh, I wasn't counting them in, sir," said Buck. "We have shot them and the she's, and the young 'uns have got away, and like enough one or two of them has carried bullets with them."

"But do you think they are near?" asked Dean.

"Maybe yes, sir; maybe no; but I should say it would be just as well to start as soon as we have had braxfas' and get as far on as we can before night."

Just then there was a hail from the waggons in Dan's familiar tones, to announce breakfast, and soon after its hasty despatch the blacks were at work skinning the lions, aided by Dunn Brown, while Buck Denham, with the assistance of Dan and Bob Bacon, had a busy time in securing some of the choicest portions of the bullock that had been shot, the doctor superintending.

Later on, before they started, the Hottentot and the two blacks were allowed to cut off as many strips of the beef as they pleased, to hang on the first waggon for drying in the sun.

Chapter Eighteen.

"We are going wrong."

"No, gen'lemen," said Buck, in reply to a question; "I have had four long trips with hunting parties, and know a good deal of the country, but this is all new to me. Mak professes to know, and I daresay he is all right. He is clever enough at choosing good open country where my bullocks can get along, and he never stops at a kopje without our finding water. You see, we have got now during this last week to the edge of the biggest piece of forest that we have had to do with, and I am not going to interfere with him till he shows that he's a bit lost. Here we are keeping to the edge of the trees where I can get the waggons along and you can have plenty of sport, which gives us all enough to eat. Oh, it's all right, gen'lemen. These niggers know what they are about. I'd trust him, and I suppose it don't matter to you where we are, because we can always turn back when you are tired and your stores begin to run out."

"But Dr Robertson wants to find the ancient cities that we have heard of. Where are they?" said Mark.

"I d'know, sir," said the man, with a laugh. "There's Mak yonder; let's go and ask him."

Instead of going to the black, Buck Denham signed to him as he looked their way, and the stalwart, fierce-looking fellow marched up to them, shouldering his spear, whose broken shaft he had replaced with a finely grown bamboo.

The questioning resulted in a certain amount of pantomime on Mak's part and a confident display of smiles.

"Oh, it's all right, gen'lemen; he knows. He says we are to keep right along just outside the trees, and that he will take us to what he calls the big stones. But they are days and days farther on."

"But that's very vague," said the doctor.

"Yes, sir, I daresay it is," said Buck, "though I don't know what vague means. I only know that there's plenty of room out in this country to go on trekking for years, and I should always feel sure that a chap like Mak would be able to find his way back when you give the order to turn round."

So the journey was continued, with no day passing without some object of interest being found. The guns and rifles of the party kept the soup pot boiling, and ample joints and birds for roasting over the embers, the picking out of places where abundant supplies of wood and water could be obtained being one of Mak's greatest accomplishments; but as the boys laughingly said when comparing notes, there was no getting any work out of Mak the Chief. He would find what was requisite, or would trace game to its lair, and then make a grand display of his powers of eating and go to sleep.

"No, gen'lemen," said Buck, one day, "we don't see many traces of lions. You see, we keep hanging about so along the edge of this great forest, and we'd rather not run against any of the great cats, because we don't want to spare any of our bullocks. If you gen'lemen wish for lion hunting all you have got to do is to tell Mak, and he will take us right out on the open veldt where there's a kopje of rocks here and there and the spring boks and antelope beasts go in droves. That's where you will find the lions—lying up in the shelter of the rocks at one time, and hanging on to the skirts of the different herds so as to stalk their dinners when they want them and go on hunting them, you may say, all over the plains."

"Yes, I understand," said Mark, "but we don't want to go out over the plains, though it's very nice to have a canter now and then and pick up a buck."

"One Buck Denham's enough," said Dean drily.

"Yes, gen'lemen; quite, I should think."

"Quite," said Mark; "but he's the best Buck on the plains. You shouldn't try to make bad jokes, though, Dean. And look here, Buck, we couldn't do better than we are doing now. Nothing pleases father more than going out of an evening with his gun at the edge of a forest like this, and picking off the guinea-fowls for supper as they come into the trees to roost."

"Yes, not bad for you gen'lemen's supper, gen'lemen, but Tot and those black fellows want something with more stay in it. The way in which they can stow away food makes even me stare, and I'm not a bad fist with the knife. You see, I have a lot to keep going; but I am nothing to one of them. I shouldn't like to leave them in charge of the teams without master. Why, if they could do as they liked they'd come to camp, light a big fire, kill one of those bullocks, and sit down to cook, and never stir again until there was nothing left but some bones for the crows to pick. Two

spans of oxen wouldn't last them so very long."

"Forty-six!" said Dean, bursting out laughing, "Oh, I say, come, Buck, you can exaggerate!"

"Oh, that's true enough, sir. They would only want time. Hullo, you, what's the matter? Here's old Mak seen something. Get your guns ready."

For the black, who had formed one of the topics of conversation that morning as he walked well ahead of the first waggon as they skirted the edge of the forest—the waggons keeping in the open—kept on making incursions towards where the huge trees spread their boughs, and the country was park-like and grand. And now, to bring forth the driver's exclamation, the keen-eyed black fellow, who had evidently caught sight of something which had excited his interest, was running swiftly in and out of the bushes more and more towards the great trees, in full chase, throwing up his spear now and then as if to signal his companions to follow.

"What is it he is after?" cried Mark.

"I dunno, sir," replied Buck, who was standing up now upon the waggon chest and holding on to the tilt so as to follow the movements of their guide. "It's something to eat; you may take your oath of that."

The black's movements had been noted by the doctor and Sir James, who, double gun in hand, had been tramping slowly a little to the left of their line of route, on the look out for anything that might be serviceable to supply their larder, and they followed the example of the two boys and threaded their way in amongst the low growth in answer to the silent appeal made by their guide.

Mark was the first to see that Mak was in pursuit of a little naked black figure that was running and doubling through the bushes like a hare.

Its effort was evidently to find a place of concealment, for three times over it disappeared and the boys thought it was gone; but upon each occasion it was evident that Mak's eyes were too keen, and they saw him approach cautiously, or creep round some clump of trees, with the result that the little black figure started out again, and finally giving up its efforts to conceal itself plunged right in amongst the close growing trees of the forest which rose up beyond the low growth like a wall.

"Lost," said Mark sharply. "Mak won't be able to follow him there."

But he was wrong, for without a moment's hesitation their guide dashed into the dark cover, while the boys stopped short on coming up to the spot where he had disappeared.

They looked round, but Sir James and the doctor were out of sight. They found too that they had left the waggons behind.

"Hadn't we better turn back?" said Dean.

"Well, I half think so," replied his cousin, "but I should like to have a look at that chap. He was quite a little boy. I say, if we stop here Mak will start him again directly, and then we can take him prisoner."

"What for?" asked Dean. "We don't want to take prisoners."

"I don't know, but I suppose Mak wants to catch him for some reason, to ask the road, perhaps. Here, come on."

"Oh, I don't know," replied Dean. "See how thick the trees are."

"Yes, it is pretty dark," said Mark. "But we are not afraid of that."

"No, but if we go in there we are sure to lose our way."

"Very well, Miss Timidity, let's lose it. It will be another job for Mak to find us again."

"I am no more timid than you are," said Dean coolly. "Come along;" and stepping quickly before his cousin he plunged directly between two huge trees whose branches on their side thickly interlaced and came close down to the ground, while as soon as they had passed them it was to find themselves confronted by tall columns standing as thickly as they could, bare of trunk and branchless till about sixty or seventy feet above their heads, where verdant roof was formed which completely shut off the light save where here and there a thin streak or two of sunshine shot down like an arrow, to form a little golden patch upon the floor of withered leaves.

"What a change!" cried Mark, as the pair stopped short, trying to penetrate the darkness; but this they found was impossible save in the direction from which they had come.

"Isn't it strange?" said Dean, after walking in and out amongst the trees for some twenty yards.

"Strange, yes," replied Mark. "Why, it wants a couple of hours to mid-day, and we might fancy that it only wanted a couple of hours to midnight. Well, let's go a little farther."

"Very well," replied Dean, stepping out; "but we could not see Mak if he was close at hand."

"No, but we shall hear him directly. He will try to cooey, and he will as soon as he has caught the little black chap. I say, didn't he scuttle along just like a rabbit!"

"Yes, but I say, let's keep together, for I am sure we shall lose ourselves directly."

"Oh, we shan't lose ourselves; but let's keep on quite straight."

"How are we to keep on quite straight when we can't get along without winding in and out?"

"That's true," said Mark; "but I say, do took upward! What trees! What a height! Just stand still and listen for a minute or two. We may get a shot at some beautiful bird such as we have never seen before."

They paused and listened, went on, and stopped, and listened again, and then made a fresh halt, making the backs of their necks ache with having to stare straight up in trying to pierce the dense foliage which shut out the sunlight sky.

But there was no rustle of bird or buzz of insect; all was profound silence. And this, joined to the deep gloom, affected both the boys in a similar way, for they cocked their pieces, which rarely left their hands, and the sound was so dull and shut in that a curious creepy feeling affected them.

"I say," said Dean, at last, in almost a whisper, "I don't want you to laugh at me for being a coward, but this does seem a creepy place. I vote we get out, before we are lost. It would be queer to find that we could not get back."

"I am not going to laugh at you and call you a coward, for I feel a little queer myself. Are you sure that if we turned right round now and began to walk back we should get out?"

"I think so," said Dean hesitatingly, "but don't let's try both together. Look here."

"It's all very fine to say, 'Look here,' when one can hardly see. It is just as if we had stepped out of day into night."

"Nonsense!" cried Dean impatiently. "I did not want you to look. I meant that I would stand perfectly still looking straight into the darkness till you had turned round and were looking right back the way we came. Then you stand still while I turn round. Then we could not make any mistake, and we could walk out together."

"Well," said Mark, "that seems right, only I am afraid we did not come in straight, and I say I think we have done a very stupid thing. We ought to have taken out our knives and chipped the bark off every tree we passed."

"Yes, but it is too late to do that, so let's try and get out at once."

"But what about Mak?"

"Oh, he's a savage, and he could find his way anywhere. Now then, I am standing still. You turn round at once."

"Done," said Mark, and he turned sharply and backed close up to his cousin, so that they were looking now in opposite directions. "Now then, this must be right. You turn round while I stand fast."

Dean turned and stood side by side with his cousin, who then gave the order to step out.

"Yes," he continued, as they began to move back slowly, "I am beginning to want to get out of this. It makes one feel confused. I wish, though, we could hear Mak rustling through the bushes."

"How could he rustle through the bushes when there are none to rustle through? It's just like being in an awful great temple, with the tall smooth pillars supporting the roof."

"Pish! What nonsense!" cried Mark. "Let's get on. We are just inside the edge of a great forest, and what's the good of imagining all sorts of things? Come along, and let's walk fast."

Dean made no reply, and the two lads stepped out, giving up in despair all efforts to keep on in a straight line, for they had to turn to right or left every minute to pass round the huge trunk of some enormous tree.

This went on for nearly a quarter of an hour, a quarter which seemed half, and then Mark stood still.

"Dean," he said sharply, "we are going wrong."

Dean was silent.

"I say we are going wrong," repeated Mark. "If we had been right we should have been outside this horrible place minutes ago."

"Oh, don't talk like that," said Dean, in a whisper, as if afraid of being heard, when all the time his heart would have leaped with joy if he had heard some other voice. "Listen," said Mark.

"Ah! What can you hear?" cried his cousin. Mark was silent for quite a minute. "Nothing," he whispered, at last. "It's so awfully silent."

And the lads stood listening each to his own hard breathing, both yielding to the sensation of strange dread that was creeping over them, in fact, fast losing their nerve. At last Mark spoke out with angry decision. "Don't let's be fools," he said, "and give way to this nasty sensation. But it's of no use to hide it from ourselves: Dean, old chap, we are lost!"

"Yes," said Dean faintly. "Shout!" Mark started, clapped his hand to his cheek, and gave out the Australians' far piercing cry—"Cooley!" listened, and then quite excitedly told his cousin to try.

Dean obeyed him and uttered his shrill version of the cry. Then both stood and listened—listened with throbbing

hearts for some response, no matter how distant, but listened in vain, and the silence now seemed more than awful.

"Oh, it's nonsense to take it like this," cried Mark, with another burst of energy. "Here, Dean."

"Well, what?"

"Let's look it all in the face. We know that we can't be far from where we came in. We know too that we left father and Dr Robertson just outside, and that Mak came in before us."

"Yes, yes!"

"Well, then, what is there to mind? All we have got to do is to stand still and let them find us; and if they try and can't make out where we are, they will bring all the men to help. Here, let's lean up against one of the trees a bit and listen and think."

"Can't!" said Dean passionately. "I feel that if I stood still I should go mad. Let's keep on trying."

"Yes," said Mark excitedly, "let's keep on trying. Will you go one way, and I will go the other, and the one that finds the way out can cooey."

"No," cried Dean feverishly, "don't let's separate. We must keep close together."

"Yes," said Mark, "we must keep close together. Come on, and let's walk quickly."

They started off, with Mark leading, and for quite half an hour they threaded their way in and out amongst the huge pillar-like trunks, which seemed to have grown closer together and looked as though if they were left undisturbed for a few years longer they would all join together and form an impenetrable wall. Then with the darkness seeming thicker than ever, they stopped short and stood hand in hand.

"Dean," said Mark, at last, and he looked at his cousin's dimly-seen face, "do you know what we have been doing?"

"Yes: making it more difficult for them to find us."

"Yes, that we have," said Mark; "and yet it seemed so impossible, just as if after walking in we had nothing to do but to walk out again; and here we are, thoroughly lost."

"But it only means," said Dean, trying to speak firmly, but failing dismally, "being lost for a few hours or so, or at the worst having to stop all night."

"Without food or water!" said Mark bitterly. "And what about the wild beasts?"

"Not a place for lions," said Dean.

"No, I know that; but doesn't it seem to you like what we have read of, about men being lost in the Australian bush?"

"But this isn't the Australian bush."

"No, it's bigger—as much bigger as those trees are than the Australian bushes."

"Well, you are a nice comfortable fellow, Mark, to come out with!"

"Yes, I am, aren't I? It was stupid of me. But there, I am going to be plucky now. Let's have another try."

"Yes, try again," said Dean; "but it seems stupid, and may mean getting farther and farther and more hopelessly lost."

"It can't be, and it shan't be!" cried Mark. "Oh, what stuff! Let's shout again—shout till we make Mak hear us and come to our help. Now then, both together. What shall we cry?"

"Cooey, of course," cried Dean; and joining their voices they called at close intervals again and again till they were hoarse, while at every shout it seemed as if their voices rebounded from the solid surfaces of the trees instead of penetrating or running between them. And then as their voices failed they started off again in and out amongst the natural pillars, growing more and more excited and dismayed, till they felt that they could go no farther—absolutely lost, and not knowing which way to turn, while the darkness above them seemed blacker than ever and the dimly-seen trees that closed them in on every side began to wear the appearance of an impenetrable wall.

Chapter Nineteen.

Among the Pigmies.

In utter weariness the two boys now stood their guns up against the nearest trees and let themselves sink together upon the thin bed of moist leaves that had not been eaten up, as it were, by the root action of the trees, glad of the relief to their now weary limbs, and for some time they sat in the silent darkness, utterly stunned—minutes and minutes, possibly half an hour, before Mark started to his feet, and, nerved by his cousin's movement, Dean followed his example.

"Hear someone coming?" he cried, in a hoarse whisper.

"No!" raged out Mark.

"What are you going to do, then?"

"What we ought to have done hours ago. We must have been asleep."

"Asleep! No."

"Well, our brains must have been. There, catch hold of your gun."

As the boy spoke he seized his own by the stock, held it up with one hand as high as he could, and fired, with the sound thrown back as their voices had been by the trees. Then they sat and listened.

"Shall I fire?" asked Dean, at last.

"No; wait a few minutes;" and Mark rested his piece which he had discharged upon a projecting buttress-like root of the nearest tree.

"Hah! What's that?" cried Dean excitedly.

"That" was the soft pat, pat, of a bare foot upon the moist, leaf-strewn earth, and showing his white teeth in a satisfied grin, Mak glided into their sight and tapped each of the lads' extended hands.

"Come," he said quickly. "Come 'long."

Both tried to answer, but no words would come, and trying hard to shake off the emotion which troubled them, they followed their rescuer as he regularly glided in and out amongst the trees, till all at once they were standing in a small circular clearing not twenty yards across, and there they involuntarily stopped short, staring in wonderment at the dimly pictured scene that greeted their weary eyes.

After what the boys had gone through it seemed something dream-like, and they were ready to fancy that in that terrible dark forest they had stumbled upon some strange abode of the fabulous gnomes or kobolds described by the old German romanticists as being the haunting inhabitants of the mines and cavernous underground regions.

As the two lads followed their guide into almost nocturnal darkness they became aware of the fact that they were surrounded by some five-and-thirty little beings, not one of whom seemed to stand above four feet high. There was nothing dwarf-like about them, or sign of deformity, for they were comparatively slight, though muscular and in every way well built.

Their appearance was threatening, for each man amongst them was half sheltering himself behind a tree, and standing holding a little bow with arrow having its neck in the string and drawn nearly to the head as if ready to let fly at the white strangers.

The two boys stopped short, involuntarily raising their rifles ready to fire, and in the quick glance Mark swept round the little arboreal circus he caught sight of as many more of the little people, much smaller and slighter, as they cowered behind their companions.

It was a swift glance, but sharp enough for the boy to realise that those were the women companions of the little men.

"Shall we fire?" whispered Dean.

"No; don't."

"But they mean fighting."

"Frightened of us," said Mark quickly. "Look, they are quite friendly towards Mak."

For the big, shapely Illaka was stalking about here and there, and as he passed each little warrior with drawn bow, the little fellow lowered his weapon and looked up at the spear-armed giant as if he were their king.

"Not hurt," cried Mak, and he stepped lightly about, pointing with his spear at first one and then another of the little black tribe. "Come, look," he shouted; and the boys shouldered their pieces, while Mak pointed with his spear to first one and then another, and then stopped to pat them on the back. "Mark, look," he said; "Dean, look!" And he took hold of one of them by the arm and turned him round as if to show him off as a curious specimen of humanity, while the little fellow submitted with a calm look of sufferance and submission.

Mak seemed never tired of showing off his find, and ended by stretching out his strong arm and catching at and dragging forward one of the tiny women, who shrank trembling as she cowered and gazed up at the to her huge giant who was treating her as a prisoner.

The tiny woman's companions looked on solemnly and made no sign of resistance, while the Illaka cropped on one knee and drew his little prisoner towards the two boys, who looked on, full of curiosity, Mak's captive shrinking and trembling as he reached out for Mark's hand and made him, willingly enough, pat the little silent creature on the head and back.

"Dean," he cried, and he extended his hand for him to administer the same friendly touches, after which the tiny woman shrank away into hiding again.

"Now come," cried Mak, and as if he belonged to the little tribe, he led the way a little farther into the forest, followed slowly by some of the child-like men, to where it was evident they formed their sleeping camp and prepared their food.

Here nestling in a hole which was lined with the skins of two or three of the native bucks, Mak pointed out with his spear one of the dwarfs who was cowering shrinkingly down so that the young travellers could see little of him but his flashing eyes.

"Mark look," said the black sharply, and taking hold of the little fellow by the wrist he gently drew him partly out of his skin bed, uttering a curious whimpering sound as if he were in pain.

"Don't hurt him, Mak," cried Dean.

"Look, Dean; see," and he pointed to the little fellow's arm and shoulder, and as Mark bent down, not understanding fully in the shadow what their guide meant, it suddenly dawned upon him that the poor little fellow, who was terribly emaciated, had evidently been mauled by some savage beast, his little wasted left arm and shoulder being in a terrible, almost loathsome, state.

"Look, Dean," cried Mark, shrinking with disgust, which he overcame directly, and handing his rifle to his cousin he went down on one knee, with three or four of the little tribe looking on, wonderingly, but all with a grave, solemn seriousness of aspect, while Mark took out a handkerchief from his breast and spread it tenderly over the fearful festering wound.

"Isn't it horrible!" he said, turning up his head to speak to his cousin, but encountering the bent over face of the illaka looking on approvingly.

"Good—boy," he said solemnly. "Mark good."

The last traces of the look of disgust passed from Mark's face, and he laughed merrily at the black.

"I say, Dean, I have lost my handkerchief, but I have got a good character. But, poor little beggar, that will kill him. Still, I shouldn't have liked to have missed seeing these people. Who would ever have thought there were any like them in the world!"

"It makes up for our being scared," said Dean quietly; "but I didn't like seeing this. It was so horrible. There, there's no occasion to be afraid of their bows and arrows now."

"I wasn't before," said Mark, "after seeing how cool Mak was amongst them. Now then, we want to go. Waggon—dinner;" and the boy pointed with his rifle, which had just been handed to him by his cousin.

Mak nodded as if he fully understood, and shouldering his spear he marched back to the little circus, now followed by an increasing train of the pigmies, whose eyes gazed at their visitors with a sort of reverence; and Mark noted that the sinew strings of their little bows were slackened as they followed them amongst the trees and out to the edge of the forest, which seemed to offer no obstacle to Mak, who would probably have found it without difficulty, though in this case a couple of the tiny blacks trotted before them and then stopped at the very edge, to gaze wistfully after them till they were out of sight.

"Why, boys," cried Sir James, "where have you been? We should have been quite alarmed, only we knew that you had Mak with you."

Chapter Twenty.

The Doctor plays Surgeon.

"You were more frightened than hurt, boys," said the doctor, after listening to their account, "and but for our guide your adventure might have turned out badly."

"A horrible experience," said Sir James, shaking his head. "I don't care how brave a man may be; there are times when he completely loses his nerve. It is very plain that that was the case with our two boys."

"Yes," said the doctor, "and they would have done more wisely if they had sat down at once and waited till Mak came to them. This he would have done, of course. But it is wonderful what an instinct these people born in the wilds display under such circumstances. But this is a splendid slice of luck. One has heard and read of the pigmy inhabitants of Africa—Pliny, wasn't it, who wrote about them?—and there were the bushmen of farther south. I once saw one of them, a little tawny yellow-skinned fellow, a slightly made little chap about as big as a boy eleven years old, a regular pony amongst men, and as strong and active as a monkey. But you say these miniature men you saw were black?"

"Oh, yes. They seemed in the darkness there darker than soot."

"Well, Sir James, we must have a look at them," continued the doctor.

"I wonder whether they are the same race as our explorers have described."

"Oh, they may or may not be, sir. There's plenty of room in Africa for such tribes. What do you think about them?"

"I am most interested," said Sir James, "and as the boys say that as soon as the little fellows found that Mark's intentions were friendly they were quiet enough—"

"Yes, father; in a dull, stupid, heavy sort of way they seemed quite disposed to be friends. Besides, Mak seemed to do what he liked with them."

"That's satisfactory," said Sir James. "We don't want to set the doctor to work extracting arrows from any of us, and I am thoroughly averse to our using our weapons against any of these people, big or little. We had better have a halt here, doctor, for some hours, and make Mak understand that we want to visit the tribe."

"Then you will come too, father?"

"Certainly, my boy; I shall go with the doctor and have a look at them myself."

"Go with the doctor?"

"Yes. Well, I suppose you have seen enough of them?"

"No," said Mark; "I wanted to take Dr Robertson myself, and get him to see if he could do anything for that poor little fellow's wound."

"I was thinking of that myself," said the doctor; "but from your description, Mark, I am afraid that we are too late."

"Yes," said Dean gravely; "I think he's dying."

"Why too late?" said Mark. "It's only a wound."

"Only a wound," said the doctor, smiling. "It must have been a very bad one."

"It's horrible," cried Dean.

"That's why I say that I'm afraid it's too late," said the doctor. "These savage people, living their simple open-air life, heal up in a way that is wonderful. Nature is their great surgeon."

"Then why didn't this one heal up?" said Mark.

"I am not a surgeon," replied the doctor, "and I do not know what may be wrong, but I should say that the wild beast which seized him crushed some bone, with the result that splinters are remaining in the wound, causing it to fester. But we shall see."

"Then you will look, doctor?" cried Mark excitedly.

"Certainly, if I find our little patient amenable to treatment."

"Hurrah!" cried Mark. "When will you go?"

"The sooner the better. It rests with Sir James."

"Oh, I am ready," said Mark's father. "You had better see, boys, if Mak has had his share of our dinner, and send him on to say we are coming."

"That won't do, uncle," said Dean decisively.

"Why not?" asked Mark sharply.

"Mak must go with us. I am *not* going to let uncle tramp in amongst those horrible trees without a guide."

"Quite right, Dean," said the doctor. "We must have Mak to lead the way, and let him be our ambassador to this tribe of giants before we approach too near. We don't want them to take fright."

"Oh, I don't think they will," said Mark.

"I think quite the contrary," said the doctor, "for I believe a little tribe like this, who exist hiding in the forests, are always afraid of persecution by stronger people. There is such a thing as slavery."

"Oh, yes," said Mark hastily. "Come along, Dean; let's hunt out Mak."

There was no difficulty about that, for the Illaka had had his share of the dinner and was aiding his digestion by sleeping hard in the shade of one of the great trees at the edge of the forest, quite regardless of the cloud of flies that were buzzing about his head.

He sprang up at a touch from Mark, and seized his spear, but as soon as he was aware of what was required of him, he followed the boys to where the doctor and Sir James were waiting, the former having slung a little knapsack from his shoulders, at which the boys looked enquiringly.

"Are we going to take anybody else?" said Sir James.

"No, I wouldn't, father," cried Mark. "We shan't want protecting. They will know us again, and Mak will make them understand that you have come in peace. Besides, we have got our rifles, and I know if there is any danger Dean is

such a fierce one that he could tackle the whole lot; couldn't you, old chap?"

"Don't chaff," said Dean seriously. "Go on, Mak."

And the black led the way onward along the edge of the forest till he reached the spot where he had dashed in after the pigmy.

"That isn't right," said Mark; but Mak only laughed and signed to them to come on, gliding in among the huge columnar trees for about half an hour, and in the most effortless way pressing on, looking back from time to time to see that his companions were following him.

"Well, I don't believe he's right," said Mark; "eh, Dean?"

His cousin shook his head.

"I hope he is," said Sir James; "but we are quite at his mercy."

"Yes," said the doctor, "and I don't wonder at all, boys, at your losing your way. I know I should have had to give up."

"It seems so far," said Dean, and he looked enquiringly at their guide, who stood smiling and waiting for them to come on.

At last full proof of the black's accuracy was shown by his stopping short and pointing forward.

"Well, what are you doing that for?" cried Mark, who was next to him. "Yes, all right, father; there goes one of them."

"I don't see anything," said the doctor, who came next in the single file in which they had pursued their way.

"I did; I saw a face peep round one of the trees and dart back again."

"Are you sure?" said the doctor. "I can make out scarcely anything in this darkness. Ah! Can you see anything now?"

For Mak was smiling at them, and pointing with his spear.

"No," replied Mark; "but we had better go on."

Their guide, however, seemed to differ, and signed to them to stay where they were, and then passed out of sight, leaving those he guided looking nervously at one another.

"Well, we shall be in a pretty mess, Master Mark," said Sir James, "if that Day and Martin fellow doesn't come back."

"Oh, he will come back, father," said Mark confidently.

"Yes," said the doctor, "I don't doubt that; only he may lose his way."

"Not likely," said Mark; "eh, Dean?"

"Well," said the latter, speaking rather nervously, "if we were back at the waggon and you said that I should think just as you do, but now we are here again I can't help feeling that nasty nervousness come back.—Ah!" he ejaculated, with a deep sigh of relief, for one minute the little party was anxiously peering about them in the deep gloom, looking for a way in amongst the towering trees, the next their guide had reappeared as if by magic, signing to them to come on. And five minutes later the doctor and Sir James were uttering ejaculations of wonderment not untinged with nervousness, as they found themselves in the circular opening and in the presence of about a dozen of the pigmies with their bows strung and arrows ready to be sent flying at an enemy. Every now and then too they had a glance at a little shadowy form which glided into sight for a moment and disappeared without a sound.

Meanwhile Mak had walked straight across to one of the little savages and made signs to him and uttered a word or two, as he kept on turning and pointing at the group he had led into the solitude, ending by catching one of the little fellows by the shoulder. Then sticking his spear into the damp earth he went through a pantomime which he intended to suggest that there was a bad wound about the shoulders he pressed, and pointed again and again at the doctor, and then in the direction where the injured pigmy had been left.

"He won't be able to make him understand," said Dean impatiently. "Oh, what a bother it is that we don't know their tongue!"

"I think it's all right," said Mark. "Look here," he continued, as their stalwart black drew the dwarf he held towards his party.

"What does that mean?" said the doctor.

"I don't quite know," replied Mark. "These people are all so much alike, but I think this is one I saw before, because he has got brass wire rings round his arm. Yes, I am right," continued Mark eagerly, for Mak raised his little prisoner's hand towards Mark and signed to him to extend his own.

The next moment Mark was holding the little black, boyish hand in his and pointing in the direction where the injured pigmy was nestled in his skin bed.

"Come," said Mak. "Doctor come;" and leaving Mark holding on by the pigmy's hand, he led the way as if quite at home, passing between the trees, while first one and then another of the little tribe glided away to right and left,

seen for a moment, and then disappearing in the deep shade, till their stalwart guide stopped short and waited till the whole of the party had closed up. Then, as if satisfied that he had done his part, he drew back a bit and pointed downward.

"Well, Mark, what next?" said the doctor.

"That's the spot where the little wounded fellow is lying," said Mark.

"But I can do nothing here in this darkness," said the doctor. "We must have a light."

"Oh," cried Mark excitedly, "how stupid! Here, I know; Mak shall tell them to make a fire in the opening, and he must carry the poor little fellow out."

"Oh, I have provided for that," said the doctor, and swinging round his knapsack he took it off and opened it, and in a very few minutes he had struck a match, which blazed up brightly and brought forth a low murmur of excitement from the hidden pigmies who evidently surrounded them.

"Never saw a match before," said Mark, as if to himself, while directly after as the wick of a little lamp burned up brightly behind the glass which sheltered its flame, there was another murmur of astonishment and a faint rustling sound as of a tiny crowd collecting to see this wonder which gave light like a brand taken from a fire.

It was but a small flame, but sufficient to find reflectors in many eyes which peered behind the trees, and as by the light of this little illumination the doctor went down on one knee beside the wounded pigmy, who gazed up at him in wonder, he drew off the white handkerchief, the one with which Dan had supplied Mark clean washed that morning.

"Come closer, Mark," said the doctor. "I want you to hold the lamp."

Mark released the hand of the little savage, which clung to his tightly, and went round behind the injured pigmy's head, meeting the wondering eyes, and laying his hand upon the little fellow's head with a friendly touch, before gazing anxiously down and watching the doctor's movements.

There was a faint gasp to follow the doctor's first touch, and a low thrilling sound arose, evidently from a group of watchers behind the trees.

"Medical men go through strange experiences, Mark," said the doctor, in a low tone, "but not many have such a case as this."

"'Tis rather horrid," said Mark.

"Hold the light lower, so as to throw it just upon his shoulder."

Mark obeyed.

"Well, I suppose I had better go on," said the doctor quietly, "and hope that I shall not have half a dozen spears stuck into me if my patient shrieks out."

"Shall you hurt him much?" said Mark.

"I shall hurt him," said the doctor, upon whose busy fingers the light now played.

"What a horrid wound!" said Mark.

"Bad enough to kill him from mortification!" said the doctor softly. "Yes, just as I expected. Here's a long splinter of the bone festering in this great wound—I should say small wound, poor little chap! I'm afraid mine is going to be rough surgery, but this piece must come out. What's to be done?"



"I HOPE THAT I SHALL NOT HAVE HALF-A-DOZEN SPEARS STUCK INTO ME IF MY PATIENT SHRIEKS OUT."

"Take it out," said Mark.

"Do you dare hold his arm up?"

"Yes," said Mark, "if it's to do him good."

"It is, of course; but these people looking on don't know. Ah, lucky thought—tell Mak to bend over and hold the light. Then you raise the poor little fellow's arm, and I'll do the best I can."

The change was made, the doctor busied himself, and in the course of his manipulations there was a bright flash of light as the little lantern played for a few seconds upon the keen blade of a small knife which the doctor took from his case, while consequent upon its use a faint cry escaped from the wounded black, and there was a low murmur, which sounded ominous to Mark's ears.

"Ah," said the doctor, in the most unruffled way, "no wonder the poor fellow's in such a state. Here, Mak—water—water. Let the arm sink down now, Mark, and take the light again. I want water, and I ought to have a basin and sponge. What can you get the water in? I don't want to wait while he is going back to the waggons. I can manage if you will only bring the water."

There was probably some spring in the forest known to the pigmies, and after some little time two good-sized gourds were brought full of the refreshing fluid.

"Now, Mark, send Mak to get some of that fresh green moss from off the trees."

This was done, the wound carefully cleansed and dried, a piece of lint saturated with some of the contents of a bottle the doctor took from his case, and the moistened antiseptic linen was applied to the wound, the whole being carefully bandaged and secured, before the doctor rose from his knees.

"There," said he, "this is a curious experience."

"But will he get better now, doctor?"

"I can't say. I don't know. What I do know is that I don't think he would have lived another week with his arm in that state. It was all going bad, from shoulder to elbow. I must dress it again to-morrow, and then we shall see."

"Then that means that we are not going on to-morrow," said Sir James.

"I am at your orders, sir."

"No," said Mark's father; "you are captain, doctor, and I don't think we ought to be in such a hurry to get on. I should like to see a little more of the habits of these people and how they live. There must be a great deal to interest us, so certainly we will stay for a day or two, and see how your patient is."

"Well, now let's get back to the waggons," said the doctor. "I suppose they won't try to stop us."

So far from it, the little people seemed less shy and retiring, many more than they had seen before pressing forward

to get a glimpse of the doctor's lamp, and a low sigh as of astonishment escaped from their lips as the light was extinguished, while a peculiar silence afterwards reigned as under the guidance of Mak the little party started back for the waggons.

"I wonder what they think about it all, father," said Mark, as soon as they had reached the edge of the forest, for very few words had been spoken while they were threading their way through the depressing darkness, while a feeling of light-heartedness and of relief came over all as they gazed around at the soft refulgent glow of the sunset.

"Well," said Sir James, "they ought to be very much obliged, and I suppose they must think that we have done the little fellow good. But I couldn't help noticing—I don't know what you thought, doctor—that there was a something wanting in them. There was more of the animal and less of the ordinary human being about them. Why, they were degrees lower in the scale of humanity than our friend the Illaka."

"Yes," said the doctor, "and they seem quite to look up to him as a superior being. I fancy that, driven by the oppression of superior tribes to take refuge in the gloom and moisture of this great forest, they have never had the opportunity of making any further advance than has come to them naturally for the supporting of their ordinary animal wants."

"I daresay you are right, doctor," said Sir James, "but I have never studied these things. What you say is very reasonable, and I am sure of one thing—they displayed more timidity, more fear, than you would find in such a race as that fellow Mak came from."

"Yes, that must be it, father; and I think we should feel just the same if we were always shut up in that great forest."

The next morning it was arranged that the boys should be out at daybreak to pay a visit to the roosting trees of the guinea-fowl, under the guidance of Mak, while the doctor and Sir James were to be out with Bob Bacon across the plain to try for a buck or two, Peter Dance being still very unwell and stiff, and evincing a strong desire to keep away from the boys and his master, a fact which brought forth the following remark from Dean:

"I say, Mark," he said, after a deep fit of thinking, "both Buck and Dunn Brown were quite right."

"What about?"

"That letting the fire out."

"Why do you say that?"

"A guilty conscience needs no accuser. He's horribly uncomfortable for fear uncle should speak to him about it."

"Yes, but he needn't be afraid; we shan't say anything. He has been punished enough."

It was still dark, and Dean was sleeping heavily after rather an uneasy night. It had been a long time before he could get to sleep, and then his dreams were tinged with a nightmare-like feeling of being forced to go on journeying through hundreds of miles of forest where the tall trunks of the trees were so crowded together that he could hardly force his way between them; and when utterly breathless and exhausted he lay down to rest he could not enjoy that rest for the trouble he had to go through with the little thin, weird, sickly looking black, who had got hold of his toe and kept on pulling at it to make him get up and come to dress his wound.

"You must wait till the doctor comes," he muttered. "You must wait till the doctor comes," he muttered again, "and—who's that? What is it?" he exclaimed, quite aloud.

"What's the matter with you?" cried Mark, who had been roused by his cry.

"Let go of my toe, and I will tell you," cried Dean angrily, and he tried to draw it up, but only to suffer a sharp jerk.

"Bother your old toe!" said Mark drowsily. "What's the matter?"

"Now, none of your silly games," cried Dean, making a vain effort to kick. "Be quiet, or you will wake uncle and the doctor directly."

"You mean you will," growled Mark drowsily. "Go to sleep."

"Go to sleep! Why—oh, it's you, is it?"

"Get up; get up. Come back—come back!" came from just outside the waggon, and Dean was fully awake now to the fact that Mak was leaning over the hind waggon chest and reaching in to try this novel way of waking him up to carry out the arrangement made overnight.

"All right, Mak. Coming. Rouse up, Mark, or we shall be too late."

"Eh? Yes; all right."

A few minutes later the boys were off, double guns on shoulders and a plentiful supply of number five cartridges in their belts, with the dimly-seen figure of Mak striding away in front.

"I did feel so sleepy," said Mark.

"I didn't," said Dean. "I could do nothing but dream about trying to get through the forest. Ugh!" he added, with a shiver. "It was horrid!"

"What was horrid?"

"Being lost."

"Yes; it wasn't nice. I wonder how that poor little chap is this morning. I hope he will get well; and I say—I wish Bob Bacon was coming with us instead of going after the buck. He would just have enjoyed this."

"Yes, and made black Mak jealous. He doesn't like it when he's left behind. I say, shan't we be too late?"

"N-no, I think not," replied Mark. "Mak knows best about this sort of thing; only we had better step out, for we ought to take back a few brace for the larder. I say, what a lot we do eat!"

Half an hour after the grove-like edge of the forest was reached, and waiting for a chance the boys let drive with both barrels right into a spot where they could see the birds of which they were in search clustering together quite low down upon some nearly leafless boughs, and for a few minutes the Illaka was busy enough picking up the dead and chasing the wounded runners, and tying their legs together so as to make a bundle of the toothsome birds.

Then tramping on along the edge of the forest in search of another resting-place, they tramped in vain, for the pintados for some reason or another were exceedingly wary that morning, flock after flock going whirring off before their persecutors could get within shot.

"Well," said Mark, at last, "it is no use going any farther, so we may as well get back with what we have shot. My word, it is a poor lot! I wonder whether the doctor has had better luck. If he hasn't, with so many mouths to feed we shall be running short. Well, let's get back;" and in spite of invitations from Mak to "Come, shoot," the boys shook their heads and trudged back in a rather disappointed frame of mind.

"It never rains but it pours," grumbled Mark, as they reached the waggon, for he was greeted by the doctor, who had been back some time, with, "Is that all you have got?"

"Yes," said Mark sourly, for he wanted his breakfast. "How many springbok have you shot?"

"Ah, you may well ask that. I made three misses, your father two, and then Bob Bacon had a turn, and he says he hit, but the last I saw of the one he shot at was when it was going like the wind."

"I say," said Mark, "what's to be done, doctor? Father said we were to lay up game enough to last two days, and—bother! Here's Dan coming up grinning, to ask what he's to cook this morning."

"I don't know," said the doctor; "but hallo! Whom have we got here?"

"The pigmies!" cried Mark excitedly. "Oh, doctor, I hope they haven't come to tell us that your little patient is dead!"

"Well, it's plain enough that they have not," replied the doctor. "I say, you mustn't talk of their being animal-like and not far removed from the apes. Why, boys, they take me for a real surgeon, and have come to bring me my fees."

For to the surprise of all, the little party of their find of the previous day marched boldly up to where their white friends were standing, two of them walking in front with their little spears over their shoulders, and bows in hand, while they were followed by four of their companions, each pair of the latter bearing a fair-sized buck slung from a spear which rested on their shoulders.

There was a half-shrinking, timid look upon their sombre countenances, but they came close up, lowered down the bucks at Mark's feet, slipped out the spears, and then turned and fled, plunging in amongst the bushes, and then under the pendant boughs of the outer lines of the trees, and were gone.

"Here, hi! Hi! Hi!" cried Mark, as he ran after them; but he came back at the end of a few minutes, out of breath. "Never got another sight of them," he said.

"Good job!" cried Dean. "I was afraid you'd get lost again amongst the trees."

"Were you?" said Mark. "You see, I knew better: I wanted my breakfast too badly. I say, doctor, think of this! Where's that Dan? Hot steaks for breakfast! But did you know that little pigmy again?"

"No. Which one?"

"One of those that came in front with a spear over his shoulder. I knew him again by the brass rings on his arms, and—I didn't notice it yesterday—he'd got them on his ankles too."

"No," said the doctor, "I did not notice that; but I did see that he had a brass ferrule at one end of his spear, and another to fix in the blade."

"He must be a sort of chief," said Mark. "Oh, here, Mak—see what your little friends have brought!" and the boy pointed to the two small-sized slender-legged bucks, the sight of which made the black's countenance expand in a grin of satisfaction.

"Here, call up Dunn Brown. He will be seeing to the ponies. Send him here, and tell Bob Bacon to come too. They will help Dan to skin and break up the game."

It was a long speech for the black to interpret, but the names of his camp companions and the sight of the bucks were quite sufficient, and Mak stalked off.

It was decided to stay that day, and towards noon, when it was turning very hot, the doctor proposed that they should shoulder their guns, take Mak for guide and Bob Bacon as bearer of any game they might shoot, and then walk along the edge of the forest beneath the shade of the trees. Sir James declined to accompany them, saying that he was sure that it would be too hot, so after explaining to the black what they intended to do, the party started off, getting a shot or two at large turkey or bustard-like birds, till without orders Mak turned into the forest and led the way in amongst the trees.

"Hi! Stop! Where are you going?" cried Mark. "Let him alone. Never mind. I meant to go into the pigmies' little camp towards evening and see how my patient is. Mak evidently thinks we mean him to go there now." It proved that they were some distance beyond where they had entered the woody labyrinth on the previous day, but their guide was at no loss, and after about an hour's walking the black set up a long, low, penetrating, owl-like cry, which before long was answered from apparently a great distance, but which must have been close at hand, for before a couple of minutes had elapsed a pair of the pigmies glided into sight, turned and led the way back from which they had come, guiding the party through many devious windings amongst the trees, right to their amphitheatre-like camp.

And now there was no display of bent bow and arrow drawn to the head, but the members of the little tribe stood waiting between the trees in solemn silence, watching their visitors to see what they would do.

"Water, Mak," cried the doctor. "Tell them what I want. You have been here twice, Mark, and can guide me to the spot where the little fellow lies."

"Yes, all right," said Mark eagerly, and he made one or two attempts to find the place he wanted, but gave up, with a look of annoyance. "You see, we came in a different way yesterday, and that has bothered me, because the trees are all alike right round, and—here, one of you—I mean you," he continued, beckoning to the little fellow he supposed to be a chief. "Wounded pigmy—bad arm—doctor's come to see him. Come, surely you can understand that?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Dean. "I say, Mark, you are getting on badly with the language! I could have managed it as well as that."

"Well, go on; why don't you manage?" cried Mark. Dean accepted the challenge, took a step or two, caught the little chief by the arm, pointed in amongst the trees, and then put his hand to his own face and closed his eyes as if sleeping.

The little chief watched him attentively, and then led them in between the trees at the opposite side to where Mark had made the attempt, and the two boys and their little leader disappeared just as Mak and a couple more of the tribe joined the doctor with the two gourds of the previous day re-filled with clear spring water.

The boys found the place where the injured little black was lying, as dark as ever, but they made out that his eyes were closed, and that he was sleeping heavily, for he had not heard their approach, and Mark was bending down watching him intently when the doctor, guided by Mak, silently approached.

"Asleep, eh?" he said. "Come, that's a good sign. Quite calmly too. That's a proof that he's not in pain." But perhaps from a feeling that others were present, the little fellow awoke with a start and stared up at his watchers with rather a scared look till he recognised who had come, when, though no muscle of his serious little countenance betokened the dawning of a smile, his eyes thoroughly laughed as they encountered those of the doctor, who knelt down by his side.

"Well, monster," said the latter good-humouredly, "you are better, that's plain."

The pigmy raised his right hand, passed it across and gently stroked the white bandage the doctor had secured about the wounded limb.

"Yes," said the doctor. "It's rather soon, and I'm half disposed to wait till to-morrow."

"Better not," said Mark. "Father may have said we had better get on."

"H'm!" said the doctor, as he softly drew the little hand away and then laid his own upon the bandage. "Rather hot," he said gently. "No wonder, after what I had to do yesterday. Yes, it can't do any harm to re-dress it;" and to Mark's surprise he drew out a little bundle of lint and a roll of bandage from his breast-pocket, setting to work at once, laying bare the terrible wound, which he bathed and cleansed, and then after drying it tenderly he applied a fresh piece of lint soaked with the antiseptic drops from the little bottle, which also made its appearance from the doctor's pocket.

"I didn't know you had come prepared, doctor," said Mark, as he supported the arm so that his companion could easily apply the fresh bandage; and when this was done he laid it gently back by the little savage's side, looking at him admiringly the while, for he had not even winced.

"There," said the doctor, "I begin to think nature will do the rest for you; but I will come in and see you again. Why, hallo!" he continued. "I didn't know we had such an audience as this."

For every tree seemed to have a little face peering round it watching what was going on, and some of the grave, serious-looking eyes were undoubtedly those of the little women, none of whom now shrank away as the doctor moved back towards the amphitheatre.

"There, Mak," cried Mark, "tell this little chief that we are much obliged for the two springboks."

The black stared at him.

"How stupid!" said Dean. "Much obliged!"

"Well, you try," said Mark angrily. "I wasn't going to pretend to chew and lick my lips as if the steaks were very good."

"Why not?" said Dean mockingly. "You know they were."

"Well, aren't you going to tell him better?" said Mark scoffingly.

"No, I'm not. Come on."

They made their way back, to find an early supper of venison awaiting them, and that night the boys lay talking in the waggon about the doctor's patient and the next day's visit, till Dean dropped off to sleep, but only to be woke up directly by Mark.

"Don't begin snoozing yet," he said.

"Bother! What did you wake me up for?"

"I want you to practise pigmy, and teach me how to say, 'Thank you; much obliged for the venison.'"

"You go to sleep; and if you wake me like that again I'll kick you out of bed."

"Can't; we haven't got one."

"Old Clever!"

"But I say, seriously; isn't it a pity the doctor doesn't know Illakee, or whatever they call it? I fancy he will soon be able to make Mak understand."

"Yes," said Dean drowsily. "Who would ever have thought he could play at surgeon like that? I believe he could do anything if he liked."

"Yes. I will tell him you said so when we are on our way to Wonder Wood to-morrow morning."

But Mark did not, for they did not go to Wonder Wood, as the boy called it, for the simple reason that a strange surprise awaited them just as Dan had announced that breakfast was ready.

"What is for breakfast this morning?" said Mark.

"Flapjack, sir, buck bones stooed, and tea."

"Tea, and no milk!" said Mark grumpily. "Why, if we had thought of it—"

"Yes, sir," said Dan, catching him up sharply, "I did think of it, only last night, when I was wondering what I should get ready for breakfast."

"Why, what did you think of?" said Mark sharply.

"That it would have been as easy as easy, sir, to have had half a dozen bullocks less in the teams, and—"

"Why, what difference would that make?" said Mark. "What good would that do?"

"Why, we could have had cows, Mr Mark, sir, and then there would have been butter, and milk for the tea and coffee every day."

Chapter Twenty One.

Small Friends.

But they might have had fresh venison steaks for breakfast that morning instead of the "buck bones stooed," as Dan called his dish, or rather, tin, for as the party took their seats beneath the wide-spreading tree where the meal was spread, they were all startled by quite a little procession winding amongst the trees. At least fifty of the pigmies were approaching, led by the miniature chief in his bangles and with his ornamented spear, and ended by four of the little fellows bearing a neatly woven hurdle upon which lay the doctor's patient, carried shoulder high.

"Tell them to set him under that tree, Mak," said the doctor—"yonder."

He pointed to the place meant, and had a little difficulty in making their guide understand.

"I had better make that my surgery, boys," said the doctor, as he hurriedly finished his breakfast, and moved into the shade where the black, glossy-skinned little fellows were waiting patiently, ready to gaze at him with something like awe. They formed a half circle a short distance away, while he went down on one knee beside the hurdle, Mark and Dean standing just behind, and Dan, according to the orders he received, having ready a bowl, a sponge, a can of water, and the doctor's case, while Sir James seated himself against a tree and Mak, spear-armed, stood beside him, looking frowning and important, as if everyone was working under his orders.

"Capital!" said the doctor, as he examined the wound, and then proceeded to re-dress it, Dan grasping his wants as readily as if he had been a surgeon's mate on board a man-of-war.

To the surprise of the boys the little patient evinced no sense of pain, and when the doctor had finished, his face lit up with the nearest approach to a smile that had been seen upon the countenance of any of the pigmies.

"Getting on splendidly," said the doctor, patting him on the shoulder. "There, you may go."

At the word "go," Mak, who had been standing like a black marble statue, started into life, and a word or two, accompanied by signs, resulted in the little bearers coming quickly forward, raising the hurdle, and beginning to move off, followed by the rest of the party, and a few minutes later they had disappeared amongst the trees.

"Well," said the doctor, "it doesn't seem as if they are dissatisfied with my treatment."

"No," replied Mark, laughing; "and they seem ready enough to pay your fees."

"Yes, and I must make haste and get our little friend well, which he soon will be, for Nature will do the rest; but I don't suppose we shall see any more of them, for people of such a low grade of civilisation would probably soon forget. But we must get on. I want to discover Captain Lawton's ancient city."

"Yes, I want to see that," cried Dean. "One doesn't want to be always hunting and shooting."

"That's right, Dean. The sooner we are off the better. Oh, here comes Mak. Let's stir him up again about where the big stones are."

"He will only point with his spear at the forest as if they were there," said Mark, "and of course we can't drive the bullocks through."

"No," said Dean; "but he may mean that the old ruins are on the other side."

"Yes," said the doctor, "and that we can go round, for we are evidently skirting the edge of this primaeval jungle."

"Skirting the edge!" said Mark, laughing. "Oh, yes—like skirting the edge of the world, and we shall be coming out some day—some year, I mean, right on the other side of America. I don't believe there are any old stones. It's all what-you-may-call-it."

"All what-you-may-call-it, you young sceptic!" said the doctor, laughing. "Well, what *do* you call it, for I don't know?"

"Trade—tradesman—trading—trade—"

"Dition," suggested Dean.

"Yes, that's it—all a tradition. I could only think of hunting a will-o'-the-wisp."

"I don't think so," said the doctor. "The captain said some of the hunting parties had seen the great stones in the distance."

"And he said too that they might have been kopjes. And I don't believe that those who came hunting ever ran against these trees, or saw these little pigmy chaps, or else they would have talked about it."

"Similar people were seen by some of our travellers, but that was farther north and more central."

"But I don't see why we should be in such a hurry to get on. We are very comfortable here," said Mark.

"Why do you say that?" said the doctor, looking at the boy searchingly. "You have some reason for it?"

"Well," said Mark hesitating, "I should like to see more of these little people. They amuse me. They are not much bigger than children, and they are such solemn, stolid little chaps. I don't believe any of them ever had a good laugh in their lives."

"That's because they never see any sunshine," said Dean sententiously. "I believe they just have a run outside the forest to stick an arrow or two into the springboks, and then run into the shade again. It's the sun makes one want to laugh, and I should be just as serious if I always lived under those trees."

"Well, I daresay they will bring my patient again to-morrow morning, and we will wait till then, and afterwards I should propose that we journey on at once."

"But you said you were going to ask Mak again about where the big stones are," said Mark, and he signed to the black, who was standing leaning upon his spear watching them, and now in response to the boy's signal, came up at once.

"You ask him, my boy," said the doctor, who was carefully examining the contents of his knapsack and tightening the cork of the little bottle before rolling it up again in the lint and bandages.

Mark seized the opportunity.

"Here, Mak," he cried, "big stones? Where?"

The black turned at once and pointed with his spear in the direction of the forest.

"There, I told you so!" said Mark. Then to the black, "Well, go on; show the way."

Mak, who evidently understood, swung himself half round, and now pointed right along to the edge of the forest.

"That's clear enough, Mark," said the doctor. "He means we have to go round, keeping to the edge and along the open plain where the bullocks can trek."

"Buck Denham—trek!" cried Mak, nodding his head, and using his spear to indicate the direction.

"Big stones," said the doctor, and he now pointed along the edge of the forest.

"Mak find," said the black, nodding his head vigorously.

"Oh, it's evident enough," said the doctor quietly. "He knows what we want, and some day will guide us there. Well, we have plenty of time, boys, and I suppose you are in no hurry to get back to the manor?"

"No, no, of course not; but I do want to see that little fellow again."

Mark had his desire fulfilled the next morning at daybreak, when instead of the numerous procession, the little chief, as they considered him, appeared, accompanied only by the four bearers with the patient and four others well loaded with twice as many big turkey-like birds, one of which showed the way in which they had been obtained, for a broken arrow projected from its back.

The game was handed over to the white foreloper, who bore the birds off to the fire to begin plucking them, the two keepers joining him to quicken the task, while the bearers set down the hurdle beneath the tree, and quite as a matter of course Dan appeared with the tin bowl and a bucket of water. Mark hurriedly fetched the doctor's knapsack and helped over the dressing of the wound, watching the while the change which had come over the little patient who lay seriously and fixedly gazing at Mark, while, as soon as the task was completed he stretched out his uninjured arm so that he could touch Mark's hand. As on the previous morning Mak stood like a spear-armed sentry till all was over, uttered a word or two like an order, and the pigmy party marched back to the edge of the forest and disappeared.

"Well, Mark," said the doctor, who had been very observant, "I suppose that touch meant 'Thank you and good-bye.' But he might have paid me the same compliment. However, he evidently considers you to be the chief."

"No, he could not have done that," said Mark. "Old Mak shows them all that he considers himself the black boss."

The doctor laughed.

"But I say," said Mark eagerly, "did you notice that little chief?"

"Yes," said the doctor. "I did notice it, and was going to speak about it. He was quite a dandy this morning, with his black ostrich feather and his brass wire band round his forehead. He looked quite smart. He must be the chief."

"But I say, doctor, is that brass wire?"

"Of course; the same as his bangles and the rings about his ankles. What else could it be? One thing's very plain. There are ostriches up here somewhere, and these people set store by their feathers. Now do you see what it means?"

"Yes," said Mark, "that the chief wears one and that none of the others do."

"I didn't mean that," said the doctor. "I meant that they evidently traded with dealers who come up the country here and use coils of brass wire as their current coin to exchange with the natives."

"Coils of brass wire which they cut in lengths, I suppose, to deal with these little blacks."

"That's quite right, my boy; but what are you thinking about?"

"I was thinking," said Mark, "that if these traders came right up here and dealt with the pigmies we should have heard about it."

"Might or might not," said the doctor.

"Yes," said Mark, who seemed very thoughtful, "and I might or might not be right if I said that I believe it isn't brass but gold."

"What!" cried the doctor. "Nonsense!"

Mark seemed as if he did not hear the doctor's contemptuous words, while his cousin, startled by Mark's suggestion, now said eagerly, "And there are those two bits like ferrules about the chiefs spear. They are not brass wire."

"No," said the doctor, "but they might be thicker pieces beaten out into ferrules. But really, boys, you have started a curious train of thought. I hardly noticed the bangles; I was so much occupied with the little fellow's wound. It might be what you say. I wish you had spoken before. It is a most interesting suggestion. Well, it isn't worth while to go after them, and we will examine them closely to-morrow morning."

"But you said that we were going away to-day," said Mark.

"Yes," replied the doctor, "but we are not obliged, and—really, this is interesting. It opens up quite a train of thought. Here, we will talk it over with Sir James at breakfast."

It was talked over quietly during the meal, and the party stayed that day, while the next morning both boys were awake before daylight and on the look out, with Mak, for the coming of the little strangers. But there was no sign of the tiny black chief and his men.

"They won't come," said Mark impatiently, "and we have let the chance slip by of finding out something very interesting."

"But we don't want to find out anything about gold," said Dean, with a ring of contempt in his words.

"No," said Mark, "but I should have liked to have found out that it was gold, all the same. Well," continued the boy, "that little chap has done with the doctor, and there will be no more bandaging."

"And no more of those big birds, unless we shoot them ourselves," said Dean.

"Wrong!" cried Mark excitedly. "Here they are!"

Chapter Twenty Two.

A Rich Discovery.

Dean Roche started in his excitement, for as his cousin spoke he saw that Mak, who had been waiting near, stood pointing with his spear at the little party of pigmies who were winding through the bushes and low growth at the forest edge, the little chief at their head, followed by four of his men bearing a couple of little antelopes swinging from spears, while behind them were two pigmies carrying what seemed to be a sort of creel, in which was their wounded fellow.

"I say, look!" cried Dean. "He must be better."

"Go and tell the doctor, Mak," said Mark, and then as Mak strode off, "I am glad they have come," cried Dean.

"Yes. We must tell the doctor to look at the brass bangles," said Mark.

"They are not brass," cried Dean. "I am sure they are gold."

The doctor came out, meeting the messenger, and Dan, who was on the watch, followed him with what was required.

The necessary attention to the wound followed, and the doctor quite excitedly pointed out with what wonderful rapidity the terrible injury was healing up.

"There," he suddenly cried, turning to the little chief, who stood leaning upon his spear, "you need not bring your friend any more, for we are going away."

The little fellow gazed up wonderingly in his eyes, and Mark burst out laughing.

"What does that mean?" cried the doctor sharply, but without moving his eyes from the pale yellow ring that encircled the pigmy's brow. Then lowering his eyes he searchingly looked at the bangles on wrist and arm. "Do you hear what I said? What does that mean?" he asked.

"I was laughing at you for speaking so seriously," said Mark. "He can't understand a word."

"Of course not," said the doctor. "Why, Mark," he cried, "I believe you are right, boy."

"That it is not brass?" said Mark excitedly.

"That it is not brass," replied the doctor. "Where can they obtain it?"

"Not in the woods, surely," said Mark.

"Oh, here's your father," said the doctor, as Sir James came towards them from the waggon.

"Look at these bangles, sir," continued the doctor, "and the band round this little fellow's head. What do you say they are?"

Sir James looked at the yellow objects attentively.

"They cannot be brass," he said decisively, "or in the moisture of that forest they would have tarnished. Why, boys, we didn't come hunting for the precious metal, but we have found it, all the same."

"Yes, there's no doubt of it," said the doctor. "Well, the ancients must have obtained plenty of gold somewhere, and they are supposed to have built a big city in this direction. I feel disposed to put these things together and to say that this city must exist, and that these little fellows must have found their gold ornaments somewhere there. What can we do to find out from them where they obtained the gold?"

"Ask them, sir," said Mark.

"How?"

"I don't know," said Mark; "but I will try."

"Well, go on," said Sir James.

Mark looked doubtfully at his father for a few moments, and then turned his eyes upon his cousin, as if for help; but Dean only shook his head.

"Well, go on," said the doctor.

"It is all very well to say, Go on, sir," retorted Mark, "but it isn't a Latin exercise, and it isn't an equation. I don't know how to begin."

Then as a thought struck him he bent down to the little chief and touched his bangles and armlets, finishing off by placing a finger upon the thin ribbon-like band which bound his forehead.

The little fellow looked at him wonderingly as if he did not understand, and turning to the doctor's patient he said a word or two in a questioning tone.

This was answered in almost a whisper of a couple of monosyllabic words, which resulted in the little chief slipping one wire bangle from his arm and handing it to Mark, the Illaka looking on attentively the while.

Mark shook his head, but the little fellow thrust the bangle into his hand and looked at him enquiringly.

"No, no," said Mark, "I want to know where you get it."

The words had no sooner passed the boy's lips than the pigmy snatched off the fellow bangle from above his elbow, and held them both out.

"No, no, no," replied Mark, "We—want—to—know—where—you—got—them."

The little fellow laughed, stooped quickly, and took off the slender little anklets, holding now the four ornaments as if for the boy's acceptance.

"No, no, I tell you," cried Mark impetuously. "We don't want to rob you;" and leaning forward he touched the slender pieces of gold with his finger and then the ribbon-like band that was half hidden amongst the little fellow's crisp curls.

"Where—where did you get them?" cried Mark.

The pigmy wrinkled up his forehead, with a disappointed look, raised his hands to his head, looking at the boy reproachfully the while, hesitated, and then snatched off the band, held all five ornaments together and thrust them towards Mark, with his face overcast and frowning the while.

"Oh, I do wish I could talk to you," cried Mark. "Here, Mak, can't you say something?"

The tall black shook his head and half turned away.

"He doesn't understand either," said Dean. "Try dumb motions, Mark."

"All right," cried Mark, seizing the set of rings, small and large, and they jingled musically together, while the pigmy with a gloomy look picked up his ostrich feather, which had fallen to the ground, thrust it into his hair, and turned frowningly away.

"No, no; hold hard," cried Mark merrily, and he prisoned the little fellow by the arm and twisted him round, making him look up in angry wonderment, and his eyes flashed resentment as Mark snatched the ostrich feather from out of his hair and stuck the quill end into one of the buttonholes of his flannel Norfolk jacket.

The little dark face before him was lined with creases, and the flashing eyes nearly closed, while as he stood unresistingly Mark replaced the band of gold—for gold it was—about his head, and then taking the ostrich feather from his breast he thrust the quill beneath the band so that it hung over on one side with quite a cock.

"There, he looks splendid now," cried Mark, "only don't look so fierce. Now then—right arm;" and seizing it the boy held it up, thrust one bangle over it and ran it up the pigmy's plump little arm right above the elbow, till it was arrested by the tightened biceps.

He served the left arm in the same way, and then sinking on one knee he caught the sturdy little leg by the ankle, and holding one bangle out before him thrust it over the little fellow's foot. The next minute the ornamentation was completed by the thrusting on of the second anklet, and then Mark sprang up, while the rest looked on, some amused, the little blacks with their eyes full of wonderment and as if not comprehending this scene.

"Now," cried Mark, "let's have another try;" and touching the gold rings one after the other, he said slowly, "Where—find?"

The little chief looked at him questioningly, then at the rest of the white visitors, and turned to his followers, who looked at him blankly, all but the doctor's patient, who, seated in his basket—as Dean afterwards said, as if he were for sale—whispered faintly a couple of words.

"Can't you understand?" said Mark, and he touched the gold band again and began a very effective pantomime, running here and there, peeping under the bushes, peering in between the trees, looking up, then down, in all directions, dropped upon one knee, to begin scratching up the sandy earth, which he took up in handfuls and turned

over in his hands, and then shaking his head sadly he turned to the little black again, crying, "Can't find any; can't find any. The gold—the gold!"

The little party of pigmies stared at him blankly, and then at each other.

"Well done," said the doctor. "Try again. Capital!"

"No, no," said Mark. "They will think I have gone mad."

"Yes," said Dean, grinning.

"Bah! That settles it; I won't," cried Mark. "Oh, I wish I knew what that little chap said!" For the doctor's patient whispered something again, with the result that his little chief bounded towards Mark, touched his gold ornaments again, and then snatched his spear from a companion who had been holding it, and touched the two ferrules that were beneath the blade and at the end. These with almost lightning-like movements he touched with index finger, following up the act by touching the fillet and bangles, and then looking enquiringly in Mark's eyes he uttered one word.

"Yes," cried Mark, at a venture. "Where do you get it?"

The little fellow's face lit up now with a smile, and drawing himself up he raised his spear and stood pointing right into the wood.

"I think he understands now," said the doctor. "Look; what does he mean by that?"

For the little fellow in a series of gazelle-like leaps bounded to first one and then the other waggon, and came running back with his eyes flashing, to stand pointing as before right into the depths of the forest. This done, he made a mark in the sandy earth with the butt of his spear, and then walking backwards he drew a line as straight as he could for about fifty yards, keeping parallel with the edge of the forest, and ending by curving his line round till he reached the first trees.

"What does he mean by that?" said Mark, as the little fellow came running back.

"I think I know," said Dean.

"So do I," cried Mark. "Here, Mak, what does this mean?"

The black faced slowly to them from where he had been leaning against the tree watching as if amused, and raising his spear he walked importantly to the waggons, touching first one and then the other with his spear before turning and pointing right into the forest, and ending by drawing a similar line to that made by the little visitor.

"Well, that's plain enough," said Mark excitedly. "I make it that the pigmy means that if we want to find the gold we must walk right round the other side of the forest; but Mak means that this is the way to find the big stones."

"Big—stones—kopje," cried Mak, nodding his head sharply, and after pointing again with his spear he slowly described a semi-circle upon the earth.

"Yes, I think you are right," said Sir James. "At any rate, doctor, we may as well try."

"Certainly, sir," said the doctor, laughing. "But it's rather a queer way of learning our route. I agree with Mark, though, that both Mark and the pigmy mean the city, only the little fellow tries to tell us that we shall find the gold there, while Mak means the big stones."

"Big stones!" cried Mak sharply, as he caught the words. "Boss—find—big—stones;" and he waved his spear again after pointing towards the forest and then describing the route they must follow in the air.

Mak watched the doctor eagerly, then turned to the little chief, said a word or two, and the little fellow passed on what was evidently an order to his followers, who began to move off, when a thought struck Mark and he caught the little chief by the arm and led him towards the second waggon.

"Here, Dean," he cried, "jump in and get those two new spare knives out of the fore chest. Look sharp. I'm afraid to leave go. This fellow's all of a quiver with fright, and I am afraid he will bolt."

"All right," was the reply, and leaving Mark and his prisoner waiting, the boy sprang up into the waggon, and came back with a couple of strongly made, buckhorn-handled, four-bladed pocket knives, one of which Mark slipped into his pocket, retaining the other in his hand.

"You take my place," he said, "and hold tight. Don't let him go."

Then turning to the little black he began to open slowly first one and then another of the highly polished blades, which glittered in the sun, while without attempting to resist, the little fellow stared at him wildly, and it was easy to read his emotions in his twitching face.

"Now, you see this?" said Mark, as holding out the knife close to their prisoner he snapped back first one and then two more of the shining blades, which went back into the haft with sharp snaps. Then taking a step to the nearest bush, with one sharp cut he took off a good-sized bough, returning to where the pigmy was watching him, trimming the piece of wood as he walked, and leaving the twigs besprinkling the ground.

"There," said Mark, as he closed the remaining blade, after wiping it carefully where it was moistened with sap, "I

didn't want to rob you of your gold rings, and you have been a very good little fellow, so that's for you."

As he finished speaking he thrust the closed knife into the little chief's hand, and then walked back with him to where the weak-looking little patient sat watching all that had gone on with wide open eyes.

"Now," cried Mark, patting him on the back; "make haste and get well. I don't suppose I shall ever see you again. Be a good boy, and don't go near lions. There's a knife for you too. So toddle."

"What nonsense!" cried Dean. "Poor little chap! Doesn't he wish he could!"

The little fellow's eyes twinkled as he took the knife which Mark held out to him and then good-naturedly opened all the blades and closed them again so that the receiver might fully understand the management of the wonderful instrument he had never seen before.

"Now, Mak, start them off, and I hope we shall never see them again," continued the boy, "for somehow or other I quite like that little fellow. He's been so patient all through his suffering, and never hardly winced, when the doctor must have hurt him no end. I don't mean like him as one would another boy, but as one would a good dog that had been hurt and which we had nursed back again to getting all right—that is, I mean," continued the boy confusedly—"Oh, bother! Here, I don't quite know what I do mean. Ah, there they go. I say, Dean, did you ever see such a rum little chap in your life, with his gold ornaments and ostrich feather? Shouldn't you like to take him back with us to the manor?"

"Yes—no—I don't know," said Dean. "Here, come on. They have all gone now, and there's Dan waving his hand for us to come to breakfast."

"That's right," said Mark thoughtfully. "We understand; you needn't shout. I say, Dean, we might as well have brought the old gong out of the hall. It would have done for dinner-bell if we had hung it outside the waggon, and been splendid to have scared the lions away."

Chapter Twenty Three.

Building the Zareba.

"Compasses are fine things," said Mark. "See, here we are with that little needle ready to spin one way or the other till it stands still without being shaken, and here it shows us exactly how we have been travelling along first to the south, then due west, and now here we are steadily going on to the north-west."

"That's all very well at sea," said Dean, "but here we are on land. Suppose that compass isn't correct?"

"There's a sceptic!" cried Mark. "Why, doesn't the sun rising and setting prove it to be all right? The needle always is correct unless it's near iron."

"Or there is some natural cause to produce a variation," said the doctor, who was listening to the boys' remarks upon the pocket compass which he always carried. "We needn't doubt it here."

"Then according to what you are showing, sir, in the fourteen days' since those pigmies left us—"

"No, we left them," said Dean.

"That's not correct," said Mark. "We stood still and saw them go into the forest, so they must have left us."

"But we left our camp directly afterwards," said Dean, "and we have been travelling along by the edge of the forest ever since."

"There, don't argue, boys," said the doctor. "It's quite evident that we have passed right round the forest and left it behind us, and I make it out that if instead of following the edge so as to be in the open where the bullocks could trek we could have walked straight through between the trees, we should have been here long enough ago. Why, we are now about opposite to the pigmy settlement."

"What!" cried Mark. "Oh, I say, let's stop and go in amongst the trees, and shout or cooey till we make them hear, and they will come and join us."

"That's a likely idea," said Dean derisively. "What a fellow he is, isn't he, doctor? He's been grumbling ever since he lost his pet pig."

"Well, I don't care. I did like the little chap."

"Yes, just because you were nursing him and getting him better. Why, Mark, you are just like a great girl with a pet lamb."

"Oh, am I?" said Mark sourly.

"Yes, that you are. She's so fond of it because it's so white and skips after her, and she ties blue ribbons round its neck and is as pleased as Punch to have it running after her, and crying ma-a-a-a-a!"

"You just wait till the doctor's gone off with father, and I'll punch your head," whispered Mark, as the doctor walked towards the waggon which they were following.

"I don't care; so you are," said Dean; "and by-and-by the pretty little lamb grows up into a great, big, ugly, stupid-looking sheep good for nothing."

"Yes, it is—mutton."

"And that's how it would be," continued Dean, "with your pet savage. It would grow old and ugly, and a perfect nuisance, and be not so good as a sheep, because you could eat that, and even you wouldn't care to turn into an anthropop—what's his name?"

"There, that's just like you, Dean; you are always trying to use big ugly words that you can't recollect the whole of. Anthropop what's his name! Why can't you say cannibal? Here, I will help you," cried the boy mockingly. "Say anthropo-phagistically inclined."

"Oh, I say, don't, Mark!" said Dean, laughing. "I am sure that's given you a twist at the corners of your jaws."

Quite involuntarily Mark clapped his index fingers just beneath his ears as if his cousin's words were true and he had felt a twinge, with the result that Dean burst out laughing.

"There, go on. I don't care about your grinning. All this travelling out here makes a fellow feel so jolly and happy. One goes to roost tired out, and is fast asleep directly, so that one wakes rested in the morning, with the air making one ready to dance and sing."

"Makes you hungry," said Dean banteringly. "But why don't you dance and sing? I should like to see you. Only tell me when you are going to begin and I will call our fellows up to look at you. I say, what a pity it is that we could not get the herd of little pigs to form a ring. I believe it would make the solemn-looking little chaps grin for once in their lives."

"Oh, go on," cried Mark. "I'll pocket all this and give it you back in some shape or another one of these days. It pleases you and it doesn't hurt me; but all the same if we do come back this way I mean to stop when we get to our old camp, and then give the pigmies a call."

"No, don't," said Dean, "because if you do you will want me to go and take care of you, and no more forest, if you please."

Oddly enough that very evening when the compass said they were travelling due west, that is to say, right across the plain that now opened before them in the direction that Mak had pointed out as being the way to the big stones, and when the great forest lay looking as if sinking into a golden cloud far behind, something occurred.

They had seen that they were now passing into the open country, for twice over a drove of antelopes had taken fright where they were grazing and dashed away, but the second time by means of careful stalking and taking advantage of the screen offered by scattered clumps of trees, the doctor and Sir James had both made a good addition to their larder.

This change in the country, though it fully proved that they could secure an ample supply of provisions, and though their black guide when questioned had pointed to one of the kopjes or clumps of granite which sprinkled the plain as being where they would find water—brought with it a suggestion of danger.

"Yes, gentlemen," said Buck; "we shall have to be careful now, what my messmate Dan calls look out for squalls."

"Roaring squalls?" said Mark, laughing. "Yes, Mr Mark, sir, roaring squallers, who as soon as they scent us out will be full of the idee that we have come here on purpose to bring them a change of wittles."

"Oh, you mean that they are rather tired of venison and want to have beef."

"That's right, Mr Mark, sir; and we can't pay them out, because though they can eat my bullocks we can't eat them."

"No, Buck, but we can pepper their hides and salt their skins."

"Pepper 'em, sir? We want to give them something stronger than that—some of the hard bullets you have got in the waggon. I have been having it over with black Mak, and he's quite at home here and is on the look out for a place where we can build up what they calls a zareba of bushes and rock with a good fire inside. We mustn't have another night like that last."

Just then Peter Dance and Bob Bacon came into sight, laden with a pretty good faggot of dry wood that they had hacked off, and which they secured to the tail of the second waggon ready for starting the cooking fire when they made camp.

The men were intent upon their work; and each had a light billhook stuck behind him in his belt, and while Dance was readjusting his faggot his chopping tool nearly slipped out of where it was slightly stuck, while in trying to save it from falling, the keeper, who had quite forgotten his bruises, glanced for a moment in their direction.

"I say, young gentlemen," said the big driver, speaking from behind his hand, "warn't it rum? It was just as if Peter felt that we were talking about him."

"What, about his letting the fire out?" said Mark. "Oh, we must forget that. I don't believe he would ever do it again."

"I hope not, sir," said Buck, and he swung himself along to overtake the waggon, giving his big whip a crack or two and his span of bullocks a few verbal admonitions to trek.

"That will be a horrible bother," said Dean, as the boys, rifle over shoulder, strode off a little to the right of the straight course so as to take their chance of anything that might spring up from one of the clumps of dwarf trees which were being avoided by the waggon drivers. For these carefully kept away from anything that might impede their progress, which was towards the first rocky eminence of any size they had seen, save on more distant hunting excursions, since they had left the forest behind.

"What, building up a kraal, or zareba, as he called it?" said Mark.

"Yes. You see, we shall be tired enough without having that to do. But it must be done."

But just at sundown the spot at which Mak had been aiming was reached. It was one of the regular kopjes of the African plains, but fairly verdant, being well furnished with dwarf trees and loose, rugged patches of rock that offered themselves for protection, while a gurgling source of water gushed out at the foot of the largest mass of granite, foamed away amongst the stones for about a hundred yards, forming several clear pools, and lost itself in a muddy, trampled little swamp which showed plenty of signs of being visited by the herds of antelope which roamed the veldt.

One of the first things done was the making of a hurried survey of the kopje, Mak at once bending to his task of leading the travellers, rifle in hand, to the examination of every spot that suggested the possibility of its being used as a lair by any dangerous cat-like beast. But no lion sprang out, and there was nothing suggestive of danger till Mak led the searchers to where the stream spread out for a while before it sank down into the sand.

Here there were plenty of traces of antelope of various kinds, their footprints showing out distinctly and indicating the ease with which a watcher could get a shot. But the next minute the thoughts of all were occupied by their guide stopping short and pointing out the plainly marked spoor of a lion.

This, however, proved to be evidently of some days' standing, but it was enough to add energy to the efforts made in having the waggons dragged up close to a mass of rock where they could form part of the protection needed and lessen the necessary labour in shutting in the beasts.

Every man had his own work to do, and even with the extra toil of strengthening their camp it was not long before the fire was blazing well, the cattle grazing upon the rich grass in the neighbourhood of the pools, and their guide, being satisfied that they had no unpleasant neighbours, now beckoned to the boys and pointed to the highest portion of the granite kopje, suggesting that they should follow him and have a climb.

The mass of granite, formed of huge, tumbled together blocks, was easily accessible, and the doctor followed them when they began to ascend, till the highest point was reached and they stood sweeping the vast expanse around which now lay plain in the beautifully limpid air.

During the day a soft, hot haze had shut off the more distant objects, but now everything showed up refracted, so that the distant hillocks and clumps of trees seemed quite near, lit up by the soft glow left by the sun that was now below the horizon.

Look in whatever direction they would, every object was in the fleeting minutes wonderfully clear. There lay in the direction from which they had come as far as their vision extended, the vast forest which they had skirted; in another direction all was plain; right and left open diversified land presenting easy passage for the waggons; and when in obedience to a sign from Mak they turned to gaze to the north-west, the black raised his spear and pointed in one direction, where the beautiful landscape seemed to come to an end in mass after mass of tumbled together rock, showing with vivid distinctness patches of woodland, deeply marked ravine that was filling fast with velvety purple shadow, and heaped up mass that as they gazed began gradually to grow less and less distinct, till that which at the first glance had stood out sharply clear and marked against the pale, golden sky began to die away till nothing was left, not even a shadow.

The boys and the doctor had somehow been so impressed by the beauty of the scene that they spoke in whispers, Mark finding words just to say, "Oh, I wish father were here! I did ask him to come, but he wanted to rest."

"Yes," said the doctor; "we have had a very long day. But how beautiful! How grand! We ought to stay up here till the stars come out.—Eh, what do you say, Mak?" as the man touched his shoulder and pointed again right away into the west.

"All gone," he said.

"Yes, all gone," said the doctor, using the black's simple words.

"Sunshine come again, 'morrow morning."

"Yes," said the doctor thoughtfully, as he stood trying to pierce the soft transparent limpidity of the coming night. "Boys, we shall never forget this."

"Ah," said the black, thumping down the haft of his spear upon the massive block where he had perched himself some two hundred feet above the plain. "Mak knows Mak's big stones."

"What!" cried Mark excitedly. "Is that where the old city lies?"

"Umps, yes," said the black. "Mak big stones."

“Don’t shoot, Father!”

“Why, we are as snug here as can be,” said Dean.

“Should be,” said Mark, “if it wasn’t for that fire.”

For the night set in dark—a night which would have been of intense blackness but for the brilliant points of light that shone down like effulgent jewels spread upon a sky of the deepest purple dye.

But it was light enough within the enclosure formed by the perpendicular patch of granite rock, the two waggons, and the dense mass of thorny faggots which had been gathered and built up so as to hedge them in.

A goodly portion of the fourth opening into the little kraal was filled up by the large fire which was burning for the protection of the bullocks and ponies, and thoroughly lit up the camping place, but in return for its protection extorted the suffering from the heat, not only in front but reflected down from the rocks behind.

“Yes,” said Dean, “it is rather a roaster. Couldn’t we let it out now?”

“No,” said the doctor decisively. “I have just been outside to have a look round with Mak. We were only out for a few minutes, and the black caught me twice by the arm to listen.”

“Well, did you hear anything?” said Mark.

“Yes; lions.”

The boy made a movement as if to reach his rifle.

“You need not do that,” said the doctor, “for the sounds were distant. Still, lions travel fast, and we might have a visit at any time; so you see that you have an answer to your proposal about letting the fire out.”

“Yes,” said Dean; “that settles it.”

“Besides,” said the doctor, “we should not be any cooler if there were no fire.”

“Oh-h-h!” said Mark, in a tone that suggested doubt.

“Don’t be too sceptical, my boy,” said the doctor. “Let me prove it to you. Come a little nearer the fire.”

The doctor had led the way, and together they stood so near to the glowing flames that they looked to those whom they left behind like a pair of figures cut out of black cloth.

“Now,” said the doctor, “how do you feel?”

“As if my face would be scorched if I stopped here.”

“Nothing more?”

“Oh, yes,” said Mark; “I feel quite a cool wind blowing into my neck.”

“Exactly,” said the doctor. “As the heated air rises from the fire the cool air from the veldt rushes in to take its place. Why, don’t you remember when the haystack was on fire at the farm at home how we went to see it, walked close up, and felt the cold wind rushing towards the flames so that you had a stiff neck the next day?”

“Of course! I had forgotten that,” said Mark, laughing. “Well, we must put up with the fire, I suppose.”

The watch was set that night, and fell to the lot of Sir James, who took up his post near the fire, rifle in hand, while every man lay down with his piece by his side, for three times by sounds much nearer, the animals were made uneasy. The bullocks couched close to the trek-tow and the ponies stamped restlessly again and again from where they were haltered to one of the wheels inside the enclosure and close up to the granite wall.

But in one case a deep growl from Buck Denham seemed to comfort the great sleek beasts, and a word or two in his highly pitched voice from Dunn Brown turned the ponies’ stamping into a gentle whinny.

At last the only sounds within the walls of the kraal were the low whispering of the two boys.

“How far is it to black Mak’s big stones, do you think?” said Mark.

“Eh?” was the reply. “You heard what I said.”

“That I didn’t!”

“Then you were asleep. I thought you were.”

“Nonsense!” said Dean indignantly. “I had only just lain down. What was it you said?”

Mark laughed, to his cousin’s great annoyance. “I said, How far is it to black Mak’s big stones?”

“A whole day’s journey.”

"Nonsense! Why, this evening they looked quite near."

"Yes, but the doctor said that was the refraction."

"Well, I hope it will refract some of the gold when we get there," said Mark. "I want to see what the place is like."

"We don't want the gold," said Dean. "Yes, we do. We should like to get some of it as curiosities. But oh, I say, doesn't it seem like all pother about what the doctor said? There's none of the cool air from the veldt coming in here under the waggon tilt." Dean made no reply.

"I shall never go to sleep in here like this. My hair's getting quite wet. Isn't yours?"

Burrrr!

"I say, Dean, don't be so horribly wide awake. I can't go to sleep if you are. Can you?"

"Eh?"

"Feel sleepy?" said Mark mockingly. "That I wasn't. I wish you wouldn't be so fond of trying to make jokes when we come to bed."

"Well, you can do as you like," said Mark, laughing, "but I'm going to lie with my head outside in the air."

"Eh? Yes, it is hot," said Dean, turning over. "I say, what are you doing?"

"Getting up."

"What for? Can't be morning yet."

"Oh, no," said Mark, laughing; "not quite. Oh, what a fellow you are! There, rouse up and let me throw a blanket over the big chest, and when I have tied back the tilt we will lie with our heads out there, and perhaps we shall be able to breathe the cool air."

This proved to be the case, with the result that Dean went off to sleep instantly, while Mark kept dozing off and waking again with a start.

At last, tired of the uneasy feeling that troubled him, he crept out from the tail end of the waggon and stood looking about the enclosure, where all was still save the heavy breathing of one of the ponies or that of the bullocks.

"Phew!" sighed Mark. "What a hot night! Here, I know; I'll go and see how the dad is getting on."

A few steps took him to where he could see his father's face, the glow from the fire throwing it up and flashing from his eyes.

"He is getting sunburnt," thought the boy, and then, stepping out of the shadow cast by the waggon, he walked quickly towards the sentry of the night and began speaking aloud:

"Don't shoot, father!"

"Why, Mark, my boy, what are you doing here? Have you heard anything?"

"No, father; but I couldn't sleep. Have you?"

"I heard a lion once, with his deep barking roar, and there are several of those wretched jackals about. I am afraid we shall hear a good deal more of these noises out in the plain than we did close in the shelter of the forest. But don't stop talking. Go back to sleep."

"But I can't sleep, father," said the boy reproachfully.

"Nonsense! Try again. I daresay you will be able to go off now, after coming out and talking to me."

"But can't I stay with you, father?" protested the boy.

"No. You must have sleep, and if you don't you will be uneasy to-morrow. What makes you so wakeful? Not going to be ill, are you?"

"Oh, no, father; I'm quite well."

"Then go back to the waggon and lie down."

"Good-night, father."

"Good-night," was the reply. "Ah, there's another of those jackals. What a miserable note it is!"

"Yes, father; but I think the hyaenas are worse," said Mark eagerly.

"Didn't I tell you to go back to bed, sir!"

"Yes, father, but—"

"Then go."

"Bother!" muttered the boy, as he went off. "He might as well have let me stay. It would have been company for him."

Mark stepped on towards the dark side of the waggon, and continued muttering to himself till he raised his hand to the side of the great clumsy vehicle, placed a foot on one of the spokes, and was in the act of drawing himself up to climb in, but suddenly let himself drop back, for something leaped out of the interior of the waggon right over his cousin, reaching the earth with a dull thud, and darting away.

"Whatever can that be?" said the boy excitedly, and with a catching of the breath.

He felt his heart begin to pump heavily in his excitement.

"It must have been one of those leopards, but it gave me no time to see what it was like. Here, Dean," he whispered, as he climbed up and bent over his sleeping cousin. "Dean!"

"Oh, bother!"

"Don't make a noise," whispered Mark. "Wake up."

"Eh? Is it lions?"

"No, no. Speak lower, or you will alarm the camp."

"Well, what do you want? You are always making me wake up when I have just dropped off to sleep. What is it?"

"Hush! I have just been out to talk to father."

"Have you?" said Dean, half asleep again. "Wha'd he say?"

"Never mind what he said," whispered Mark, with his face close to his cousin's ear.

"I don't."

"No, you don't, of course, you sleepy head! Wake up."

Mark seized his cousin by the shoulders, raised his head, and let it fall down again with a bump on the blanket-covered box lid.

"Oh, you brute!" began Dean, wide awake now.

"Well, I didn't mean to do it so hard; but do you want to lie here with wild things coming at you?"

"Eh? No," cried Dean, half rising up. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I went out to talk to father—"

"Well, yes, you said so before," cried the boy pettishly; and he made as if to lay his head down again.

"No, you don't!" cried Mark, checking him. "Listen."

"I—can't—lis'—I am so slee—"

"Do you want to be eaten up by wild beasts?"

"Eh? No," cried Dean, fully awake now.

"I came back to the waggon, and was just getting in when something came from behind you."

"What was it? Not a big snake?"

"No, no. I thought it was a leopard, but I don't think so now. I only just had a glimpse of it as it jumped out and dropped down at the end there, and scuttled off."

"Oh!" cried Dean excitedly. "A leopard?"

"No," whispered Mark. "It was one of those baboons."

"What baboons? I haven't seen any baboons."

"No, no; but one of those that they say live in packs amongst the kopjes."

"Ugh!" ejaculated Dean. "I believe they bite horribly."

"Well, did you feel him bite?"

"Of course not! If I had it would have woke me up."

"Oh, I don't know," said his cousin, laughing. "Well, at all events one of them must have got in here as soon as I had

gone, and been making itself comfortable in my place.”

“I say, I don’t like that,” said Dean. “You shouldn’t have gone.”

“Well, I didn’t want to,” said Mark softly. “But I am glad we are not going to stay here, for though we did not see any, this must be one of the kopjes where the baboons live. I say, do you feel sleepy now?”

“No, not a bit.”

“Nor do I. Let’s lie still and talk. That will rest us, even if we don’t sleep, and, as father says, we want to be fresh tomorrow.”

“All right,” said Dean, reaching for his rifle. “But let’s keep a sharp look out.”

This they did for quite five minutes, and then so hardened were they to their outdoor life that their restful breathing was the only thing that disturbed the silence within the waggon, save a faint rustling at the other end, caused by the doctor turning over, for during the last few minutes he had been awakened from a deep sleep by the boys’ muttering, and now that they were quiet again he too went off soundly.

It still wanted an hour to the coming of the first dawn when Mark started up.

“Here—what—” he began, when a hand was clapped over his mouth and he felt Dean’s lip at his ear. “Don’t make a noise,” his cousin whispered. “What’s the matter? Has the ape been again?”

“No. It wasn’t a baboon; it was one of those pigs.”

“Bosh! A pig couldn’t climb into the waggon.”

“No, no, stupid! Pigmy!”

“What nonsense! You have been asleep again.”

“Yes, fast; I couldn’t help it. So were you.”

“Was I? Well, yes, I suppose I was; and I’m glad of it. But I have had a sensible sleep.”

“Well, so have I, but—”

“No, you haven’t. Mine was, for I didn’t get dreaming that I saw a baboon.”

“And I didn’t either,” whispered Dean angrily. “I was asleep, but I woke up feeling a soft hand going over my face.”

“Bah! You dreamt it.”

“I didn’t, I tell you! I could feel it as plain as could be; and then it moved away from me, and I could just make out by the starlight that it was passing its hand over your face. Didn’t you feel it?”

“No,” said Mark. “You can’t feel ghosts and dreams. They only seem.”

“Ghosts and dreams!” said Dean impetuously.

“Well, baboons, then—sleep baboons. Oh, I say, Dean, what’s coming to you? You used to be content with going to sleep like a top. But if you are going to begin having dreams like this I shall sleep under the waggon.”

“Oh, you obstinate mule! Who said anything about baboons?”

“Why, you did.”

“I didn’t. I said it was one of those pigmies.”

“Then you dreamt it. What time is it?”

“I don’t know. Shall I strike a light?”

“What, and wake the doctor? No, it would only make him grumpy at being roused for nothing. There, I can guess pretty closely. It wants over an hour to dawn. So here goes. I’m off.”

As he spoke Mark wrenched himself round, turning his back to his cousin, and at the same time reached his face over so that he could breathe in the cool, soft breeze that comes just before the day, while Dean sighed and followed his example, both sleeping heavily till there was a sharp crack of a waggon whip, and they both started up, to utter almost together, “Hallo!”

“Hallo!”

And then they stared hard at each other over something else.

Chapter Twenty Five.

“Made of India-Rubber.”

The “something else” the cousins looked across was one of the pigmies—evidently a chief of higher rank than the little leader they had last seen, though he seemed to be less in size.

He was rich in bangles, for he had four upon each arm and wrist and a wider ribbon of gold about his forehead, in which band were stuck two ostrich feathers, a black and a white. But, as Mark afterwards said laughingly, that was almost all he wore, except a bow and arrows and a spear.

“Well, who are you?” began Mark. “And what—why, Dean, it’s our little chap!”

“It can’t be,” said Dean, whose back was towards the increasing light.

“But it is,” cried Mark. “Look here;” and he laid his hand tenderly about the pigmy’s shoulder, where the black skin was somewhat puckered up, showing that a great scar was forming. “Why, little one, you can’t say we didn’t make a good job of mending you up.”

“But it can’t be,” said Dean, staring doubtingly at their little visitor. “But I don’t know—he is very thin.”

The little fellow raised himself up slightly as he knelt upon the great chest, and looked first at one and then at the other with a calm air of satisfaction as if he found it pleasant to be scanned and praised, but making very little sign besides as he turned from one to the other in obedience to a touch, and ended by changing his bow from his right to his left hand, where it lay in company with his spear, and then placing three fingers upon Mark’s wrist.

“Oh, come, I say,” cried the latter, “I am all right; I don’t want my pulse felt. How’s yours?” and the boy played the part of a doctor for a few moments, but blunderingly felt for the pulse in the wrong wrist. “Well, you seem uncommonly fit, little chap. Are you growing quite strong again? Tell us how you got here.”

The visitor could not respond to the question, nor comprehend it in the least, but he looked gravely at Mark again and once more laid three fingers upon his arm.—“Oh, I wish he would talk,” cried Mark.

“You don’t even grunt,” said Dean.

“Pigs do grunt in our country,” said Mark. “But I say, Pig—Pigmy, what a little dandy you have grown! Ostrich feathers—gold,” continued the boy, touching the bangles, “where do you get them?”

The little fellow took his spear in his right hand again and used it to point out of the waggon in the direction where the lads had seen the towering masses of stone on the previous night.

“Oh, come,” said Dean, “he understands that.”

“Yes; so do we, and I want to get off to see what sort of a place this is. But we mustn’t be rude to the visitor who brought us so much venison. I wonder where father is.”

“And the doctor,” added Dean, peering out of the waggon. “Oh, there they are, going up to the top of the kopje. Hi, Mak! Come here!”

The black was standing half way between the waggon and the top of the kopje, shading his eyes from the newly risen sun, as he stood scanning the veldt in different directions, but began to descend directly with his customary deliberation as if he had nothing whatever to do with the preparations for the morning start.

“I say, Dean, we must have breakfast before we go, this morning. We can’t send company away—and such a grandee as this—without a feed.”

A few minutes later, as the boys sat silently gazing at their little visitor, noting that in spite of being thin and rather hollow of cheek his eyes were bright and there was no sign of weakness in his movements, while his skin, in spite of its swarthiness, looked healthy and clean, Mak strode up to the open end of the waggon and looked in; and his eyes opened wider as he displayed his beautifully white teeth in a pleasant smile.

“What do you think of this?” cried Mark, as he checked himself in laying his hand upon the scar of the pigmy’s wounded shoulder and placed it upon his right.

And now for the first time the little fellow displayed animation, for he snatched the hand away quickly and placed it upon the scar.

“Oh, very well,” said Mark. “I was afraid of hurting you. Well, Mak, aren’t you surprised?”

The black shook his head, and then quietly nodded it.

“Come,” he said. “Pig come.”

“Thank you,” said Mark, laughing; “but we knew that. Well, we will chance whether the boss likes it or not; tell Dan we shall want some breakfast before we start.”

“Yes, mps,” said the black, nodding his head. “Coff. Plenty eat;” and he went away.

“Well, jump down, little one,” said Mark. “Come on, Dean; there’s a splendid chance here for a dip, so let’s go and have one. Pig here won’t mind.”

He leaped down, and the little fellow followed him at once, Dean coming last.

"I say," said Mark merrily, "that's better, young fellow. You can get along now without being carried in a basket. But I can't understand how you managed to get right so soon."

"'Tis his nature to," said Dean drily; and as the boys chatted from one to another across him, throwing, so to speak, verbal balls from one to the other, their little visitor seemed to be listening intently and with a grave look of satisfaction upon his countenance, as he walked with them down to the stream which Mark had selected overnight for his bathe.

"Now I wonder whether he will do as we do," said Mark, as he quickly made ready and plunged in.

"No," said Dean, sending the water flying as he plunged in after his cousin. "Look at him!" For the pigmy gravely seated himself upon a little block of granite, laid his bow and spear across his knees, and sat watching the wet gambols of the lads, till, quite refreshed, they both sprang out, had a run over the sand in the hot sunshine, and then returned to dress.

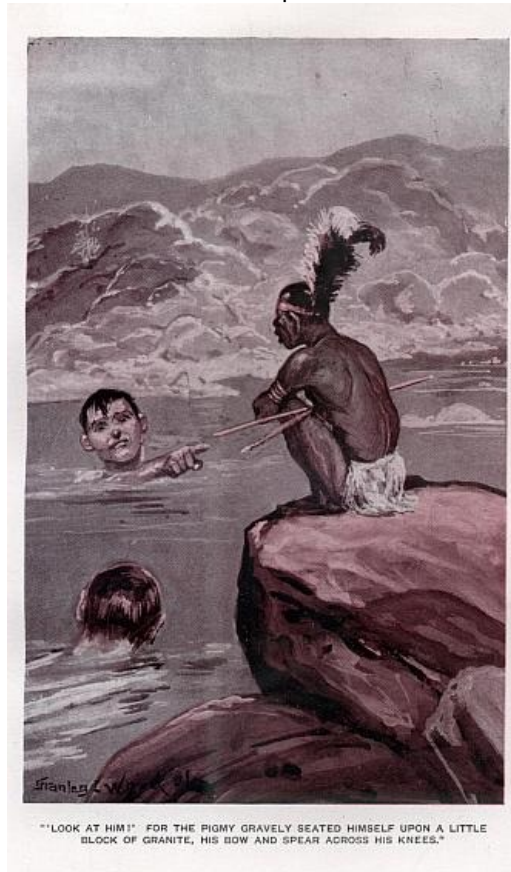
"Don't you ever bathe?" said Mark, rather breathlessly, as he hurried on his flannels.

"Not he," said Dean. "If he could speak to us he would say, I never wash; there's no need."

"Why, boys," cried the doctor, who had descended from the kopje and approached with Sir James, unobserved, "is this another of the pigmies?"

"Look again, sir," said Dean. "He's got your stamp upon him."

"What!" cried the doctor, bending down over the seated visitor. "Impossible! Look here, Sir James; it is; and his



wound has closed up again as if he were made Why, he has followed us right across this veldt."

of india-rubber. Splendid!

"I shouldn't wonder," said Mark, "if he has followed us all the way. Oh, no, he could not have done that. He must have come across from this side of the forest. We are going to give him some breakfast, father, before he goes back. Is that right?"

"Of course, my boy," said Sir James, walking up and gently patting the pigmy on the shoulder. "Well, I like this, doctor. It shows the little fellow's grateful; but I should like to see him smile."

"He did just now, father."

"No, not quite, uncle," said Dean; "only very nearly."

Dan was not long getting the morning meal ready, and Mark took upon himself to supply the visitor's wants. But the pigmy now showed that he had notions of his own, for he walked straight away and dropped down by the side of Mak, whose breakfast he shared along with the men.

"I like that, Mr Mark, sir," said Dan. "The little chap looks quite a gentleman in his way; and he acted as such too, didn't he, Buck?"

"Ay," growled the big driver. "There arn't much of him, but he makes the most of it; don't he, Bob?"

"Yes," said Bob, laughing. "Peter Dance and me have been talking him over. We should like to take him home with us. They would give anything we liked to ask for him in London, to put in a circus or a show."

"Indeed!" said Mark, with a snort. "Thank you! But you had better not let your master hear you talk like that, Bob. He'd begin making your ears warm by telling you what the slave trade was. This little fellow's a visitor, and my cousin and I want you men to treat him well. No nonsense, sir. He has only come to stay till we start, and then he is going back to the forest."

But nothing seemed farther from the pigmy's thoughts, for when a fresh start was made, with the distant kopjes and piles of stone now hidden by the heated haze, the little chief shouldered his spear, crossed to the Illaka's side, and marching beside him, two steps to his one, kept abreast.

"I do like that, Mr Mark, sir," said Dan. "Look at old Brown going along yonder with his foreloping. Why, it would take three of that little chap to make one of he, and I don't know how many of him to weigh down Buck Denham in a pair of scales. But is the little one coming along with us?"

"I suppose so," said Mark: "eh, Dean?" he continued, and signing to him to follow he dropped back a few paces and continued to his cousin, "I have only just thought of it; he is coming with us to show where they find the gold."

"Why, of course!" cried Dean. "I might have thought of that."

"Yes, but you didn't. Here, let's go and tell father and the doctor. Come on! And then I'll give you your chance. You tell them just as if it had occurred to you."

"No, thank you," said Dean quietly. "I don't like borrowed plumes."

Chapter Twenty Six.

Finding an Antiquity.

The kopjes with their supposed buildings proved to be farther away than was expected, and a halt was made at night at the first of the outlying piles of tree overgrown stones, while it was the middle of the next day before their goal was reached. A regular halt was made at a very chaos of stones, some being evidently artificially built up after the fashion of walls huge in size, but so overwhelmed, as it were, by a wave of ancient verdure, and dragged down by the wonderfully abundant growth of vines and creepers, that it was difficult to tell which were the stones that had been piled together and which formed part of the nature-erected kopje.

"Well, doctor," said Sir James, later on, "what do you think of this?"

"Grand," was the reply. "Even if there were nothing more than we can see now, this place would be full of interest."

"Do you really think that this is the place of which we have heard?"

"It must be," said the doctor; "and it is proved by what we can gather from these two blacks."

"Yes," cried Mark excitedly; "and it is there the pigmy obtained his gold."

"Yes, boy. Those ornaments were never made by people in such a savage state as he is. Well, the first thing to do is to settle down here and make as strong a camp as we can."

"Just here?" said Sir James.

"Certainly, for the present. We may no doubt find later on some old temple or other building that we can add to, but for the time being we must contrive a kraal where we can set dangerous visitors to our cattle quite at defiance."

"But you talk about temples," said Sir James. "Do you really think there are more buildings here than we can see?"

"My dear sir," cried the doctor, "I just climbed up fifty or sixty feet amongst the masses of rock, and as far as I can see in three directions there seems to be quite a wilderness of natural and artificial ruins."

"Then what do you propose?" said Sir James.

"To have the waggons drawn up across that opening that lies between those two walls."

"Walls!" said Mark. "You mean that ravine of old stones that looks like a split made by an earthquake."

"My dear boy," said the doctor enthusiastically, "that earthquake, as you call it, I am sure was caused by men. What we see across there are two walls."

"Well, they don't look like it," said Dean.

"Not as they are, boy," said the doctor, "crumbled, grown over, and in utter ruins; but I have had a look long enough to satisfy me that all this was built up—perhaps thousands of years ago. We can prove all that by-and-by. I want to see everyone at work making what will be an easy task—a strongly fortified little camp into which no lions can break and we can sleep in peace."

"Yes," said Sir James; "those are the words of wisdom, boys, and we shan't have to go far for our materials. But I don't see any water."

"We did, father," cried Mark. "Mak took us over those piles—oh, not above fifty yards—and in what seemed to be a gully there was a beautiful river of water running along at the foot of a precipice."

"Well, it wasn't a precipice," said Dean. "We were looking down upon it from the top of what if it had been built up we should call a wall; but I think it's the side of a kopje."

"Never mind what it was," said the doctor, "so long as the water was there. We might have known that the black would not select a place without a supply. Now then, I think we can make a very good temporary shelter before it grows dark in the place I have pointed out, for it is one that we can go on improving by degrees."

Under the doctor's instructions everyone set to work with a will; a shot or two was fired to scare away any undesirable lurking beasts, with the result that the reports went echoing away amongst the rocks with many a strange reverberation, and then the ponies and bullocks were driven into the undergrowth to browse, while the men set to hacking and chopping with axe and billhook, Dan proving himself an adept at twisting up tough willow-like wands to form bands which the two keepers utilised for securing the faggots; till Buck cried "Hold! enough!" Then Dan started a fire in the shelter of a pile of stones, and when that was blazing well and heating water and cooking meat, the rest blocked up an opening here, heaped up thorns there, and by means of sharp pegs and a cloth or two contrived a covered-in shed for the men against what might have been an old wall, but looked like an almost perpendicular bank of rock.

The evening closed in upon them with its threats of total darkness, their surroundings making their position the more secure from the numbers of towering trees that sheltered them in almost every direction.

The cattle were driven in near to where the fire was blazing, every branch that was thrown upon it having been selected with the idea of clearing a wider space where progress was literally choked up by the wealth of growth everywhere around.

"For I never see such a place, Mr Mark, sir," said Bob. "Seems to me as if this is where the world was finished, and where all as warn't wanted was chucked in a heap."

"I know what I should like," said Peter Dance.

"What, mate?" asked Bob.

"Why, to set our Mak making a lot of basket coops."

"What for?" cried Mark.

"What for, sir? Why, if you stopped here and give me the chance and a few dozen sittings of eggs I could show you some pheasant shooting in a year's time. But I suppose I shan't have the chance to make that big chap a bit useful. He arn't got a mossel of work in him."

"What, Mak?" cried Mark merrily. "But see what a splendid fellow he is to look on."

"Oh, yes, he can look on, sir. But I could do that, easy."

"And guide?" said Mark. "But you couldn't do that, Peter."

"Well, but I arn't had no practice, sir."

"And find water for camping by," continued Mark.

"Yes, sir, he can do that."

"And you said yourself the other day that he could track the bucks splendidly."

"Yes, sir. You see, he's used to it."

"And we have never wanted for game since we have come to Africa."

"That we haven't, sir," said Bob Bacon.

"Then he is some use, after all," cried Mark.

That night, with their strange surroundings wonderfully illuminated by the glowing fire, and a feeling of safety infused by the knowledge that the doctor and Buck Denham were their well armed watch, all slept off their weariness soundly and well.

There were two little interruptions to their rest, one of which Mark, as he was awakened, knew at once to be the barking roar of a lion far out upon the plain; but he dropped off to sleep directly, and the next one to rouse up suddenly was Dean, who found himself gazing at the doctor standing full in the light cast by the fire, and who at a word from the boy came slowly up to his side.

"What is it?" he said. "Well, Dean, I am rather puzzled myself. The cries were those of a drove of some animals, but I don't think they were either hyaenas or jackals. Whatever they were, they were scared by the fire, and—there, you can hear them going farther and farther away among the ruins. I could almost fancy it was a pack of some kind of

dogs hunting. There, go back to your blanket. The air's quite cool, and I was glad to come closer to the fire for a warm. Get to sleep again, for I want to explore as much as we can to-morrow. The more I think, the more sure I feel that we have hit upon a very wonderful place, and I am longing for the morning and breakfast, so that we can start for our exploration and see what there is to see."

"Do you think we shall be able to go all over the ruins to-morrow, sir?" asked Dean.

"No, my boy," said the doctor, laughing; "I certainly do not. There, lie down."

As Mark said, it was his nature to, and Dean had no sooner lain down than he dropped off fast asleep, to be roused by his cousin in the pale grey dawn to look at the pigmy seated upon a block of stone just outside the end of the waggon, waiting for the boys to appear, ready to continue his occupation of the previous day and follow both wherever they went.

"There he is," said Mark. "I don't know how long he means to stop, but he watches me like a dog. I wish he'd talk, and understand what I say. He can't half take in what Mak says, and Mak's nearly as bad; but somehow they get on together, with a few signs to help, and they are capital friends."

"Dan seems quite to put life into us," said Mark, later on. "One feels quite different after a good breakfast. He's been begging me to get the doctor to take him with us as soon as we start to explore."

"Well, you don't want any begging," replied Dean.

"Oh, no, I shall ask; but Bob Bacon has been at me too, and you saw Buck Denham beckoning to me just now?"

"Yes; but he doesn't want to come, does he?"

"Doesn't he! Why, he began by telling me that Peter Dance had promised to look after the bullocks and help Dunn. He said he liked driving, but he was fond of hunting too, and he should like a change now and then."

"Well, let's ask the doctor."

"I have, and he said that he can't take everybody, because everything's new as yet, and the camp must be protected."

"Well, that's true," said Dean, "and we want to go."

"But it's all right," said Mark. "Father says that he will be glad of a day's rest, and he will stay and be sentry."

"Now, boys!" cried the doctor just then, and a short time later the well armed party started to see what they could make out of their strange surroundings, each of the men carrying now either a billhook or a small sharp hatchet stuck in his belt.

They soon found though their progress was so impeded by trees and tangled growth that the doctor turned as much as was possible to what proved to be kopje after kopje of piled up stones in their natural state, to find that the rocks were scored with ravine and gully, while in the higher parts some of these took the form of cavernous hollows pretty well choked with creepers, vines and thorns, and into which they could peer, to find darkness, while their voices sounded echoing, hollow and strange.

Every here and there too they came upon signs that the hollows had been crossed by piled up stones looking like rough walls, which half cut off the entrances. In another place what seemed to be a cavern was completely shut in, save that a hole was left, into which Mark pitched a loose stone that he managed to dislodge, to hear it go rumbling away into the darkness as if it had fallen to where there was a steep slope.

"There's something to see there," said the doctor, "some day when we are provided with lanterns and a rope or two. Why, boys, all this grows on one. There's no doubt now that we are amongst ruins, and how far they extend it is impossible to say. Stop here a few minutes, and let's have a look round. This bit is evidently natural kopje."

The party stood and sat about the steep slope of rock, and taking out a small field glass the doctor carefully scanned the rocky expanse for a few minutes, before handing it to the boys, who used it in turn.

"Why, it is a wilderness, doctor," cried Mark. "You look there," he continued, returning the glass, "just to the left of that clump of trees. I am sure that must have been a wall. You can see the what-you-may-call-them—layers of stones—courses. They are rough enough. But it must have been built up, because every here and there regularly holes are left."

"Yes," said the doctor, "you are quite right;" and he closed the glass again. "That is a regular chequer pattern. That must have been the top of the wall, and just below I made out a line of stones laid edgeways to form a zig-zag band. Old buildings, my boy, without doubt."

"But I want to see where our little chap found the gold," said Mark.

"Well, let's ask him," said Dean.

The boys turned to where the two blacks were standing watching them, a strangely assorted pair as they kept together, Mak towering up above the eager-looking pigmy, who seemed to have grown during the few hours that he had been with the party more active and better than before.

Mark began with Mak, asking a question to which the only answer he could get was a wave of the spear; but when he turned impatiently to the pigmy and began to question him in signs, touching the gold ornaments in the same way as he had tried to enquire of his fellow of the forest camp, the only reply he could get was a shake of the head.

"Well, I call that disappointing," said Mark. "It is just as if he had brought us here on purpose to show us, and now won't tell."

"Wait a bit," said the doctor. "We can't find out everything at once. Come along, and don't wander away to a distance. Let Mak lead so that he may be able to follow the back track. I don't want to have any troubles of getting lost."

"But we can't get lost here, sir," said Mark, "for we can see for miles around."

"Yes, but the place is a regular maze. It's terribly hard work climbing about, and before long we shall want to return to camp."

And then oddly enough the doctor in his interest forgot his words and took the lead himself, descending into a gulch between the rocky slopes where they had been gazing into the rifts and cavernous places, and then rising and climbing to what is commonly known as a hog's-back ridge, which proved to be the untouched massive pile of granite that rose higher than any other near, and was found to be broken up at the top with tumbled together heaps of rough blocks through which they wound in and out till they found their way narrowing with the walls inclining more and more till they touched. They paused at last in obedience to a call from the black, who shook his head, frowned, and signed to them to come back.

"What does that mean?" said the doctor.

"I don't know," replied Mark. "Hallo! Look here!"

For though the doctor and his white companions stopped short, the pigmy darted off quickly, not stopping till he reached Mak, who was some distance away, and who now began to retire more and more.

"I don't see anything to make him shrink away," said the doctor. "Shout to him, Mark, and tell him to return directly."

The boy leaped upon a stone and began waving his hand to their guide, signing to him to come on, but without effect, for Mak shook his head, gave the pigmy a sign to follow him, and retired more and more till they passed round behind some tall bushes and disappeared.

"This is tiresome," said the doctor. "We want the fellow here, for he goes about just as if he knows the place, and it strikes me that he must have been here before. Well, I suppose we may as well turn back."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that, sir," said Mark. "Look, we can surely find our way without him. I know I could. It only means going down into the hollow, getting up on the other side, and then—oh, I could find my way. Let's go on now. I want to see where this leads to. What do you say, Buck? Could you find your way back to the waggons?"

"Find my way back, sir? No fear of that! What do you say, Bob? And you, Dan?"

"Oh, yes," they replied; "that will be easy enough."

"But there must be some reason," said the doctor, "for Mak wanting to go back. Perhaps he's afraid of our being attacked."

"No, sir," said Buck, "it isn't that. I know what these fellows are better than you do, perhaps. If there had been any chance of a fight he would have stuck to you."

"Unless he was afraid of numbers," said the doctor.

"No, sir; that wouldn't make him turn tail. These Illakas are brave enough for anything. But Mak's a bit scared, all the same."

"But you said they were brave," cried Mark.

"So they are, sir, over anything they can see; but when it's anything they can't, then they are like so many children as are afraid to go in the dark. I believe he's got an idea in his head that there's something no canny, as the Scotch people call it, as lives in that there hole in the rocks, and nothing will make him go in for fear he should be cursed, or something of the kind."

"Very likely," said the doctor. "All about here has some time been a town, or towns, and it may bear the reputation of being haunted by the spirits of the dead."

"Yes, sir; that's something what I meant to make you understand," said Buck. "It's very babyish, but you see these Illakas are only savage blacks, and we can't say much about it, for there's plenty of people at home—country people—as wouldn't go across a churchyard in the dark to save their lives."

"Well," said the doctor, "I may understand by this that you wouldn't be afraid to go into some dark cavern?"

"Well, sir, I don't know as I should," replied the big driver. "I think I should like to have a light, in case there was any holes that one might go down; but I am like Bob Bacon here, who tells me that he watches for poachers when he's at home, and Dan, who has been used to keep watch at sea; we shouldn't stop from going into the dark for fear of the

bogeys that would scare the niggers. Mean ter to go on, sir?"

"Can we get a light if we want it?"

"I have got matches, sir, and Bob Bacon here, sir, has got a bit of old dead sort of fir wood as will burn well enough."

"What do you say, boys?"

"Let's go on," they cried eagerly.

The doctor looked back, and for a moment or two he could make out no sign of the two blacks. Then from close to the ground a long way back the sun shone upon a couple of dancing feathers, and some three feet above them appeared the black head of their guide.

"They are watching us," said the doctor. "No: they are gone. Come along, then." And the party passed on, with the sides of the ravine closing in till the way grew half dark, and as far as they could make out they were at the mouth of a good-sized cavern.

Here they stopped short, and the doctor held up his hand.

"What is it?" whispered Mark.

"It may be fancy," replied the doctor, "but I fancied I heard a faint rustling."

This sounded so like a warning to beware of any wild beast which might be the occupant of the cavern that three of the party cocked their pieces and waited for the doctor to go on.

"Like me to go first, sir?" said Buck quietly.

"No, I will go on directly, my man; but look here."

Everyone pressed forward to look at that which had taken the doctor's attention, for he was gazing into a side nook that suggested, from a dry heap of fern-like growth and grass, that it had lately been occupied.

Bob Bacon pushed past Mark, went down upon one knee, and began feeling the dry grass. "Well?" said Mark sharply.

"It arn't cold, sir, nor it arn't warm; but I should be ready to say that something's been lying here not long ago."

"An animal of some kind, then," said the doctor, lowering his rifle. "You, Bacon, you are a very fair shot; come beside me; but don't fire unless there is real necessity. You boys, come along cautiously. There may be a leopard here. Don't fire unless it springs."

"All right, sir," said Mark. "Well, Buck, you can come next."

"Well, no, sir; if you wouldn't mind I think I will walk close to the doctor. I am big and strong, and I shouldn't like to see you hurt."

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Mark. "I am not going to give up my place, and I don't believe that there is anything here after all."

"Stop again," said the doctor. "I am sure I heard something moving, and it's getting quite dark in front. Let's have a light."

"Here you are, sir," cried Buck Denham. "Strike a match, somebody."

This was done, the big driver holding Bob's resinous wood to the flame till it began to blaze well, and then winking to himself, as Dean saw, the big fellow stepped right forward before the rest, holding the improvised torch so that the light illumined the glittering walls and ceiling of the rift of beautifully clean granite rock.

Everyone was on the alert, as Buck now led on and on into the darkness, till he said, "You will mind and not shoot me, gen'lemen; but be on the look out, for there is something here."

The man stopped short as he spoke, holding up the torch as high as he could, and the doctor and Mark pressed forward with their rifles extended on either side of the big driver.

"That's right, gen'lemen," he said. "Now you can't hurt me, so you can let go when you like."

"One minute, gentlemen," said Bob Bacon. "This was to be my job. You, Bob, hand over that there link; I only give it to you to hold while I struck a match."

"Yes, I know, mate," replied Buck, "but it's well alight now, and you are quite safe there. Now, gen'lemen, can you see him?"

"Yes; take care!" cried Mark. "I can see its eyes gleaming. Look, doctor—can't you see?"

"Yes, quite plainly. Some animal that has crept in here to die."

"That's it, sir," cried Bob Bacon. "I can see him too. Here, don't waggle the light about like that, Buck. Look, gentlemen; there arn't much sperrit left in him, for he's lying up against the side there as quiet as a mouse."

"Quiet enough," said the doctor; "but take care. The brute may have life enough left in it to scratch."

"Not him, sir," said Buck, who now took a couple of steps forward, shaking the light to and fro to make it flare more brightly. "He arn't got much scrat left in him, sir."

"What is it—an old leopard?"

"No, sir. There, I can see quite plain now. It's one of them baboons, same as live on some of these kopjes; and a whacker too, and as grey as a Devon badger. Here, Bob Bacon, as you are so precious anxious to have the light, catch hold. I will soon see whether he will scratch or not."

"What are you going to do, man?" cried the doctor, as the exchange of torchbearer was effected.

"Lug him out, sir."

"No, no! You will get torn."

"Nay, sir. He's got no scrat in him."

"Perhaps not, Buck," said Mark excitedly, "but I have read that those things can bite like a dog. Stand still and let me shoot."

"Nay, sir; let's have him out into the light."

Before any protest or fresh order could be given the big driver thrust out a hand and gripped the grey-looking object which had crawled apparently right to the end of the cavernous hole. There was a faint struggle, and a low guttural cry.

"There's no bite in him, sir," cried Buck. "I don't believe he's got a tooth in his head. Now then, old 'un; out you come!"

By this time Buck had got hold of a long, thin, hairy arm, and overcoming a slight resistance and scuffling, began to walk backwards, dragging his prisoner after him, his companions making way, a low whining noise escaping from the prisoner the while.

"Gently, Bob Bacon," cried Buck. "My hair's quite short enough. No singeing, please. You might have seen that I got Dunn Brown to operate upon me with those scissors of his."

"Here, let me come by you, Mark," cried the doctor, excitedly.

"No, sir; I wouldn't, sir," cried Bob Bacon. "I have only just got room to hold the light up as it is, and Buck Denham's so precious particular."

"Yes," said Buck, "and I want to get my catch out. You back with the light, Bob; and make a little room, gen'lemen. It's all right. We don't want any light now to show as this is one of them baboons—a long one, 'most as big as me."

All backed away now, leaving room for Buck, who dragged his captive along the windings of the dark cavern, commenting upon his appearance the while.

"Yes, gen'lemen, I want to get him out and show black Mak the sperrit as he is afraid of. Rum beggars, these natives are, ready enough to fight and spear anybody. Got as much pluck as we have; but they are just like kids in being frightened about ghosts and by stories told by old women. Now then, it's no use to kick. Poor old chap! Here, I could tuck him under my arm and carry him, only he may as well walk. He is just like a skin bag of bones. Hallo, you, Bob Bacon, who told you to put a 'stinguisher on that light?" For a sudden darkness came upon them all.

"'Stinguished itself," growled Bob.

But the darkness was only apparent for a few moments, for about fifty yards ahead there was a bright gleam of sunshine at the mouth of the cavern, and two shadows moved, which proved to be Mak and the pigmy peering in as if listening and trying to make out what was going on inside.

"Hi, you sir!" shouted Dean. "We have caught your spirit. Come and help him out."

But as if grasping the lad's meaning by the tone of his voice, Mak turned sharply and darted away at a rate which carried him in a series of bounds down the slope of the great kopje, so that by the time the little party of explorers were out in the broad sunshine with their captive, Mak was threading his way amongst the rocks, closely followed once more by the pigmy, and about to disappear.

"There, gents!" cried Buck. "What do you make of him, sir?" And he thrust his captive more into the light. "Why, he must have been a monkey as big as me when he was in full fettle."

"Monkey!" cried Mark. "Why, it's a man!"

"Man, sir!" cried Buck scornfully. "He arn't a black; he's grey. Who ever see a man like that?"

"Not I," said the doctor, laughing.

"There, Mr Mark," cried Buck triumphantly.

"But a man it is, Buck," said the doctor. "Poor old fellow! Doesn't say much for the natives' civilisation, for there must have been some living near. Crawled into that cave to die. Now, I should say he's one of their old priests or medicine men, who, taking advantage of his great age and supposed wisdom, has imposed upon his fellows till he got to be looked upon as one who held intercourse with the unknown world, and lived upon his reputation, till his fellows grew to look upon him and talked about him as a spirit. That's why Mak objected to our exploring this cave. Poor fellow, he meant well; and he made his objections no doubt in our interest, for fear that we might come to harm."

"Why, a poor old scarecrow, sir!" said Buck. "He only wants one or two old clothes put on him, and he'd make a fine tatter-dooley. Not much to be afraid of in him! Well, gentlemen, we have got him."

"Yes, we have got him," said Mark; "but it seems to me that the question is, what are we going to do with him now we have got him?"

"Yes," said the doctor; "that is a bit of a puzzle. We can't take him into camp. What do you say, Dean?"

The boy wrinkled up his forehead as he gazed down at the curious, weirdly thin object at their feet, who lay there looking like a re-animated mummy, gazing feebly up at his captors, his dull eyes gleaming faintly through the nearly closed lids as if suffering from the broad light of day, before they were tightly shut, as the wretched creature, who seemed hardly to exist, sank back into a stupor that looked like the precursor of his final sleep.

"Well, Dean, what have you got to propose?" said Mark. "Nothing. But if he's coming into camp along with us I am going to camp out."

"It's a rum 'un," grumbled Buck. "My word, he must be an old 'un!"

"Yes," said the doctor; "of a great age."

"And he is a man, sir?"

"Oh, yes, and he must have been a fine man in his time—six feet three or four, I should say."

"Yes, sir," said Buck, "and that's the pity of it."

"What has his being six feet three or four got to do with it being a pity?" said Mark sharply.

"I didn't mean that, sir," said Buck. "I meant it was a pity as he's a man."

"Why?" asked the boys in a breath. "Because if he had been only a beast, sir—I mean, a big monkey—it would have been a charity to put him out of his misery."

"Poor wretch, yes," said the doctor. "But you can't do that, sir. I know what I should do if it was me."

"What should you do, Buck?" asked Mark. "Well, sir, he arn't nothing to us. If it was me, as I said, I should put him back again."

"Humph!" grunted the doctor. "Well, one wants to behave in a Christian-like way to a fellow-creature. Lay him in his place there at the mouth of the cavern, where we scared him out."

This was done, and the doctor turned to Mark. "Now, boy, what next?"

"I know," cried Mark. "Here, Dan, what about the soup?"

"Plenty, sir—only wants making hot."

"Be off and get a tinfal, if you can find your way."

"If I can find my way, sir!" said the little sailor, laughing. "I think I can do that;" and he trotted off.

"That ought to put some life into him," growled Buck; "but I want them two chaps to come and see their spirit. There they are, peeping round the corner at us."

"Yes," said Mark, "but we are not going to stop here. Don't you think they ought to come and look after the old savage?"

"Well, I don't know," said the doctor. "I should be afraid to trust them. They might do the poor old fellow a mischief. Here, boys, call them up."

Mark cooeyed, but only made the two blacks shrink back again.

"It's of no use," said the doctor. "We must leave him alone." And after laying their find carefully in his den the little party wended their way back to the camp to report their adventures to Sir James.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Query: King Solomon?

"Well, Dan," said Mark, as he and his cousin came upon their handy man, "did you give the poor old fellow the soup?"

"No, sir."

"What! Then why didn't you?"

"Couldn't find him, sir."

"Didn't you go up to the old cavern?"

"Yes, sir. I went right in to where there was that snug sort of place where Bob Bacon found he had been lying—where we left him, sir."

"Well, do you mean to say he wasn't there?"

"No, sir; that he wasn't."

"Oh, how could you be so stupid! The doctor trusted you to fetch the soup because he thought you were a man he could depend upon."

"Well, that's right, sir."

"And because you didn't see him directly, the poor creature never got the soup."

"That's right, sir, too," said Dan, smiling.

"There's nothing to laugh at in it, sir," cried Mark, angrily. "Did you ever know anything so stupid, Dean?"

"No," cried Dean, taking up his cousin's tone. "You might have been sure, Dan, that as soon as we had gone the poor old fellow would have crawled right in as far as he could go."

"Yes, sir; that's what I did think, sir."

"You went right in?" cried Mark. "Yes, sir; right to the very end, and he warn't there."

"Where was he, then?"

"Oh, I don't know, sir."

"Did you look about well?"

"Yes, sir, as far as there was anywhere to look about."

"As far as there was anywhere to look about?"

"Yes, sir. Don't you remember you could only go right on into the hole or come back again? You couldn't climb up the sides without somebody had gone up there first with a rope and let it down to you."

"Yes, that's right, Mark," said Dean. "Yes, I suppose so," replied Mark, "but I wanted that poor old fellow to have the soup. It might have been the means of saving his life."

Dan shook his head solemnly. Mark made no observation about that, but went on: "Look here, Dan, somebody must have been there and helped him."

Dan shook his head again solemnly. "Did you try to tell Mak about it?"

"Yes, sir, as well as I could."

"But do you think you made him understand you?"

"Yes, sir; I think he did."

"And what did he say?"

"Nothing, sir. Only shook his head, just like that."

"Bother! Don't get wagging your head in that way," cried Mark angrily, "or you will have it come loose. Well, what did you do with the soup?"

"Ate it, sir."

"What!" cried Mark sharply.

"Well, sir, I couldn't drink it, it was that thick and strong. It was some of my best."

"And so you ate it?"

"Yes, sir; I was so precious hungry."

"Did you ever hear such impudence, Dean?"

"Well, I thought it a pity to waste it, sir, and I have always got plenty more on the way."

"Bah!" cried Mark. "You couldn't have half looked."

"No, sir; I put my back into it and did it thorough. But he was gone;" and Dan shook his head again.

"What do you mean by that?" said Dean.

"Same as black Mak did, sir."

"And what did black Mak mean?" cried Mark.

"Seems to me as he thought the poor old chap had dried up like and gone."

"What nonsense!"

"Well, sir, it may be nonsense, but I had a good look at the poor old chap when we had him out. Why, you see him, sir. Look what his face was like. Walnut shell was nothing to his skin. I have been thinking about it a deal, sir, and I have heard what you gentlemen have said about this 'ere place as we have found. I have been about a deal, sir, all round the world, and seen and heerd much more than you would think."

"Oh, of course you would see and hear a good deal, being aboard ship."

"Yes, gentlemen, and it set me thinking a deal, both as I was going up and as I was coming back again with the empty tin. I thought a deal, Mr Mark, sir."

"Perhaps it was the soup made you think so much, Dan," said Mark sarcastically.

"Very like, sir," said the man with an innocent look.

"Well, what did you think?" asked Mark.

"I thought about that old fellow being so awful old, and that he must have had to do with the building up of them stones."

"Nonsense! It must be two or three thousand years since those walls were built."

"Daresay, sir, and he's been there ever since."

"Oh, that's impossible," said Dean.

"Ah, that's what you say, sir, but nothing is impossible out in a place like this. Why, just look at him. Why, if you got him out in the sunshine where you could see what a way inside his eyes were, you would have found that he was always looking right backwards. He was a regular old 'un, he was—lots older than he knew hisself. You heard what the doctor said the other day about this being the place where King Solomon sent his ships to find gold?"

"Yes, and it's quite possible," said Mark.

"Oh, you own to that, sir?"

"To be sure I do. He had ships built, and sent them round by Africa, or else south down by the Red Sea."

"Yes, sir, that's right enough, sir. I have pretty well been both ways myself, and seen plenty of big stones there. Up in North Africa and in Egypt. I should say, sir, that that old chap will like as not been one of them as dug out and melted the gold. He don't look a bit like the regular natives, do he? He was hook-nosed, wasn't he, sir?"

"Yes, Dan."

"Not a bit like one of the regular natives, sir?"

"Not a bit."

"A lot of them seem as if their mothers used to sit upon their faces when they was kids, to keep them warm and flatten their noses out."

"Well, yes. They are of another race, though—the regular niggers. These Zulu sort of chaps like Mak are quite different."

"That's so, sir; and this old fellow, he was a regular hooked beaked 'un. Put me in mind of one of them big tortoises as you see in the islands up by Mauritius."

"Never seen them, Dan."

"Well, you take my word for it, then, sir; they look as old as if they had come out of the Ark. Now then, sir, just you tell me this. What was King Solomon?"

"King of Israel, of course."

"I don't mean that, sir. Warn't he a Jew?"

"Of course: a descendant of Abraham."

"Well, that's what that old chap is, sir."

"Stuff!" said Dean.

"Ah, you may call it stuff, sir; but see where we found him, in this old cave. He's been there for ages and ages, and he got so old at last that he crawled in there to die, but found he couldn't die a bit. He's been going on keeping just alive for nobody knows how long; and when an old man gets as old as that he has got past wanting to eat and drink. He just goes on living; and it's my belief, as I said afore, that he's one of them as set up those walls and dug the gold and melted it for King Solomon's ships to take away. Did you ever hear of the wandering Jew, sir?"

"Yes, Dan. Of course."

"Well, sir, that's 'im."

"We did find a curiosity, then," said Mark merrily.

"Oh, bother!" said Dean. "Here, Dan, you had better leave history alone. I shouldn't be at all surprised, though, if the animated fossil has lived as long as old Parr."

"Old Parr, sir? You mean him as made the Life Pills?"

"No, he doesn't," said Mark, laughing. "He was an old fellow who lived to about a hundred and fifty."

"A hundred and fifty, sir! Why, that's nothing! Why, look at 'Thusalem; he lived close upon a thousand years. Well, if a man could live to one thousand years, why couldn't he live to three or four, or five, if you come to that? I don't say as this 'ere old fellow is quite so old, but he's the oldest chap I ever see except the mummies, and that's what this chap might be, only he's just got life enough in him to move, and they arn't."

"Well, that will do, Dan," said Mark. "But I am sorry you didn't find the poor old fellow after all."

The boys related their conversation with Dan to Sir James and the doctor, the former laughing heartily at the little sailor's belief.

"I suppose," said Sir James, "the poor old fellow must have summoned up strength enough to crawl away."

"I don't think that was possible," said the doctor. "He could not have stirred without help."

"But he had no help," said Sir James.

"I don't know," said the doctor quietly.

"What do you mean?" said Sir James; and the boys listened in surprise.

"I mean this, sir," said the doctor. "We have found that these ruins were well known to Mak and the pigmy."

"Of course."

"And we have found too this poor old fellow in his sort of cell."

"Exactly," said Sir James.

"Well, we know that, however old, no man could exist without nutriment. Consequently we have just had proof that a tribe of the natives must have regular communication with this place."

"Yes, I suppose that must be the explanation," said Sir James.

"And I am disappointed," said the doctor, "because I was in hopes that we had the place all to ourselves so that we could go on with our interesting researches."

"Well, it would have been better," said Sir James. "But so long as they don't interfere with us it will not matter."

"And very likely," put in Mark, "if they come and find us here they will keep away."

"That's what I hope," said the doctor.

"And you think," said Dean, "that some of these people have been and carried that old fellow away?"

"Yes, my boy; that's exactly what I do think."

"Well," said Mark musing, "I suppose we shall soon know. But we certainly don't want them here."

Chapter Twenty Eight.

A Discussion.

"A mussy me, Mr Mark, sir, as my old mother used to say. Ah, and she would say it again, poor old soul, if she were alive—bless her—and could see her pretty little curly-headed darling out here in savage Africa. Nice little curly-headed darling, arn't I, Mr Mark, sir? 'My beauty,' she used to call me, when she had made me cry by jiggling the

comb through my hair, as would always tie itself up into knots like a nigger's."

"Why, it isn't curly now, Buck."

"Not a bit, sir; been cut too many times to keep it short, and all the curl got cut off, ha, ha, ha!" And the big, burly fellow burst into a boisterous laugh. "Bless her old heart! She never could have thought that I should grow into a six-footer weighing seventeen stuns. Little woman she was—a pretty little woman too," said Buck proudly. "Fancy her seeing me seventeen stuns, and not a bit of fat about me! Ah, it's rum, sir—rum. Rum as the name of our old village where we used to live down in Essex. Chignal Smealey. Well, sir," continued the big driver, wiping his beaded forehead, "we have had a pretty good time of it, haven't we? And I mean to say that we are regular ship-shape. What do you think of it, sir?"

"Oh, never mind what I think, Buck. I'll tell you what father said to the doctor."

"Ah, do, sir."

"He said all you men had worked splendidly."

"Oh, come, that's nice, sir," said Buck, beaming.

"And that he felt ashamed of having been so idle, doing nothing but look on."

"Idle be sat upon, sir!" cried the bluff fellow. "Why, he's the boss. What's a boss got to do but give his orders? Oh, he hasn't been idle, and as for the doctor, why, he's never at rest. Look here, Mr Mark, sir; I have journeyed about the world a good deal, same as Dan Mann has. You know I was a sailor and made several voyages before I settled down at Natal and took to driving a twenty-four-in-hand. But in all my wanderings about I never did run up against such a one as the doctor. He seems to know everything. Why, he's the best shot I ever see. Peter Dance and Bob Bacon are pretty tidy with their guns. I have matched myself agin them more than once when I have been out with them to get something for the pot, and I used to think I could shoot, but they beat me. But that doctor, sir, could if he liked do more with his left hand than I could with my right. You said he used to teach you young gents at home?"

"Yes, Buck; anything and everything."

"I suppose so, sir. Greek and Latin and mathics, and all that sort of stuff."

"Yes, Buck," said Mark, laughing. "All that sort of stuff."

"Ah, he would, sir. He's a splendid chap at lingo. I know a bit about that. I can get on fine with black Mak when I am in the humour, but that arn't always, for sometimes my head's as thick as it's long."

"Oh, we all feel like that sometimes, Buck," said Mark. "I know I do. There were some days over my books that I could learn as easily as can be, and sometimes the doctor would say I was quite dense."

"Dense, sir? What's that?"

"Thick-headed."

"Not you, sir," said Buck, laughing. "But as I was saying, I can get on a bit with black Mak, and I am beginning to pick up a bit better with the little Pig, as you young gents call him; and then there's old Hot-o'-my-Tot and t'other black. Yes, there's something alike, as you may say, about the way these black chaps speak; Mak and Pig, for instance. They know each of 'em what t'other says, more than a little. But the doctor, he's got so much book laming in him; he beats me with them. But I am real glad, sir, that the boss is satisfied, and I should like to tell the other chaps, if I may. I won't, sir, if you say I oughtn't to, for I don't want you to think because you young gentlemen treat me friendly like that I am all chatter and brag."

"Tell them, by all means. Chatter and brag! What nonsense! Why, the doctor says you are a man that anybody could trust."

"Said that, did he, sir?" cried the big fellow, with his eyes twinkling with satisfaction. "Why, that's as good as what the boss said. Well, I'm not going to tell any of the other fellows that. They would laugh at me, and sarve me right. But we have worked, sir, all of us, to get the place square, and when we have made a regular clearing of all this rag and tangle of rocks and trees—"

"Which we never shall, Buck," cried Mark.

"You're right, sir; never! For I never saw such a place. You can go miles anyway to the nor'ard and find more and more built up stones and walls and what not. Why, once upon a time there must have been hundreds of thousands of people living here, and now—where are they all? All we have seen was that old nigger, as Dan sticks out and argues, when we are having a pipe together of a night, was the last man that was left; and then he always finishes off by shaking his head when I say I wonder how he got away."

"Ah, it was curious," said Mark.

"Not it, sir. He crept away as soon as he thought it was safe. Got into some hole or another. There must be hundreds of places where he could tuck hisself, and we shall dig him out one day, as sure as sure; and that'll be when we least expect it. But talk about a kraal, sir, for my bullocks! They are as safe as safe, and you have got a regular stable for your ponies, quarters for us as Dan calls a snug fore-castle and Peter says is a bothy, and as for yours, you gen'lemen's being up against that wall, why, it's splendid, only as I was telling the doctor, sir, I shan't feel quite

happy till we've got an extra thatch on. You know, it can rain out here in Africa, sir, and when it does it goes it."

"Well, I daresay we shall get that done, Buck, when we have got time."

"Yes, sir, when we have got time; but that won't be just yet, and I suppose I shan't be here to help."

"You not here to help! What do you mean?"

"Well, sir, I suppose I wasn't to chatter about it, but I may tell you; the doctor got talking to me only yesterday about what he calls the supplies, by which he meant wittles for the guns and extra for ourselves."

"Ah," said Mark.

"He said that of course meat was plentiful enough, and there were lots of fish in the river, but we ought to be prepared if we stayed here long to get a fresh lot of flour and mealies, tea, and coffee, and sugar, so as to have enough when the stores begins to run out."

"Yes; I never thought of that," said Mark.

"Ah, but the doctor did, sir. He thinks of everything. Well, sir, he put it to me whether I could pick out a mate and be ready any time to take the waggons and go back to Illakaree."

"There," cried Mark, "what did I say?"

"I d'know, sir. Lots of things."

"I meant about the doctor trusting you. Did you say you'd go."

"Course I did, sir. I don't want to go, for I'm just right here. This is the sort of thing I like. I am enjoying myself here just as much as you young gents. It fits me right down to the ground, and if I do go I shan't be happy till I get back."

"Ah," said Mark thoughtfully. "But you said about picking out a mate. Whom should you choose?"

"Well, if you come to regular choosing, sir," said Buck, "I should like to have you—not for a mate, sir, but to be my young boss. I know though that couldn't be, and I wouldn't want it, 'cause I know how I should be cutting you off from all the sarching as the doctor wants done. Why, you wouldn't be here when you hunt out the place where all the gold is buried."

"N-no."

"And the working tools and the pots and pans as the doctor expects to find."

"N-no," said Mark thoughtfully. "But I say, Buck, do you think there is plenty of gold here somewhere?"

"Pretty sure of it, sir. Why, where did that little kiddy of a black get his ornaments from?"

"To be sure," said Mark, still speaking very seriously. "But why is it, then, that he will not say anything about it? He only shakes his head and goes away when one tries to get him to show where he got his bangles from."

"Well, I don't quite know, sir. There's a something behind it all. They're sort of jealous like about having the old things meddled with, I think. Mak showed us the way here, but I never see him begin to sarch like to find anything the old people left, and if you remember he tried all he could to keep us from meddling and looking for the place where we found that old man."

"Oh, the doctor said that was superstition," said Mark.

"Then that's what it was, sir, if the doctor said so, for he'd know, of course."

"Yes," said Mark. "I should like to go with you, Buck, but I couldn't. Whom should you choose?"

"Well, sir, I should like to have little Dan."

"Yes, he'd be a capital companion; but—but—but—"

"Yes, sir; that's it. Them butts are a t'r'ble bother sometimes. I know he couldn't be spared, so I made up my mind for Bob Bacon. He's a very good sort of chap, and one you can trust. I'd go to sleep if it was him," and the man looked very fixedly at Mark and meaningly closed one eye. "He wouldn't go to sleep and let the fire out, sir."

Mark said nothing, but he returned Buck's fixed look and did not close one eye.

"I say, Buck," he said, "it will be a case of spade and shovel and billhook to-morrow."

"Eh? Will it, sir?"

"Yes; the doctor says he won't keep you men clearing up any more for the present, for he wants to begin digging in one of the likely places he had marked down, to see what we can find."

"That's right, sir. I am ready, and I know the others are, for we all talk about it a good deal, and as Dan says, seeing what thousands of people must have lived here they couldn't help leaving something behind."

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Among the Old Stones.

In the clearing away of the abundant growth and selecting a position for their camp, a great stretch of wall was laid bare, one portion of which displayed the chequered pattern and another the herring-bone ornamentation adopted by the ancient people in building up what seemed to be the remains of a great structure which might have been temple, fort, or store.

"It is impossible to say what it was until we have cleared away all this crumbled down stone and rubbish that has fallen from the top," said the doctor. "You see, this is one side of the building; there's the end; and those two mounds will, I think, prove to be the missing side and end."

And it was here by the chequered wall that the next morning, directly after a very early meal, the first researches were made. The bullocks and ponies had been taken down to the river to drink and driven back into the ruins where they could be under the eye of Dunn Brown and the blacks, and so not likely to stray.

Sir James had charge of the rifles, which the boys helped him to carry up to a convenient spot at the top of the enormously wide wall, where he could perform the duty of sentry, his position commanding a wide view of the country round, where he could note the approach of any of the wandering herds and seize an opportunity for adding to the supply of provisions, while at the same time keeping an eye upon the Hottentot and the foreloper and seeing that they did not neglect their task, while, best of all, as he said to the boys, "I can see what you find, and," he added laughingly, "put all the gold you discover in one of my pockets."

The doctor, full of eagerness, set out what was to be done, appointing each man his duty, digging, cutting away undergrowth, and basketing off the loose, stony rubbish that was turned over, a couple of stout, strong creels having been made by the two keepers. And very soon, and long before the sun was peering down over the wall, to fully light up the great interior where excavating had commenced, the two boys were busy under the doctor's instructions turning over and examining the rubbish that was carried away to form the commencement of a convenient heap.

As this was begun Mak, who had stopped back for a little while to make another addition to his breakfast, came up with the pigmy, when they both selected the spot where they could squat upon the big wall and look down, very serious of aspect, at what was being done.

"We ought to make some discoveries here," said the doctor, rubbing his hands. "This wall is very, very old."

"Think so?" said Sir James.

"I am sure so, sir. You see, no cement has been used."

"So I see," said Sir James, "but I shouldn't attach anything to that. Why, we have plenty of walls built up of loose stones at home. Don't you remember those in Wales, boys?"

"Yes, uncle, and in Cornwall too," said Dean.

"Not such a wall as this," said the doctor, with a satisfied smile. "I feel perfectly sure that this goes back to a very early period of civilisation. Now, my lads, we are pretty clear so far as the trees and bushes go. Keep your shovels at work."

"Ay, ay, sir," cried Dan. "Here, I'll have first go, messmate. I'll fill the basket, you'll carry out." Buck nodded, and directly after the two men were hard at work, while whenever the sailor's spade, which he dubbed shovel, came in contact with a big loose stone, one or other of the keepers pounced upon it and bore it to the heap of earth and rubbish that began to grow where Buck emptied his basket.

"Farther away; farther away," said the doctor. "What for, sir?" asked Dean.

"Go on, Dean," cried Mark. "Can't you see that if they make a big heap close to, it may come crumbling down again and Dan will get covered in?"

The sailor chuckled, and threw a shovelful of rubbish, purposely missing the basket and depositing the well aimed beginnings of the hole he was digging upon Dean's feet.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, sir!" he cried apologetically. "Here, you, Buck Denham, what made you put the basket there? You ought to have known it was out of reach. More this way, messmate."

"All right," said Dean. "I shan't forget this, Master Dan.—Bother!" And he stepped on one side, seated himself at the foot of the wall, and occupied himself with untying the laces of one shoe and taking out the little bits of grit which refused to be kicked off.

"Now, no larking," said the doctor sharply. "Wait till we have done work."

"Ay, ay, sir!" cried Dan; and digging away with all his might, he very soon after shouted, "Full up, messmate!" Then Buck stooped down, lifted the heavy basket, and bore it away, leaving the empty one in its place.

"Stones, lads!" cried the sailor, raising first one and then another with his spade ready for the keepers; and the work went on, with the doctor stepping down into the hole that was soon formed to examine some of the loose earth and

rubbish that the sailor dug out ready for the baskets which were kept going to and fro.

"We don't seem to find much, sir," said Mark, after a time.

"No, my lad," replied the doctor. "All rubbish so far; and most of these pieces of stone have no doubt crumbled down from the wall."

"Eh? Think so, sir?" cried Dan, looking up sharply from where he was now standing nearly up to his middle in the hole.

"Oh, yes, there's no doubt about that," cried the doctor.

"Beg pardon, sir," said the digger to Dean, "but you might keep a heye on the wall and call out 'below!' if you see any more crumbs a-coming, just to give a fellow time to hop out, because, you know Mr Mark says I might be buried, shovel and all."

"Oh, I will keep a sharp look out," said Dean.

"Full up again, mate," cried Dan; "and look here, Buck; when I get down a bit deeper you had better come and take my place; you're 'bout twice as long as I am. Stones again, lads!" And he handed up first one and then another on the flat of his spade.

"Both square ones, Dean," cried Mark. "Think they have been chiselled into shape, doctor?"

"No, no; selected," said the doctor, as he carefully examined the block which the boy held. "You see, that's the under part where it lay in the wall, not weathered a bit. The other side has crumbled away, while the under part is comparatively fresh, and would show chisel marks if it had been chipped."

The work went on for nearly an hour, the sailor having dug away in the most vigorous manner and cleared out a fairly wide, squarish hole, three of whose sides were cut down through earth, the fourth, near the foot of the wall, being bedded together loose stones and rubbish and pretty well open.

Almost every spadeful had been carefully examined for traces of the olden occupation, the doctor during the first portion of the time having been constantly stepping down into the hole and out again to examine some suggestive looking piece of rubbish, until Mark's attention was drawn to Dan, who kept on trying to catch his eye and giving him nods and winks and jerks of the elbow, pointing too again and again at the doctor's back, but all in vain.

"What does he mean by all that?" thought the boy. "Oh, bother your dumb motions! Why don't you speak?"

"Pst!" whispered Dan. "Can't you see? You tell him. He keeps on a-hindering me, hopping up and down like a cat on hot bricks. You tell him to stop up there and turn over every basketful as they chucks upon the heap."

A delicate hint was given to the doctor, and from that time forward he left the little digger room to work.

All at once, just as Buck was depositing his empty basket within Dan's reach, and the boys were standing at the edge looking on at where the sailor had begun to scrape away some of the loose crumbs, as he called them, from the side of the bottom of the hole, there was a faint rustling sound and the man dropped his spade, stepped back and bounded out of the excavation as actively as a cat.

"What's the matter, mate?" cried Buck, "a arn't given you a nip?"

"Wall's not crumbling, is it?" cried Mark excitedly.

"No, sir. Did you see it?"

"See it? See what?"

"Dunno, sir. Thought perhaps you gents up there might have ketched sight of it. Summat alive."

"Eh? What's that?" cried the doctor sharply, from where he was poring over the rubbish which the keepers had last deposited on the heap; and he hurried to the edge of the hole. "What have you found?"

"Nowt, sir," replied the little sailor. "I was just scraping up the crumbs where there's all the rough stones yonder as I have been leaving so as not to loosen the foundations, when something scuttled along there. Gi' me quite a turn;" and as he spoke there was a sharp *click, click*, from where Sir James sat sentry on the top of the wall.

"Humph!" said the doctor. "Mouse or rat."

"Mouse or rat, sir?" said Dan sharply. "What, are there them sort of jockeys here?"

"Yes, and all the world round, my lad."

"Fancy that!" cried the sailor, jumping down into the hole again. "Scar'd me like a great gal, Mr Mark, sir;" and evidently ashamed of having been startled, he bent down to pick up the fallen tool, dislodging as he did so some of the loose rubbish, and bounding backwards to raise the spade and hold it ready to strike as with an axe; for just at the foot of the ancient wall the rustling sound began again, and stopped, leaving Dan in the attitude of striking and the rest of the party leaning over with searching eyes in full expectation of seeing some little animal spring out.

"What do you make of that, sir?" said the sailor.

"Humph! Don't know. Stand back, all of you," cried Sir James, as he rose erect from his seat on the top of the wall. "You stop, Dan; the rest leave me a clear course for firing."

"Wait a minute, father," cried Mark excitedly. "Let me get my piece and change the cartridges."

"No, no," said Sir James; "one's enough, and I've got a barrel loaded with small shot. I suppose you would like to see what the specimen is, doctor."

"Certainly," was the reply. "I can make a shrewd guess, though."

"So can I, sir," said the sailor; "and I can't abide them things."

"Now then," said Sir James, as he stood ready. "I won't hit you, Dan. Reach out with your spade, stir up those loose stones again, and spring back quickly."

"I just will, sir!" said the man to himself, and leaning forward he thrust the spade amongst the loose rubbish; and hopped back with wonderful agility.

It was a most effectual thrust, and beyond the noise made by the steel blade of the tool and the rattle of the stones there was a sharp rustling of something disturbed in its lair, and a loud vindictive hiss.

"Oh, scissors!" ejaculated the sailor, and swinging up the spade again he held it ready to give a chop; but it was not delivered, for Sir James shouted to him to step out of the hole, lowered himself down from the wall, and joined the others on the edge.

"A snake, and a pretty big one too, I expect," said the doctor. "Python, most likely."

"Pison?" said Dan.

"Python, my lad, not pison," said the doctor. "That class of serpent is harmless. Don't miss it, Sir James, and don't shatter its head if you can help it."

"If I shoot it," said Sir James, "I will not answer for where I shall hit. If you want it as a specimen, take the gun."

"Do you mean it, Sir James?"

"Certainly. Catch hold."

"Oh, I say, doctor, let me shoot!" cried Mark excitedly.

"No, no, my boy; don't interfere," said his father. "No, doctor, don't give up to him," for the latter was drawing back. "Now, all of you," cried Sir James, setting the example, "pick up a stone each, and we will throw till we drive the reptile out."

His orders were obeyed, and for the next five minutes as the doctor stood ready to fire, stone after stone, big and little, were hurled at the foot of the wall, but with no further effect than producing a slight rustling sound, as if the creature had plenty of room in the hollow which formed its lair.

"I think I can do it, Sir James," said Buck.

"How, my lad?"

"I will get up on the wall, sir, and drop one of them big stones right down over him."

"Good! Do."

"Wish I had thought of that," said Dean. "I should just like that job."

"Never mind; let Buck try. Send down a big one!" cried Mark.

"I just will, sir," said the man, and climbing quickly up to the top of the wall he edged his way along the stones till he found what he considered a suitable block, loosened it, but not without considerable effort, for it was hard to move, and then turned it over and over till he forced it to the edge of the crumbling wall.

"That about right, sir?" he cried.

"No; two feet farther along. That's right! Now then, all ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Give it a gentle push then, when you get the word from me. I want it to fall close in there."

"Right, sir."

There was a moment's silence in the midst of an excitement which was great for so trifling an incident, and then Sir James said sharply, "Heave!"

Down came the stone, and it seemed to the boys as if it occupied seconds of time to pass through the air, and crash down upon the loose rubbish below. A little dust arose, but not sufficient to hide the occupant of the ruined

foundations. Then silence again, and the two boys uttered a jeering laugh.

"Out crept a mouse," said the doctor good-humouredly; "but where is it?"

"He's in there, sir," said Dan, "for I just ketched sight of him. But I'm sure he warn't a mouse."

"Shall I throw down another stone, sir?" cried Buck, from the top of the wall.

"'Tain't no good, mate," shouted Dan. "Let me go and stir him out, sir, with the shovel. He's down some hole, with his tail hanging out. Mebbe I can give him a chop and make him wriggle out back'ards so as to give you plenty of time to shoot."

"Would you mind doing it, my lad?" said the doctor.

"Not me, sir, now I knows what it is. You meant it warn't a stinger, sir, didn't you?"

"It's only guess work, my lad, but it's evidently a large serpent, and those with poisonous fangs are mostly small."

"Take care, Dan," cried Mark, as the sailor prepared to jump down again into the hole.

"I just will, sir!"

"Yes, but mind this," said the doctor. "Stir up the stones, and if you see it, give it just a touch or two with the edge of the spade. I don't want it injured."

"All right, sir," said the man; and spade in hand he approached the foot of the wall, cautiously holding the tool at arm's length, all looking on eagerly, while the doctor, armed as he was with the double gun, shared the position with the sailor of the most important figures there.

"Ready, sir?" whispered Dan, as he reached forward.

"Yes, quite," replied the doctor.

"They are small shot, arn't they, sir?" said Dan.

"Small shot don't hurt much, do they, Bob?" cried Mark, laughing.

"No, sir. I have got one left in my neck now."

"Don't you be afraid of my shot," replied the doctor. "I shall not hit you. But take care of yourself if you start the serpent."

"Right, sir. Here goes!" cried the sailor; and giving the spade a powerful thrust in amongst the stones, he twisted it about, and then started back, for a large scaly head darted out in his direction.

Chapter Thirty.

A Reptilean Fight.

There was the loud report of the rifle, and then all that was visible was the slowly rising smoke.

"Missed him, sir?" cried Mark excitedly.

"Seems like it, my lad," was the reply, and the doctor opened the breech of the piece to slip in a fresh cartridge. "But I only had a glance, and—"

"Oh, murder!" cried Dan. "Here, let me get out of it," and he scrambled from the hole, for the doctor's words were silenced by a rushing sound, and through the fainter growing smoke were visible the writhings of a great serpent whose head seemed to have turned its tail into a huge whip with which the reptile had begun to thrash about in all directions, leaving no doubt about the doctor's shot having had effect.

"Shouldn't like to be licked with such a flogger as that. My eye, Buck, messmate, fancy what it would be if he had nine tails! But look out, everyone; let's get to the top of the wall before he comes out among us."

Bang!

For just when the heavy blows delivered around the sides of the hole were at their height the doctor fired again, his shot being followed by a rush on the part of the serpent, which flung itself out of the excavation, scattering its enemies in different directions as they made for shelter from the startling assault.

"Fire again, doctor! Fire again!" cried Mark, from half way up the wall.

"I want a chance first," was the reply, from the top of the heap that the men had formed. "He's making for the other side of the enclosure. Well, I suppose I must follow him up."

"Take care," said Sir James, who as it happened had made for where a couple of rifles were leaning against the wall. "Let me come with you."

"And me," cried Dean, who possessed himself of the other piece.

"Yes, but where do I come in?" said Mark. "Here, Buck, run to camp and get another rifle."

"No, no," said Sir James. "Three of us are too many. Here, what does the dwarf mean?" For the little fellow, who was making his way along the crumbling top of the wall, suddenly stopped short and mutely answered Sir James's question by pointing with his spear to where the bushes were thickest. "We shan't be able to see it there," continued Sir James.

As if the pigmy understood his words, he dropped down quickly, joined the doctor, gave him an intelligent glance with his piercing dark eyes, and then, spear in hand, made his way through the bushes to the other side of the clump in which, the wounded serpent had sought for shelter.

"You had better leave it to me to finish the work," said the doctor, following the little black.

"Yes," said Mark. "Too many cooks spoil the broth."

"Snake soup," said Dean, laughing; "and I don't know that I want to go."

"I do," cried Mark. "Here, hand over that rifle."

"Shan't. I want to defend myself. Get behind me, if you are afraid."

"You wait," cried Mark sharply.

"Quiet, there!" cried Sir James. "No one but the doctor is to fire. I don't want the beater to be injured amongst those thick bushes."

There was a few moments' silence, for the faint rustling that had been made by the reptile in its retreat through the thick growth had now entirely ceased.

"It's all over," cried Buck.

"Not it, messmate," said Dan. "Them things arn't got nine tails, but they've got nine lives. Even if you cut 'em up you have to kill each piece, and then it won't die till after the sun goes down."

"Lu-lu-lu-lu-lu!" cried the pigmy, from where he was hidden on the other side of the clump.

It was evidently intended to mean, "Look out, doctor," for the boys caught sight for a moment of his raised spear, which disappeared directly, and it was patent to all that it was being plunged again and again in among the tangled growth.

The next moment the blows were resumed, as the serpent began to flog the bushes. There was another report from the doctor's piece; the bushes all about were in motion for a minute or two, and then the noise of the reptile's writhing ceased.

"Killed him, doctor?" cried Mark.

"Can't say, my boy," was the reply, "but I am afraid I have completely spoiled my specimen."

"Never mind, sir," said Dean; "it will be all right for the soup. But do you think it's safe to go near? I want to see what the monster's like."

"So do I," cried Mark; "but we will soon have him out. Here, Buck, step in, lay hold and haul him out into the open."

"Where's that, Mark?" said his father, smiling.

"Well, where it's most open, dad. Now then, you Buck, look alive!"

"No, thank you, sir," said the man, grinning. "I don't want to see him."

"Bah!" cried Mark. "You are afraid."

"That's right, sir; I am—'orrid. You tell Dan, sir. He'll go in with his sharp spade and cut him up in chunks and shovel them out a bit at a time. Snakes is nasty things to touch. Here, go on, messmate. Don't you hear as the young gents wants to see it?"

"You go on! They didn't ask me to do it," said the sailor; "and he arn't dead yet."

"Yah! What a fellow you are! Who's a-going to wait till it's dark and the thing's made up its mind to die? Go on in."

"There arn't room to get a good sight of it," said Dan. "Cut his head off, then. One good chop would do it."

"Not me! I know all about these things. They gets tight hold and twissens theirselves round till they have squeezed all the wind out of you. Here, I say, Mak; you understand these insecks; get hold of him and pull him out."

The black looked at him laughingly and went forward, spear in hand, but at that moment there was a rustling and crackling amongst the thick growth, and everyone but the doctor, who stood firm ready for another shot, began to retreat, but stopped as they realised the fact that the pigmy had stuck his spear upright through one of the bushes,

and had seized hold of the serpent, to begin trying to haul it out.

There was a faint suggestion of writhing, a grunting ejaculation or two, and a few words as if of appeal or command, which had the effect of making Mak step forward to the pigmy's help, and together the blacks hauled the dying reptile to where the morning's work had been going on.

"Well, I am disappointed," cried Mark. "It's only a little one, after all."

"Little one!" said the doctor, as he bent over the stretched out prize. "Why, it's a good twelve feet long! A python, evidently."

"And pretty thick," said Dean; "quite as thick round as my leg," and raising his foot he planted it upon the serpent near to its tail. "Oh!" he shouted, as he started back, for at his touch the reptile drew itself up together almost in a knot, and then stretched itself out again, to the great delight of the two blacks.

"Well, I don't see anything to laugh at," said Dean, and he looked rather discomfited, while the doctor went on, "Beautifully marked. Not unlike the Australian carpet snake; but quite spoiled as a specimen."

"Not a nice thing to take home, doctor," said Mark.

"The skin would not have been very heavy," said the doctor, smiling.

"Well, no," said Mark. "I say, Dean, carpet snake! How many skins would it take to make one carpet?"

"Beg pardon, sir," said Dan; "think these 'ere have got any stings in their tails?"

"No. Why?"

"Because he managed to catch me a flip across the lynes, and I've got a sort of fancy that it's beginning to prickle, though I can't say as it warn't a thorn."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Mark.

"I don't think about it, my lad," said the doctor, "and you may just as well get rid of that popular fallacy."

"But some of them do sting, sir," said Buck, "because I did hear of a fellow being killed by one in a precious little time."

"Not by a sting, my man," said the doctor, "but by a bite from some small serpent that had poison fangs."

"Then don't no snakes have stings in their tails, sir?"

"No, my man; you must turn to insects or scorpions for dangers of that class."

"Ho!" said Dan thoughtfully, as he stood looking down at the slowly heaving length at his feet. "Well, I never knowed that before. But if I had ha' knowed that this 'ere customer had got his nest in among them ol' stones just where I was digging I should have mutinied against orders and sent old Buck. Beg pardon, sir, but could you say if this 'ere was a cock or a hen?"

"No, I couldn't," said the doctor, laughing. "Why do you ask?"

"I was only wondering, sir, whether him or she had a messmate down in the hole."

"You may take it for granted that if that serpent had a companion it has escaped by now."

"Well, that's a comfort, sir."

"Oh, I see," said the doctor, with a peculiar look at the boys; "you were thinking that we were wasting a good deal of time over this business instead of digging down."

"That I warn't, sir," said the sailor indignantly; and then catching the twinkle in the doctor's eye, he winked at him in return. "I wouldn't be so unfair towards my messmates, sir," he hastened to say. "There's Buck Denham been for ever so long wanting to handle the shovel, and I was just a-going to say it would rest me a bit to take a turn with the basket when my gentleman here said he was at home. Now, Buck, mate, let's get on."

"That's his way of poking fun, Mr Dean, sir," said Buck, turning to the boys. "Rum chap, ain't he? He's got a lot of comic in him sometimes. He do make me laugh. No, Dan, mate, you stick to the spade; you don't have so far to stoop as I should, and I shouldn't like you to get a crick in your back by heaving up them loads, which are pretty lumpy sometimes; and I will say that for you:—you did always fill them for me, as much as they would hold."

"Well," said Sir James good-humouredly, "settle it between you, my lads, for the doctor is, I am sure, anxious to go on."

"Thank you, Sir James; I am. Still, this is an interesting episode, and one that I am sure the boys would not have liked to miss."

"That we shouldn't," they cried, in a breath. "But what's going to be done with the snake?" said Dean. "It won't be in the way."

"No," said Mark, "and I suppose it isn't likely to come to life again; but it won't do to have it lying there in the sun."

"No," echoed Dean, with a look of disgust; "it smells bad enough even now."

"Look here," said Mark, "we will get rid of it at once. Take it away, Mak;" and partly by signs he explained his wishes.

The black smiled, shrugged his shoulders, and spoke to his little companion, who turned an enquiring look upon Mark, who nodded at once as if to say, Yes, I wish it.

A word or two passed between the two, and Mak turned to Dan, signing to him that he wanted him to come with him.

"What does he want, Dan?" cried Dean. "Knife, sir. All right, messmate; I'll come." The pigmy had started off, dodging in and out amongst the thick bushes, and stopped directly after by a long stout cane, which he caught hold of and dragged out straight, signing to the little sailor to use his knife.

"Cut it off down there, little 'un?—There you are, then. Now trim off all them leaves?—Will that do for you? Want to tie it up in a bundle, do you? 'Cause if you do I wish you joy of it. Better let it twist itself up into a knot."

But Dan had misunderstood the pigmy's wishes, for as soon as the long cane was clear he caught it up, turned back with Mak to where the serpent lay, and waited while the big black pierced a hole in the serpent's neck. The cane was passed through, and then each taking hold of one end, they dragged the reptile over the ground out of the opening of the kraal, and then onward to where the kopje ended in a little precipice by which the bright stream of the river glided fast. Here they stood swinging it backwards and forwards a few times, let go together, and the nearly dead serpent fell into the water with a splash and was swept away.

"That's an end of him, then, Dean," said Mark. "Come on; let's get back. I want to find something before we give up for to-day;" and hurrying on, leaving the two blacks to follow at their leisure, and, as it struck the boys, rather unwillingly, the excavation was reached.

"Come along," said the doctor. "I have been waiting for you before I began, for I did not want you to miss whatever we find next. Now, Denham."

Buck seized the spade, leaped into the hole, and began to ply the tool energetically, while the two keepers used the baskets, and Dan danced about, as active as a cat, seizing the stones that were thrown out; and in this way the hole was deepened.

"You don't seem to find anything," said Sir James.

"We haven't got to the bottom yet," replied the doctor.

"Perhaps there is no bottom," said Mark, laughing.

"Don't you see," said the doctor, "that we are standing in the interior of some old building? It must have had some form of paving for the bottom, and what we are clearing away is the rubbish that has fallen in. Go on Denham. We shall find something before long."

The doctor was right, for before many minutes had elapsed the big driver, who drove the spade in energetically and with all his strength, suddenly shouted, "Bottom!" and stood tapping the spade down upon something hard.

"Only another stone, messmate," cried Dan.

"Nay; smooth, hard bottom," said Buck. "Look here;" and after lifting out several spadefuls of the loose stuff he scraped the tool backwards and forwards over what seemed to be a perfectly level surface.

"You are quite right, Denham," said the doctor excitedly, "and you have proved my words. Now then, Dance; jump down with that shovel and help Denham clear out the loose stuff."

This took some little time, but at last the two men stood up in the square hole, which was thoroughly cleared out, and exposed the level flooring of the old building beneath one of whose walls they had been at work.

"What?" cried the doctor, in answer to a question. "How far does it go? It is impossible to say without clearing out the whole extent of the place. What is the bottom, Denham—slabs of stone or bricks?"

"Neither, sir. As far as I can make out it's a kind of cement."

"Then that proves that the building can't be as old as we thought," said Sir James.

"Oh, no," said the doctor. "Cement in some form or another is very ancient;" and he paused for a few minutes while the last baskets of rubbish which had been thrown out were carefully examined.

"Nothing here," said the doctor. "Now, Denham, I want that iron bar that you use to make the holes for the tent pegs."

"Hop pitcher? Here, Bob, mate, run to the waggon and fetch it."

The interval of time taken by the younger keeper to fetch the big pointed crowbar was utilised for further search, during which the two blacks came back and stood a little aloof, watching curiously the acts of their white companions.

"That's right, mate," replied Denham.—"Oh, well, if you like; jump down, then. The boss wants a hole picked, I suppose, for you to break up a bit of the floor here to see what it's like."

The keeper was handy enough with the fresh tool, and after picking out a good many small pieces of what proved to be powdered granite, consolidated probably by lime, or perhaps only by time itself, he called for one of the stones that had been thrown out, laid it by the side of the hole he had picked, and then thrusting down the iron bar and using the stone as a fulcrum, he levered out a good-sized piece of the hard cement.

"Throw it up here," cried the doctor, who caught it deftly and held it in the sunshine, examining it carefully. "No," he said, in rather a disappointed tone.

"Here's a bigger bit here, sir," said Bob, "as seems loose. Yes, out you come!" And pressing his lever down hard, he brought up a great flake of the flooring, nearly a foot long and some inches wide. This he handed to Buck, who examined it casually as he bore it to the side of the hole and handed it to the doctor.

"It's broken up granite, sir, for certain," he said, "and this other side sparkles just like—"

He was going to say something, but the doctor excitedly, so to speak, snatched the word from his lips.

"Yes," he cried—"gold!"

The two boys started forward excitedly.

Chapter Thirty One.

An Explosion.

"Yes," said the doctor, as he scanned some little specks of the pale yellow glistening metal, and the two blacks crept silently closer, "this is gold, sure enough."

"I don't know much about these things," said Sir James, examining the big flake carefully, "but I didn't think that it was possible to find gold in cement. If it had been quartz rock, doctor—"

"Ah, you are thinking of gold ore, Sir James," said the doctor, taking out his knife and opening it. "These are scraps of manufactured gold."

"Why, who could have manufactured them," said Mark sharply.

"We must go to history for that," replied the doctor, "and the only people I can suggest would be the Phoenicians; but I may be quite wrong, for gold has been searched for and used by most ancient people.—Allow me, Sir James;" and he took back the piece of cement and with the point of his knife picked out a little rivet, which he tried with a sharp blade. "Yes," he said; "pure gold. You see it's quite soft. Why, I can cut it almost as easily as a piece of lead. Here's another little rivet. I should say this has been a piece cut off a length of gold wire."

"But what would they want such little bits as that for?" asked Dean.

"For the purpose I name, as rivets, to fasten down gold plates. There are more and more of them here—and look at this corner where the cement has broken. Here's a scrap of thin hammered plate of gold. Why, boys, we have come to the place where our little friend yonder must have obtained his gold wire ornaments."

"But it isn't likely," said Mark, "that we should come by chance and dig down in the right place."

"No, I don't think this can be the right place, but I do think that we have come to the ruins where this precious metal is found."

"But that means," said Mark, now speaking excitedly, "that we have come to a place where there must be quantities of such things."

"I think so too," said the doctor. "We have certainly made a very curious discovery—one which may help us to find out who the people were who raised these walls. What do you say, Sir James? Should we be satisfied with what we have found, or leave it all for to-day?"

"I will go by what the boys say," said Sir James. "What do you think, boys?"

"Oh, go on!" cried the lads together, and as they spoke Mark caught sight of the pigmy leaning forward as if to draw his big companion's attention to what was going on.

"Go on, then, doctor," cried Sir James.

"Well, then," said the doctor, "what I should like to do now would be to bore right through this cement—tamp it, as the mining people call it—then ram in the contents of a couple or three cartridges and fire them with a fuse."

"You mean and blow the floor to pieces?"

"Exactly," said the doctor. "It will save a great deal of time and labour, and show us whether it is worth while continuing our researches here."

"Oh, go on, then," cried Mark.

Bob Bacon set to work the next minute tamping a hole diagonally down from where the large piece of cement had been taken out.

The doctor had been under the expectation that they were nearly through the cement floor, but the iron bar was driven down lower and lower, re-pounding the granite into dust, which was fished out by means of a cleaning rod, till the hole was about eighteen inches deep, measuring from the surface of the floor. Then gunpowder was put in and rammed down pretty hard, and the question arose, What was to be done for a fuse?

"Here, I can soon manage that, gentlemen," said Dan the handy. "I want a drop of water."

"I have some in my flask," said the doctor.

"Bit of string," continued Dan; and he fished out a piece directly from his trousers' pocket, and after the doctor had poured a little water into the cup of his flask the little sailor thrust in a piece of string, let it soak for a few minutes, and then drew it through his fingers to squeeze out as much of the water as he could and send it well through the partly untwisted fibres.

"Now, Mr Mark, sir, got a blank cartridge?"

"No, but I can soon take the ball out of one."

This the boy did, and after removing the wad he poured a little of the dry powder into Dan's palm. The piece of string was roughly rolled up, laid upon the pinch or two of powder, and then the little sailor placed his palms together and gave them a circular, millstone-like movement one over the other till all the powder was absorbed and his hands as black as ink.

"There, gentlemen," he said, passing the string two or three times through his fingers, "that's nearly dry now, and if it's shoved down the hole, one end left out, and the hole stopped with a bit of clay—"

"Where are you going to get your clay, mate?" said Bob Bacon.

"Oh, I don't know," said the man. "Never mind the clay. You can make baskets."

"What's that got to do with it?" growled Bob.

"Not much, but pull out your knife and find a good soft bit of wood that you can turn into a peg."

This was soon done, and laying the string fuse a little way along the cement floor, Dan declared the mine to be ready.

"Only wants everybody to stand clear, gentlemen," said the little fellow, "and somebody to go down with a match, and then run. Then up she goes; and that's my job."

"Oh, I'll do that," cried Mark, and he pulled out a little silver box of matches that he had in his pocket.

"Steady, Mr Mark, sir—steady!" cried the little fellow.

"Clear out, everybody!" cried Mark.

The doctor opened his lips to speak angrily, but on second thoughts he followed those who were in the hole and had begun making for a safe distance from the explosion that was to come.

"Spring out the moment you have lit the fuse," he shouted.

"All right," cried Mark impetuously, as, bending down, he rapidly struck a wax match and held it to the string fuse; and then—he could not have explained why—stood over it as if affected by some nightmare-like feeling, watching the tiny sparkling of the damp powder as it began to run along the string towards the hole.

"Mr Mark!" shouted the little sailor. "Run—run!"

The boy started violently, turned to look at the speaker, then back at the faint sparkling of the fuse, and then stared helplessly again after those who were now standing some little distance away.

"Yah! Run!" yelled Buck Denham, and as he shouted he snatched off Dean's hat and sent it skimming like a boomerang right away over the bushes, though, unlike a boomerang, it did not come back.

It affected his purpose, though, for startled by the driver's fierce yell, and his attention being taken by the flying hat, Mark made a dash, climbed out of the hole, rose to his feet, and had begun to run for safety, when the explosion came with a roar; and it was as if a giant had suddenly given the boy a tremendous push which sent him flying into the nearest bushes, out of which he was struggling when Dean and Buck Denham came running through the smoke and fragments of earth and cement which were falling all around.

"Oh, Mark, don't say you are hurt!"

"Why not?" said Mark slowly, as he snatched at Buck's extended hand and struggled out from amongst the thorns. "I am, I tell you," continued the boy.

"Not much, sir, are you?" said the driver. "Only a bit pricked, eh?"

"Well, I don't know," said Mark slowly, as he began to squirm and alter the set of his clothes. "Yes, pricked a bit, though."

"And a good job it's no worse, sir."

"Here, you," cried Dean angrily, for the excitement of the incident had brought on a curious attack of irritation. "You, Buck Denham, how dare you snatch off my hat like that and send it flying!"

"Eh?" said the man, staring. "Oh, ah, so I did."

"Then don't do it again, sir!" And then turning hurriedly away with a feeling of annoyance at his display of fault-finding with one who he felt now had probably saved his cousin from serious hurt, he went on after his hat, but only



to meet the pigmy half way to the spot where missing straw at the end of Mak's spear.

it had fallen, holding out the

"Are you hurt much, Mark?" said the doctor sternly; and the words were echoed by Sir James, who came hurrying up.

"Oh, no," said the boy hastily, feeling half annoyed now at the bearing of those near; and then he stood looking at his father's frowning countenance and listened to the doctor's sternly uttered whisper.

"Foolishly impetuous and thoughtless," said the doctor. "How often have I told you to try to think before you act!"

"I—I'm very sorry, sir," faltered Mark. "And so am I," said the doctor gravely, as he turned away. "Now, Denham," he continued, in his natural tones, speaking as if to put an end to the incident by those last words, "how has the fuse acted?"

"Splendid, sir," replied the man, who had followed Dan down into the hole. "There's no end of pieces loose ready for you to have a look at them. Yah! Mind where you are coming to, my lads!" he continued, to the two keepers, who had now followed him down into the hole. "Don't trample. Get your baskets and bring them to the edge here, and me and Dan'll hand you out the bits to lay ready for the boss to look over. Here's one or two of them, Dr Robertson, sir, as has got a touch of gold in them."

And so it proved, for as the pieces were carefully picked up and passed on for the doctor to examine, he found more of the little eighth or quarter of an inch long scraps of wire, and in addition, here and there in the fragments of cement, tiny wedge-like tacks of the precious metal.

"Doesn't seem much," said Mark, "after all. It would take ten times as many scraps as we have found to weigh a sovereign."

"I don't know about your calculation," said the doctor, speaking cheerfully now, for his angry feeling had passed away. "From one point of view we might say the whole find was of no value, but from another—the archaeological point of view—valuable indeed. But by the way, boys, I don't like those two blacks looking so glum at us. It's almost as if they felt contempt for the white man seeming so anxious to find gold."

"Here's another bit, sir," cried Buck Denham. "The powder chucked it right over here, close to the wall."

As he spoke the man held a good-sized fragment of the cement pressed against his side with one hand, and began to climb out of the hole.

"No, no, thank you, sir," he said, as Mark stooped down to take the piece of cement; and then in a whisper, "I wanted for them blacks not to see it; but they have got eyes like needles, and I think they did. Don't look round at them. These chaps have got ideas of their own. See that, doctor, sir?" He turned the fragment over now, as he stood with his back turned to Mak and the pigmy. "See that, sir?"

"Yes," said the doctor; "that explains what I was talking about just now. Their ideas are that to disturb the bones of the dead may mean mischief or injury to themselves. I believe that is what they think. Look, Sir James;" and he held the fragment so that his chief could see that, fixed in the cement like a fossil, there was a large portion of a human bone.

"Yes," said Sir James. "Possibly there has been fighting here."

"No, sir, I don't think that," said the doctor. "What we have found before, and this, seem to point to the fact that we have hit upon one of the old dwellings, for it is the custom among some of the nations to bury their dead beneath the floor of their homes, and to cover them over with a fresh floor before another family can occupy the old place."

"Fresh floor?" cried Mark eagerly.

"Yes, and we have seen confirmation of what I have read, for these scraps of gold and the bone must have been covered-in with the wet cement for it to be bedded within like this."

"This is rather gruesome, doctor," said Sir James.

"Yes, sir, but I think you must agree that it is very interesting, teaching us as it does the habits and customs of people who lived many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years ago."

"Yes," said Sir James; "but it is rather ghoulish to disturb their remains. What are you going to do now?"

"I was going to confirm my notions by going down into the pit and trying to make sure whether there are any more remains; and if there are, I propose that we shall refrain from doing anything that may arouse the prejudices of the blacks."

"How?" said Sir James.

"By having that hole filled up again, for I feel convinced that we shall find plenty to satisfy our desires without interfering with such relics as these."

"I quite agree," said Sir James.

"Here, come with me, Denham," said the doctor, and without heeding the two blacks, who stood aloof, leaning upon their spears close under the wall, the doctor, closely followed by Denham and the boys, descended into the deep square hole, where the sides of the round cavity torn out by the charge of powder were examined for a few minutes, and then word was given and the men set to work with alacrity to fill up the great hole again.

"I say, Mark," said Dean, who had been looking on, quietly observant, while the work progressed, for as there was no trampling down, that which had been dug out kept on rising, till the hole was filled and rose up above the edges in a loose heap, "have you noticed Mak?"

"Yes," said Mark, "and the Pig too. As usual, the doctor's right. The more the hole gets filled up the more they seem to grow good-tempered again. Yes, they didn't like it, and the doctor's always right."

"But I say, Mark, you didn't think so when he gave you such a snubbing for rushing forward to fire the train."

"Yes, I did," said Mark, in a whisper. "I did think so, and I think so now, and that's what makes it feel so hard."

It is impossible to say whether the doctor, who was supposed to be always right, had any idea of what the boys were saying, but just then in his cheeriest tones he cried, "Come along, boys; don't stop talking. We have done work enough for one day. Let's go and see what Dan has ready for us in the way of cooking. I feel half starved, don't you?"

"But Dan is helping to finish the covering in."

"Oh, no, he is not," said the doctor. "Brown came and fetched him half an hour ago. He has been keeping up the fire, and I daresay we shall not have to wait for our evening meal."

The doctor started off, and the boys before following him went back to where the two blacks were standing waiting, to gaze at them with half questioning looks.

"Come along, Mak," cried Mark cheerily. "Come along, pigmy;" and he made signs suggesting something to eat.—"Oh, it's all right again," he said. "They don't mind now. Why, black Mak's face came out all in one big smile."

"Yes," said Dean, "and the little Pig looked as if he would like to rub his head against you just like the old Manor House cat when we had been out."

Chapter Thirty Two.

A Suspicion of Baboons.

A few nights later Mark, who had just finished his portion of the nightly watch, called up Dan and made his report that all had gone well till about an hour before, when he fancied he had seen something creeping along through the bushes just beyond the camp.

"Jackal," said Dan.

"No; it seemed too big."

"Well, didn't the horses seem uneasy?"

"No."

"Fancy, perhaps."

"Well, it may have been, and I half thought so then, else I should have roused someone up."

"Which way did it go, sir?"

"Right into the middle of the temple square."

"Well, it wouldn't have been a black, because if it had been one of them he would have made for the open."

"The doctor said that most likely there would be blacks about."

"Well, but," said Dan, "no one has seen a sign of anyone but our chaps."

"That's true," replied Mark, "but there must be tribes about here, and they'd see us before we saw them."

"Yes, sir; that's pretty sure, and it might be one of them come in the dark scouting to see what we are like, and how many there are of us."

"That doesn't sound pleasant, Dan. We don't want any company of that sort."

"No, sir. But look here; I think I have got it. Are you sure it wasn't a leopard?"

"I can't be sure, because it is too dark to see spots."

"Well, was it a human, sir?"

"I don't think so, because it was going on all fours."

"Oh, well, sir, the niggers are clever enough in that way. Both Mak and the little chap can run along like dogs and jump over a tree trunk or a big stone. It is wonderful what strength some of these half savage chaps have in their arms. Being a sailor and doing a great deal going up aloft has made me pretty clever hanging by one's hands or holding on by one's eyelids, as we say, at sea, while we furl a sail; but I am nowhere alongside of our Mak."

"But you as good as said you had an idea, Dan."

"Well, I have, sir, and I got it only the other day when I was down yonder right away towards the end of the ruins, seeing how far I could go without getting lost. I'd quite forgot all about it till you began to talk. I caught sight of something—just a peep of it as it looked up at me and then ran in amongst the rocks and bushes. I hadn't got a gun with me, and perhaps I had no business to be loafing about."

"Oh, never mind that," said Mark. "What was it you saw?"

"Well, it was something like a good big dog, but I had no chance of seeing it well; and I was just going to turn back when there it was again, or another like it, squatting on a stone at the end of one of them big walls; and when it saw I was watching, it was out of sight directly."

"Well, that doesn't help us much," said Mark impatiently.

"Don't it, sir? I thought it did, for it seems to me that it was what you saw to-night."

"Maybe," said Mark; "but what was it?"

"Well, I will tell you, sir. It was one of them big monkeys as Buck Denham talks about."

"I never knew him talk about any."

"Oh, he has to me, sir. He has seen them over and over again when he has been out with hunting gentlemen. He says they are as big as a good-sized dog, and a bit like one about the head. But they've got next to no tail. Go in packs, they do, like dogs, and make a sort of a barking noise. Pretty fierce too, he says they are, and bite like all that. Don't you think it might be one of them? Buck says they live in the kopjes."

"But would one be likely to be about here in the dark?"

"There's no knowing, sir—hanging round our kraal to see if it could pick up a bit of anything to eat. But there, I'll keep a sharp look out, and if I see anything worth while I'll fire."

"Do," said Mark. "Good-night."

“Good-night, sir.”

Mark went to his blanket, and forgot all about the incident till after breakfast when he met his relief, who signed to him to follow into the clearing they had made by cutting down and burning the bushes.

“What is it, Dan?”

“Only this, sir. Remember what you saw last night?”

“Yes,” cried Mark eagerly. “Did you see it too?”

“Well, I’m not sure, sir; only think I did.”

“Think?”

“Well, you see, sir, what you said seemed to make me expect that I should see something. I could not be sure.”

“Well, we had better tell my father and the doctor, and let’s do it now.”

Mark led the way straight to where the above were busily talking together and just about to start for a further exploration of the gigantic walls whose ruins cropped up in all directions; and after the matter had been discussed it was decided that though there was a doubt as to whether it was not all imagination, it would be wise to try to keep up a stricter watch by night.

“You see,” said Dan, as Sir James and the doctor resumed their search, “it’s like this, sir. It might be some animile or one of them doggy monkey things come stealing about in the night, or even one of the niggers come to see if he could pinch something good out of the stores.”

“That’s hardly likely,” said Mark.

But a morning or two later Mark went up to his father and startled him with a question:

“Have you taken my rifle away, father?”

“Your rifle? No! Why?”

“It isn’t hanging on the pegs with the others.”

“Nonsense! Perhaps you did not look in the right place. Let’s see.”

Sir James led the way to where a number of pegs had been driven into the old wall beneath the canvas roof.

“They are not all there, certainly,” he said. “Perhaps the doctor has taken yours by mistake.”

“No; he has got his own.”

“Mark, my boy, I’m afraid you have had it out somewhere and left it standing up against a rock or tree—forgotten it.”

“Oh, father,” cried the boy excitedly, “I am sure I haven’t! I had it last night, cleaned it and oiled it carefully, and then put it back in its place.”

“Are you sure? Last night?”

“Yes, father, certain. Here, I will call Dean.”

The latter came trotting up in answer to his cousin’s whistle, heard what was wrong, and corroborated Mark’s words.

“But are you sure it was last night?”

“Yes, uncle, certain. I did mine at the same time. You must have had it out, Mark. It can’t be lost.”

“I haven’t had it out,” cried the boy angrily. “I had breakfast, then went and had a talk with Dan, and then went to get the rifle, and it was gone.”

“Well, let the matter drop for a time,” said Sir James quietly.

“Is anything wrong?” said the doctor coming up.

“Yes, my rifle’s gone;” and after hearing what each had to say the doctor turned to Mark.

“You feel sure about it now, my boy, but we all have such fits as that sometimes; then all at once the fact dawns upon us that we have put away the missing article to be safe, or for some other reason, and then we wonder how we could possibly have forgotten it.”

Mark nodded his head, looked at his cousin, and they went off together.

“Yes, the doctor’s right,” said Dean, as soon as they were out of hearing. “You will remember it all by-and-by.”

“That I shan’t,” was the angry retort. “I feel as sure as can be that it has been stolen. Oh, here’s Dan.”

They came in sight of that sturdy little individual, in company with Buck.

"Here, Dan," cried Mark, "you know when I was talking with you a little while ago?"

"Yes, sir, of course."

"Had I got my rifle with me?"

"No, sir. A'n't lost it, have you, sir?"

"Yes, it's gone. You can't help me, can you, Buck?"

"No, sir.—Here, stop a minute."

"Ah! Now it's coming," cried Dean, laughing. "I told you so."

"You told me!" cried his cousin scornfully. "You only said what father and the doctor had told me before. Now, Buck, what were you going to say? When did you see it last?"

"Well, I saw it with you last, sir, when you relieved me on sentry."

"That's two or three nights ago," said Mark impatiently.

"Yes, sir; that must have been last Tuesday, and since then when you was on duty old Dan relieved you."

"Oh, don't go on prosing about that," cried Mark angrily. "I know as well as you can tell me. I want to find my gun."

"Well, sir, that's what I was going to tell you of, only you pretty well jumped down my throat."

"Well, tell me, then, and put me out of my misery. Where is it?"

"Oh, I don't know, sir."

"Then why did you begin talking as if you did?"

"Oh, come, Mr Mark, sir, don't get in a huff with a poor fellow. I warn't a-goin' to tell you where it was; I was a-goin' to tell you where it warn't."

"Oh," cried Mark, stamping his foot, "isn't it enough to aggravate a saint? These two are just alike, going on telling you a thing over and over again, especially if it is something you don't want to know. Look here, Buck; I have lost my gun."

"Yes, sir; you said so afore."

"And I know as well as you do where it is not."

"Exactly so, sir. You mean, in the arms rack as we made by driving them hard pegs into the courses of the wall."

"Yes," said Mark. "Well?"

"Well, sir, I was going to tell you—"

"What were you going to tell me?" raged out Mark.

"That when I went there this morning to get the ile bottle—"

"Yes, yes?" cried Mark.

"I run my eyes over the guns, and it struck me like as there was one short."

"The third one?" cried Mark eagerly.

"Yes, sir; that's right."

"Well, of course that was mine. Well, where is it?"

Buck took off his cap, scratched his head, and looked hard at Dean.

"Well, you needn't look at me," said the boy. "I haven't got it."

"No, sir, I can see that," said Buck, and he stared hard and questioningly at Dan, who looked back resentfully.

"Here, don't stare at me, messmate," cried the little sailor. "Think I've got it up my sleeve, or down one of the legs of my trowzes?"

"No, mate; you are such a little 'un that there wouldn't be room," said Buck thoughtfully.

"Right you are, mate; but you see I may grow a bit yet."

"Yes," said Buck, very slowly and thoughtfully, "and pigs may fly."

"Hullo!" cried Dan. "Pigs—pig—arn't likely, is it, as that little chap has took a fancy to it and sneaked it?"

"No," cried Mark indignantly. "The little fellow's as honest as the day."

"Yes, sir," said Buck dreamily, "but blacks is blacks, and whites is whites, and temptation sore long time he bore, till at last he may have given way."

"Oh, bosh!" cried Dean.

"No, sir," said Buck; "don't you say that. I've see'd that often, that little bow and arrow and spear chap looking longingly at that gun and kinder sorter was hupping of it as if it was a hidol as he'd give anything to grab."

"I don't believe he would," cried Mark. "If either of those two blacks would take anything, it would be far more likely to be Mak."

"Yes," said Dean, "but I wouldn't believe it of him. Why, we know for a fact that these blacks, who are something of the same breed, are awful thieves. But no; poor old. Mak is a very brave fellow, and now that he's beginning to talk a bit more English I'm sure he wouldn't rob us of a thing."

"Well, I don't know, Mr Dean, sir," put in Dan. "I wouldn't take upon me to say as he'd pinch a rifle, but it arn't safe to leave him anywhere near cold bones."

"Oh, food," said Mark; "that's nothing for a savage. But you have never known him dishonest over that."

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say dishonest, sir," said Dan, "but if you left a bit of one of them little stag things that we shoot and have after dinner cold for supper, he'd go and look for it again hung up in that pantry. It takes a lot of looking for; and then you don't find it, do you, mate?"

"No," said Buck, rather gruffly; "I do say that, mate. We have been disappointed three or four times and had to be contented with flapjack. He have got a twist, and no mistake. I have known him eat as much as me and Dan Mann put together, and then look hungry; but I suppose it is his natur' to. You don't think, then, gents, as it's likely that he's nobbled your rifle?"

"Well, I don't know," said Mark. "I hope not."

"So do I, sir," said Dan dreamily. "You see, it makes one feel uncomfortable about his 'bacco box and his knife. But oh, no, sir, I hope not," continued the sailor slowly. "It's true he's a bit too full of that jibber jabber of his as you calls language, but he's getting to talk English now, and since he's been what Mr Dean there calls more civilised I've begun to take to him a bit more as a mate. Oh, no, sir, he wouldn't collar your rifle; an' then as to his sneaking a bit of wittles sometimes, it arn't honest, I know, but he wouldn't take your gun, sir. Why, I put it to you; what good would it be to he? He could not eat that."

"No," said Dean, "but I have heard of savages getting hold of anything in the shape of a tube to turn into a pipe for smoking."

"Do they now, sir?" said Buck thoughtfully. "But of course he wouldn't want the stock, and it's a double gun. That'd be rather a 'spensive pipe, Dan, mate, for he'd have to have two bowls."

"Couldn't he stop up one barrel?"

"Here, I wish you two fellows would leave off chattering," cried Mark.

"Beg pardon, sir," said Buck, rather indignantly. "But it was Mr Dean who started that idea about the pipe."

"Oh, bother! Never mind; I want my rifle."

"That's right, sir; of course you do."

"And I am going to have it found."

"That's right, sir, too. Well, I hope you are satisfied, sir, that it was neither me nor Dan here as took it?"

"Of course I am."

"Then what about old Brown?"

"Oh, no!" cried the boys, in a breath.

"Look here, sir," said Buck, drawing himself up to his full height and seeming to swell out with some big idea; "it couldn't have been neither Peter Dance nor Bob Bacon, 'cause they have got guns to use, and they both tells us lots of times that a gun has been a sort of plaything to them ever since they was babbies."

"Of course," said Mark huffily. "There you go, again, telling us what we know."

Buck hit himself a sharp slap in the mouth as much as much as to say, "I've done"; and the little sailor grinned and said, "And then about old Mak and little Pig: you can't sarch them, because there's nothing to sarch."

"Ah!" cried Mark. "I had forgotten all about that. I know now."

"Hooroar!" said Dan. "He knows now! Found out where you have put it, sir?"

"No, Dan. What about that dark thing that we saw crawling through the clearing the other night, and which neither of us was sure about?"

The little sailor answered by bending his knees and then bringing his right hand down with a tremendous slap upon his right thigh.

"That's it, sir. You've got it. Nigger crawling up from outside come pickling and stealing. See that, messmate?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Well," said Dan, "it must have been some black beggar from outside come creeping up at night to see what he could smug."

"Yes, Dan," cried Mark, eagerly.

"Well, I'm blessed!" cried Buck. "And—and—and—" He looked first at one lad and then at the other, as he rummaged first with one hand and then with the other in his pockets, and then with both together, before turning savagely upon Dan and roaring out, "Here, who's got my knife?"

"Well, not me, messmate. Here's mine;" and laying hold of the short lanyard about his neck he hauled out his big jack knife from inside the band of his trousers. "You don't call that yourn, do you?"

"Na-ay!" growled Buck. "Wouldn't own a thing like that. Mine was made of the best bit of stuff that ever came out of Sheffield."

"Only a Brummagem handle, though," said Dan.

"Never mind about the handle," growled Buck. "I wouldn't have lost that knife for anything—almost as soon lost my head. You know what a good one it was, Mr Mark, sir. Why, you might have shaved yourself with it, sir, if you had waited till you was grown up."

"Here, none of your chaff, Buck. You can't joke easily. I know I have got no beard, but when it does come I hope it won't come carroty like somebody's."

"Carrotty, sir? Not it! Last time I see my mother it had growed while I had been away three years, and she said it made her feel proud, for it was real hauburn."

"Well, never mind about your beard, messmate," said Dan, in a deep, gruff voice. "Do you feel sure as you have lost the knife?"

"I feel sure that it's gone in the night, along of Mr Mark's rifle."

"What, out hunting together?" said Mark, laughing.

"Well, good companions," said Dean. "One shoots the game, and the other skins and cuts it up."

"I don't quite see what you mean, gentlemen," said Dan; "but it seems to me, Mr Mark, that you and me see the beggar that comes hanging about and that sneaked your gun and his knife."

"Yes," said Mark, "that's it; and I feel sure that if we come to look about we shall find lots of other things are gone."

"Yes, sir," said Dan, "no doubt about it, and we have got the right pig by the ear, Mr Mark. I don't mean our little Pig, but you know what I do mean; and now, I don't like to take too much upon myself, sir."

"Take an inch, Dan; take an ell. You being a sailor, take as many fathoms as you like, only find my gun."

"That's just what I'm going to try and do, sir, and old Buck's knife too, if I can; so if you will allow me, gentlemen, I'll just make a propogishum."

"Go ahead then, and be smart, before old Brown gets here. Yonder he comes."

"Well, it's just this way, gentlemen. I say, let's get our two niggers here, and don't let them think for a moment as we 'spects them, but drum it into their heads somehow as something's missing. Teach 'em same as you would a dog, and show them a rifle and a knife, and tell them to seek. I don't quite know how you are going to make them understand as it's a black who crawled up in the night, but I daresay you two clever gents will manage that."

"And what then?" cried the two boys, in a breath.

"What then, sir? Strikes me as them two, the little 'un and the big 'un, will turn theirselves into traps, and we shall wake up some morning to find that they have got the thief as they caught in the night."

"Well done, mate! I didn't think you had got it in you," growled Buck.

"Bravo!" cried the boys together. "Splendid!"

"Now then," said Mark, "the next thing will be to take the two blacks into our confidence. Hold hard; there's Brown."

Chapter Thirty Three.

The Lost Rifle.

The long, weary-looking fellow came up, looked sadly from one to the other, nodding to his companions shortly, and then, turning to the boys, "Very sorry, gentlemen," he said slowly; "your rifle, Mr Mark. Just heard from Sir James."

"Yes, it's a nuisance, Dunn. Haven't seen it, I suppose?"

"No, sir, no," replied the man, with a sigh. "Haven't stood it up against a rock or a tree—"

"There, there, stop that. We have gone all over it, and found out where it's gone."

"Found—out, sir?"

"Yes; we think some of the blacks have come in the night, crept in and stolen it."

"Ah!" ejaculated the man, almost animatedly.

"Hullo! Do you know anything about it?" cried Mark.

"My ponies—two nights—uneasy," said the man, very slowly.

"And you got up in the night to see if there were any beasts about?" cried Mark excitedly. "Oh, do go on! Make haste."

"Yes," continued Dunn, more deliberately than ever. "Coming back—dark—fancied I saw something crawling.—Jumped aside.—Like baboon."

"That was it, Brown, safe. Dan and I saw one too. Now, what's to be done?"

"Shoot," said the man laconically.

"Oh, we don't want to kill them."

"Small shot," said Brown softly.

"Pepper," said Dean.

Brown nodded.

"Well, we are not going to try that," cried Mark. "Here, you go and fetch the two blacks. You are quite good friends now."

Brown nodded, hurried off, and returned in a few minutes with the pair he had sought, who came up with their eyes hard at work gazing searchingly from one to the other and looking as if they expected to be called to account for some misdoing.

"They think you are going to bully them, Mark," whispered Dean. "Tell them it is all right."

Mark, who was seated upon an ancient block of stone that had fallen from the wall, sprang to his feet so suddenly that the pigmy took flight on the instant, and Mak was following him, when Mark sprang to him and caught him by the arm.

"What are you going to do, stupid?" he cried. "I wasn't going to hit you. It's all right. Sit down. Here—*pious—cooey!*" he cried.

"*Pig, tchig, tchig, tchig, tchig!*" cried Dean; and the dwarf turned to glance back as he ran.

"Tell him it's all right, Mak. We want to talk to you," said Mark. "There sit down, and he will come."

The big black hesitated a moment, and then slowly squatted.

"I say, Dean, a guilty conscience needs no accuser! Look at him in front. He's been having something since breakfast. Pig! Pig! Mak, call him."

The Ulaka looked doubtingly at the speaker, and then gave utterance to a low, soft call which made the pigmy cease running and stop as if in doubt. Mak called again, and the little fellow turned, to stand watching him, when Mak called once more and he came slowly back, Mark talking to him the while as if he were a little child that he wanted to encourage, and smiling as he held out his hand, in which after a little more hesitation and searching gazing in Mark's eyes, he laid his own.

What followed was for the main part in pantomime, first one and then another of the English party trying to make the Illaka understand what had happened and what was required of them, a good quarter of an hour being expended over this, with the black staring at them stolidly the whole time, till Mark gave up in disgust and disappointment.

"It's no use," he said. "They can't understand a word we have said, or make out one of our signs."

"Oh, I don't know, sir," said Buck.

"But he seems so stupid," cried Mark.

"That's his way, sir," said Dan. "He can do better than that. You a'n't seen so much of him as we have. What do you say, messmate Brown?"

"Not stupid, sir," said Brown drily; and he pointed to the pigmy, who had been crouching in the sand, nursing his bow, and slowly polishing the handle of his spear. "Pig Illaka," said the horse keeper; and he pointed at the little fellow, who looked up at him quickly and then began to polish his spear handle more energetically with a handful of very fine sand.

Mak uttered a low grunt, sprang up with flashing eyes, looked sharply round at the party, and then as if quite transformed, he sprang at the dwarf and gave him a quick light flip upon the shoulder with his open hand.

"I thought so, gentlemen. He's been sucking it in all along. Now then, you shall see what you shall see," said Buck.

The minute before the pigmy had squatted in front of them deliberately polishing his spear handle, but as if suddenly inspired by his big companion's burst of energy, he sprang up, strung his bow, placed the nock of an arrow upon the twisted sinew which held his weapon in a state of tension, and then bending forward he stood watching the movements of Mak, who stuck his spear into the earth, and then after fixing the pigmy with a fierce look, began to crawl slowly and cautiously in and out amongst the bushes as if trying to steal a march upon the camp.

He kept this up till he was quite hidden from the eyes of those who watched his movements, and then suddenly burst into sight again, maintaining his body bent nearly double as if intending to keep himself hidden from anyone at the camp, and ran swiftly back, to stop short, almost touching the two boys.

"Well," said Dean softly, "I don't see much in this."

"Wait a bit," whispered his cousin. "I think I do. There! See?"

And now it was as if the white party were non-existent and Mak were playing his part solely for the pigmy's amusement, for he stepped lightly up to him as if he were carrying something in his hands, which he was holding out for him to see. Then making believe to thump one end of it down and holding it with one hand, he began to dance round it, grinning with delight, stooping down from time to time to kiss it, and hug it to his breast, and ending by making belief to load it. Then dropping on one knee, he drew trigger, uttered a sharp ejaculation to simulate a report, and then crouching behind a block of stone he went through the loading movements again, advanced, retreated, advanced again, shading his eyes with one hand, and then dropped flat on his chest and crawled out of sight behind a heap of stones.

"Well, has he done?" said Dean, in a whisper.

Mark held up his hand, and directly after the black reappeared from quite another direction, raising himself slowly from behind another block of stone, resting an imaginary rifle upon the top, before taking aim again and firing, dropping out of sight, but only to reappear once more and repeat his tactics, after which he sprang up, waving the fancied weapon and went through what was meant for a dance of triumph over the death of an enemy.

This ended as it were one part of his performance, but it was only to be followed directly after by the careful handling and petting of the rifle, which he bore now in his arms to where the pigmy was still watching his every movement and looking more excited than the big black, as he leaned forward, his face full of animation and his eyes sparkling, while Mak seemed to be expatiating in silence upon all the merits of the wonderful weapon that he had secured.

He pointed here and pointed there, and then seemed to be laying it upon a stone and drawing back to admire it, stepping backward for some distance, approaching it again, patting it from end to end, and then going back to the pigmy, to touch him on the back and point at the top of the stone.

This done, he took hold of his little black companion's spear, stuck it up in the sand, smiling at it with contempt, and then toppled it over with a kick, before snatching the pigmy's bow and arrow, pointing at them with his face screwed up in token of disgust, before throwing these with similar expressions of contempt to that with which he had



"SPRANG UP AND WENT THROUGH
A DANCE OF TRIUMPH."

treated the spear, some little distance away upon the ground.

Then he paused to rest his cheek upon his left hand and stood gazing with a ridiculous look of sublime satisfaction at the top of the stone with its supposititious rifle, towards which he advanced upon the tips of his toes, pretended to lift it off, and bore it once more to the pigmy, laid it before him and knelt down to begin talking to him in a low, smothered tone.

It was evident that the difference of their dialect was sufficient to make the pigmy reply from time to time with eager questions, which made his companion repeat himself with some show of annoyance, frowning angrily, till the pigmy nodded his head quickly, showing that he grasped his companion's meaning.

This lasted pretty well ten minutes, after which the pigmy picked up his weapons, Mak repossessed himself of his spear, and then turning to those who had been intently watching him all through, he gave them a heavy nod and then marched off without a word.

"Well, ought we to clap our hands?" said Mark.

"No, don't," said Dean. "Look there; Pig's going off too;" for the little fellow took a couple of steps towards him, nodded his head, and then followed Mak.

"I say, all of you, what does this mean—that Mak has been trying to show little Pig that the rifle has been stolen, and that he is going to try and find it and get it back?" said Mark.

"I don't know enough about these people to say, sir," replied Buck. "Sometimes I seemed to make out that that was what it meant; at other times it looked as if he was only making a fool of himself, just capering about like a dancing doll in a show. What do you say, Dan?"

"Same as you do, messmate. I just got a bit here and there."

"That's right," said Brown, with one of his usual sighs. "He has been telling Pig, as you call him, that a rifle has been stolen, and that they have got to get it back."

"Do you feel sure he means that?" asked Mark.

"Quite," said Brown confidently, "and we shan't see them again till they have got it."

"Then you think they will get it?"

Brown shook his head, and was silent for a few moments.

"If they get it we shall see them again; if they don't, we shan't."

"Ashamed to show their faces eh, messmate?" asked Dan.

"No—the others too much for them."

"Then we may be sending them to their death. Here, I don't like this, Dean. I am sure father would rather that we lost the rifle. Here, let's call them back. Come on!"

Chapter Thirty Four.

A Terrible Slip.

The two boys hurried off in the direction taken by the blacks, hastening through the ruins in the full expectation of coming upon them at any moment, till the mazy wilderness of stones and trees closed in and farther progress was checked.

"We can't have passed them, can we?" asked Mark.

"No; impossible."

"Well, then, where are they?"

For answer Dean gave a shout, and another and another, the two boys standing awestricken as they listened to the strange, hollow echoes that multiplied and magnified the hail till it slowly died out in whispers. But there was no reply.

"I say, they must have managed to top this wall in some way, or known of some passage by which they could get outside into the further ruins."

"I don't know," said Dean, in a whisper. "I say, this place seems to grow more strange and weird the more you wander about it. Doesn't it to you?"

"Yes, sometimes—horribly creepy, only it is stupid to think so, but I can't help feeling as if we are surrounded by things that are watching us."

"What do you mean? Those dog monkey brutes—the baboons?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Mark hurriedly. "Let's get back. I know it's stupid, but one knows that there must have been thousands upon thousands of people living here, no one can tell how long back, and I don't like it."

"I say," said Dean, and as he spoke he gave an uneasy glance round, "isn't that being superstitious?"

"I don't know," replied his cousin. "Perhaps it is; but I can't help feeling a bit queer. When we get in these dark parts where the sun doesn't shine and it's all so silent till you speak—there, hark at that! We are just at the mouth of that great passage where the walls, quite forty feet high, are close together and go winding away—and there, you can hear that; it's just as if something was taking up what I said and whispering."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Dean aloud, and then turning sharply he caught excitedly at his cousin's arm, gripping it almost painfully, and dragged at him to hurry him away. "Oh, I say," he whispered, for his laugh had turned into an almost unearthly burst of harsh chuckles and cries which went literally rattling away down the dark passage nearly choked with thick growth and only dimly-seen. "Oh, do come away, Mark! This isn't the passage we came to that day with uncle and the doctor. There must be something watching us—something no canny, as the Scotch people call it. Quick, let's get away."

"I can't," said Mark. "I feel as if I couldn't stir."

"Why? Is something seeming to hold you?"

"No," replied Mark; "but I do feel rather shuddery all down my back, and—I know it's nervousness and imagination—that's why I feel I can't go away. It is all nonsense, I tell you, and I mean to come here another time with Buck and Dan, and we will see what they think of it."

"That will all depend on how we look to them," said Dean.

"Exactly," said his cousin, "and that means that we mustn't behave like a pair of shivering girls."

"And then?" asked Dean.

"And then—go right straight in and along that narrow passage wherever it leads. I don't suppose we shall find any ghosts of the old people. I say, how easy it is to frighten yourself in a place like this!"

"Oh, I don't know. It is very creepy."

"Seems to be," said Mark—very emphatic over the "Seems."

"But it will be dangerous as well as horrid to go along a place like this."

"Why?"

"There may be serpents, or baboons, or no one knows what fierce animals may make it their lair. Then too there may be holes and cracks."

"Course there may be," said Mark, "but we shouldn't be such a pair of noodles as to come here without a lantern or two."

"And plenty of candles," said Dean.

"Of course. There, it is very evident that those two have given us the slip. Let's give them one more shout, and then get back."

"Oh, never mind the shout," said Dean hurriedly. "We will go back at once. I wouldn't be overtaken here when the sun goes down, and lose my way, for I don't know what."

"Why?" said Mark, half mockingly.

"Because—because," replied his cousin, with something like a shiver, "uncle and the doctor would be so uneasy."

Mark gave his companion an arch look, and there was a faint smile upon his countenance as his eyes seemed to say—"Oh, Dean, what a humbug you are!"

The boy read it as meaning this, and he said hastily, "Don't laugh at me, old fellow. Hope I am not going to have a touch of fever, but I do feel very queer."

"Let's get back, then, old chap," said Mark, clapping his companion on the shoulder. "But don't you fancy that. It's damp and cold here, and no wonder. Come along. I think I can find my way back; don't you?"

"Don't know. I am not at all sure. It must be getting late, and in here it will be as dark as pitch as soon as the sun's down. I say, don't you think we were rather foolish to come so far?"

"Well, yes, it was rather stupid, but one was led on by a feeling of excitement. For it would be horrible if we sent those two poor fellows to where they may get into trouble and never come back."

It was about an hour later that, after forcing their way through the almost impenetrable bushes, climbing over stones and round them, and losing themselves again and again in what had become, as it seemed to them, more and more a horrible maze, Dean made a snatch at his cousin's arm as he slipped and fell, dragging Mark, till the lad checked his descent by a desperate snatch at the trunk of a gnarled climber.

"Oh, I say," cried Mark, "don't say you are hurt!"

A low, half stifled gasp or two came from some distance down.

"Dean, old fellow! Here, I say, speak! Where are you?"

"Down here somewhere.—Ugh! It is black and cold."

"Well, climb up again. I am reaching down and holding out my hand. Catch hold."

"I can't reach," came back, in a husky voice, "and I am afraid."

"Don't say afraid!" cried Mark angrily. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"I have hurt my ankle, Mark, and it gives way under me. Oh, why did we come here!"

"Don't talk like that. Here, I'll get back out of this and go and fetch father and the doctor and the others, and we will carry you back."

"No, no, Mark; I am sick and faint. Don't—pray don't go and leave me. I am afraid I am a horrible coward, but if you leave me alone here in this dreadful place, and like this, I don't think I could bear it."

"Oh, nonsense! You are only in a sort of split in the rocks. Be a man. I must go for help; it's no use to shout."

"No, no," said Dean, in a hoarse whisper; "don't—pray don't shout."

"Well, I won't! but I must go and leave you for a bit."

"I can't bear it. You shan't go and leave me! There, I think my ankle's better now, and it doesn't seem so dark. You can't be above twenty feet above me; and that's nothing, is it?"

"No, nothing at all," replied Mark hoarsely.

"Then I am going to climb up."

"Yes, be careful, and—"

"Oh, Mark! Mark!"

His cousin's cry seemed to hiss strangely past the lad's ears. Then there was a moment or two's silence and a horrible splash, followed by the washing of water against the sides of the black chasm down which Mark was straining his eyes to gaze, and then whisper after whisper, soft and strange, until they died away.

Chapter Thirty Five.

Striking a damp Match.

Mark Roche turned cold—not the cold of contact with ice, but what may be termed in contradistinction to muscular cold, a mental freezing of the nerves with horror. For how long a space of time he could not afterwards have told, he stood bending over what he felt must be some horrible depth down which his cousin had fallen, to be plunged into deep water at the bottom. Every faculty was chained save that of hearing as he listened, waiting for some fresh disturbance of the depths below by Dean rising to the surface to begin struggling for life.

And all this time he could not cry out for help. It seemed to him as if he could not have breathed for the icy hand that was clutching him at the throat.

There were moments when he could not even think, when it seemed to be unreal, a nightmare-like dream of suffering when he had been called upon to bear the horror of knowing that his cousin had died a horrible death, while he could not even feel that it was his duty to climb down somewhere into the darkness where he might be able to extend to the poor fellow a saving hand as he rose.

But all was still; the last faint whisperings of the water against the rocky sides had died out. Not a sound arose. He could not even hear his own breath. And then all at once he uttered a gasp as he expired the breath he had held, and *thud, thud, thud, thud*, he felt his heart leap the pulsations keeping on now at a tremendous rate as they beat against his quivering breast.

He might have been dead during the moments that had passed. Now he was wildly alive, for, as if by the magic touch of a magician's wand, he had been brought back to himself, as in a slow, awestricken whisper Dean uttered the words, from somewhere apparently close below, "Mark! Did you hear that?"

Once more the lad could not reply, and Dean's voice rose again, loudly and wildly agitated now.

"Mark! Are you there? Did you hear that?"

"Yes, yes," gasped the boy. "Oh, Dean, old fellow, I thought it was you that had gone down!"

"No; but wasn't it an escape? I began to climb, and a big stone upon which I had trusted myself went down with that horrible splash; but I kept hold of the side, and I am all right yet. But oh, how you frightened me! I began to think, the same as you did, that it was you who had fallen, in spite of knowing that it was the stone. But being here in the darkness makes one so nervous."

"Yes," panted Mark, who was pressing his hands to his breast.

"But I say, what's the matter with you? Your voice sounds so queer!"

"Does it? I shall be better directly. Fancying you had fallen set my heart off racing—a sort of palpitation; but it's calming down now. Can you hold on? Are you safe?"

"Well, I don't feel so bad. That horrible frightened feeling has gone off, and I think I can hold on or begin to climb again now."

"No, no; don't try yet," cried Mark.

"All right; but what are you going to do?"

"Come down to you as soon as I can breathe more easily. I am all of a quiver, and just as if I had been running a race."

"All right, then, wait; but it's of no use for you to try to get down. What good could you do?"

"I don't know yet," replied Mark. "All I know is that I can't leave you like this. I must come and help you."

"No, you mustn't," said Dean. "You would only be in the way, and I am getting more and more all right. I felt just like a little child in the dark for the time; but that nasty sensation has all gone now. Why, Mark, old man, you seem to be worse than I was."

"I am," said Mark emphatically.

"You couldn't be, old fellow. I should be quite ashamed of it, only I couldn't help it a bit. It was very stupid, but I had got a sort of idea that I had slipped down into a place full of bogeys, and I daren't let you shout again for fear that it would be telling all those—what's his names—that made the echoes where I was. Ugh! It was horrid! But the queer part of it is that though I must be in a very awkward place, with water down below, I don't seem to mind; but I don't want to get wet. It would be rather awkward if I went down, though; but I don't think it's far, and it would be better to fall into water than on to stones. One would come to the surface again directly and get hold of the walls somewhere."

"But it would be very horrid," said Mark hoarsely.

"Oh, when you come to think of it," said Dean coolly, "that's only fancy. Water's water, and it's only because it's dark that it seems so horrid; for it is only seems, you know, because if the sun were shining right down here we should think nothing of it."

"M-m-m-no," said Mark dubiously. Then speaking more firmly, "Look here, Dean."

"Can't; it's all black," replied the lad coolly.

"Well, you know what I mean. Can you hold on?"

"Oh, yes; I am standing upright on a big piece of stone that sticks out of the side."

"Yes. Go on."

"I am," said Dean quite calmly. "But wait a minute; I want to see—no, no, I mean find out—how far it is to the water."

"What are you going to do?"

"Drop this piece of stone in that I am touching. It is quite loose."

"No, no; don't!" cried Mark excitedly. "It will raise up all those horrible echoes again."

"Well, let it. Who's afraid?"

Plosh!

"There!" cried Dean. "Why, I don't believe it's six feet below where I'm standing. What a queer whispering echo it does make, though. I wonder whether there is any kind of fish down here. Eels or newts, perhaps. Now then, what's to be done next?"

Mark was silent for a few moments, and then beginning to be more imbued with his cousin's coolness and matter-of-fact way of treating his position, he exclaimed, "I can't think as clearly as you do, Dean. I want to see what's best, and all that I can come to is that I must go for help. If you dare hold on there till I come back with the others, and ropes or halters—"

"Dare?" cried Dean. "There's no *dare* about it. I must. But I say, what a pair of guffins we are!"

"Oh, don't talk like that," said Mark. "It is very brave and good of you, but I know it is only done to try to cheer me up. I wish I wasn't such a coward, Dean."

"I don't," said Dean, with quite a laugh. "You are just the sort of coward I like—sticking to your comrade like this. Think I want you to be one of those brave fellows who would run away, calling murder? But I say, arn't we a pair of guffins?"

"Oh, don't talk like that! What do you mean?"

"Well, here we are in the dark."

"Yes; we had no business to come. We ought to have known that we might be lost here after sundown, and have brought a lantern."

"Pooh! Who was going to expect that Pig and Mak were going to dodge us like they did? But all the same we did show some gumption, only we let ourselves get our heads full of fancies; and here have we been standing in the dark all this time with each a box of matches in his pocket."

"Oh!" ejaculated Mark.

"You get yours," continued Dean. "I am all right now, and I don't want to risk slithering off into the cold wet water."

Scratch!

There was a faint line of phosphorescence giving its pallid gleam for a few moments; then the rattle as of matches being moved about in a tin box, another scratch, a line of light, and then a very faint dull spark seemed to descend and become extinct in the water beneath.

"Try again," said Dean.

Scratch!

The same line of light, and the phosphorescent tip of the match going down again to expire in the water.

"Hope you have got plenty of matches," said Dean.

"Yes, plenty," cried Mark, making the rattle in the box again.

"You must have got them wet somehow."

"No, no," cried Mark impatiently. "It is my fingers that are so moist with perspiration."

"What a bother! I'd have a try, but my hands are regularly wet. The stones down here are dripping and oozing."

"Don't you stir," cried Mark. "I'll try again, and give my fingers a good rub first on my sleeve."

"Yes, do; and mind you don't touch the round tip of the match."

"I'm afraid I must have done so to all of them."

"Afraid be hanged!" said Dean impetuously. "What is there to be afraid of? Now, don't hurry. I'm getting as cool as a dessert ice; and you are getting better, arn't you?"

"Ye-es."

"Well, it doesn't sound like it. You don't seem to be yourself, old chap. You know I always look up to you as being more plucky than I am. Here we are getting better every minute, and there is nothing to hurry about. They won't begin the supper till we get back. Leave the matches alone for a minute or two and give a good hail. They must be looking for us."

"No, no; I can't shout now."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. There, I must strike another match."

"No, you mustn't. Give a good hail."

"I can't, I tell you."

"Well, I can," cried Dean. "I don't feel a bit frightened of bogeys now."

"Ahoy-y-y-y-y!" he shouted, and there was a hollow echoing noise, but nothing approaching what they had heard before.

Then they listened till the reverberations died out; but there was no hopeful sound to cheer them, and with a low despairing sigh which he tried in vain to suppress, Mark drew another carefully selected match across the side of the box. This time there was a flash, the head of the tiny wax taper blazed out, illumined the square hole into which Dean had slipped, and revealed him about a dozen feet below where his cousin was holding the match.

"Quick!" cried Dean. "Get another out and light it before you burn your fingers. Well done—that's the way! Hold it more over. I want to reconnoitre, as the soldiers say."

"Be careful!" panted Mark. "Mind you don't slip."

"Trust me," said Dean. "No, no, don't light another. It will only be waste, because I have seen it all."

"I had better light another match," cried Mark hoarsely.

"No, you hadn't. Chuck that down; you are burning your fingers."

The still burning end of the tiny taper lit up the sides of the square hole as it descended to the surface of the water and was extinguished with a faint *spet*.

"Now then," cried Dean, "I have got it all fixed at the back of my eyes like what old Buck calls a fortygraff, and just where I am standing it is all straight up and down, but a little way to the left there's a regular set of holes just as if stones had been left out. Why, it's as easy as kissing your hand. This must have been one of the old temple wells, and these holes must have been left like steps for the old people to come down and clip their water."

"Oh, do take care!" cried Mark.

"Won't I just! I shall be all right. I say, old chap, what a lark!"

"Lark!" cried Mark angrily. "What do you mean by that?"

"Why, it seems to me quite comic to think that we two fellows, who ought to have known better, should have made such a hullabaloo about nothing at all. Oh, I say, isn't it lucky that nobody else was here! I wouldn't—"

"Ah!" gasped Mark, as there was a faint rattling of bits of stone, and *plish, plash, plosh*, three fragments dropped into the water.

"All right, sonny," said Dean, who had shifted his position and begun to climb. "I am *en route*; no tree roots here, though, but plenty of stony holes. Clear the course, for up I come!"

The boy spoke cheerily enough, but his words were accompanied by a faint panting as if he were making great exertion.

"I say, though, Mark," he went on, "how about your brave British boy? How about your manly pluck? Pretty pair we have been! All right, old man; I didn't slip. It was a stone. Ah!" ejaculated the boy, with a cry of pain.

"Oh, Dean!"

"Don't! It's all right, I tell you. Do you want to frighten me off?"

"No, no, no. But you cried out."

"Enough to make me. I must have twisted my ankle a bit, and it gave me such a stab just then. All right—better. Up I come. What was I talking about? Oh, I know. But I say, Mark, don't you feel like a gallant young Briton, ready to face any danger?"

"No, I don't," cried Mark angrily. "I feel like a miserable coward;" and he uttered a hysterical sob as he passed his wet hand over his dripping brow.

"Do you?" said Dean coolly. "Well, that's about what's the matter with me; only this is rather hard work, and I am too busy to squirm. Brave British boys! Ha, ha! Well, I suppose every chap feels a bit soft sometimes. I say, say something."

"Oh, take care, old chap!"

"Well, I am doing that. Say something else."

"I can't!" groaned Mark.

"That's enough," cried Dean excitedly. "I can't see, but I can hear that my head must be a bit out of this hole, and—Quick! Hand!"

The last two words were ejaculated wildly, and Mark responded by making a snatch in the direction he felt that his cousin must be, and caught him fast, throwing himself backward. There was a rush and the fall of a heavy stone with a tremendous splash; then no sound but a hoarse breathing from two chests.

"Hah!" ejaculated Dean. "That last stone must have grown mouldy, and gave way; but it's all right. Now for a rest. Shouldn't like to do that again."

Then there was profound silence for the space of a few minutes as the two lads knelt there clinging to each other in the profound darkness, thinking of many things; and the thoughts of both had the same trend, the grips of their hands involuntarily growing tighter the while.

How long they knelt there, communing, giving their better feelings full sway, neither knew, but at last the silence was broken by Mark whispering, "Dean, old fellow; what an escape!"

"Don't, don't!" was whispered back. "Don't speak to me, or I shall break down."

"Ah!" sighed Mark, and there was silence again, broken this time by Dean.

"I can't help it, Mark, old fellow. I have been trying so hard; but I must be a terrible coward. Tell me, oh, do tell me! Am I safe?"

The answer came faintly from apparently some distance away, in the shape of a sailor's, "Ahoy-y-y-y!"

"Yes," cried Mark excitedly. "That's old Dan's voice. They are looking for us. Ahoy-y-y-y!" he shouted, with his voice sounding strangely cracked and wild.

Quite a minute elapsed before they heard another hail, and by this time the two boys had pulled themselves together a bit, enough to respond with double the vigour of before, while ere many minutes had passed a steady interchange of calls made the task of the searchers so easy that the gleam of a lantern appeared, to be followed by the report of a gun, and this time there was a perfect volley of the strange echoes.

"Hear that?" cried Dean, in his natural voice.

"Hear it? Yes?"

Dean uttered a gasp as if he were swallowing something that was hard, and then with a laugh he said, "Mark, old chap, isn't it queer! That seems to be the jolliest sound I ever heard in my life."

"Yes," said Mark coolly; "but we have got a long walk before us, and no end of stones to climb, and I expect we shall get into a precious row."

"Never mind the row, old fellow. I wonder what they've got for supper!"

Chapter Thirty Six.

The Pigmy's Dive.

The party were seated in their shelter close under the highest wall of the ancient ruins, well screened from the ardent rays of the tropic sun, which had not yet risen sufficiently high to interfere with their comfort, and for about the third time the boys were giving their account of the previous evening's adventure, with nothing more visible to show than a few scratches from the stones and the traces of pricks from the many thorns, when the doctor said, as if he were delivering a lecture, and frowning severely the while, "Care, care, care. If ever our eyes should be called upon to carefully discriminate where we are going, there never can be such need for discrimination as here."

"You are right, doctor," said Sir James. "You must be careful, boys; eh, doctor?"

"Yes," said the latter. "You see, we have done nothing yet to clear away the tangle of growth that covers the stones and the remains of old buildings. I fully believe that this place is honey-combed with passages and cell-like remains, and that there may be dozens of old wells and other reservoirs of water. There is the little river yonder, of course, but if, as I fully believe, this place for miles round was all roughly and strongly fortified, it seems quite probable that the inhabitants, who were gold-seekers, were in the course of generations besieged by the many enemies who coveted their wealth and resented the coming of strangers to settle in their land. If this were the case, in this heated district water would have been most valuable, and the approaches to the river were doubtless guarded by the enemy. Thinking of all this, one sees good reason for the existence of such a well-like place as you encountered yesterday."

"Yes," said Sir James, "and I quite agree with you, doctor, that if we could find them where they are buried by the old buildings that have crumbled in, and overgrown by bushes and creepers, there are scores of such places."

"Well," said the doctor, "one would be sufficient for our supply of water, but we must, if possible, find out as many as we can for our own safety."

"So as not to fall down any of them?" said Mark. "Dean and I don't want another such adventure as we had last night."

"No," said his father; "it might be very serious. Let it be a lesson to you, boys."

"It was, father," said Mark, and he gave his cousin a meaning look, which was returned, the latter saying to himself, "It takes some of the conceit out of you, old fellow."

The conversation then turned upon the disappearance of the two blacks, and Dunn's ominous words as to the possibility of their non-return.

"I hope he is not right," said the doctor, shaking his head, "but I am afraid he is. From your description, boys, it is quite evident that the one made the other fully understand about the missing rifle."

"Oh, but I don't want to think, sir, that those two poor fellows are going to get themselves killed in trying to bring it back."

"Neither do I, my boy," said Sir James, "and pretty well surrounded as we are by these people, it is rather a lesson to us, for the doctor and I have been talking about it that we can't afford to lose two such useful guides and friends."

"Oh, we shan't lose them, uncle," said Dean cheerily. "They will come trotting in some day—I mean Pig will, so as to keep up with Mak's long strides."

"Well, I hope so," said Sir James, "and I hope too that the little feud between us and our visitors will come to an end. What do you think, doctor?"

"I cannot commit myself, sir, to giving any judgment upon the matter, but I hope that our display of firmness, and the possession of weapons that we know how to use, may keep them at a distance."

"I hope so," said Sir James, "but there will be no relaxing of our watchfulness, and it will be very hard upon us after a hard day's work over our researches, this taking it in turns to guard against visitors in search of what they can annex."

"Nocturnal burglars," said Dean.

"Oh, we shall get used to it, father. But what are we going to do to-day?"

"Ask the doctor," said Sir James. "I give myself up entirely to his guidance. Someone will have to stay in camp, of course, on guard, and ready to fire or whistle and give notice of the approach of any of the blacks. What do you propose, doctor?"

"Taking two men with us to cut and slash away the growth at the first place that we think worthy of investigation; and the sooner we are off the better, before the sun gets too much power."

"There's plenty of shade," said Mark.

"Yes, my boy, but the trees and these towering walls cut off what breeze there is, and I am afraid that we shall find the heat sometimes too great to bear."

But in the excitement and labour of the next few days the heat was forgotten, and the interest of the discovery amongst the old ruins was quite sufficient to keep all on the *qui vive* for any fresh object upon which they might stumble.

They had talked about the two blacks, of whom they had seen nothing since they had plunged in amongst the ruins of what seemed to have been the huge fortified temple, and in spite of the two lads devoting a good deal of time to discovering some opening through the old walls by which they might have reached the open country, their efforts were quite without success. It was certainly possible that they might have helped one another to reach the top of the lowest stretch of wall, and lowered one another down the other side, but Mark argued that they would not have done this. There must be some secret opening or slit through which they could have squeezed, one well known to them.

"I feel that if we keep on searching," he said, "we shall find it sooner or later."

This was said in the hearing of Buck Denham, who suddenly exclaimed, "But look here, gentlemen; you don't think, do you—" He stopped short, and the boys waited for nearly a minute, before Mark burst out with, "Yes, we do, Buck—lots."

"Yes, I suppose so, sir," said the man, rather sulkily.

"Well, go on. What were you going to say?"

"Only that Mr Dean here slipped down that hole."

"Well, we know that," said Dean shortly. "You needn't bring that up."

"No," cried Mark. "Why did you?"

"Didn't mean any harm, sir. I was only going to say that if you two gents met with an accident like that, mightn't them two niggers have had one too?"

"Ay, ay, messmate," growled Dan, "and being blacks not have the pluck and patience of our two young gentlemen here as helped theirselves and got out."

"Pluck and patience!" thought Mark, as he stole a glance at his cousin.

"Patience and pluck!" said Dean to himself, as he met his cousin's eye.

"Why, Buck," cried Mark, "you have regularly spoilt my day."

"Me, sir?" said the big fellow wonderingly. "Not spoilt yourn too, Mr Dean?"

"Yes, you have," said the lad addressed. "You have set me thinking that the poor fellows have tumbled down somewhere and been drowned, or else are regularly trapped in some deep cellar-like passage underground, where they have lost their way."

"Well, that means, gentlemen, that what we ought to do is to go for a big hunt in and out amongst the ruins till we find them, or something else."

"Yes," said Dan, "something else; and that would be like killing two birds with one stone."

"Come on, then," cried Mark, "only this time we will take two ropes and a lantern, and we will go at once. Look here, Dean, we will start from where we saw them disappear amongst the bushes. Shall we take our guns?"

"I would, gentlemen," said Buck. "You see, you never know what you are coming against."

"No; but they are a bother to carry."

"Oh, we will carry them, sir—sling 'em."

"There, we needn't all go. Run and fetch what we want, you two, and we had better take a canteen or two of water and something to eat, in case we lose ourselves. But no, we had better all go together, Dean, and rig up, or we shall be sure to find we have left something behind that we ought to have taken."

"Especially matches," said Dean.

They were about half way to the opening in front of their shed, known generally as the camp, when Dean suddenly uttered an ejaculation.

"What is it?" cried his cousin.

"The blacks."

"Ah! Where are father and the doctor?" cried Mark excitedly. "And we are wandering about here without arms."

"I did not mean the savage blacks," cried Dean.

"Why, you don't mean—"

"Yes, I do. Hooray! There they are, along with Dunn and the ponies—an old croaker, to make believe that they might never come back!"

Just then Dunn pointed in their direction, and the two blacks turned and caught sight of them, to begin marching slowly forward, Mak shouldering his spear and stepping out with quite a military stride, while the pigmy strutted along with an assumption of braggart conceit that was amusing in the extreme.

"Well," cried Mark, as they met, "what luck? You haven't found the rifle?"

"Yes. Find 'em."

"Where?"

"Stolen. Nigger."

"But where was it?" cried the boys together.

Mak pointed to the pigmy, who nodded and laughed, and by degrees the little party managed to elicit from their two scouts that ever since they started they had been in hiding near the ruins, waiting and watching in the belief that sooner or later whoever had stolen the rifle would come again for further plunder.

"But you have been away for days," said Dean. "Have you been hunting too, so as to get something to eat?"

This was rather a long speech for Mak, to whom it was addressed, to fully comprehend, but when it had been repeated to him simplified as far as possible by Mark and the two men, the black nodded cheerfully and explained that he had waited every night till they were quite fast asleep, and then the pigmy had crept up like a dog or a

baboon to help himself to what they wanted, and then stolen away again to watch.

"But he couldn't have done that," cried Mark; "certainly not when I was on guard. It must have been your turn, Dean, and you went to sleep."

"That I declare I didn't!" cried the accused, and the two boys now gazed severely at their men, who looked at one another, as if feeling guilty, "I swear I didn't, messmate. I couldn't have slept for thinking that some of the niggers would come stealing, and steal my life," grunted Dan.

"Same here," growled Buck.

A rough cross-examination ensued—a very hard one too, for Mak nodded his replies to fit his misunderstanding; but at last the investigators felt convinced that they were only listening to the truth, and that, thanks to his size, activity, and possible resemblance to some animal, the pigmy had had no difficulty about stealing into the camp for supplies.

"That's right enough, gentlemen. I believe the little beggar could tickle you on one side and make you turn over, thinking it was a fly, while he helped himself on the other and went off again like a monkey."

During the latter part of the examination Mark's father and the doctor joined them, full of satisfaction that their forebodings were false, and glad to welcome the friendly blacks again. They too learned that Mak and the pigmy had kept up their watch till the last night, when they had come upon two of the Illakas stealing into the camp. But one of them got away, and the manner of his escape was explained in pantomime by Mak, who made his little companion show how it occurred; and this, it seemed, was by his being pursued right up to the top of one of the further walls and then right along it in the darkness till he could get no further and had to jump, the Pig making it all clear as daylight, to use Buck's words, for he took them to the place, and while they stood below watching, the little fellow mounted to the top, then ran right along and dived right off.

"Good heavens!" cried the doctor. "The poor fellow must be killed!"

"Yes," said Mark's father, and he involuntarily took out his handkerchief to wipe his moist hands.

"Here, quick!" said the doctor. "He must be lying somewhere below there;" and he made for the imagined spot close by, followed by the rest, evidently to Mak's delight, for he began to grin hugely and raised up suspicion in the boys that their sympathy was being wasted, for all at once Pig hopped back on to the top of the wall, baboon fashion, to perch there like one of the hideous little beasts, none the worse for his leap down into the tree top that he had selected.

"Confound the fellow!" muttered the doctor. "He gave me quite a scare! But look here. You, Dunn, I don't understand. Make them tell us what became of the other."

Dunn turned to Mak and spoke a word or two to him in his own language, when the black stared at him stolidly and then turned away.

"What does that mean?" said Mark. "Wouldn't he tell you?"

"No," replied Dunn sadly; and he gave the boy a very meaning look.

"Why, you don't mean to say—that—"

"Yes; don't bother him, or he may go off. Afraid. The boss mightn't like it."

"Not like it?"

"No. Saw him cleaning his spear."

Glances were exchanged, and the looks seemed in silent language to tell the tragic story that either Mak or his little companion had speared and afterwards buried the enemy they had overcome.

"I don't like this, doctor," said Sir James. "It's tragedy. What can we do?"

"Nothing," said the doctor gravely.

"But these men—for I suppose we must call that little savage a man, though he looks a child—"

"The big herculean black is no bigger in intellect. If they have killed a brother savage I cannot feel that our consciences are to blame. The men were here to rob, and if we had caught them in the act I honestly believe that it might have cost us our lives."

"Probably," said Sir James; "but we must make them understand our utter abhorrence of the deed, and threaten punishment for the act."

"No, Sir James. Remember the old saying, Example is better than Precept. I feel sure that if we interfere with them with any stringency of action they will forsake us at once."

"Well, boys," said Sir James, "I would rather give up the expedition at once and make our way back, than have such horrors as this occurring. Here, what does this mean?" he continued, for Mak came forward with his little companion, both looking joyous and jubilant, Mak talking away and putting in a word of English now and then—words which constituted "come," "show," and "gun."

"Oh, that's plain enough, father," cried Mark. "They have got the gun."

The little party followed the two blacks at once, and to their great surprise they were led into the temple square and across it till they were near to the big wall. Then both the doctor and Sir James stopped short.

"This is too horrible," said Sir James angrily. "Come back, boys. They want to show us where they buried that unfortunate prowler."

"I am glad of that," whispered Dean. "What horrible wretches these blacks are!"

"Ugh! Yes," whispered back Mark, with a shudder. "Come along. I shall begin to hate myself for having been so friendly with them."

The two blacks stood looking at one another in amazement, as they saw the others moving away. But directly after Mak literally bounded before them and began waving his hands as if trying to drive back a flock of sheep.

"No go away!" he shouted. "No go. Gun! Gun! Gun!" And he pointed to the loose heap of sand and stones that had been piled over the old burial place.

"What's that?" said the doctor. "Gun?"

"Gun! Gun! Gun!" shouted Mak excitedly, and the little pigmy bounded on before them to the heap and began signing to them, pointing down the while.

"Doctor! Uncle!" cried Dean. "I believe they mean that the gun is buried there."

"Gun! Gun! Gun!" cried Mak, and he bounded after his little companion, to take his place on the other side of the heap, and began to imitate his gestures, looking at the boys now, and shouting, "Gun! Gun! Gun!"

"Oh, do be quiet!" cried Mark angrily.

Then in a questioning tone he looked at the blacks, pointed to the heap, and repeated the word. Both began to dance now with delight, pointing down and making signs as if scraping a hole in the heap before them.

"Well," said Dean, "if the gun's there don't keep on dancing like a pair of black marionettes. Dig it out;" and he imitated the blacks' signs of scraping away the loose rubble.

Mak nodded his head eagerly, and shrank back, a movement imitated by Pig.

"No, no," said Mark; "don't go. Dig it out."

The black looked at him enquiringly.

"Dig?" he said.

"Yes; both of you dig it out," cried Dean.

To the great surprise of the boys the two blacks dashed at them, caught them by the wrist, drew them close up to the heap, and tried to bend them down so that they might draw away the loose rubbish.

"Oh, no, you don't," said Mark merrily, snatching away his wrist. "I am not going to have my hand used as a trowel to save yours, you lazy beggar. Here, Dean, get hold of Pig and do as I do. Let's give them an object lesson."

The little fellow smiled with pleasure as Dean caught him by the wrist, and then the two boys, to use Mark's expressions, proceeded to use the black palms and digits as trowels; but the smiles of both blacks changed to angry frowns. They snatched their hands away and backed off from the heap, Mak shaking his head fiercely.

"Well, that's cool," said Mark. "Here, come back;" and he pointed to the heap and stamped his foot. "We are not going to do the dirty work and let you keep your hands clean, my fine fellows. Come—dig out—gun!"

Mak shook his head angrily and imitated Mark's action of stamping his foot and pointing to the heap.

"Dig—out—gun," he said, imitated the while by the pigmy, who repeated the words "Dig—dig" to Dean.

"No—no—you two!" cried Mark.

"No—no—you two!" cried Mak; and he pointed again at the heap, running close up to it and pointing to where some parched up fern leaves had been scattered about.

He only stayed there a moment, and then darted away, to stand with his little companion, shaking his head and chattering away as he energetically kept on signing to the boys to act, and shouting.

"Gun! Gun!"

"All right, gentlemen; never mind," said Buck good-humouredly. "These niggers are mighty particular about doing just what work they like and no more. Me and my mate will soon fish the gun out if it's there. They seem to think that as they have found the place where it's buried their job's done."

"No," said Dunn dismally.

"What do you know about it?" growled Buck.

"Been here five years," said the man sadly, quite in a tone which seemed to suggest that he wished he had never seen the place. "Won't go because they know people have been buried there. It's where you dug out the bones."

"Ah!" said the doctor. "Yes, that must be it. These people fear the dead more than they do the living."

"Oh, that's it!" cried Mark. "Don't you remember how they wouldn't go near after we had found the bones?"

"No, no, Buck—Dunn; we'll do it, and show them how cowardly they are."

The two men drew back, and while the blacks shifted a little further away and close together watched, with their faces drawn with horror, the boys bent down and tore away the dead fronds of the fern.

"Here, it's all right," cried Dean. "Hooray, Mark! Here's your gun. Why, they've only buried the stock and half the barrels."

For there, lightly covered with stones and sand, were the barrels of the missing gun, fully six inches quite exposed.

"Here, let me come," cried Mark.

"No; first find," cried Dean, seizing the rifle by the barrels and giving it a jerk which drew it right out, and then uttering a yell of horror he dropped it, for as he tugged a tiny snake thrust its head out of one of the barrels and opened its jaws menacingly, then closed them, and the sun shone upon its flickering forked tongue, which darted out again and again through the natural opening in the closed jaws.

"Ah! Take care!" cried Sir James; and the two blacks turned as if moved by the same impulse and scrambled to the nearest pile of stones, to stand there holding on to one another, their superstition strengthened by what they believed to be instant punishment being brought down upon the heads of those who had dared to disturb the resting-place of the dead.

"Oh, I say, Dean!" cried Mark, as he picked up the double rifle, noting as he raised it from the ground that the snake had shrunk back out of sight into its novel refuge. "I'll soon settle him," he said. "Yes, all right," he continued, as he raised the gun so that he could examine the breech. "It's all right; it's loaded. I'll soon finish him;" and raising the piece higher, holding it as if it were a pistol, he drew trigger, and a volley of echoes followed the report, the two blacks being already in full flight.

"Anybody see him go?" said Mark merrily, and as he spoke he let the rifle slide through his hands till he grasped the muzzle, while the butt rested between his feet. "New way of killing snakes," cried the boy; and then with a look of horror, wild-eyed and strange, he held the muzzle as far from him as he could, half stunned by realising the fact that he had fired the wrong barrel, as he saw the little snake glide rapidly out of the mouth of the second barrel, play for a moment or two over his hands, and then drop in amongst the loose stones and disappear.

"Mark, my boy!" cried Sir James excitedly. "Don't say you are bitten!"

The boy drew a deep sigh, his face turning ghastly white the while, and then, "I must, father. It was only a sharp prick, but—"

Chapter Thirty Seven.

The Doctor's Lancet.

There was a peculiar dreamy look in the injured boy's eyes, as he turned them from his father to Dean and back.

"Here, let me come," cried the doctor. "Let him sit down on that stone—feel faint, my lad?"

"No-o," faltered Mark; "only strange and queer. Is it a poisonous snake?"

"I don't know. I hope not," said the doctor. "I only had a glimpse of it, and it's gone. Where did you feel the prick?"

"In this finger. No, no—don't touch it!"

"Nonsense! Be a man. I am not going to hurt you. Did either of you get a good sight of the snake?"

"I did, sir," said Buck, "and it must have been a poisonous one."

"Why must it?" said the doctor sharply.

"Because the niggers run away as soon as they saw it, sir," said Dan. "Look at them up yonder;" and he pointed to where the two blacks were perched on the top of the wall. "They know, sir."

"Oh, yes, they know a great deal," said the doctor, shortly, as he busied himself pressing the sides of a little speck of a wound which pierced the boy's skin, now with one nail, now with both at the same time, and making Mark wince.

"You are hurting him a good deal," said Sir James.

"Do him good," said the doctor, shortly, "and take off the faintness. Now, Buck, I want to make sure," continued the

doctor, who from the smattering of knowledge he had obtained from reading was looked up to by everyone present as being master of the situation in the emergency. "What sort of a head had the snake?"

"Nasty-looking head, sir! and it kept sticking out its sting with two pyntes to it."

"Pooh!" ejaculated the doctor, as he busied himself over the tiny puncture. "But was it a broad spade-shaped head?"

"Spade-shaped, sir? What, square? Oh, no, it warn't that."

"Bah!" ejaculated the doctor. "I meant spade-shaped—the spade that you see on a pack of cards."

"I couldn't be sure, sir. It was so quick, you see. But I should say it was more like a diamond."

"Beg pardon, sir," cried Dan; "I think that the place ought to be sucked. I'll do it."

"Thanks. Good lad," said the doctor. "You are quite right;" and he gave the little sailor a quick nod as he took the advice himself, held Mark's index finger to his lips, and drew hard at the tiny puncture, trying to draw out any noxious matter that might have been left in the wound, and removing the finger from his lips from time to time to rid his mouth of any poison.

"Here, you, Dean," he said, upon one of these occasions, "slip that silk handkerchief from your neck, twist it a little, and now tie it round his arm just above the elbow. That's right—no, no, don't play with it—tie it as tightly as you can—never mind hurting him. I want to stop the circulation."

He placed his lips to the wound again and drew hard; then speaking once more—

"Harder. Now, you, Sir James; you are stronger. Tighten the ligature as much as you can. You, Dean, put your hand in my breast-pocket—pocket-book. Open it and take out a lancet."

"There isn't one here, sir."

"Bah! No; I remember. Get out your knife, my boy."

"There's a lancet in that, sir, you know, and a corkscrew, and tweezers too. Here's the lancet, sir;" and the boy drew out the little tortoiseshell instrument slipped into the handle of the handsome knife which his uncle had presented him with before the start.

"Now, then, Mark; I am going to operate."

"Very well, sir," said Mark, calmly enough. "You had better take the finger off close down to the joint, for fear the poison has got as far as that."

The doctor smiled.

"Is it absolutely necessary?" said Sir James anxiously.

The doctor gave him a peculiar look which Dean looked upon as horribly grim.

"I see two chaps who were bit by snakes out in 'Stralia, gentlemen," said Dan, "and one of them died; and they said that if there had been someone there who had known how to cut his arm off so as he shouldn't bleed to death, it would have saved his life."

"Kept the pison from running right through him, mate," growled Buck, with a look of sympathy at the injured lad.

"That's so, messmate," continued Dan; "but they sucked t'other one where he was stung for ever so long. He got better."

"Now, then," said the doctor sharply, "no more anecdotes, if you please;" and as he spoke he made a slight cut across the speck-like puncture with the keen-pointed lancet, so that the blood started out in a pretty good-sized bead.

"Hurt you, my lad?" he asked, while Dean looked on in horror.

"Just a little," said Mark. "But hadn't you better do more than that?"

"No," said the doctor coolly. "There is a little poison there, and the bleeding will relieve it. It has begun to fester."

"What, so soon?" said Sir James.

"Yes," was the calm reply. "Now, Dean, I must come to you for another of your surgical instruments—the tweezers."

"Yes," cried the boy excitedly; and in his hurry he broke his thumb nail in drawing the tweezers out of the haft of the knife, for the instrument was a little rusted in.

"Now," said the doctor, as he pressed the two little spring sides of the tweezers right down into the cut and got hold of something.

"Oh! hurts!" cried Mark.

"Yes, but it would have hurt more if I had taken your finger off," said the doctor, laughing. "There we are," he continued, as he drew out a sharp glistening point and held it up in the sun. "There's your snake sting, my boy, and the little cut will soon heal up. There, suck the wound a little yourself, and draw out the poison."

"But, doctor," cried Sir James, "surely a venomous snake injects the poison through hollow fangs. Are you sure that that is a tooth?"

"No, sir," said the doctor. "That is the point of one of those exceedingly sharp thorns that we are so infested with here. Look at it;" and he held out the tweezers for everyone to examine the point. "It's a false alarm, Mark, my lad. I can see no sign of any snake bite."

"But I felt it!" cried Mark, as he stared at the thorn.

"I can't see any mark, and if the snake did bite it was only a prick with one of its tiny sharp teeth. Look, Sir James; you see there's no sign of any swelling, and no discoloration such as I believe would very soon appear after the injection of venom."

"But what's that?" said Sir James anxiously, pointing.

"That? That's a thorn prick," said the doctor.

"Well, but that?"

"That's the stain from some crushed leaf."

"Well, that, then?" cried Sir James angrily at finding the doctor so ready to give explanations to his doubts.

"That's another prick."

"Tut, tut, tut! Well, that?"

"That's a scratch."

"Well, that, then?" cried Sir James, almost fiercely. "There's the discoloration you said would appear."

"Oh," said the doctor, laughing; "that's dirt!"

Sir James made no answer, but snatching a handkerchief from his pocket he moistened a corner between his lips, passed it over the clear skin of his son's wrist, and the dark mark passed away.

"Here, Dean," said the doctor, "hands up! That's right; draw back your shirt sleeve."

The boy obeyed.

"Look here, Sir James," said the doctor, and he pointed with the thorn he held between the tweezers. "You see that—and that—and that?"

"Oh, those are only pricks I got in the bushes, sir, the other day," said Dean sharply.

"Yes, I see," said the doctor, "and you had better let me operate upon this one. It has begun to fester a little too."

As he spoke the doctor pressed the little dark spot which showed beneath the boy's white skin.

"Oh, you hurt!" cried Dean, flinching. "Yes, there's a thorn in there, and I see there's another half way up your arm, Mark, my lad. You had better try to pick that out with a needle. It is all a false alarm, Sir James, I am thankful to say. Snake bites are very horrible, but you must recollect that the great majority of these creatures are not furnished with poison fangs. I was in doubt, myself, at first, but the fact that the puncture was so large, and unaccompanied by another—venomous snakes being furnished with a pair of fangs that they have the power to erect—was almost enough to prove to me that what we saw was only produced by a thorn."

"I beg your pardon, doctor," said Sir James, grasping him by the hand. "I could not help thinking you were dreadfully callous and cool over what has been agony to me. I am afraid I was horribly disbelieving and annoyed."

"Don't apologise, sir," replied the doctor. "I did seem to treat it all very cavalierly, but I had a reason for so doing. I wanted to put heart into my patient to counteract the remarks which were being made about snake bites and treating them by amputation. Now, Mark, do you feel well enough to handle your gun again?"

"Oh, yes, quite," cried the boy, starting up; and getting possession of his rifle he raised it up, fired the remaining cartridge, and then opening the breech held it up, to treat it as a lorgnette, looking through the barrels.

"There are no snakes in here now," said the boy, speaking quite cheerfully, "but the night damp has made a lot of little specks of rust."

"Let me clean it, sir," cried Dan. "I'll wash out the barrels and give it a good 'iling."

"Yes, do," said Mark, who began to suck his finger.

"Why, I say, Mark," cried Dean, "I never thought of it before: that's the finger you asked me to get the thorn out of that day after we got back from my slip into that hole."

"Eh?" exclaimed Mark, looking at him doubtfully.

"Why, of course! Don't you remember?"

"No," said Mark. "I feel quite stupid this morning, after this."

"Try to think, my boy," cried Sir James impatiently. "It would set all our minds at rest."

"Why, to be sure, Mark," cried his cousin. "Don't you remember? You said you could not do it yourself because it was in your right finger and it was such a bungle to handle a pin with your left hand."

Mark stared at his cousin for a few moments, and gazed round at those who were waiting to hear him speak; and then a gleam of light seemed to dart from his eyes as he cried excitedly, "Why, of course! I remember now; and you couldn't get it out with the pin, and you said it was a good job too, for a brass pin was a bad thing to use, and that we would leave it till we could get a big needle from Dan, such as he used for mending his stockings."

"Hear, hear!" cried the little sailor, by way of corroboration as to his handling of a needle.

"And then we forgot all about it," cried Dean.

"Yes," cried Mark. "Oh, I say, I am sorry! What a fuss I have been making about nothing!"

Chapter Thirty Eight.

A Family Party.

"I don't like to talk about it," said the doctor, "but I am afraid of what those two black fellows have done."

"Yes," said Sir James; "there is an ugly suggestion about it. But say what you are thinking, doctor."

The doctor was silent, and the boys listened for his next words with strained ears.

"I tell you what I think," he said, at last. "I am afraid that it may cause us great trouble—the great trouble of a visit from a hostile party of neighbouring savages."

"To take revenge," said Sir James, "for the injury or death of their friends?"

"Yes," said the doctor.

"But why should they think that we hurt them, when it was done by Mak and the pigmy?"

"Because they may associate us with them," replied the doctor. "Still, there is the hope that they may not know we are on friendly terms; but it is a very faint hope, and I am disposed to say that we ought to give up and make our way back to the station."

"Oh, that would be such a pity," said Mark. "This is such a wonderful place, with so much to find out yet."

"Yes," put in Dean.

"Well," said Sir James, "I feel like the boys do."

"And I must own," said the doctor, "that I should bitterly regret having to go from a neighbourhood where we cannot stir without coming upon something to interest us."

"Then don't let's go," cried Mark. "We are a strong party, and if we were attacked we could defend ourselves. A few shots would scare an enemy away."

"You had better be silent, Mark," said the doctor. "I shall be tempted to run the risk."

"Let's go on tempting him," said Dean, laughing; and Sir James smiled.

"We may be only frightening ourselves with shadows, doctor," he said, "and it is quite possible that our visitors were only one or two wandering blacks."

"I hope you are right, Sir James," said the doctor; "but the finding of that old fellow when we first came, and the way in which he disappeared, lead me to suppose that we are not so lonely as we seem. Well, if we stay, the great thing is to keep a most stringent watch night by night, and always to be ready against surprise."

These last words of the doctor's decided the matter, and the rest of the day on which they were spoken was devoted to a reconnaissance made by the boys and their captain, several of the nearest kopjes being ascended and the glasses they had with them brought to bear. But nothing was seen till the last kopje was ascended prior to journeying back to the waggons, when Dean in sweeping the sides of a slope half a mile away suddenly gave the alarm.

"There they are!" he cried.

The doctor snatched out his glass, focussed it upon the indicated spot, and closed it again with a laugh.

"Yes, there they are," he cried. "Look, Mark."

"I am looking," replied the boy, who was focussing the objects that had startled his cousin.

"Well, do you see them?" said the doctor.

"Yes, dozens of them, with their old women behind them carrying their babies. Oh, I say, Dean, you are a fellow! Monkeys—baboons."

"No! Are they?" cried Dean, twiddling the focussing nut of his glass with trembling fingers. "Why, so they are!"

That night careful watch was kept, and the following day and those succeeding were devoted to research after research among the wonderful ruins, the men—who were not troubled by the doctor's misgivings, of which they were kept in ignorance—working most enthusiastically; and scarcely a day passed without spade and shovel laying bare some records of the ancient inhabitants of the place.

Gold was not found, in quantity, but they constantly came upon traces. In one place shut in by walls there were the remains of a smelting furnace, and with it old crucibles that showed patches of glaze with traces of gold still within them.

Moulds too were found, into which molten gold had been evidently poured. These the doctor declared to be formed of the mineral known as soapstone, and pointed out in them specks of gold still adhering to the glaze.

On other days fresh attempts were made to explore the ruins. Cautious descents were accomplished down holes which had evidently been excavated to the water, of which a pretty good supply was found, proving that the adjacent river made its way right beneath the ruins; and the more the bushes and overgrown vines were cleared away the more the tired party returned to their kraal ready to declare that their task would prove endless, Mark saying that the more they found the more there was to find; and in the evening, while Sir James dozed off to sleep in the soft darkness after a weary day, the doctor would always be fresh enough to interest the boys with his remarks and surmises about the old people who at one time must have thickly populated the miles upon miles of ruins.

At last when the expected seemed most distant, and the exploring party were busy turning over the ruins of a newly creeper-stripped wall, a sharp whistle came from the camp, where Dunn Brown had been left to keep watch over the bullocks and ponies, while Dan was busy in his kitchen, as he called it, roughly built up in the shelter of one of the walls. Before a second whistle rang out everyone was returning at the double, or by as near an approach thereto as the rock and stone encumbered way would admit.

Mark was one of the first to reach their rugged stronghold, and there his eyes lighted at once upon a little party of five blacks, who were squatting down, spear in hand, solemnly watching Dan, while perched together upon the sheltering wall and looking very solemn, were Mak and the pigmy watching them, Dan going on busily the while, roasting and stewing the results of the previous day's hunting expedition, as if the visitors were of no account.

There was nothing alarming in the visit, the black party seeming perfectly inoffensive, and after sitting like so many black statues for about a couple of hours, the doctor proposed that some food should be given to them, and after receiving a goodly portion of roast antelope and mealie cakes, they took their departure, to the great satisfaction of the boys.

This visit gave rise to a long discussion and a good deal of questioning of their two blacks; but very little could be obtained from them beyond grunts and scowls, which showed anything but a friendly feeling towards their visitors.

Then more days passed without further alarm; but the feeling was general that the camp was no longer safe; the night guard was more strict than ever, and it was an understood thing that the expedition was to be prepared for any emergency, while everything was kept ready for an immediate start for a return to the station.

Chapter Thirty Nine.

The Sudden Attack.

"Mr Mark, sir!" This in Dunn Brown's most dreary tones, and before the boy could answer there came, in almost a piteous wail, "Mr Dean, sir!"

"Hillo!" cried Mark, from where he and his cousin were seated cross-legged like tailors, in the shade of one of the walls, repairing damages, as they called it—that is to say, they were very untidily sewing, up thorn-made tears in the jackets laid across their knees.

It was a delightfully still afternoon, with the air limpid and clear, while the sun threw down the shadows of wall and tree of a dense velvety black. The doctor and Sir James were away somewhere, exploring, alone; Mak and the pigmy had picked out a good sunshiny spot where they could sleep, while the rest of the party were not far away and busy clearing out an excavation that they had begun the previous day.

All was so still that Dunn Brown's curiously intoned high-pitched calls sounded peculiarly shrill, and almost startled Dean in his clumsy manipulation of his needle, making him prick his hand.

"Oh, there you are, gentlemen; I couldn't find you, nor anybody else."

"Well, what's the matter?" said Mark.

"The—blacks—sir," said the man looking down sadly at Mark's torn jacket.

"Sewing," said Mark, noting the direction of the man's eyes.

"Yes, sir—Dan—sews—best."

"Well, I know that," cried Mark. "What about the blacks?"

"Come again."

"Bother the blacks!" cried Mark. "Look here, Dunn; I won't have it. We won't have it," he added; "eh, Dean?"

"No," cried Dean, sucking his pricked finger and looking very ill-humoured. "A set of black beggarly cadgers! They are getting to think they have a right to be fed. Go and start them off, Dunn. Why didn't you do it before?"

"I did, sir, yesterday. They've come again."

"Send them about their business."

"Rather afraid—" began the man.

"Don't believe you, Dunn," said Mark. "You are not a coward."

"No."

"Well then, send them off."

"Meddled with the ponies yesterday."

"Hallo! I didn't hear of that."

"No, sir. Big fellow began to pull the halter."

"Oh, and what did you do?"

"Knocked him down."

"You never said so."

"No.—Afraid—mean trouble."

"And now here they are back again? Well, come along, Dean; let's see what they mean. Where's the doctor?"

"Gone off with uncle."

"Bother! Well, we must do the bossing."

"Shall I whistle for the men?" said Dean.

"Oh, no. They would think that we were afraid, and I don't want that. Come along, Dunn. Where are the beggars now?"

"Close—Dan's store."

"Oh, I say, that won't do," cried Mark, and the next minute the sight before him showed him plainly that it was quite time to interfere, for there in the sheltered store made of a kind of thatch spread over some roughly piled up stones, close to what Dan called his kitchen, were a party of the blacks—some fifteen or twenty, at a glance—helping themselves from a bag of mealies.

"Come along, Dean," shouted the boy, and without a moment's hesitation he made a rush at the grinning black who was holding up the edge of the bag for his companions to clutch out its contents as hard as ever they could.

"Come out of that, you thief!" cried Mark; and he charged right at the fellow, when to his great surprise the black turned upon him and held him tightly by the arms. "What!" cried Mark, wrenching himself away. "Here, Dean—Dunn! Help! We can't stand this. Ah, would you!" he continued, as the man, with lowering face, dashed at him fiercely with extended hands to seize him by the throat.

This was too much for the English lad, and without any thought of what might be the consequences, he met the chief marauder with a straightforward blow from his left, which took effect upon the black's nose, staggering him for the moment with surprise, and making his companions stare.

Dean had felt startled, but the effect of his cousin's blow made him give vent to a loud "Ha, ha!" for the black, who was quite unarmed, placed his hands to the prominent organ which had received Mark's blow, took



"USING THE SPEAR QUARTERSTAFF FASHION,
HE DROVE THEIR ASSAILANTS BACK."

them down again very much stained, stared at them and uttered a piteous

yell.

It was, to use the term of the old-fashioned singlestick players, "first blood," and the sight thereof had a disastrous effect. For, recovering himself, the black turned round and caught his spear from where he had leaned it against the side of the shed, while the others yelled in chorus and began to menace the boys with their spears.

"Quick, Dean—guns!" cried Mark; and, then, "Bravo, Brown!" for the tall, thin, amateur foreloper snatched the spear from the first black, dashed before the menaced boys, and using the spear quarter-staff fashion, he made it whistle through the air as he struck to left and right, striking spear hafts, shoulders, and in two cases heads, as he drove their assailants back.

Just then Sir James and the doctor came into sight round one of the ruined walls, rifles over their shoulders, and catching sight of what was going on, came running forward to render aid.

"Hurrah!" cried Mark. "Give it to them, Dunn!"

Brown needed no urging; but the blacks were recovering from the surprise of the sudden attack and were coming on again.

"Fire, doctor!" shouted Dean excitedly.

"Yes, fire, father!" cried Mark. "Never mind us."

"No, no, my boy," panted his father, as he dashed up with presented rifle. "We must have no bloodshed."

"But we must drive them back," cried the doctor sternly, as he made the locks of his rifle click.

While these words were being spoken, the blacks, who had been startled by the appearance of the new-comers and drawn back for the moment, began to advance again, but only to receive another check caused by the clicking of first one and then the other rifle; but as nothing followed this they again, all moving as if by the same influence, took another step forward as if to get a little closer before hurling their spears.

At that moment the shrill piercing note of Mark's whistle rang out, as he blew with all his might a loud and ear-ringing call, the appointed signal that he knew would bring help from all by whom it was heard.

This checked the blacks again, and one or two made an uneasy movement as if to retreat; but this was stopped by a fierce yell from their leader, the black who had received Mark's blow, and all began again to advance with dancing movements which at another time would have excited mirth, but which Mark read rightly as being the savages' self-exciting gestures prior to a rush.

"Guns," whispered the boy to his cousin. "I'll stay."

Dean hesitated for a moment, and then dashed off to fetch the weapons from the rough rack where they hung ready for use, leaving Mark with his eyes running from black to black with the intent of seizing an opportunity to snatch a spear if he could see a chance.

"I'm afraid we must fire," said Sir James, in a low hoarse voice which was almost drowned by the fierce yellings of

their enemy. "I'll fire first—over their heads. You follow."

As Sir James spoke he raised his rifle, and drew trigger, there was a sharp pat from the top of the wall above the heads of the blacks, and the report raised a peal of echoes from the surrounding ruins. So startling were the sounds that the blacks stopped short.

"Now!" cried Sir James, and the doctor fired in the direction of the highest pile, which sent back a roar, and the report seemed to have loosened one of the great needles of rock which had stood up for ages on the top of a loose ridge, and now came down, bringing with it quite an avalanche of stones, with such a thunderous crash that the blacks turned and fled, yelling with horror, while Mak and Pig, who were coming from where they had been sleeping in the sunshine, dropped upon their knees, the Pig following this up by creeping among the bushes that were left standing, and hiding his little head, ostrich-like, in the darkest part.

"Bravo! Hooray!" cried Mark, snatching a rifle from his cousin as Dean rushed up with a piece over each shoulder. "Give them another, father!"

"No, my boy; only a waste of powder. We will save this shot for their next visit, for I suppose we shall have another rush when they have got over their alarm."

"Here, you two, come out," cried Mark, trotting up to where Mak and Pig had taken refuge amongst the stones and bushes. "Get up, Mak; you have got nothing to mind. You, Dean, lay hold of Pig's leg." Mak rose from his knees and began to grin, but made a rather poor display of mirth as he tried to explain that he knew the two "baas" did not mean to shoot him, but he thought all the stones were coming down; and then he joined merrily in Mark's laughter as they both looked on at the encounter Dean was having with the pigmy, who was still half buried amongst the bushes. Dean had given a haul at one leg which he grasped just above the ankle, but had to drop it directly, for it saluted him with a tremendous series of kicks. He fared no better when he managed to grasp the other, and then as he was driven back, every advance was greeted with a display of kicks, which enraged him at first, till he awoke to the fact that he was helping to create a perfect exhibition. Then, and then only, he joined in the hearty laugh. This effected that which violence had failed to bring about: the little pair of black legs that were sticking out from beneath the bushes ceased to kick as soon as the attack was given up, were drawn a little farther in, and then by slow degrees Pig turned himself so that he could look out at his assailant, found that the attack came from a friend and that there was nothing to fear, and soon after he was laughing merrily with the rest.

"Run up to the top of the wall, Pig," cried Mark; and the little fellow scrambled up, and as soon as he reached the top called out to Mak that the blacks were running away, following up the announcement by capering in what was meant for a set of jeering, defiant gestures, ending by picking up loose fragments of stone and hurling them in the direction of the retreating party.

"That will do!" shouted Mark; and as the little fellow turned he signed to him to come down, while the two lads made for where their elders were discussing what had taken place.

"Well, boys, this is unfortunate," said Sir James, "for, as the doctor says, we wanted to keep on the best of terms with these people."

"I could not help it, father; I was obliged to do something. You don't think I ought to have let them do as they liked with us?"

"Most certainly not," said his father. "I think you both behaved very well; but it is unfortunate, all the same. One thing is evident—we have been too easy, and I am afraid they will take it for granted that we were afraid of them. The doctor would be most unwilling to make a move from here."

"Oh, yes," said that gentleman. "I looked forward to our making endless discoveries here and in the neighbourhood, and I must say again that it would be a thousand pities to give up."

"I agree with you," said Sir James, "and the boys don't want us to make a move."

"Oh, no!" they exclaimed, in a breath. "Well, it is very unlucky, and we shall be driven to give them a severe lesson."

"Well, you have, father," said Mark. "And it is very easy to drive them away, uncle."

"Yes," put in the doctor, "once or twice; but I am afraid we have come to the end of friendly feeling, and this cannot be resumed. There must be no more coming into the camp, Sir James."

"Certainly not. They must be taught to keep outside, without violence if we can manage it—if not, with."

During the next few days the blacks kept aloof, and it almost seemed as if they had been too much alarmed by the falling stones to come near.

"Yes," said the doctor, "they must have thought that we could start the old buildings to crumble about their ears, for they have been too much accustomed to the effects of rifles to be frightened by them so long as nobody falls. And I suppose if later on we are obliged to use small shot, those will only scare them for a time."

"Yes, it's a most unfortunate business, and I almost think that we had better go farther afield," said Sir James.

"And fare worse, father," said Mark.

"Perhaps," said his father, smiling. "But there, we will hold out for the present, and see what time brings forth."

"Perhaps it will be all for the best," said Mark. "If they had not been checked there's no knowing what they might have taken next."

Chapter Forty.

In the Night Watch.

"It's of no use; I can't go to sleep," said Mark to himself, as he lay gazing out through the end of the waggon at the black darkness of the night.

It seemed hotter than ever, and he turned and turned again and again, with a strange, fidgety sensation that made him feel irritable to a degree, completely driving sleep away.

"What's the matter with me?" he said to himself. "Supper, I suppose. That's what the doctor would say. But one must eat; and I felt so horribly hungry."

He turned over again and lay watching a gloriously bright planet—Venus or Jupiter, he did not know which; but it was gradually sinking in the west, and even that made him more wakeful.

"Wish I could get some water," he muttered; "but I should only be disturbing poor Dean if I moved. There," he half ejaculated, "my brain must have gone to sleep, though my body wouldn't. How absurd, when I knew all the time that Dean had the watch! Hope he won't go to sleep and let the blacks come and surprise us because he doesn't give the alarm. How badly things do happen! He could go to sleep, of course, and I can't. Why shouldn't we change places? Oh dear, how hot it is! I should like to go down to the riverside and have a swim. Ugh!" he ejaculated. "And some croc hunting for food would get hold of me by the leg and pull me down. Horrid idea! The blacks," he went on, as he dismissed the thought of the reptile—"oh, the blacks are peaceable enough now. They only wanted showing that we wouldn't stand any of their nonsense. They are just like children."

The boy turned upon his rough couch so as to avoid the bright beams of the setting planet, and five minutes later he turned back again, feeling that he must watch it as it went down, and he felt more wakeful than ever.

"It's of no use," he said to himself, at last, "I—can't—go—to sleep, and it's only waste of time."

Creeping cautiously out, he let himself drop to the earth, and then after standing listening for a few minutes to the breathing of the cattle and watching the dancing flames of the fire that was regularly kept up, he cautiously approached the ponies, speaking softly to them so that they might not be scared by the approach of a dark figure to the spot where they were tethered.

First one and then another whinnied softly and stretched out its muzzle to receive his caress.

"I do like horses," he said to himself. "When once they know you they are as friendly as dogs. But you ought to have heard me, Master Dean. I think if I had had the watch I should have known if anyone had crept out of the waggon and come and spoken to the horses. I'll tell him so."

The boy went cautiously on past the first waggon, then by the kraal, looking eagerly before him the while but making out nothing.

"Taking a bit of a round, I suppose. The other side of the fire, perhaps," he said to himself.

Mark went slowly and silently on, pausing once to note that the bright planet, which seemed to grow larger and larger, was just dipping down behind the highest kopje near, and then he listened to a distant barking sound which he knew must proceed from a baboon prowling about, possibly on the watch for the approach of one of its greatest enemies—a leopard.

"Everything seems to have its enemy," thought the boy, "and the blacks are ours; but I don't think they will come near us any—"

Mark stopped short, a feeling of rage and bitterness running through him, for as he was walking slowly on, cautiously so as not to startle his cousin, he felt ready to choke with indignant rage.

"Oh, I wouldn't have thought he could have been so untrustworthy," he said to himself, for there, just before him, seated upon one of the many loose stones, his chin upon his breast, was his cousin, sleeping profoundly.

At this Mark's first idea was to awaken the overcome boy by snatching his rifle from him and ordering him to go off to bed.

"And I will too," he said, half aloud, "and shame him in his disgrace."

He was in the act of stooping over to seize the rifle, but there was no rifle to seize.

"He has stood it up somewhere," thought the boy. "Oh, who could have believed it! And at a time like this when we might be surprised and speared before the alarm could have spread. I'll go and tell the— no, I won't. It shall be our secret; but I'll say words to him that shall make him too much ashamed ever to take the watch again. Oh, where has he stood that rifle?"

Mark was trying to penetrate the darkness as he stepped cautiously along, looking here and there for the missing

weapon, when he felt as if a hand had been pressed upon his throat to check his breathing, for there, dimly-seen, standing pressed close up to the rock which ascended behind their camp, was the figure of an armed black, motionless as a statue, and with his spear, which looked somehow distorted, resting against his arm.

For a few moments the boy could not breathe, but his heart beat with a heavy throb against his breast, while his lips parted to utter a cry that should alarm the camp. But no sound escaped from him: the silence was broken by a deeply whispered, "Baas!"

"Ah-h-h-h-h! You, Mak!" sighed Mark; and the words, "How you startled me!" were ready for utterance, but they were not spoken.

"Him—him—sleep," whispered the black. "Mak watch.—Got gun."

As he spoke he raised Dean's rifle, which was resting upon the ground in company with the black's spear, and Mark caught at it eagerly.

"Baas watch too," said the black. "Pig gone see."

Mark raised the hand at liberty and patted their black friend upon the shoulder, asking himself the while what the man meant about the pigmy. But he was too much occupied with the thoughts that he was arranging in his mind with respect to his cousin and the black's presence.

"Why, he must have come and found him asleep, and taken the rifle to keep watch for him. No, I won't wake him. We will stop here together till he comes to himself; and how it will bring his disgrace home to him!—Here, what's that?" he whispered, as he turned to catch Mak by the arm.

But as he did so he felt that the faint sound he heard could be nothing alarming, for the black stood silent and unmoved.

Mark realised directly, though, that he was listening with head bent forward, and he began to breathe hard as with a faint rustling sound his little black companion sprang to his side and whispered something.

In an instant Mak clutched Mark by the shoulder and tapped the barrel of his piece.

"Shoot, shoot!" he whispered loudly, and as the boy grasped his meaning he became aware of hurrying footsteps one of the bullocks uttered a low, excited bellow, its sleeping fellows sprang to their feet, and the boy drew trigger, the report raising the echoes that were lurking amongst the black ruins waiting to be aroused. Then he fired again, past his black companions, in the direction of the approaching steps.

The bellow uttered by the ox had made Dean spring to his feet, to feel for his rifle.

"This way! Come!" cried Mark, making a dash for the waggon, followed by the two blacks, all running for where the men from both waggons were snatching their arms and preparing to respond to their leader's commands.

What followed was to the boys one horrible mental chaos. There were the loud yells of a strong body of savages uttering their fierce war cries, to stagger and alarm the occupants of the camp; the reports of rifles, the rush of feet, the shadowy figures of the fierce enemies, the being crushed together in a contending crowd, the eager cries of familiar voices, above all that of the doctor, giving orders which in the confusion could not be obeyed. There were harsh pantings too, blows, and the rattling made by spears against the barrels of rifles. More than once there was a raucous cry, and Mark in the wild excitement felt a strange pain through one arm, before he was trampled beneath the feet of those who were swaying to and fro fighting desperately.

The last thing that seemed clear to Mark was that everything was coming to an end and he was nearly unconscious as someone cried piteously, "Oh, father! Father!"

And then all was dark.

Chapter Forty One.

"A Bit off his Head."

But it was not all over. When sense and feeling began to resume their seats, Mark was lying in the forest shade, dimly conscious that the sun's rays were striking horizontally through the dark, misty shadows of some place that he had never seen before.

A dull, heavy pain seemed to be pressing his head into the earth, and a sickening feeling of confusion troubled him which seemed to take the shape of one of the glorious golden rays of the sun darting and piercing him through the shoulder with the agonising pangs that accompanied fire.

Then in his throbbing head there was a question that kept on repeating itself—that cry he had last heard as of someone calling piteously, something about his father, and who could it be?

This went on and on for what seemed to be an endless time, and he could make out nothing else, till someone spoke in a deep, gruff voice, and said, "Yes, my lad, it is a very bad job, and I say, thank my stars I hadn't the watch."

"Ay, messmate, and I say the same. The cooking was more in my way."

"Buck—Dan Mann," thought Mark, for he recognised the voices; but he could not make out why it was he was lying there, nor whose father it was somebody had been calling to.

He tried to think, but the more he tried to make out what it all meant the greater grew the confusion, and at last he felt too weary to try, or the power to continue the effort failed, for he lay quite still in a stupor.

When his senses began to return again the sun had attacked—or so it seemed—his other side. There was a peculiar gnawing in his shoulder, and now and then a stinging pain as from a red hot ray, and while he was trying to puzzle it out, a hand was gently laid upon his forehead, where his head was most charged with pain, and he made a feeble effort to turn where he lay upon his back.

"Who's that?" he said.

"Oh, Mark! Mark!" came in a familiar voice; and that voice seemed to give back the power to think.

"You, Dean! What does it all mean?"

"Oh, don't you know?"

Mark was silent, for like a flash came the recollection of what had passed—his going to seek his cousin, his sitting asleep, and the big Illaka standing close by in possession of the watcher's rifle, doing the duty that had been neglected.

"I was beginning to be afraid that I should never hear you speak again, and you mustn't speak much, I'm sure, while you are so dreadfully weak. But I must talk to you a little. You do feel a little better now?"

"Better? No."

"Oh, Mark, old fellow, don't say that!"

"I'm wounded, am I not?"

"Oh, yes, dreadfully; and I have been in despair. I couldn't have borne it, but Buck kept giving me hope. There were days, though, and nights, when you hardly seemed to breathe."

"Days and nights!" whispered Mark. "What do you mean? Wasn't it yesterday? Or was it to-day, just before dawn?"

"Oh, Mark! Mark! It was weeks ago!"

Mark was silent for a few minutes, as he lay thinking.

"Weeks!" he said, at last, and he lay perfectly silent. "Where are we now?"

"Right away in the wilds somewhere, where our friends brought us after they carried us off that night. I have hardly thought of that—only of you."

"Our friends!" said Mark, at last. "Who are our friends?"

"Buck and Dan and the two blacks."

"Buck and Dan!" almost whispered Mark. "I heard them talking, and thought it was a little while ago."

Strangely wild thoughts were running now through Dean's brain. His cousin had been so long in that dreadful stupor, insensible even to the touch of those who had dressed his wounds and cooled his burning brain by applications to the spot where a blow from a club had struck him down. Was this the poor fellow's senses returning for a short time, before—?

"I can't bear it," whispered Dean to himself. "Speak to me again just this once, Mark," he said aloud, "and then I want you to sleep. Both Buck and Dan say that sleep is the best thing for you now. I want you to tell me that you will get better."

Mark made no answer. He was thinking. It was coming back more and more.

"Oh, I know you are badly hurt," said Dean, at last. "I know how awful it all is, but Mark—Mark, old chap, don't—don't say anything to me; only tell me you are going to be better!"

"I can't speak. I can't think. Don't talk to me. Go away."

Dean uttered a groan of misery, and rising slowly he left his cousin to begin fighting once more against the confusion that oppressed his brain.

And now as the poor fellow lay seeming to go backward into what was like so much mental darkness, he heard the gruff voices of the two men talking, and then his cousin's words sounding as if in appeal, while soon after Mark opened his eyes to find that somebody was leaning over him. But the sun had set, and it was growing too dark now for him to make out who it was.

Then he knew.

"Asleep, Mr Mark, sir?"

"No, Dan. What does it all mean? Is it fever?—No, no, don't speak. I remember now. Hasn't there been a big fight?"

"Yes, sir; horrid."

"Did you get hurt?"

"A bit pricked, sir."

"With a spear?" said Mark sharply.

"Yes, sir. One of the black thieves made a job at me."

"But you are not hurt much?"

"Quite enough, sir. But a hurt soon heals up. I want to know about you, sir."

"Yes, yes; but tell me—what about Buck Denham?"

"Got enough, sir, to make him horrid wild. But he don't mind much."

"Ah!" said Mark quietly, as he fought hard with the difficulty of thinking. "Has the doctor seen him?"

"No, sir," said the man hesitatingly.

"But he ought to see him," continued Mark, "and you too. He knows so much about that sort of thing. Why doesn't he come and see me? There! There's that pain back again, as if I was burnt."

"Yes, sir; it is nasty, of course. I have done all I knowed to it."

"Thank you, Dan. What is it?"

"Spear, sir. But it's quite clean; I saw to that. It's your head's the worst."

"Yes," sighed Mark. "It's my head's the worst. Well, now go and tell the doctor to come."

Dan was silent.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Yes, sir," said the man, "but hadn't you better try and go to sleep?"

"I have been trying for hours, Dan—ever since I lay down; and then as I couldn't I got out of the waggon and came to have a chat with you; and then—it wasn't you, because it was—because it was—is that you, Dan?"

"Yes, my dear lad; it's me. What is it you want?"

"I don't know, Dan, only I feel as if I couldn't think and talk properly. Who's that?"

"Buck Denham, my lad. How goes it?" said the big fellow.

"I don't know, Buck, only that—oh, Dan said that you got hurt with a spear."

"Oh, yes, my lad; a bit of a dig—made me so wild I brought the butt of my rifle down on that nigger's head, and it was too dark to see, but I felt him roll over, and I trod on him."

"Look here—look here, Buck; I'm hurt."

"Yes, my lad; but just you lie quiet and try to sleep it off."

"Now you are talking the same. I want the doctor to come and see to Dan; and you had better let him see to you too. I say, Buck, whose father was it somebody was asking for?"

"Whose father, my lad?"

"Yes. I was lying in the dark, and I heard somebody call out for him."

"Here, I say, Dan, lad, what's to be done?" said the big driver, in a soft, deep growl. "Don't he know?"

"No," said Dan quietly. "A bit off his head still."

"What's that you are saying?" said Mark sharply. "What is it I don't know? Well—why don't you speak?"

"Don't—don't talk so much, my lad," said Buck softly. "You are a bit off your head from that club."

"Yes—yes—oh, I understand; you are trying to make me not think about it. Ah, I can think better now. Where's my father?"

Neither of the men replied.

"Yes, I do understand more now. I know, Buck, you are keeping something from me. Don't say my father's hurt!"

The boy waited for the answer that did not come.

"Then he is!" he cried excitedly. "And Dr Robertson?"

Still there was no reply.

"Ah, you won't tell me! Call my cousin—no," added the boy sharply, "don't—pray don't. Speak to me yourselves; I can bear anything now."

"You had better tell him, Dan, lad. He must know."

"Can't, messmate," came in a hoarse whisper. "You are a bigger chap than me; you tell him, for you are about right: he ought to know."

"Yes, I ought to know, Buck," said the boy softly, and he winced with agony as he tried to raise his left hand, but let it fall directly and caught at the big fellow's wrist with his right. "Now tell me, or tell me if I am right, for I can think now—that cloud has gone. The blacks attacked us last night?"

"Ay, my lad. They stole a march on us."

"And my father?"

"I dunno, my lad," said Buck hoarsely.

"The doctor, then?"

"Nay, Mr Mark, sir; it was all so dark, and such rough work, that I heard him shouting to us to come on, and that was all."

"Well, is Dunn Brown here?"

"Nay, my lad. He turned tail and left us in the lurch."

"Oh!" groaned Mark. "But Peter and Bob Bacon?"

"They fought like men, sir, and I hope we all did; but they were too much for us, and if it hadn't been for our two black fellows I don't believe Dan and me would have got you two young gents out of it."

"Ah, then," cried Mark, "you got us away?"

"That's right, sir; but it was close work, and it was big Mak kept the brutes off while Dan carried you, and I got Mr Dean up on my back while the little Pig showed us the way through the darkness."

"Then—then—" cried Mark passionately. "You—two—two strong men came away and left my father and the doctor in the hands of those wretches! Oh, cowards! Cowards! Cowards! How could you! How could you! How—"

The boy fainted.

Chapter Forty Two.

A Vain Appeal.

It was one morning when Mark lay fairly collected and able to talk, and the first objects his eyes lit upon were the two blacks seated together busy crushing up some succulent leaves, which they worked between a couple of stones till they had formed them into a thick green paste. This done, the little fellow brought other leaves, covered one with the green paste, and then as Mark watched him he placed this woodland-plaster on the fleshy part of his companion's leg and secured it in its place with some long, grassy, fibrous growth which Mak had chewed and twisted into a kind of string.

This done, the black lay upon one side with his teeth at work preparing some more rough bandage, while the pigmy formed another plaster, which was in turn secured to the black's left arm.

As Mark lay there feeling too helpless and weary to move, he watched in turn the surgical applications of the pigmy, as he attended to bad cuts that had been suffered by Buck Denham and Dan.

Mark did not know it then, during those next few days, but he realised afterwards that it was due to sheer weakness that with the knowledge of the terrible defeat, and that his father and friends were either killed or taken prisoners, he could lie there so calmly watching what was going on.

There was much to see in the coming and going of the two blacks, who brought the food and the water they drank, while Buck Denham and Dan, badly as they were hurt, never wearied in their attentions. His cousin too was constantly at his side, ready to attend to every wish. At other times he sat gazing at him with an imploring expression of countenance as if begging not to be reproached for a catastrophe that he laid upon his own shoulders.

"Who'd have thought it, Buck?" said Mark, one day, as he lay helpless, listening to the trickling water of the spring in the thick patch of forest that had been made their camp.

"Thought what, sir?" said the big driver, as he emptied the last scraps of tobacco from his pouch into his homemade corn-straw pipe.

"That that little black would be so grateful for what the doctor did."

"Oh, yes, sir; he's a reg'lar little trump—the Jack, me and Dan call him, and old Black Mak the King. Those two chaps arn't as fond of you as Christians would be, but they think a deal more of you than dogs would, and it seems to me they are a kind of people as never forgets, especially the little 'un. Anybody that has ill-used them they'd wait if it was for years till they got their chance to let them have it again, and as Dan says, they never seem as if they could do enough for one who has done them a good turn. Why, old Dan and me got so chopped about that night that we could only just crawl about after we had cooled down. Luckily in the 'citement we didn't feel so bad, but after a day or two we could hardly move, and as to doing a bit of hunting or shooting, we were good for nothing. Why, we might have got thinking that we should starve out here in the woods, but here have we been living like fighting cocks."

"Oh, don't talk about eating!" said Mark peevishly. "I don't see why not, Mr Mark, sir. Dan says a bit of eating helps to put life into you."

"Ah!" said Mark, with a low deep sigh. He made an effort to turn round on the bed of leaves, that the blacks had made for him, but it was beyond his strength, and Dean, giving him a wistful look, tenderly placed him in the position he wished, Mark grasping his hand the while, and strengthening his grasp as Dean tried to draw his own hand away.

The next minute to his surprise Dean found that his cousin had sunk into a deep sleep, and many hours passed before the boy awoke, still holding his cousin's hand.

That next morning was the turning point, for Mark answered a wistful look from his cousin with the words, "I couldn't help it, Dean—no, no, no, Dean! Dean! Dean!—I say, I couldn't help it after what had happened. There, that's all dead and buried."

Dean hesitated, but he saw his cousin's eyes flash, and he held out his hands and drew him into a sitting position.

"Here, Dan!" cried Mark; and the little sailor sprang to him from where he was busy cooking.

"Hullo, Mr Mark, sir!" he cried. "You are a-getting on!"

Those words, uttered loudly, brought up Buck Denham from where he had been bathing one of the cuts he had received.

"Oh, I say, Mr Mark," he said, "you mustn't do that! You arn't strong enough."

"I want to get up and walk; help me," was the reply, or rather command; and the big fellow obeyed at once, taking one side, Dean the other, and between them the poor lad took a few steps; and then his head sank sideways while he submitted to being laid back on his leafy couch, breathing hard and closing his eyes.

The next day he was as insistent as before.

"I want to walk. I must grow strong," he said, sternly now. "Help me."

Another day passed, and Dean, who had left his cousin asleep while he went out to help the men to fetch water, returned to camp to look about with startled eyes, for Mark's couch was vacant, and Dean's first thought was that, fancying he had gained enough strength, he had started off alone.

Reproaching himself with what he looked upon as neglect of his cousin, he hurried off amongst the trees, searching in the direction that he thought it probable Mark would have taken.

"I'm sure he can't have gone far," he said to himself; and so it proved, for before long he caught sight of him.

Mark, who did not hear him come up, was kneeling by a great trunk, his clasped hands resting upon the buttress, his brow bent, and his lips moving rapidly.

Dean, with the nerves of his face twitching, crept silently up to where he could touch his cousin, and then resting his own hands upon those of Mark, he too bent down, and the next minute his lips were also moving.

At last Mark spoke.

"Oh, Dean," he said, "a few minutes ago I thought that all was over. But oh, what a coward I have been, when perhaps all the time the poor dad, a prisoner, is comforting himself with the hope that we shall go and rescue him!"

"Don't—don't, old chap!" cried Dean. "Call *me* a coward, if you like; I won't mind. But it's like sticking one of the Illaka's spears into me when you, you brave old chap, keep on reproaching yourself; and every word you say is nothing but a lie."

"Brave old chap!" cried Mark mockingly, and he burst into a strange laugh which made his cousin shiver.

"Don't!" cried Dean passionately. "What does a fellow want? To be brave? Doesn't he want to be well and strong?"

"Oh, I suppose so."

"And there have you been fainting dead away over and over again. Who could be brave when he is like that?"

"There, don't talk. We are wasting time."

"What are you going to do?"

"You ask me that, with your uncle waiting to be saved! Come on."

"Come on where?"

"I must—I must get back to the ruins."

The boy took hold tightly of the sharp-edged buttress-like root upon which his hands had rested, and exerting the little strength that he had gained, he drew himself up erect, and then with everything swimming round, he reeled away from his support and would have fallen heavily but for the way in which Dean snatched at him, and yet, in spite of a quick effort on the boy's part, the pair fell heavily down amongst the bushes.

"It's of no use, Mark; you are too weak and helpless. We must go on camping here for the present."

"You are quite right," said Mark sadly, "I am as weak as a child; but we have to go."

"But you can't," cried Dean angrily.

"I must, and I will," cried Mark, with fierce determination. "And promise me this—"

"Promise you what?" said Dean, for his cousin ceased speaking.

"This," he cried again, with passionate energy. "The others will talk about giving up now and saving ourselves, but whatever I say you must support me. Promise me you will."

"That I will."

"Oh, here you are then, gentlemen," cried Dan forcing his way in to where the two lads were standing. "Ahoy! Buck! Heave ahead! Here they are! Why, we have been hunting for you everywhere, gents. You must be better, Mr Mark."

"Ay, that's so," cried Buck, coming up; "but I don't believe we should have found you if it hadn't been for these 'ere two. I believe little Pig here sniffed you out all the way. Aren't you tired?"

Mark shook his head, and Buck gave him a look as much as to say "I don't believe you."

"Well, we are a good way from camp, my lad. If you will take my advice, Mr Mark, you will lie down and have a snooze while we light a fire and get ready something to eat."

"No, don't do that," said Mark angrily. "We must go on."

"Go on, sir? Where?"

"Where? Back to the ruins."

"You can't do it, sir. It's just about madness. You are talking wild. What do you say, Dan? Don't leave it all to me."

"Same as you do, messmate."

"There, Mr Mark; and I put it to you, Mr Dean; isn't it about playing the lunatic for him to think of going to the help of Sir James, and the captain, with him like this?"

"Don't ask me, Buck," cried Dean excitedly. "My cousin is determined to go, and I have promised to help him."

"Of course you would, sir. But Mr Mark, sir, just think!"

"I have thought, Buck. It is my duty, and I appeal to you and Dan to come with me. Those faithful blacks will help, if they see you are with us, and go I must."

"Nay, sir. That's very well for you to talk, and I suppose folks would say it is very grand to go and throw away your life trying to save your father. If they gets to know of it at home they will say you are a hero, and write about you being a fine example. All very fine for you, because you are a gentleman; but I'm only an or'nary sort of fellow, and I don't want people to write about me."

"That will do," cried Mark angrily. "Go with them, Dean, old fellow." Dean shook his head.

"I don't want to be a hero," continued Mark. "I want to save my father, and if I can't save him I'm going to die too. There, good-bye. I have talked about people being cowards, but it is only because I am half wild with misery. You have all done your best, and I know what I want you all to do is impossible. Shake hands and say good-bye." Mark shook hands with the men in turn. "Now you," he said, and he held out his hand to the blacks, who advanced smiling as if they did not understand, but took it that it was something all right, and then shrank back.

Mark hesitated for a moment, and there was something piteous in his look as he turned to the big driver again.

"I don't like to go like this," he said, "but go I will. I have always looked on you as a brave man, Denham, so I will make this last appeal to you. Will you come with me and help me to save my father and the doctor?"

"No, sir, I won't," said the man gruffly. "Nor your own friends and companions?"

"No, sir."

Mark sighed.

"Then I appeal to you, Dan. You will not let us two go alone?"

"Can't be done, sir," said the little sailor, shaking his head.

"Do you mean this, Dan?"

"Yes, sir," replied Dan, after glancing at his big companion.

"Very well," said Mark quietly. "I have no right to ask it. Come along, Dean; we will go alone."

Making an effort over his weakness, he strode off as nearly as he could guess in the direction of the ruins, walking fairly steadily now, neither of the pair attempting to look back, and the forest was so silent that the soft rustling of the two lads amongst the leaves sounded loud and strange.

They were walking in Indian file, for Mark had told his cousin to take the lead, and immersed in their own thoughts upon the desperate nature of the attempt they were about to make, they went on and on, in and out amongst the trees that grew more open as they progressed for quite an hour, when coming upon a patch of mossy stones Mark uttered the word, "Rest," and setting the example he sank down upon one of the stones, to lean his head upon his hand.

"Do you feel weak?" asked Dean.

Mark shook his head.

"No," he said; "I am getting stronger. We will go on again in a few minutes, and who knows what may happen? I feel that we shall save them yet. Ah!" he cried.

For all at once the little figure of the pigmy stood before them, holding his spear across his breast as if to bar their way.

"Look at that, Dean," cried Mark. "Faithful and true to us as ever, even when those three men have forsaken us."

"They have not," said Dean. "Look."

Startled by his cousin's tones, Mark turned from the little black, to realise the fact that the three men whom they had left must have taken a circuitous course under the pigmy's guidance, cut them off by the scattered stones where they were resting, and were now coming straight towards them.

"Then you have repented, Buck?" cried Mark eagerly.

"No, sir."

"Then why are you here?" said the boy, starting to his feet, and catching at his cousin's arm, for his weakness seemed to be returning.

"Because we think, Dan and I, that we have let you go on in your own way long enough. It won't do, Mr Mark, and you must come back with us; eh, Dan?"

"That's right, Mr Mark, sir. I never started mutiny before, but I am in for it now. We have ris' against our officers, and you are both prisoners."

"Prisoners!" cried Mark wildly. "You will not dare—"

"Yes, my lad."

"Here, Mak!" cried Mark fiercely. "And you too," he continued, turning upon the pigmy; "you will stand by us, after all?"

"There, sir," said Buck; "even they won't do what you ask. Can't you see now, my lad, how mad it is?" And the man pointed to where the two blacks had darted away amongst the trees. "There, there must be no nonsense now. We have got to save your lives. You are our prisoners, so give up like men.—Ah, I never thought of that!"

For at that moment there was a repetition of the fierce yelling made familiar to them by the night attack, and they were surrounded by some fifty of the Illakas, who came rushing through the trees, flourishing their spears and looking formidable enough to make the bravest heart beat faster.

Chapter Forty Three.

Prisoners.

It was the day following their being made prisoners—the party of four, Mak and the pigmy having seemed to melt

away amongst the trees at the first onset of the Illakas and not having been seen since.

The two boys were utterly disheartened, while their companions, tightly bound, with the canes which were twisted and knotted about their arms and wrists and thoroughly secured behind their backs, looked despondent, Dan in particular, who kept fixing his eyes upon Mark and then turning to shake his head at his companion.

For all had had a long and wearisome tramp, urged on by their captors, who at the slightest suggestion of hanging back made threatening gestures with the points of their spears. To the wonder of his party, this last misfortune had seemed to act like a stimulus to Mark, and though slowly, he had kept on as well as he could and had only broken down twice; but now this was the third time, and after what Dan muttered to Buck was "a crackling jabbering," their captors made preparations for lighting a fire, and some of them went off as if in search of food, while the prisoners gladly sank down to rest.

"Say, messmate, drop a word or two to the poor chap."

"All right," growled Buck, and he turned to where Mark lay alone with his eyes closed. "Come, hold up, Mr Mark, sir. Never say die. They don't mean to kill us, or they'd have done it before. What do you say, Dan?"

"Same as you do, messmate. But what do you say to waiting until night and then as soon as they are all asleep make an escape of it?"

"Can't be done, cookie, and Mr Mark knows as well as as I do that he'd break down before we had gone a couple of score yards. Wish I'd got my waggon here, and the span of oxen. That would just suit you now, sir."

"Don't talk to me, Buck; don't talk to me."

"Must, sir. I want to cheer you up a bit. Don't be rough upon us two. We never meant to let you go on by yourselves, and we set the little Pig after you directly to keep his eye on you, ready for us to come up soon as you gave in and couldn't walk any farther. And it's my belief that that little chap has been creeping about among the leaves ever since we started again."

Mark looked at him listlessly, and then half closed his eyes again, utterly exhausted.

"Where do you think they are going to take us, Buck?" asked Dean.

"Oh, we two have been turning that over, sir, and we both think the same thing. The black brutes have been on the hunt after us ever since we got away, and now that they have caught us they are taking us back to our old camp."

"What makes you think that?" said Dean.

"Those two sugar-loaf kopjes that lie right out yonder," said Buck, giving his head a wag to indicate the clumps of rock that he alluded to.

"But those look like the kopjes that we could see from the big wall beyond the waggons."

"That's right, sir," said Buck. "They were a good way off, because the air is so clear here. But that's the way we are going, and sooner or later we shall be there."

"What is it? Feel faint?" said Dean, for his cousin shuddered.

"No," was the half whispered reply. "I can't bear to think of it. It means so much, Dean."

"Then don't think," said Dean. "What's the good. What's gone by can't be altered now."

"You don't understand me," said Mark passionately. "The past is bad enough. It is what we have to face when we get there."

"You mean—" began Dean sadly, and then he stopped.

Mark was gazing at him wildly, and Dean seemed to read now fully what his cousin meant.

"Oh, don't think that," he said at last, in a choking voice. "These blacks are savage enough, but as Buck said, if they meant to kill us they would have speared us before now."

"Yes," said Mark, "and I daresay he's right; but I was thinking of what happened during that horrible fight in the darkness."

"Ah-h-h!" sighed Dean softly; and no more was said.

Later on the blacks brought their prisoners half cooked food from their fire, which was scarcely touched, and water from the spring by which they were camped for the night; and of this they drank with avidity.

Then came the soft darkness, with the light of the great stars seeming to the boys to gaze pityingly down upon them; and then as the eager chattering of their captors ceased, the great silence of the forest fell upon them, bringing with it the sweet reward of the utterly wearied out.

Twice over in the night Mark, however, awoke with a start, the first time to listen to the deep barking roar of a lion which approached the prisoner, but without bringing any sense of dread.

It was a familiar sound to him, that was all; and as at intervals it came nearer and nearer and the thought occurred to the boy that the savage beast might be waiting to make a spring, it did not trouble him in the least. The position was curious, that was all; and the last time he heard the beast's roar Mark found himself wondering what it would feel like to be suddenly snatched away, and he was still wondering, when all grew utterly still and lonely and then he started, knowing he had been asleep, but quite convinced that something had crawled close up to him and had lightly drawn its paw across his breast.

"The lion!" he thought, and then he remembered having read about those who had been seized by one of these great beasts having felt mentally stunned and so helpless and free from fear and pain that they had made no attempt to escape, and thinking that this was exactly his case, he lay trying to pierce the darkness so as to make out the shape of the fierce beast whose jaws might at any moment close upon his arm.

Just then one of the blacks sprang up, to utter a yawn and shake himself, while from close behind Mark's head something leaped away, making bound after bound.

Silence again as Mark lay listening to the one of their captors who had sprung up, and who now uttered a long-drawn yawn and lay down again.

It must have been quite half an hour after that Mark, though he had heard nothing approach, felt the touch of his late visitor's paw laid heavily upon his breast, and as if fascinated the boy lay without moving, until the paw—no, it was a hand—a small hand—was laid across his mouth, and directly after a pair of lips, quite warm, rested upon his right ear, and the word "Baas" was breathed therein.

"The pigmy!" thought Mark, and there was the sensation as of a great sob of joy struggling from his throat.

That was all; but the incident meant so much. There was a friend who was free, watching over the blacks' prisoners, and the next minute a feeling of confidence pervaded the boy's breast, for he was now sure that the inseparable Mak would be near at hand.

Chapter Forty Four.

A Surprise.

Morning again, after a long sleep, and the rest and the feeling of confidence that had come like an inspiration enabled Mark to partake of some of the rough food brought to them by the blacks; and when in obedience to the latter Mark and his companions arose, he was better able to resume the march, which lasted till towards evening, while about noon they passed between the two kopjes, where they were allowed an hour's rest, and as the afternoon grew older, familiar objects made the boys' hearts bound and sink again with despair. For they were convinced now that before night they would reach the ruins, where the blacks who had made the first attack would be doubtless awaiting the portion of their tribe who had been so successful in their raid after the escaped party.

There was no doubt about it now, and as the boys walked together their countenances showed the emotions that swelled their breasts.

At one time their hearts seemed to sink lower with despair, and when this was at its worst, hope would come again as they marked portions of the ruins which they had visited; clumps of trees that had afforded them shade; plains that had never failed to furnish them with bucks when out with the rifle.

Later on they caught again and again rays that darted, reflected from the river which had supplied their fish. Several times too they sprang coveys of the partridge-like birds that had been so welcome to their table; and at such times as this, with the full intent of cheering up the drooping spirits of Mark, little Dan had drawn his attention to a drove of antelopes or a flock of birds, with some merry suggestion connected with his old fire place—his kitchen, he termed it—at the ruins.

Mark smiled feebly, and Dan shrank away to the side of Buck.

"I didn't do much good, messmate," he said, "but it's wonderful how he's kept up. It's my belief, and I says it 'cause I know, and no one better, what it was to be as weak as a cat and as sick as a dog after my fever—it's these 'ere plains as does it. Soon as I had started up country I began to grow. One day I was like a little kid—just a baby, you know. Next day I was a toddler just beginning to walk. Next day I was a little boy as could run; and so I went on breathing and growing till—you know what I was like, feeling as if I was alive again, and I was a man ready and willing for aught."

Buck grunted and frowned at the ruins they were approaching.

"What's the matter, messmate? Cheer up, can't you!"

"Can't, Dan. I'm a-thinking of my two span of bullocks."

"Oh, they'll be all right."

"Not they, Dan. I know what these blacks are. They will have sat down for one of their great big gorges. But if they have eaten six-and-forty of my bullocks I'll never forgive them—there!"

"Well, we shall soon see, messmate."

"I'm afraid, my lad, as we shan't see."

"Well, but I didn't finish," said Dan. "I was talking about Mr Mark. The way in which he has pulled up has been just like me, and he'd be just wonderful only he's so low-spirited about his governor—and no wonder. Young Mr Dean too's just as bad, and he arn't got the pluck left in him to do his cousin no good. Heave to alongside of him and say a word or two."

"All right; but who's to heave to with his arms and legs all tied together behind him like a market calf?"

"Well, it arn't worse for you, messmate, than it is for me. I don't like it a bit, and it's all very well to call a fellow's arms his feelers, but there arn't a bit of feel left in mine."

"No," said Buck, "and I don't feel as if I'd got any. Just look and see."

"Oh, they are all right, messmate. I did think of setting to and gnawing through them canes last night; but they would only have tied them up again, and tighter too."

Buck nodded, giving his companion in misfortune a friendly look, and as he was about to approach closer to Mark, he stopped to whisper, "I don't know what to say, mate, for whenever I look at the poor plucky chap and think about all he's gone through, I feel as if I should like to sit down and howl. But there, that will do. I have thought on it now."

The next minute, after making a quiet approach so as not to draw the attention of the blacks who were driving them, as he said, "like a span o' oxen," Buck was alongside of the two boys.

"Say, Mr Mark," he said, "don't that there big kopje put you in mind of going up and finding that there cave?"

Mark started, for his thoughts had a far different trend, and he shook his head.

"I've been a-thinking of it, sir, ever since it come into sight. 'Member finding that there walking mummy as Dan said was such an old 'un?"

Mark shook his head.

"Oh, but you do, Mr Dean. I wish we had had time, all of us, to have got up there before the niggers came that night. We could have kept them back for a twelvemonth if we had only knowed."

Poor Buck had joined the boys with the best intentions, but seeing the look of agony Dean directed at him he slackened his pace and let the pair go on without another word.

"Why, what's the good of that?" said Dan, as the two men were alongside again. "You didn't half talk to 'em."

"Didn't half talk to 'em, my lad? I talked a deal too much. Why, I no sooner opened my mouth than, as they said of the chap, I put my foot in it. Well, what's it going to be?" continued the big fellow sadly—"regular heartbreaking work for those two poor young chaps? I can't talk much about it, but I have thought a deal."

"So have I, messmate."

"Ah," said Buck, "I'm afraid it's all over with the poor old governor. Fine old English gentleman he was."

"Ay," said Dan, "and the poor doctor too. Talk about a man, Buck—they don't build many craft like him. Thorough gentleman down to the ground, and all the same a regular working man too. If there's anything he couldn't do it's because it arn't been invented yet. My word, messmate, what a skipper he would have made! I should just like to have gone through life as his first mate."

"Ah," said Buck, "well, we shan't be long before we know the worst. Look! Here they come, yelling and shouting and singing welcome home to our lot. Now, what's it going to be next?"

"Ah, that's what I want to know," said Dan. "They arn't cannyballs, or it would mean a big fire and a wholesale roast."

"Haw, haw!" ejaculated the big fellow, in a dismal attempt at a laugh. "Why, they will be making you cook, Danny. Well, if they do, put me out of my misery first, and good luck to 'em! They will find me pretty tough. I know what I should like to do, Dan. I have been wishing that I was a nigger like our Mak. He is just like a heel. No matter what happens he's always able to slip out of the way. But just now I don't wish I was a nigger. I should just like to be one of them Malay kris chaps, get my arm set free, and then run amuck."

"What's the good of that, messmate? They'd only spear you at last."

"Well, I should have sarved some of them out for what they've done to the boss and the doctor, and what they are a-going to do to them two poor lads."

Buck Denham ceased speaking, for a party of about sixty of the Illakas came rushing out, yelling, from the ruins, and brandishing their spears, joining the boys' captors and beginning to indulge in a furious kind of war dance, a savage triumph, in which the prisoners were surrounded and hurried right in amongst the ruins to the opening of the kraal, and where the clearing had been made by the travellers and explorers of the wondrous ruins.

Mark and Dean allowed themselves to be forced unresistingly along, wild-eyed and staring, but not with fear, for self for the time being had no existence in their minds.

Their wildly staring eyes were searching here, there and everywhere for a glimpse of Sir James and the doctor. But

they looked in vain.

It is, they say, the unexpected that occurs, for all at once as the prisoners were standing right in the middle of the kraal, surrounded by fully a hundred of the gesticulating, yelling and spear-waving blacks, there was the clattering of hoofs and a shrill and seemingly familiar ear-piercing whistle.

“Look, look!” cried Mark wildly, as a feeling of rage pierced his breast. “Look at him! The coward! He has come to join these wretches’ triumph!”

“Ah!” cried Dean excitedly.

“Then he arn’t going to stop,” growled Buck.

“No,” added Dan savagely. “He just ketched sight of me. Oh, if I—”

He got no farther, but stopped in astonishment as great as that of the surrounding blacks, for, whistling loudly as he galloped up on one of the ponies, and followed by the other three, and apparently leading a charmed life, careless too of the threatening spears, Dunn Brown swooped at full speed into and round the kraal, and then away again out of the opening towards the plain to join the advancing line of dust-clothed helmeted men who, raising the genuine old English cheer, were led on by a couple of mounted officers, and the next minute every stone and hillock of the ruins was being occupied; a bugle sounded, and then—*Crack! Crack! Crack!* every report being repeated scores of times as it rattled amongst the ruined walls. The little peaceful home of the explorers had become a miniature battlefield.

There was a wild yelling and the hurling of spears, as for a few minutes a brave enough resistance was being offered by the savage tribe; but soon there was the peculiar spirit-thrilling metallic rattle of bayonets upon rifles, and then with black figures falling in all directions the company of British infantry swept through the kraal and cleared the little camp to line the great wall, and, taking up this commanding position, to bring down the enemy as they fled.

It was only the work of minutes, and before long the wall at the back of the camp had its coigns of vantage lined, and was sending forth its little puffs of smoke, while Captain Lawton had sprung from his horse, and cut free the prisoners, and was warmly shaking hands with each in turn.

“Thank God, my lads, we are here in time!” he cried. “But your father—the doctor—where are they?” he added. “Don’t say that—”

“Hooray!” came faintly, quite a distant cheer, which was answered by the men upon the wall and taken up by every British soldier within hearing, and followed up by the triumphant notes of the bugle as it sounded cease firing—for the fight was at an end.

There was another cheer in the distance, and another, and the boys, whose breasts were still swelling with emotion, doubled by the captain’s words—his appealing “Don’t say that—” now stared vainly and unable to comprehend why it was that fresh shots were raising the echoes again in the direction of the cavern kopje; and it was not till Buck Denham on one side, Dan Mann on the other, caught Mark, wincing and grimacing with pain from their numbed arms, and pointed, that the truth came home.

Both he and Dean were beginning to have some glimmering of the truth, and then it was enforced by a volley fired from the slope leading down from the cavern.

It was only a little volley fired from four rifles, but it was as if the echoes of the old ruins had multiplied it as being from four thousand.

It was so little, but meant so much, for it was fired by Sir James, the doctor, and the two keepers, who had found a refuge in the old medicine man’s sanctuary, which, in spite of fierce besieging, they had managed to hold until the rescue came.

Chapter Forty Five.

Clearing Up.

“How did I manage to come to your help?” cried Captain Lawton, as he stood with his fellow countrymen in a group; and when his men had ceased raising the echoes again and again with their exultant cheers, “Why, of course it was through your messenger, who galloped hot foot all the way, changing ponies as they broke down. Cheerful looking chap that, but how he can ride! Ah, here he comes.”

For Dunn Brown came into sight, walking towards them slowly, the four ponies following him like dogs.

He came up very quietly, and as those whom he had rescued advanced to meet him, full of expressions of gratitude, there was one who could not speak the words he wished to say. They were something that he had at heart concerning calling Dunn Brown a coward; but he never knew, and for his part, when he had to speak he only looked dismally at those who surrounded him and said, “So—” Then he stopped short to give a gulp, and added, “glad;” but it sounded like a sigh.

He literally sneaked away as soon as he could, to shake hands with Dan and Buck Denham. This however he did with so much energy than Dan yelled and Buck roared, “Murder!”

"Don't!" he cried. "My arms are both coming off. But I say, Brownie, you are the finest foreloper I ever had in my life, and I never expected to see you again. Here, Mr Mark, sir," he cried, as he turned his back suddenly upon the gaunt self-appointed messenger who had saved all their lives, "just take me away somewhere, or I shall break down and blubber like a great girl. Quick, sir, before the soldiers see." Then quickly, and his big voice raised the echoes again from all around—"Have any of you seen anything of my teams—two span, forty-six oxen?"

He was answered by a deep bellowing from out of sight somewhere in the depths of the ruins.

"Hooroar!" cried Buck. "The poor beggars know me, and the niggers haven't ate them all."

"Well, sergeant," said Captain Lawton, "want to speak to me?"

"Yes, captain."

"Well, what have you to report?"

"All has been done as you wished, sir."

"How many prisoners?"

"Only two, sir—a big one and a little; and the little one's a chief, sir. Gold bangles, and a gold band round his head and feathers in it."

"What's that?" cried Mark anxiously.

"Feathers, sir," said the sergeant. "Quite a dwarf."

"Oh!" cried Mark excitedly.

"T'other's a big fellow, sir, about six foot four. Fine-looking chap; but they both had a very narrow escape. Four of our lads came upon them dancing a sort of war dance on the men who had been shot, and I think if our lads had not come up they would have begun spearing."

"But the men did not hurt them?" interposed Mark.

"No, sir," replied the sergeant. "They did not mind being taken a bit. Began laughing and wanted to go on dancing; but our men were a bit too wild. You see, sir, their blood was up after the fight."

"But you are sure they are not hurt?" cried Mark.

"Oh, yes, sir; quite sure, sir."

"They are our friends, Captain Lawton. The big one is your Illaka whom you found for us."

"Oh, that accounts for it," said the captain. "Fetch him here, sergeant."

"And the little one too, sir?"

"Oh, yes," cried Mark. "He is a pigmy chief. They have saved our lives again and again, Captain Lawton."

"And thought nothing of risking their own," put in Dean.

In a few minutes the sergeant was back with the two so-called prisoners, who no sooner caught sight of the boys than flailing the spears, which had been taken from them, they flung up their hands and began a dance of triumph which would have gone on for long enough if Mark and Dean had not stopped them, when Mak drew himself up stiffly and made an imitation military salute to the captain, and the pigmy snatched off his gold band and feathers, dropped on all fours, and began rubbing first one cheek and then the other against Mark's feet, just like a cat, as the boy afterwards said.

It was that same night again beneath the stars, and with the walls of the camp guarded—now by military sentries, though there was not the slightest fear of a return of the severely punished and scattered tribe. The two boys were seated with Sir James and the doctor, Captain Lawton having retired with his officer to one of the waggons which had been given up to them, worn out as they were with their forced march made under the guidance of Dunn Brown, when Dan made his appearance to say that Peter Dance and Bob Bacon would be glad if Sir James would see them for a minute.

"Oh, yes, of course," was the reply, and directly afterwards the two men made their appearance.

"Well, Dance? Well, Robert," said Sir James. "What is it?"

The two men looked at one another, then at their master, ending by grinning at Mark and Dean.

"Oh," said Sir James good-humouredly, "it was them you wanted to see, was it?"

"Well, Sir James—" began the elder keeper, and then stopped and looked at Bob.

"Oh, don't hesitate to speak," said Sir James. "Boys, these two brave fellows fought for us like heroes."

"No, no, Sir James," grumbled Peter. "It was Bob Bacon."

"Nay, Sir James," cried Bob sharply. "It was Peter."

"It was both of them," said Sir James sharply, for he was worn out with the excitement of the day. "Peter, after we had got away—the doctor and I both wounded—nursed us both as tenderly as a woman."

"Beg your pardon, Sir James," growled Peter; "not as a woman, sir."

"Well, as good as a woman; and as for Robert Bacon, we should have starved over and over again but for the clever way in which he stole down of a night from the cavern, and never came back without food in some shape or another; eh, doctor?"

"Invariably," replied the gentleman addressed.

"Oh, it warn't anything to make a fuss about, Sir James," said Bob, changing from one foot to the other, and looking very uncomfortable. "I stole lots of it from the waggon."

"Yes," said the doctor, "and risked being speared by the enemy."

"Oh, no, sir, begging your pardon," said Bob modestly. "It was much too dark for that; and the two forelopers as the blacks kept to look after the bullocks always saved me a snack or two for you when one of the beasts was killed."

"Well, thanks to you both, my lads, we did well. Yes, Peter; what is it?"

"I only wanted to say, Sir James," said the keeper, "that—that is, Sir James—here, go on, Bob; you know what we want to say."

"Yes, mate, but now it's come to the point I don't like to say it."

"My good men," said Sir James, "I am too old and tired for all this shilly-shallying. So now then, Robert, tell me what it is you both want to say."

"Yes, Sir James. I will try, Sir James. But you see you have been a good master to us, and now it comes to the point, though we settled it all right together, it don't seem quite fair just now for us to give you warning."

"No," said Sir James, "it does not. But if I take your warning, as you call it, how are you going to get back?"

"Well, sir, Peter thought that we might go back with the soldiers."

"I don't think it would be possible," said the doctor, interposing, "and you must not forsake us now."

"Oh, no, sir; not forsake you, sir. We want to give a month's notice to leave; and we thought that would be quite right. You see, sir, as I said to Peter here, black game don't seem in our way—didn't I, Peter?"

"That's a true word, Bob," said the elder keeper; "and you said, lad, it was all right with pheasants and partridges and a hare now and then—"

"Yes, Sir James and Dr Robertson, and I says to my mate, if I had 'listed, I says, and it was my duty to, I'd pot the niggers as free as anyone, but being only a gamekeeper it don't seem quite the thing."

"Well, doctor," said Sir James, "you hear what these men say. Now I should like to hear your opinion."

"Well, Sir James, I will give it you plainly. As a man with a great love for research I should go away from this ancient place with a feeling of extreme regret—but I must own that we are buying our curios at too dear a rate."

"Thank you, doctor," said Sir James. "Now, boys, what have you to say. Don't both speak at once."

"No, father," said Mark, "I am too ill and weak to do the talking. Dean will say all I want."

"Well, Dean, boy," said Sir James; "speak out frankly. Do you think we ought to stay here, as perhaps we safely might after the lessons the natives have had?"

"No, uncle, I don't; and if the place were a hundred times as tempting as it is I would give up all the curios and the gold sooner than you should run such a risk again."

"Hear, hear, hear!" cried Mark. "But don't think me a coward, doctor, for turning faint-hearted like this."

"You needn't be afraid of that," said the doctor quietly. "What I want to hear is your father's definite opinion upon the question."

"Well, I will give it to you," said Sir James gravely. "As an elderly man who wishes to act wisely, I cannot help feeling that we are intruders in the country of these wild tribes, and we should never be safe."

He paused for a few moments, and his hearers exchanged glances. Then he continued, "Speaking now as your father, Mark, my boy—as your uncle, Dean—I feel that I should not be justified in running any more risks; and lastly, as an old man who wants to behave generously and well to our servants, and those who have risked so much for our sake, I am," he continued, with a twinkle in his eye, "very, very tired; old England was never so dear to me before. There, doctor—there, my dear boys, I want to go home!"

Memorandum: They went home.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DEAD MAN'S LAND ***

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