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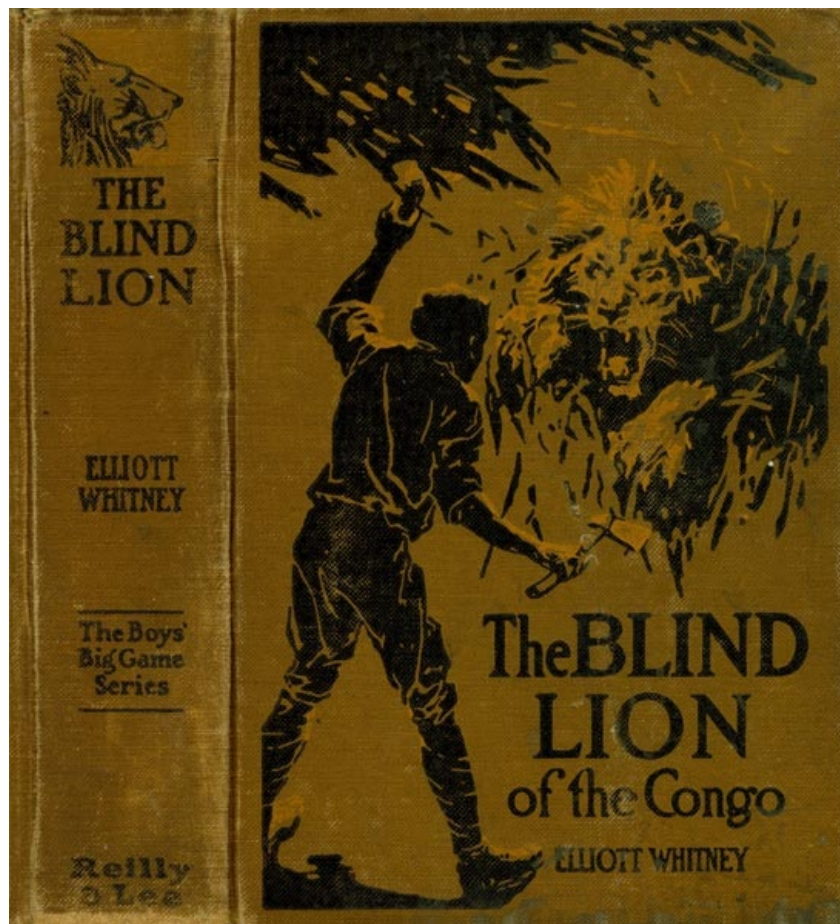
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BLIND LION OF THE CONGO ***

The Blind Lion of the Congo





Without the least trace of excitement in his voice Mr. Wallace had whipped out his revolver and covered the other. "Keep your hands on the table, Montenay!"

THE BLIND LION OF THE CONGO

BY
ELLIOTT WHITNEY

Illustrated by Dan Sayre Groesbeck

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THE BLIND LION OF THE CONGO

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The Blind Lion of the Congo

CHAPTER I

AN AMAZING PROPOSAL

"What's on for to-night, Burt?"

Mr. St. John, a large automobile manufacturer of New Britain, Connecticut, looked across the dinner table at his son Burton. The latter was a boy of seventeen. Although he was sturdy for his age, his features were pale and denoted hard study. As his father and mother watched him there was just a hint of anxiety in their faces.

"Lots," replied the boy. "Got a frat meeting on at seven. Then I've got to finish my last paper for the history prof."

"Can't you let the paper go?" asked his mother. "You've been working pretty hard, Burt!"

"Yes," added Mr. St. John heartily. "Forget the work, son. You've done enough papers lately for a dozen boys."

"Not much!" answered Burt earnestly. "I'm goin' to grab that Yale scholarship. There's only a week till school's out now." [Pg 10]

At that moment a maid appeared at the dining room door.

"Mr. St. John, there's a man called, sir. He didn't give me any name and—"

She was interrupted by a tall, fur-overcoated form that brushed her aside. The visitor's hawk-like face broke instantly into an eager smile.

"Hello, good people!" cried the man, as Mr. St. John sprang to his feet. "Forgotten me, Tom?"

"George!"

"Wallace!"

"Uncle George!"

The three members of the family broke into three simultaneous cries of surprise. The next instant Mrs. St. John was in the arms of the tall man, who supported her with one hand and with the other greeted her.

"Hello, Burt! How's your grip?" he cried as he released the couple and seized the hand of their son.

"Ouch!" yelled the boy, his grin changing to expression of pain. "I ain't no wooden man!" [Pg 11]

"Where on earth did you come from?" exclaimed Mr. St. John, taking his brother-in-law's big coat and handing it to the astonished maid. "We haven't heard from you for a year!"

"Give me something to eat, Tom, and I'll talk later." As the hawk-faced man sat down, Burt gazed at him admiringly. George William Wallace, his uncle, was the boy's greatest hero. Famous under the name of "George William" for his books on little-traveled countries, he was known widely at every end of the world. He had crossed the Turkestan deserts, helped to survey the Cape to Cairo

railway, led armies in China and South America, and explored the recesses of the Sahara. In his brief intervals of relaxation he lived with the St. Johns, having no home of his own.

As he gazed, Burt half wished that his own face was not so square and angular and more like that of his uncle. Mr. Wallace was thin but of very large frame. His close-cropped hair revealed a high forehead, beneath which two intensely black eyes. A long, curving nose gave his face its hawk-like effect, and thin lips and strong chin completed the likeness to some great bird of prey.

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"What are you doing with that fur overcoat in June, George?" asked Mrs. St. John with smile.

"Keeping warm!" shot back the explorer as he pushed away his plate. "This beastly rain goes to the bone, Etta. I landed only yesterday and got the first train up here after leaving my cases at the Explorers' Club."

"Come on with the yarn, uncle!" exclaimed Burt eagerly. "Where've you been this time?"

Mr. Wallace lit one of his brother-in-law's cigars with huge enjoyment and led the way to the library without answering. When all four were comfortably ensconced about the big table he started in.

"Let's see. I wrote you from Naples last time, wasn't it?" The others nodded. "That was just before the war. I got a chance to go to the front as special correspondent, and snapped it up. I hung around for a while at Tripoli, then took a trip to the Turkish camp. There I got into a scrap with a Turk officer and had to run for it. There was no place to run except into the desert, so it took me quite a while to make civilization again.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Burt's father. "I suppose you circled around and made Algiers?"

"Tried to, but a bunch of Gharian slave dealers pulled me into the mountains. I spent two months in the chain gang; then they sold me south. There was no help for it. Instead of escaping to French territory I sneaked off with a racing camel and ended up at the Gold Coast two months ago."

"What!" Mr. St. John leaped up in amazement. "Do you mean to say you crossed the whole Sahara a second time, from north to south?"

"That's what," declared Mr. Wallace. Burt stared at him wide-eyed. "Found some of my old friends and they helped me along. How are you fixed, Tom? Can you put me up all right, Etta?"

"Your old room hasn't been touched," smiled Mrs. St. John as she glanced at her husband. The latter nodded.

"All fine and dandy, old man. Oh, I'm getting along pretty well. We've got some new buildings over at the works. Turning out some great little old cars too. Say, how long are you going to stay?"

"That depends." Mr. Wallace smiled whimsically. "I have a book that I want to finish this time. But I also have a notion that I want to do some ivory hunting in the Congo. If the pull doesn't get too strong I may stay a month or two."

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"Hurray!" chipped in Burt, enthusiastically. "Come along to the frat meeting and tell us about the war last year! We got a 'nitiation on an' you can boss it!"

"No thanks!" laughed his uncle heartily. "When I want to do any lecturing I'll let you know, Burt. By gracious, Tom, the boy looks like a ghost! Been sick?"

"No," replied Mr. St. John gravely. "I'm afraid he's overworked. He's been trying for a scholarship at Yale that the high school offers, and the strain has been a little too much."

"Hm! Won't do, Burt," declared Mr. Wallace. "Books are all right but no use running 'em into the ground. Play baseball?"

"Sure!" replied Burt. "Not this spring though. Been too busy. Besides, I've been helpin' Critch with some stuff."

"Critch?" repeated his uncle, puzzled. "Who's Critch?"

"Howard Critchfield," replied Mr. St. John. "His father is my head draftsman and Burt and Howard are great chums. Howard has a room down at the shops where he works afternoons and putters around at taxidermy."

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Burt glanced at his watch and rose hastily. It was past seven and he had forgotten the time.

"See you later, uncle!" he said as he went to the door. What a tale he would have for the other boys! Despite his uncle's refusal to come with him Burt knew that once he got "the crowd" up to the house Mr. Wallace would provide a most delightful evening.

The next day the explorer's trunks arrived and he got settled in his old quarters. These were filled with hunting trophies, guns and foreign costumes from every quarter of the world. For two days Burt did not see his uncle except at meals, but on Friday evening Mr. Wallace announced that he would like to take a look at the works the next day. Burt promptly volunteered his services, which were accepted.

"You don't look right to me, Burt!" stated Mr. Wallace as they walked down the street after breakfast. "If we were down on the West Coast now I would say you were in for a good dose of fever." [Pg 16]

"Did you ever have it?" asked Burt. He did not relish such close interest in his health, which seemed good enough to him. He also had vivid memories of a vile-tasting remedy which his uncle had proposed for a cold, years before.

"A dozen times," came the reply. "A chap gets it in high and low countries alike in Africa. So you've been helping young Critchfield, eh?"

"A little, sir. We haven't much chance of course but we've got some birds and rabbits and an old weasel we shot. It's heaps of fun."

"Hm!" Mr. Wallace cast a sharp glance at Burt but the boy did not observe it. They were nearing the factories now and presently Burt turned into a large fence-enclosed ground where the works stood.

They did not visit the old shops, which Mr. Wallace had seen before but went through the new assembling rooms and display building. The explorer was much interested in all that he saw and proved to have no slight knowledge of mechanics himself. Mr. St. John saw them from his private office and came out. By his orders they were treated to the unusual sight of a complete machine lying on the floor in pieces and inside of five minutes ready to run. [Pg 17]

"Say!" cried the explorer in admiration. "Civilization certainly can produce wonders, Tom! I suppose that some day there'll be a shop like this in the heart of Africa! But let's have a squint at this chum of yours, Burt. I'd like to size him up a bit."

They left the new buildings and went to one of the older ones where Howard had been given a small room. Without stopping to knock, Burt threw open the door and ushered in his uncle proudly.

As he did so his look of confident pride vanished. Before him stood Critch, his freckled face streaked with dust and blood, his long apron spotted and stained and on the table before him two rabbits half-skinned.

"Gosh! You look like a murderer!" exclaimed Burt in dismay. "Uncle George, this is Critch. He ain't always in this shape though."

"Sorry I can't shake hands, Mr. Wallace!" said the red-haired boy. To his surprise the explorer laughed and stuck out his hand. [Pg 18]

"Nonsense, lad! Shake!"

Critch dropped his knife, wiped his hand hastily on his apron and gripped that of the explorer heartily. "Frank Gates brought in those tame rabbits of his that died," he explained. "I told him it wasn't worth while stuffing them this weather, but he had the coin to pay for 'em and pretty near got sore about it, so I took on the job. I'm awful glad to meet you, sir! I've heard a heap about you, and Burt's lent me all your books."

"Go right ahead," insisted Mr. Wallace. "I'd like to see how you do it. Many's the skin I've had to put up in a hurry if I wanted it, but I'd sooner tramp a hundred miles than handle the beastly things!"

Critch picked up his knife and Mr. Wallace glanced around the little room. On the walls stood shelves of books and stuffed birds and animals. Bottles of liquids stood in the corners, and over the door was a stuffed horned owl mounted on a tree branch.

"That looks good!" commented the explorer approvingly. "That owl's a mighty good piece of work, boys!" He turned to Howard. "There you have him—nice and clean! You know how to handle a knife, I see. Ever hear how we tackle the big skins?" [Pg 19]

"No," replied Critch with interest. "Tell us about it, Mr. Wallace, if you don't mind! I've read a little, but nothing definite."

"With soft-skinned animals like deer we usually do just what you're doing with those rabbits—simply make incisions, slit 'em from neck to tail and peel off the skins. By the way, what do you use for preservative?"

"Get it ready-mixed," replied Critch and pointed to the bottles. "It's odorless, takes the grease out o' the skin, and don't cost much. Guess I'll use arsenic on these, though. They need something pretty strong."

"I see," went on Mr. Wallace. "Well, with thick skins like elephant or rhino, it's a different matter. I never fixed an elephant skin myself but I've seen other fellows do it. They take it off in sections, rub it well with salt and let it dry after the fat's gone. Then a dozen blacks get around each section with their paring knives and get busy."

"Paring knives!" cried Burt. "What for?"

"Pare down the skin," smiled Mr. Wallace. "Thick skins are too heavy to carry and too thick to be pliable, so the skimmers often spend a week paring down a skin till it's portable. Then it's rubbed [Pg 20]

with salt again or else packed in brine and shipped down to the coast or back wherever your agents are, who get it preserved right for you."

They talked for half an hour while the rabbits were being finished. Then Burt and his uncle left the building, and finding that Mr. St. John had already gone to lunch, started home themselves.

"Say, Burt," said Mr. Wallace as they walked down the street, "how'd you like to come to Africa with me next month?"

CHAPTER II

[Pg 21]

MR. CRITCHFIELD IS INTERVIEWED

"What! Me?" Burt stopped short and stared at his uncle. Mr. Wallace chuckled and lifted one eyebrow.

"Of course, if you don't want to go—" he began.

"Want to!" shouted Burt, careless of the passers-by who were looking at them curiously. "You can bet your life I want to! I'd give a million dollars to go with you!" His face dropped suddenly. "What's the use, Uncle George? You know's well as I do, the folks ain't going to stand for anything like that. Why, dad'd have a fit if he thought I was in Africa. What's the use of dreaming?"

"Here—trot along!" His uncle seized his arm and drew him on toward home. "I guess you're right about that, Burt. Anyhow, you keep mum and let me do the talking. Mind, now, don't you butt in anywhere along the line. I'm dead in earnest, young man. Maybe we'll be able to do something if you lie low and let me handle it. Understand?"

[Pg 22]

"I understand," replied Burt a trifle more hopefully. "Gee! If I could only go! Could I shoot real lions and elephants, uncle?"

"Dozens of 'em!" laughed Mr. Wallace cheerfully. "Where I want to go there are no game laws to hinder. You'd have a tough time for a while, though. It's not like a camping trip up the Maine coast."

"Oh, shucks!" replied the boy eagerly. "Why, there ain't a boy in the world that wouldn't be crazy to hike with you. They've *got* to let me go!"

Although nearly bursting with his secret Burt said nothing of it until he returned to the shops that afternoon and joined Critch. Then he was unable to hold in and he poured out the story to his chum. Critch listened in incredulous amazement, which changed to cheerful envy when he found Burt was not joking.

"Why, you dog-goned old bookworm!" he exclaimed when Burt finished. The red-headed boy was genuinely delighted over his chum's good luck. "Think of you out there shootin' your head off, while I'm plugging away here at home! Think your folks'll kick?"

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"Of course they will," groaned Burt gloomily. "Ever know a feller to want any fun, without his folks kicking like sin? They like Uncle George a heap, but when it comes to takin' the darlin' boy where he can have a reg'lar circus, it's no go. Darn it, I wish I was grown-up and didn't have any boss!"

"It'll be a blamed shame if they don't let you go, old sport!" agreed Critch with a smile. "But you haven't asked 'em yet. Mebbe they'll come around all right."

"Huh!" grunted Burt sarcastically. "Mebbe I'll find a million dollars in my clothes to-morrow morning! Say—"

"Well? Spit her out!" laughed Critch as Burt paused suddenly.

"S'pose I could work you in on the game!" cried Burt enthusiastically. "That'd help a lot if the folks knew you were going, too, and if your dad would fall for it we might take you as some kind of assistant! I tell you—I'll take you as my personal servant, my valet! How'd that strike you, just for a bluff?"

"Strike me fine," responded Critch vigorously. "I'd be willin' to work my way—"

[Pg 24]

"Oh, shucks! I didn't mean that. I mean to get your expenses paid that way, see? After we got going—"

"Come out of it!" interrupted Critch. "You talk as if you was really going. Where do you reckon my dad comes in? S'pose he'll stand for any game like that? Not on your life! Dad's figgering on pulling me into the office when school's out."

Burt left for home greatly sobered by the practical common sense of his chum. He was quickly enthusiastic over any project and was apt to be carried away by it, while Critch was just the opposite. None the less, Burt was determined that if it was possible for him to go, his chum should go too.

After dinner that evening while the family was sitting in the library, Mr. Wallace cautiously introduced the subject to Burt's parents. Burt was upstairs in his own room.

"Etta, isn't that boy of yours getting mighty peaked?"

"I'm afraid so," sighed Mrs. St. John anxiously. "But we can't make him give up that scholarship. I'll be glad when school is over next week." [Pg 25]

"I guess we'll pack him off with Howard," put in Mr. St. John. "I'll send 'em up the Kennebec on a canoe trip."

"Nonsense!" snorted the explorer. "What the boy needs is something different. Complete change—ocean air—make him forget all about his books for six months!"

"There's a good deal in that, Tom," agreed his sister thoughtfully. "Perhaps if I took him abroad for a month or two—"

"Stop right there!" interrupted the explorer. "Take him abroad, indeed! Tie him to your apron strings and lead him to bang-up hotels? Dress him up every day, stuff him on high-class grub? Nonsense! If you want him to go abroad, for goodness sake give him a flannel shirt and a letter of credit, and let him go. Don't baby him! Give him a chance to develop his own resources. Guess you didn't have any indulgent papa, Tom! All the boy wants is a chance. Why won't you let him have it?"

"Don't be a fool, George!" cautioned his sister, smiling at the outburst. "You know perfectly well that I don't want my boy running wild. He's all we have, and we intend to take care of him. And I warn you right here not to put any of your notions into his head. It's bad enough to have one famous man in the family!" [Pg 26]

The explorer laughed and winked at Mr. St. John, who was enjoying the discussion from the shelter of his cigar smoke. At this, however, he came to the aid of his brother-in-law.

"Yes, George is perfectly right, Etta. Burt needs to shift for himself a bit, and I think the Kennebec trip will be just the thing for him if we give him a free hand and let him suit himself. I don't want to send him off to foreign countries all alone."

"Look here, Tom." Mr. Wallace leaned forward and spoke very earnestly. "That kind of a vacation isn't worth much to a good, healthy boy. He wants something he has earned, not something that's shoved at him. Make Burt earn some money while he's having a good time. He'll enjoy it twice as much. Make him pay his own expenses somewhere; do something that will repay him, or get busy on some outdoor stunt that will give him something new and interesting to absorb him. Think it over!" [Pg 27]

The conversation ended there for the night. Mr. Wallace was satisfied that he had sown good seed, however, and went up to Burt's room with a smile.

"Hello, uncle!" cried the boy, giving up his chair and flinging himself down on the bed. "Say anything to the folks yet?"

"A little. We'll have to go slow, remember! Now just what do you know about putting up skins and taking them from their rightful owners?"

"Me? Not a whole lot. Let's see. I helped Critch skin an' mount Chuck Evan's bulldog, some birds, a weasel—"

"Hold on!" laughed Mr. Wallace. "That's not what I mean. Know anything about horned animals?"

"No," admitted Burt. "I've read up 'bout 'em though. So's Critch."

"Suppose you had a deer's horns to take off. How'd you do it?"

"Take his skin off by cuttin' straight down the breast to the tail," replied Burt promptly. [Pg 28]

"Make cross-cuts down the inside o' each leg an' turn him inside out. For the horns you make a cut between 'em, then back down the neck a little."

"Wouldn't you take his skull?" questioned Mr. Wallace.

"Sure! I forgot that. You'd have to cut between the lids and eye-sockets down to the lips an' cut these from the bone. For the skull, cut her off and boil her."

"Pretty good!" commented his uncle. "I guess you've got the knowledge all right. How'd you do in Africa about the skin?"

"Nothing," grinned Burt. "'Cording to your books you just salt 'em well and ship 'em to the coast."

"All right!" laughed his uncle. "Get those rabbits done up?"

"You bet!" Burt made a wry face. "We rubbed them with arsenic. That's about the only stuff that'll hold them in this weather. We make money though—or Critch does. We've done lots of birds for a dollar each, and we got five for Chuck's bulldog."

"I wish you'd take me over to your friend's home to-morrow night if you've nothing special on," replied Mr. Wallace. "I'd like to have a little chat with him. Are his parents living?" [Pg 29]

"His father is, but not his mother. They only live about three blocks down the line. We'll go over after supper."

"Well, I'll go back and write another chapter before going to bed." Mr. Wallace rose and departed. He left Burt wondering. Why did his uncle want to see Critch?

He wondered more than ever the next evening. When they arrived at the small frame house in which Howard and his father lived, Mr. Wallace chatted with the boys for a little and then turned to Mr. Critchfield, a kindly, shrewd-eyed man of forty-five.

"Mr. Critchfield, suppose we send the boys off for a while? I'd like to have a little talk with you if you don't mind."

"All right, uncle," laughed Burt. "We'll skin out. Come on up to the house, Critch."

When they got outside, the red-haired boy's curiosity got the better of him and he asked Burt what his uncle wanted with his father.

"Search me," answered Burt thoughtfully."

"He put me through the third degree yesterday about skinning deer. Next time he gives me a chance I'll ask him about taking you along." [Pg 30]

"What!" exclaimed Howard. "Have your folks come around?"

"I don't know. I'm leaving it all to Uncle George. Believe me, they've got to come around or I'll—I'll run away!"

"Yes, I've got a picture o' you running away!" grinned Critch. "Mebbe dad'll tell me what's up when I get home."

But Critch was not enlightened that night nor for many nights thereafter. This was the last week of school and Burt was too busy with his examinations to waste much time speculating on the African trip. Howard was also pretty well occupied, although not trying for any scholarship, and for the rest of the week both boys gave all their attention to school. On Friday evening Burt arrived home jubilantly.

"Done!" he shouted, bursting in on his mother and uncle. "Got it!"

"What, the scholarship? How do you know?" asked his mother in surprise.

"Prof. Garwood tipped me off. Won't get the reg'lar announcement till commencement exercises next week but he says I needn't worry! Hurray! One more year and then Yale for mine!" [Pg 31]

"Good boy!" cried Mr. Wallace. "Guess you've plugged for it though. Burt, I'll have that book finished next week. If she goes through all right I'll be off by the end of the month for Africa." He winked meaningly. "Guess I'll take you along."

"What!" exclaimed Mrs. St. John in amazement. "Take him along? Why, George William Wallace, what do you mean?"

"What on earth d'you suppose I mean?" chuckled her brother. "Why shouldn't Burt take his vacation with me if he wants to? Don't you think I am competent to take care of him?"

Burt was quivering with eagerness and his mother hesitated as she caught the anxious light in his eyes. He stood waiting in silence, however.

"George," replied his mother at last, "are you serious about this? Do you really mean—"

"Of course I do!" laughed the explorer confidently. "If I know anything about it, Burt'd come back twice as much a man as he is now. Besides we ought to pull out ahead of the game, because I'm going after ivory." [Pg 32]

"Wait till Tom comes home," declared Burt's mother with decision. "We'll talk it over at dinner. You'll have a hard task to convince me that there's any sense in such a scheme, George!"

As her brother was quite aware of that fact he forbore to press the subject just then. A little later Mr. St. John came home from the works and at the dinner table his wife brought up the subject herself.

"Tom, this foolish brother of mine wants to take Burton away to Africa with him next month! Did you ever hear of anything so silly?"

"Don't know about that," replied Mr. St. John, to his son's intense surprise. "It depends on what part of Africa, Etta. You must remember that the world's not so small as it used to be. You can jump on a boat in New York and go to Africa or China or Russia and never have to bother your head about a thing. What's the proposition, George?"

"I've been thinking that it would do Burt a lot of good to go with me to the Congo," answered the explorer. "The sea voyage would set him up in fine shape, and we would keep out of the low lands, you know."

"The Congo!" cried his sister in dismay. "Why, that's where they torture people! Do you—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Mr. Wallace impatiently. "The Congo is just as civilized as parts of our

own country. We can take a steamer at the mouth and travel for thousands of miles by it. I have one recruit from New Britain already, and I'd like to have Burt if you'll spare him."

"Why, who's going from here?" asked Mr. St. John in surprise.

"Young Critchfield," came the reply.

CHAPTER III

[Pg 34]

THE DECISION

"Critch!" shouted Burt, unable to restrain his amazement. His parents looked equally incredulous and Mr. Wallace explained with a smile.

"Yes, Howard Critchfield. You see, I'd like to bring back some skins and things but I detest the beastly work of getting them off and putting them in shape. So when I found that Critch was no slouch at taxidermy and only needed the chance, it occurred to me to take him along. I saw his father about it and proposed to pay all his expenses and a small salary. Mr. Critchfield came around after a little. He saw that it would be a splendid education for the boy—would give him a knowledge of the world and would develop him amazingly."

"Why didn't Critch tell me about it?" cried Burt indignantly.

"He didn't know!" laughed his uncle. "His father and I agreed that we'd let him get safely through school without having other things to think of. Now look at the thing sensibly, you folks. We wouldn't be away longer than six months at most. Burt would be in far more danger in his canoe on the Kennebec than in a big steamer on the Congo."

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"But after you leave the steamer? You can't shoot ivory from the boat, I presume," protested Mr. St. John.

"And what about snakes and savage tribes?" put in his wife.

"My dear Etta," replied the explorer patiently, "we will be near few savage tribes. I might almost say that there are none. As for snakes, I've seen only three deadly ones in all the years I've spent in Africa. After we leave the steamer, Tom, we'll get out of the jungles into the highlands. Burt stands just as much chance of getting killed here as there. An auto might run over him any day, a mad dog might bite him or a chimney might fall on him!"

For all his anxiety Burt joined heartily in the laugh that went up at his uncle's concluding words. The laughter cleared the somewhat tense situation, and the discussion was carried into the library. Burt saw, much to his relief, that his father was not absolutely opposed to the trip, although his mother seemed anxious enough.

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"Now give us your proposition, George," said his father as they settled down around the table. "What's your definite idea about it?"

"Good! Now we're getting down to cases!" cried the explorer with a smile at his sister. "Burt, get us that large atlas over there." Burt had the atlas on the table in an instant. "Let's see—Africa—here we are. Get around here, folks!" As he spoke Mr. Wallace pulled out a pencil and pointed to the mouth of the Congo River.

"Here's the mouth of the Congo, you see. Here we step aboard one of the State steamers. These are about like the steamers plying between New York and Boston. Following the Congo up and around for twelve hundred miles, roughly speaking, we come to the Aruwimi river. Up this—and here we are at Yambuya, the head of navigation on the Aruwimi. From here we'll go on up by boat or launch for three or four hundred miles farther, then strike off after elephants."

"But how do you get down there in the first place?" asked Mr. St. John, who seemed keenly interested.

"Any way you want to!" returned the explorer. "There are lines running to Banana Point or Boma, the capital, from Antwerp, Lisbon, Bordeaux, Hamburg, or from England. We'll probably go from England though."

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"My gracious!" said Burt's mother. "I had no idea that the Congo was so near civilization as all that! Are there real launches away up there in the heart of Africa?"

"Launches? Automobiles, probably!" laughed her husband.

"Of course," agreed Mr. Wallace. "There are motor trucks in service at several points. We could even take the trip by railroad if we wished, and we'll telegraph you direct when we reach there!"

"Well that's news to me!" declared Mr. St. John. "I thought that Central Africa was a blank wilderness filled with gorillas and savages. Seems to me I remember something about game laws in Roosevelt's book. How about that?"

"There are stringent laws in Uganda and British East Africa," replied Mr. Wallace. "But I intend to depend on trade more than on shooting for my ivory. Now look at this Makua river that runs west, up north of the Aruwimi. I'm not going to take any chances on being held up at Boma after

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getting out. There are several trading companies who'd be tickled to death to let me bring out a bunch of ivory and then rob me of it at the last minute. So we're going right up to the Makua and down that river to the French Congo. I've got a mighty strong pull with the French people ever since they made me a Commander of the Legion of Honor for my Sahara explorations."

"I see." Burt's father gazed at the map reflectively then looked up with a sudden smile. "You say 'we' as if it was all settled, George!"

"Oh, I was talking about young Critchfield and myself," laughed the explorer. "Come now, Etta, doesn't it sound a whole lot more reasonable than it did at first?"

"Yes," admitted his sister. "I must say it does. Especially if it is all so civilized as you say."

"Now look here." Mr. Wallace bent over the map again and traced down the Congo to Stanley Falls. "A railroad runs from here over to the Great Lakes, at Mahagi on the Albert Nyanza. The Great Lakes are all connected and have steamer lines on them, so that you can get on a train or boat at the west coast and travel right through to the east coast just like going from New York to Duluth. Get me?"

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"Why," exclaimed Burt, "I thought you had to have porters and all that? Can you just hop on a train and shoot?"

"Not exactly," laughed his uncle. "When we leave the Aruwimi we'll probably take a hundred bearers with us."

"Well, it's not a question that we can decide on the spur of the moment," announced Mrs. St. John. "We'll talk it over, George. If conditions are as you say, perhaps—"

"Hurray!" burst out her son excitedly. "You've got to give in, dad! Mother's on our side!" And Burt darted off to find his chum.

"The fact that you've won over Mr. Critchfield counts a good deal," smiled Mr. St. John as the door slammed. "He's a solid, level-headed chap and, besides, I really think it might do Burt good."

Burt found his chum in a state of high excitement. Critch's father had just told him about Mr. Wallace's proposal and his own qualified consent.

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"I'll have to think it over some more," he had said. "It's too big to rush into blindly. As it stands, however, I see no reason why you shouldn't go and make a little money, besides getting the trip."

Burt and Critch got an atlas and went over the route that Mr. Wallace had traced. When Burt reported all that his uncle had said about civilization in the Congo, Critch heaved a deep sigh.

"Seems 'most too good to be true," he said. "To think of us away over there! I don't see where your uncle's going to clear up much coin, though. It must cost like smoke."

"So does ivory," grinned Burt. He was in high spirits now that there actually seemed to be some hope of his taking the trip. "He ain't worried about the money. Say, I'm mighty glad I've been learning French! It'll come in handy down there."

"You won't have any pleasure tour," put in Mr. Critchfield quietly. "Mr. Wallace means business. He told me he meant to leave the whole matter of skins and heads to you two chaps."

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"Wonder what he wants them for?" speculated Burt. "Mebbe he's going to start a museum."

"Hardly," laughed Mr. Critchfield. "He said he wanted to give them to some Explorers' Club in New York. That means they'll have to be well done, Howard. I want you to be a credit to him if he takes you on this trip."

"I will." Howard nodded with confident air. "Just let me get a chance! How's the scholarship? Hear anything yet?"

"Got her cinched," replied Burt happily. "Well, guess I'll get back. See you to-morrow!"

For the next week the question of the African trip was left undecided. When Burt had received his definite announcement of the scholarship, dependent on his next year's work, Mr. Wallace urged that the matter be brought to a decision one way or the other. On the following Saturday evening Mr. Critchfield and Howard arrived at the St. John residence and the "Board of Directors went into executive session," as the explorer laughingly said.

"There's one thing to be considered," announced Mr. Critchfield. "That's the length of your absence. Next year is Howard's last year in high school and I wouldn't like his course to be smashed up." Mr. St. John nodded approval and all looked at Mr. Wallace expectantly.

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"I anticipated that," he replied quietly. "I saw Mr. Garwood, the superintendent of schools, yesterday. I told him just what we wanted to do and asked him about Burt's scholarship. School will not begin till the twentieth of September. He said if you boys were back by November and could make up a reasonable amount of work he'd make an exception in your cases owing to your good records. I'm fairly confident that we'll be back by November."

"I don't see how," interposed Mr. St. John. "I've been reading up on Stanley's journeys in that country and—"

"Hold on!" laughed Mr. Wallace. "Please remember, Tom, that Stanley made his trips in the eighties—nearly thirty-five years ago. Where it took him months to penetrate we can go in hours and days. This is the end of June. By the first of August we'll be steaming up the Congo. I don't think it'll take us two months to cross from the Aruwimi to the Makua and reach French territories. In any case, I intend to return direct from Loango, a port in the French Congo. We'll come down the river under the French flag in a French steamer, turn the corner to Loango and there'll be a steamer there waiting to bring us and our stuff direct to New York. I'm almost sure we'll be back by November."

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"Even if we aren't," put in Howard, "it'll only throw us out half a semester."

"Supposing they do miss connections, Critchfield," said Mr. St. John, "I wouldn't worry. It is a great thing for the boys and perhaps an extra six months in school won't do any harm. However, figure on getting back."

"I guess it's up to you, Etta!" laughed Mr. Wallace. "What do you say? Yes or no?"

As Burt said afterward, "I came so near havin' heart failure for a minute that I could see the funeral procession." Mrs. St. John hesitated, her head on her hand. Then looking up, her eye met Burt's and she smiled.

"Yes—"

"Hurray!" Critch joined Burt in a shout of delight, while the latter gave his mother a stout hug of gratitude.

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"I don't know what we'll do here without you," she continued when freed. "When will you start, George?"

"Since we have to be back by November," replied the explorer, "we'll leave here Monday morning and catch the *Carmania* from New York Tuesday. I'll wire to-night for accommodations."

"Monday!" cried Mr. St. John in amazement. "Why, there'll be no time to get the boys outfits or pack their trunks, or—"

"We don't want outfits or trunks, eh, Burt?" smiled Mr. Wallace. "The comfort of traveling, Tom, is to be able to take a suit case and light out for anywhere on earth in an hour. That's what we'll do. Wear a decent suit of clothes, boys, and take a few changes of linen. We'll reach Liverpool Friday night and London on Saturday. We'll get the outfits there, and if we hustle we can pick up one of the African Steamship Company's steamers Tuesday or Wednesday."

"But your book?" asked Mrs. St. John. "Is that finished?"

"Bother the book!" ejaculated her brother impatiently. "I'll write the last chapter to-night and if the publishers don't like it they can change it around to suit themselves. I'm going to Africa and I'm going to leave New York Tuesday morning rain or shine!"

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"That's the way to talk!" shouted Burt, wildly excited. "Good for you, mother! I'll bring you back a lion skin for your den, dad!"

Had Burt been able to foresee just what lion skin he would bring back and what he would pass through before he got it he might not have been so enthusiastic over the prospect of his African trip.

CHAPTER IV

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OUTFITTING

The trip was begun very much as Mr. Wallace had outlined. The news spread rapidly that Burt and Howard were going to Africa, and when the two boys arrived at the station early Monday morning a good-sized crowd of friends was present to see them off.

"Take good care of yourself," cautioned Mrs. St. John as she kissed her son good-bye. "Don't be afraid to telegraph us!"

The train pulled out with a last cheer from the frat fellows, and Burt and Howard realized that they were actually off. They arrived in New York at noon and Mr. Wallace took them direct to the Explorers' Club for luncheon.

Here they first began to feel in touch with the outside world. The club was an institution composed of explorers, hunters and wanderers in foreign lands. Its walls were decorated with game heads, arms and armor of many savage tribes, while in glass cases were hung odd costumes and headgear and unique relics and curios. At the dining-room tables the boys saw bronzed and bearded men who nodded to Mr. Wallace like old friends or spoke to him in strange tongues.

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"You fellows wait for me in the library," said the explorer as they finished luncheon. "I guess you'll find plenty to amuse you there. We'll stop here for to-night. I'm going down to send off some cables now and get part of our outfit ordered ahead. When I come back we'll go out and see the town a little."

"Did you get rooms on the steamer?" asked Critch.

"Wired last night. The answer will be down here at the office but there's not much doubt about getting them. See you in the library."

The boys made themselves at home in the library and in half an hour Mr. Wallace returned with the stateroom slips. Then they took a taxi and made a few purchases for the voyage. As there was nothing to be obtained except some clean linen and a steamer rug each, they spent most of the afternoon "seeing" New York City.

The evening spent at the club was a wonderful one to the boys. On talking it over later they found that they had only a confused memory of meeting several famous men and of hearing some surprising stories.

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"Critch!" whispered Burt as they lay in bed. "'Member that thin fellow with the scar on his chin? S'pose his yarn was true!"

"What? About being tortured by New Guinea cannibals?" returned his chum. "Prob'ly. That sure was a whopper though that the man with the black beard told! The one that'd been in China, I mean."

"Said he had photos of the Forbidden City, didn't he?" asked Burt. "Gee! That story of his about the joss with the emerald eyes and the ropes of pearls—"

So it went until long past midnight when the boys finally fell asleep. They were up early and after breakfast took a taxi again and went on board the *Carmania*, which was to sail at ten.

The voyage was uneventful to Mr. Wallace but proved of tremendous novelty to the boys. By the time they reached Liverpool Burt felt like new. His color was returning fast and the sea air had filled out his lungs once more and put him into prime condition. The question of their outfit was what puzzled the boys most until they put it up to Mr. Wallace.

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"Oh, we'll get all that in London," he explained. "I cabled ahead so that most of it will be ready. You see, boys, these outfitters put up boxes of food in regular amounts for each day. All I have to do is to tell 'em how long we'll be gone and how many of us there are. They pack a box—chop-boxes, they're called—holding enough for so many days. According to custom the blacks only expect to carry sixty pounds, so these boxes are made up at that weight. All are of tin, hermetically sealed. Some firms use colored bands to distinguish the boxes but ours numbers each box and furnishes us with lists of what they contain."

"Some system, isn't it!" exclaimed Critch admiringly. "Do we have to carry everything with us? Must be an awful freight bill!"

"Can't go to Africa for nothing," laughed Mr. Wallace. "Yes, we'll get most of that stuff here. We could get it at Boma but I'd sooner depend on the English firm."

"Wish we could stay longer in London," sighed Burt. "I hate to rush off without seeing anything of the city."

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"Well, our boat leaves Tuesday afternoon and this is Friday," replied his uncle. "Our chop-boxes are already on board, I suppose. Our trunks—tin-lined by the way—will probably go down Monday night if we get our stuff Saturday. I'd like to spend a week in London myself but if we're to be back home by November we haven't much time to waste."

The Liverpool customs did not delay them long as they had only a suit case each, and they took the night express for London. The boys were much surprised and not a little dismayed when they entered the English compartment cars, so different from the coaches they were used to. They soon found that it was much nicer to travel by themselves, however, as Mr. Wallace interviewed the guard and provided against intrusion. In the morning they awoke to find themselves in London.

Mr. Wallace took them to the famous Carleton House for breakfast, now entirely rebuilt after its fire of the year before. When they had finished, all three went to the writing room.

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"Take out your pencils now," said the explorer, "and get busy. I know just about what I want to take and a list ready-made will save a lot of time in the shops. Ready?"

The two boys were not only ready but anxious. The lists that they wrote out were identical. Here is that of their personal effects and clothes as Burt made it out.

- Four suits underwear, Indian gauze.
- Two ditto, woolen.
- Two heavy gabardine shooting suits.
- Two flannel shirts, khaki cartridge pockets.
- Two pair high boots. One pair of soft leather.
- Extra thick leggings, two pairs.
- Camelshair poncho blanket, convertible.
- Kid-lined gloves, two pairs.
- Sleeping bag, waterproof.
- Wool socks and pajamas.
- Two khaki helmets.

Mosquito net for head and body.
Cholera belt, flannel.
Zeiss field glasses.
Large colored silk handkerchiefs, six.
Compass. Toilet articles.

"There," exclaimed Mr. Wallace as he ran over Burt's list, "that looks pretty good to me. You won't need the wool underwear unless you get prickly heat. The leggings are the most important. If you get scratched up by spear-grass and thorns and then step into some swamp-pool it's all off. You'd get craw-craw sure."

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"What's that?" asked Critch. "Sounds like crow!"

"It's a skin disease," replied Mr. Wallace. "Something frightful, too. The poncho will serve for blanket and raincoat, but this is the dry season. Must have the mosquito net, though. When we get up the Aruwimi we'll find little bees about as big as gnats but a whole lot worse, and it'll need thick nets to keep 'em out. New for the armament."

Burt's "armory" consisted of the following weapons:

Double-barreled Holland .450 cordite rifle, for close quarters.
Winchester .405 rifle for general use.
Twenty-gauge Parker shotgun.
Eight-inch skinning knife.

"Ain't we going to take revolvers?" asked Burt disappointedly as his uncle finished.

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"No," replied the latter. "They're of no use whatever. I'll take mine from force of habit but you chaps will never need one. Oh, the ammunition! Put down a hundred solid and a hundred soft-nosed cartridges for the Hollands; for the Winchesters two hundred of each, and six boxes of shells. That'll be enough to last us double the time."

"How 'bout a camera?" asked Critch anxiously. "Will we be able to tote one along?"

"Surest thing you know!" replied Mr. Wallace. "We'll take one of those new moving-picture machines. They're no larger than a camera and you can take motion pictures or straight shots on the reel."

"Gee! That'll be great!" cried Burt delightedly. "But won't the heat spoil the reels? An' don't they cost like fury?"

"The reels will be hermetically sealed before and after using," explained his uncle. "Needn't worry 'bout them. The whole outfit only costs twelve or thirteen pounds—say sixty dollars. It's well worth it, too. Now for the tents. We're going to travel light as possible, so put down two double-roofed ridge tents twelve by ten, with ground-sheets. Three cots without mattresses. You'll have to do without them or pillows—they're a beastly nuisance to pack along. Canvas bath each and condensing outfit to supply fresh water."

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"Why's that, uncle?" asked Burt in surprise. "Lots of fresh water, ain't there?"

"Lots," smiled his uncle, "and lots o' guinea worms, fever germs, poisons and other things in it. Better add a four-quart canteen, glass stoppers, to your personal list. Can't take any cork or the roaches'll eat it. Two blankets for each person, and six towels. I guess that's all we need put down now, boys."

"Hold on there!" cried practical Critch abruptly. "How 'bout eatin' utensils and fryin' pans, medicine, can openers and all them things?"

"All arranged for," laughed Mr. Wallace. "The cooking part of it will be up to John Quincy Adams Washington."

"John—who?" stammered Burt. "Say it again, please!"

For answer Mr. Wallace pressed a button and a footman appeared.

"Send the manager here at once, please." The man bowed and withdrew and while the boys were still staring at the explorer in wonder a dapper little man appeared bowing.

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"Mr. Wallace? Glad to see you looking so well, sir! What can I do for you?"

"I want that fellow Washington," smiled the explorer. "Can you let me have him for say three months? I'm going down to Africa and he'll have to go along."

"Certainly! I'll send him right up, sir." The manager vanished with another bow and Mr. Wallace turned to the boys.

"Washington—or John rather—is a Liberia boy I picked up five years ago. He's the best cook on earth! He's been in China and South America with me and whenever I don't need him he has a steady jo as fifth chef here. Ah, here he is!"

An immense black man appeared, wearing a grin that almost hid his face, as Burt expressed it. He stepped up and caught the explorer's hand, not shaking it but pressing it to his forehead as he spoke.

"Glad to see you, sar! What for you want John now?"

"Africa, John. This is my nephew, Mr. St. John, and my friend, Mr. Critchfield, who will go along. We leave for the Congo Tuesday." [Pg 56]

"Pleased to meet you, sar!" The grinning black pressed the hands of Burt and Howard to his forehead in turn. "What boat we leave, sar?"

"The *Benguela*. African Steamship Company docks."

"Hit's Liverpool boat, sar! What time hit leave London docks?"

"Three o'clock, John. Here's a hundred pounds." Mr. Wallace peeled off five twenty-pound bank notes and handed them to the negro; "that ought to buy your outfit, eh?"

"By hall means, sar! Thank you. Hi'll 'ave most helegant brass pots, sar!"

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Burt as the cook withdrew. "You hand out bank notes as if you're made o' money! S'pose the coon'll ever show up with all that wad on him?"

"Show up?" repeated Mr. Wallace. "Why, I'd turn over my bill book to him and never count it when he gave it back! He's a blamed sight more honest than most white men you'll meet down there. And nerve! He carried me five miles on his back once, in northern China, stopping occasionally to fight off a bunch of bandits. That's the kind of man John is." [Pg 57]

"Funny accent he's got," said Critch. "I thought all coons talked like they do down south."

"You'll get over that pretty quick!" laughed the explorer heartily. "John can use West Coast, cockney, Spanish and half a dozen other accents accordin' to whom he's been mixing up with latest. When we strike the Congo he'll probably fall into French. Well, let's trot along to Piccadilly and get measured. It's gettin' on toward noon." [Pg 58]

CHAPTER V

THE CONGO

The boys were now due to receive another surprise. When their taxi drew up they jumped out, fully expecting to see a wonderful store like those of New York. Instead they found themselves before a dingy little shop whose aspect gave them distinct disappointment.

"No," laughed Mr. Wallace as he dismissed the taxi, "it's all right! Doesn't look up to much but it sends out good stuff."

This was the gunshop and they found it very different inside. Mr. Wallace had no time to waste in having special guns made, so the clerks measured the boys' shoulders and arms and that was all there was to it, for the guns would be slightly altered and sent on board.

Now the party went to the Boma Trading Company's store. Here they found that the chop-boxes had all gone on board their ship. Mr. Wallace ordered three Borroughs and Wellcome medicine cases, specially made up for the West Coast. He also procured two hypodermic syringes and a small quantity of Pasteur serums. [Pg 59]

"We'll probably never need them," he explained, as they left the store, "but in case our men strike a snake a quick hypodermic is the only thing to save them. Then we have poisoned arrows to consider also. If we happened to get into the pigmy country—which I hope we won't—it'll take a powerful anti-tetanic serum to kill their poisons."

After a lunch they returned to the Boma Company. The lists which Mr. Wallace had given the clerks had been filled and now each of them was measured for the clothes and personal equipment. This consumed an hour, after which they took another taxi and went to a camera supply house.

The boys went into extravagant delight over the small and compact moving-picture outfit. Burt promptly took charge of this, or rather promised to take charge, for when the whole outfit had been sealed up it would be sent down to the steamer like the other supplies.

"Tell you what," he cried, "we'll get some great little old pictures! You let an elephant chase you, Uncle George, while I get a good view and Critch shoots him!" [Pg 60]

"Don't want much, do you?" laughed his uncle. "Nothing like that for mine. I'd sooner have an elephant after me, at that, than a big buffalo. That's the most dangerous animal we'll find in Africa."

"How 'bout rhinoceros?" challenged Critch.

"All poppycock," snorted the explorer. "A rhino can't see ten feet away. He goes by smell. He'll usually run away unless he's wounded. But a buffalo doesn't wait to be wounded. You rouse him up out of a comfortable feeding place and he'll go for you. Takes more than one bullet to kill him unless you're lucky."

The boys now stocked up with fresh linen for the voyage while Mr. Wallace looked up his own

guns, which he usually stored in London. They stopped at the Carleton over Sunday and Monday. As Burt's father had sales offices in London they secured a large touring car without cost and spent the two days riding about the historic city. There were various minor details of their outfits to be attended to on Monday and on Tuesday noon they went aboard the *Benguela*, when she arrived from Liverpool.

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She proved to be a large cargo and passenger boat and was very comfortably fitted up. They had seen nothing of John Quincy Adams Washington but Mr. Wallace smilingly assured them that he would show up in time. Sure enough, when they went up the gangplank the big negro was waiting with his all-embracing grin.

"Good mornin', sar, good mornin'!" he cried, taking charge of their hand baggage and assuming a lordly attitude over the stewards. "Very hauspicious day, sar! John t'ink we 'ave very fine trip, sar!"

And a fine trip they had. There were a dozen other passengers on board. Most of these were clerks or traders going out to positions at Sierra Leone or the Gold Coast, with one or two Frenchmen and officials of the Congo State. When they crossed the Equator there were the usual ceremonies and horseplay among the sailors, and the boys thoroughly enjoyed themselves. By the time they left the Gold Coast behind and headed for Banana Point Burt felt better than he had ever been in his life and his uncle assured him that he need not worry about the fever.

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Finally the long reddish cliffs and grassy up-lands of the Congo coast drew into sight late on the fifteenth afternoon. The *Benguela* took a black pilot aboard and proceeded straight up to the port of Banana. Mr. Wallace and the boys at once disembarked and interviewed the customs officials and took a launch up to the capital, Boma. The steamer would follow them after discharging some cargo.

The next morning Mr. Wallace put on his ribbon of Commander of the Legion of Honor. The boys were amazed at the respect which this gained for all of them when they sought an audience with the governor general. After explaining to him the object of their trip and the length of time they would be gone, Mr. Wallace arranged to have all the necessary papers made out and to charter one of the State steamers to take their outfit up the river.

"I can give you only a small one," said the governor general. "Unfortunately, there are few at my disposal just now. Stay! You might arrange with Captain Montenay. He chartered *La Belgique* two days since for a similar trip, but surely he'll have plenty of room to spare."

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"Montenay?" repeated Mr. Wallace. "Isn't he the Scotch explorer?"

"Yes!" smiled the governor. "Come to think of it I believe he is at the palace now." Clapping his hands, he dispatched a gendarme. "If you can arrange matters with him I will see that your baggage is passed directly to *La Belgique* through the customs. You have no liquor, I presume?"

"Half a dozen pint flasks of brandy," replied the explorer and the governor nodded. It is one of the strictest laws of the Congo that no liquors shall be brought into the country, save in small personal amounts. A moment later the gendarme returned with a small, khaki-clad man. He was very sallow of complexion, had dark hair and eyes, and carried his left arm awkwardly. When the governor introduced him to the three Americans his thin face lit up with a quick smile and he gripped Mr. Wallace's hand impulsively.

"So you're Wallace!" he cried, looking deep into the other's eyes. "Man, I've been wantin' to meet ye for ten years! I ran across your trail in China and got within fifty miles o' ye when the Cape to Cairo was surveyin'. Man, I'm pleased to meet ye!"

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"I'm mighty glad to meet you, too," smiled Mr. Wallace. "I've heard a lot about you, Montenay!"

Mr. Wallace then introduced the boys and suggested that they have a talk in another room of the palace. Thanking the governor for his assistance and kindness they followed the gendarme to another room.

"Now, Captain," said Mr. Wallace, "we're going up the Aruwimi after ivory. We can't get a large boat here and the Governor suggested that you could take us up on the *Belgique*."

"O' course I can!" exclaimed the small but famous Scotchman. "An' that's precisely where I'm bound for too. How'd ye guess it?"

"Good!" cried Mr. Wallace. "When do you start up?"

"I was meanin' to go in the mornin'," answered the other, rubbing his stubbly chin reflectively. "We'll get your stuff out o' the *Benguela* to-morrow or ma name ain't McAllister Montenay!"

"We'll split expenses on the *Belgique*, of course," declared the American. "It's mighty good of—"

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"None o' that now, none o' that," interrupted Captain Montenay hastily. "Why, man, I'd give a hundred pound for the benefeet o' your company up the stream! Ivory, you say?"

"Partly." Mr. Wallace answered the keen questioning look with a nod. "I'm going up past the Avatiko country to the Makua and down the river under the French flag. I've chartered a tramp to be waiting at Loanga by November. Get the idea?"

"Aye!" Montenay threw back his head in a noiseless laugh. "Man, ye're no fool! I brought down

ten tusks two year gone. When I got down to Stanley Pool the Afrique Concessions jumped me an' laid claim to the lot. The rank thieves! They had witnesses to swear that I got the ivory in their land an' before I knew where I was they fined me twenty pound—*an'* the ivory! By cripes, they won't monkey twice with McAllister Montenay though! Well, let's be movin'. It'll be vera tiresome gettin' these blacks to work."

As they passed a water cooler on their way out the captain paused. The boys saw him take a bottle from his pocket and pour out a palmful of white powder into a cigarette paper. This he rolled up and threw into his mouth, tossing a glass of water after it.

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"Quinine," he explained, although he called it "queeneen."

"Pretty big dose, wasn't it?" asked Mr. Wallace.

"'Bout fifty grain," replied the other calmly, to the intense astonishment of the boys. "Fever gets me bad down here on the coast. By cripes, ye're a lucky beggar!" he continued as they came in sight of John standing guard over their valises. "That's your man Washington? I've heard o' him. They say he's a magneeficent cook."

"Better than that," laughed Mr. Wallace. "He'll take charge of your blacks and get real work out of 'em. Do you mean what you said about going up the Aruwimi?"

"Aye." Montenay nodded. "We'll talk that over later. Ye'll be wantin' yer mosquito nets, so better bring the stuff down to the *Belgique*. We'll sleep on board her to-night."

As they had stayed at the hotel the night before, the boys had not been troubled much by the insects. They were much more worried by the quantities of quinine that Mr. Wallace insisted on their taking. When Burt had protested at taking ten grains all at once his uncle had laughed.

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"Nonsense! I'm running this trip! Why, it's nothing unusual for men to take seventy and eighty grains out here. So put it down and shut up or I'll send you back home!"

They found the *Belgique* to be a small but comfortable little steamer manned by a crew of a dozen blacks and a Swiss pilot. The *Benguela* came up the river that afternoon and the smaller steamer was placed alongside her. By special arrangement with the customs people the boxes belonging to Mr. Wallace were slung right out to the deck of *La Belgique*. Here John was in charge of the blacks and under his heavy-handed rule the cases were rapidly stowed away.

Mr. Wallace and the boys got out all their personal equipment at once. The heat was intense and the boys naturally suffered from it greatly at first, although the two older men did not seem to mind it in the least. By the next afternoon their loading was completed and the *Belgique* headed upstream without further delay.

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Their five days' trip got the boys inured to the heat somewhat. They never tired of watching the tropical forest on either bank of the river and the strange craft that plied around them. Although there were many other steamers and State launches as well as trading companies' boats, there was no lack of dugouts and big thirty-foot canoes laden with merchandise from the trading posts. The two explorers lay back in their canvas chairs and recounted their experiences in strange lands, while the boys listened eagerly as they watched their new surroundings.

The water-maker, as John called it, was installed the first day out. The boys found their cook to be all that Mr. Wallace had stated and more, while Captain Montenay was so delighted that he laughingly offered John exorbitant wages to desert the American, but in vain. The *Belgique* made stops for wood only and after four days they arrived at the mile-wide mouth of the Aruwimi River.

On the fifth day they arrived at Yambuya, just below the great cataracts which stopped further navigation. Here the two experienced explorers unloaded the chop-boxes, tents and other supplies and proceeded to make arrangements for hiring bearers. This was accomplished through the local chief with the aid of the government representative, who was an Italian. Indeed, the boys found that not only were Belgians and French employed all through the country, but men of every nationality, from "remittance men" of England to Swiss and Cubans.

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After a two days' delay at Yambuya the caravan was formed. It consisted of one hundred Bantu porters under the directions of a head-chief who spoke French fairly well, as do many of the natives. Besides the porters there were tent boys, skimmers, gun-bearers and cooks to the number of thirty. Captain Montenay spoke Bantu to some extent and all the orders were given by him direct while the river trip was continued.

The expedition started from the other side of the cataracts in five immense dugout canoes paddled by the porters. For the white men had been provided a small antiquated launch with which the canoes were easily able to keep up.

"Well," said Mr. Wallace as they puffed away from the shore, "the real trip's begun, boys! We'll arrive at Makupa to-morrow and then up to the Makua!"

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"Makupa?" exclaimed Captain Montenay. "Why, that's only a hundred and fifty miles up! Well, we can talk it over later. John, fill a canvas tub. I feel the need o' havin' a bath."

And Captain McAllister Montenay's bath was the first indication that the boys received of the Blind Lion.

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CHAPTER VI

THE MARK OF PONGO

The folding tubs they all used were more like little canvas rooms, open at the top. The crew of their launch consisted of two Bantus. One of these helped John fill the tub by the simple method of standing on a chair and pouring water on the head of the occupant of the tiny chamber after his clothes had been thrown out.

The boys were watching the proceedings and intended to follow the captain's example. As he finished he told the Bantu boy to hand him his clothes and stretched out an arm through the slit in the canvas walls. As it happened, this opening faced the boys.

The Bantu held up the bundle of clothes. As Captain Montenay took them the boys saw the black recoil suddenly and sink to his knees with a low groan, his face gray. Burt immediately leaped to his feet and caught the Bantu but the latter thrust him away and staggered back to the engine. Here he sank on a locker and buried his face in his knees. [Pg 72]

"Well I'll be jiggered!" exclaimed Burt half angrily. "What's the matter with him?" He was about to call his uncle who was up under the forward awning when Critch caught his arm.

"Shut up!" the red-haired boy whispered excitedly. "Come over here." When they reached the rail he turned on Burt. "Didn't you see it, you chump? What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"Me?" gasped Burt, bewildered by this sudden attack. "Say—"

"Thought you saw it sure," interrupted his chum hurriedly. "Didn't you see Cap'n Mac's arm?"

"No," returned Burt shortly. "Like any other arm, ain't it? I was lookin' at the sick nigger."

"Sick nothin'," retorted Critch. "Cap'n Mac's got a shoulder on him enough to scare a cat! When he shoved the canvas back I could see it all twisted up an' dead white, with a big red scar on the corner o' the shoulder. That nigger wasn't sick—he was scared!" [Pg 73]

"Scared!" Burt stared at Critch and then turned to look at the Bantu boy crouched on the locker. "Golly! Mebbe he is! Say, what was the scar like?"

"Looked to me like a cross but I didn't see it well. Come on, we'll ask the coon. He talks French some."

They stopped beside the Bantu. The second black was sitting in the bow at the wheel and had noticed nothing. Critch took the black by the shoulder and gave him a shake, while Burt addressed him in French.

"Wake up, boy! What scared you?"

The Bantu gave one terrified shudder and his eyes were rolling wildly as his head came up "Pongo! L'emblème de Pon—" he began with a frightened gasp and then stopped. His face resumed its normally blank expression and he glanced around quickly.

"What's Pongo?" questioned Burt. "What do you mean by the sign of Pongo?"

"No savvy, m'sieu, no savvy." The Bantu shook his head and absolutely refused to say another word in spite of threats and commands.

"Come on," said Critch disgustedly. "He's wise to something but he won't let on. There's Cap'n Mac. Shut up." [Pg 74]

They rejoined the captain and Mr. Wallace in the bow. Evidently the Scotchman had neither seen nor heard anything unusual, for he at once plunged into discussing plans with Mr. Wallace.

"Look here," he said finally. "I can't give up that cook o' yours, Wallace! Ye've got a good Scots name too. S'pose we make one party?"

"One party!" exclaimed Mr. Wallace. "I thought you were going more to the east?"

"Aye, but I ain't over parteec'lar. Mind, I'm no sayin' I'll go clear to the Makua wi' ye, but I may."

"Here's John with the dinner," said Mr. Wallace. "We'll talk it over while we eat. Looks mighty good to me, Montenay! I'd like you to go with us if you will."

"Hello, what's this stuff?" cried Burt as he leaned over his bowl and sniffed suspiciously. John stood by with a triumphant grin.

"Smells good," commented Critch. Captain Mac, as they had come to call him, winked at Mr. Wallace.

"It's vera good for fever," he said solemnly. "They make it out o' chopped snakes an' nigger bones." [Pg 75]

The boys looked up in dismay but were reassured by Mr. Wallace's smile and John's ever present grin. Burt put the question to the latter.

"Palm-oil chop, sar! Chicken chop-chop, palm-oil, peppers, hother t'ings halso, sar. Hit be good."

The boys cautiously sampled the concoction and found it to be new but not unpleasant. Before they had been in the country another week they were vociferously demanding palm-oil chop from John every day. The launch tied up at a plantation dock for the night and at daylight proceeded on her way.

"Hello!" exclaimed Critch as he emerged from the tiny cabin for breakfast. "That's funny! Thought it was in my outside pocket."

"What's bitin' you?" asked Burt with a rather sickly smile. He also was fishing in his pockets.

"My compass—it's gone!"

"Same here," confessed Burt after a moment. "I'll be jiggered! My coin's all right!"

"What's the matter?" inquired Mr. Wallace. He was just coming out and behind him was Captain Mac. The boys explained their strange loss and Montenay frowned.

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"That's queer," he said thoughtfully. "Mine's safe. How's yours, Wallace?"

"Here." Mr. Wallace produced his own silver-set compass from an inner pocket. "You've probably dropped 'em around the cabin, boys."

The two turned and vanished hastily but reappeared shaking their heads. The missing instruments were not to be found on board, although a thorough search was made of the launch and men.

"Na doot they were stolen," said Captain Mac as they sat at breakfast. "These blacks will steal anythin' that ain't nailed down, an' they were prowlin' all about last night. Well, we'll get new ones at Makupa from the trader when we get there to-night."

"It's decidedly queer, Montenay!" Mr. Wallace looked out over the river with a perplexed frown. "Why should these two compasses vanish, when nothing else in the cabin was touched? I don't like it."

"Ye know what ju-ju is, o' course?" Captain Mac leaned back easily in his chair as the American explorer nodded. "The Bantus think compasses are ju-ju."

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"What's that?" asked Critch.

"Anything they don't understand and that savors of witchcraft or mystery is ju-ju," explained Mr. Wallace. "In that case, Montenay, our compasses will be looked upon as the gods of a Bantu village, eh?"

"Aye. Let's get our business done with, Wallace." Montenay deftly rolled himself a quinine capsule and swallowed it. "What d'ye say? Shall we combine or no?"

"I don't see why we shouldn't," returned Mr. Wallace thoughtfully. "We're both after ivory. One caravan will cut down expenses for each of us. You're not sure about making the Makua with us?"

"Well," replied the other slowly with a sharp glance at Mr. Wallace, "I'm no sure yet. There's some mighty queer country north o' here that I'd like to have a look at. Mind, I'm no promisin' anythin' whatever. I'll be free to come an' go."

"Of course," answered Mr. Wallace. "Then it's agreed, Captain! We'll leave Makupa together in the morning."

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"Vera good. Now I'll be lookin' after a letter or so under the awnin' aft where the shakin' ain't so strong." Montenay rose and strolled aft and was immediately absorbed in his traveling writing-case. Mr. Wallace gazed after him reflectively.

"There's a curious man, boys! We're in luck to have him along. There probably aren't a dozen men in Africa who haven't heard of him and there probably aren't a dozen who know him outside of officials. He always travels alone. If he strikes in at Zanzibar or Nairobi he's likely to come out at Cairo or the Cape."

"Strikes me as a good sport," agreed Burt heartily. "He don't say much but I'd hate to monkey with him when he gets mad. Say! Ever hear o' Pongo, Uncle George?"

"Pongo?" repeated the explorer as he stared hard at Burt. "Pongo? No, don't think I have. What is it?"

The boys explained what had taken place the previous afternoon but to their surprise Mr. Wallace frowned disapproval. "Whatever it is, boys, it's his business. If you'll look at his arm you'll see a dozen scars. I have a few myself. That's where a native chief cuts a gash in his arm and ours, the cuts are rubbed together and we are then termed 'blood-brothers.' It may have been some such mark that scared the black boy."

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"No it wasn't," asserted Critch positively. "It looked like a cross. Wasn't cut either. Looked like a burn more than anything else."

"Then forget it," commanded Mr. Wallace decisively. "It's none of our business. I must say that Montenay's mighty indefinite though. He says he's after ivory and wants to have a look at the

country. But if I know anything he's not worrying about ivory this trip."

"Why not?" asked Burt. "D'you mean he's lying?"

"Lying is a strong term, Burt!" smiled his uncle. "It's not a nice word to use either. No, I think he's keeping us in the dark about his own projects. Probably he has some new animal or some new tribe he wants to be sure of getting all the credit for discovering. Naturally he wouldn't want to run any risk of our cutting in on him."

Just then the subject of their discussion rejoined them and the topic was changed. On up the river they went all that day while the big canoes followed closely with the paddling-chants of the men rising from time to time. The breeze created by their motion relieved them of the clouds of mosquitoes and other insects but the heat was so great that it even affected John to some extent.

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Just before sunset they reached the Makupa station. This consisted of a large native village dominated by the State trading post, a corrugated iron building whose whitewashed walls contrasted strongly with the palm thatched huts of the blacks all around. The trader met them at the landing and proved to be a Belgian, pleasant and courteous in every way.

They spent the night here. In the morning they were up before daybreak and Mr. Wallace mentioned the compasses as they were dressing. At that moment Burt was speaking to Captain Montenay, and he saw a peculiar light flash into the little explorer's face when his uncle spoke. That look puzzled Burt somewhat. He was still more puzzled when Montenay rushed through his dressing and hurried from the room. The sudden change in the man had evidently been caused by his uncle's words, but Burt could not see any connection whatever.

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When they entered the lamp-lit dining room for breakfast they found the agent and Captain Mac together. The former sprang up and greeted them effusively, hastily stuffing something into his pocket that looked to Burt like banknotes. Still, the boy remembered his uncle's words of the day before and made up his mind not to bother about other people's affairs.

"Oh, the compasses!" ejaculated Mr. Wallace as the black boys brought in fruit and coffee. "Lieutenant, we lost two compasses coming up the river. It would be a great assistance if you would sell us a couple from your stores."

"Alas!" An expression of dismay rose to the Belgian's face and he spread out his hands helplessly. "My friend, I am grieved deeply to have to inform you that we have none! A trading party came down the river last week and completely cleaned me out, even to my own instrument. I am desolated, my heart is torn, but it is impossible!"

A sudden suspicion flashed across Burt's mind but as he glanced sharply at Captain Mac he dismissed it. Montenay was the picture of dismay, but to all their suggestions and queries the Belgian only returned a "desolated" shrug.

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"Well, never mind." Mr. Wallace smiled at Montenay in resignation. "We still have ours. Two should be enough. Now make a good breakfast, boys! We eat from chop-boxes after this."

With sunrise the caravan started north from the station. The river bottom was low but Captain Mac asserted that after a day's journey they would find themselves on the higher plains, and this proved quite true. On the second day they entered the great forests and left behind the half-civilized tribes. As they drew up to the top of a hill-crest that rose among the trees Critch caught Burt's arm and pointed ahead to where the jungle thinned out.

"There we are, ol' sport! Look at 'em, just look at 'em!"

And Burt saw through his glasses a number of black groups of animals, grazing and moving slowly about.

"What are they, Uncle George?" he cried in high excitement to Mr. Wallace who was also looking through his glasses.

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"Hartebeest, bushbuck and antelope," replied the explorer calmly. "If I'm not mistaken there's a rhino in that patch of bush about two miles to the right—see it? John, O John! Get those gun-boys on deck, will you?"

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CHAPTER VII

CRITCH'S RHINO

"Are we going to have a hunt?" asked Burt as they left the hill and plunged forward into the jungle again at the head of the caravan.

"Not to-day," laughed Mr. Wallace. "We won't get out of this till night, will we?"

"Hardly," replied Montenay. "Once we get out o' this thick jungle and up to those plains we'll have clear sailin'. I'm no meanin' that we'll find no jungle there, mind, for we will. But by night we'll be in more decent veldt-country I'm thinkin'."

They camped at sunset in a grassy space clear of trees. As Captain Mac had predicted, the low and malarial jungle was left behind them and they were now getting into the higher lands. These

were scattered with patches of dense forest and jungle, but there were also great plains or veldts covered with game and animal life.

"Now we'll make those gun-boys earn their pay," said Mr. Wallace the next morning.

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"We'll shoot half a dozen antelope every day to give the bearers meat."

"We'll be shootin' more than that," grimly added Captain Mac as he held up his hand for silence. "Hear that?"

All listened. It seemed to Burt and Critch that in the distance sounded a faint mutter of far-away thunder, and they looked at the older men expectantly.

"Lion," laughed Mr. Wallace shortly. "If we only had ponies we'd land him to-day!"

The advisability of taking horses along had been discussed but the explorer had vetoed it finally. "It would only be an experiment," he had declared. "In other parts of the country it might work but not in the Congo. We have too many jungles to wade through and a horse would be stung to death in a day or two."

Three or four of the Bantu hunters were sent ahead, and toward noon, as they approached a little rise, one of these came running back. He said something to Captain Mac, who translated.

"Get your guns! They've located a herd of wildebeest an' hartebeest just ahead."

The boys excitedly took their second-weight guns from the bearers. The heavy guns were not needed for the antelope. They all moved forward, while the porters halted in charge of John, and after a half hour reached the crest of the rise, wading through the deep grass and bush. Here the Bantus made a gesture of caution and carefully parted the grass ahead of them.

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The boys gave a little gasp of surprise. Before them was a plain scattered with high ant hills and trees. Grazing without thought of danger were hundreds of antelope-like animals, some with long curving horns and others with straight spiral ones. As Burt watched them he found himself trembling with feverish excitement.

"Keep cool, lad!" whispered Captain Mac with a slight smile. "See that group to the right? Take the bull hartebeest. Ready, Wallace?"

Mr. Wallace and Critch had selected their animals and the former nodded. Montenay gave the word and all fired together. Burt saw his bull give one tremendous leap and fall. Critch, who had fired at a small bull, had poorer luck, for his animal bounded off with the others of the herd and was gone in an instant. Both Montenay and Mr. Wallace had dropped hartebeest bucks, and the bearers were jubilant as all ran down the hill.

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"Now, Critch," said Mr. Wallace, "it's up to you! You boys stay here with the blacks and we'll go back and bring on the porters and the salt. Keep the heads of that hartebeest of Burt's and mine. We don't want to fill our empty chop-boxes too fast."

As the tin-lined chop-boxes were emptied they were to be used for packing heads and skins of game and were thus doubly useful. The Bantus took out their knives and while Burt transmitted in French the orders of his chum they set to work. Mr. Wallace and Montenay returned to meet and bring up the caravan, whose advance was necessarily slow.

The skilled blacks first removed the two heads and skinned them carefully. Then they laid aside the skulls for boiling and cut up the three bodies to serve as rations for the porters while the boys stood looking around them. Although the great herds had bounded off at the volley, they had only gone a mile or two away and in the thin clear air seemed half that distance. Burt stood with his eyes glued to his glasses for a few moments, then saw a jackal a hundred yards to the right, slinking through the grass. As jackals are invariably destroyed wherever seen he called Critch and took a gun from the pile dropped by the bearers. Luckily for him he grabbed up one of the heavy Winchesters in his haste.

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"Come on, Critch! Get over to that ant hill an' we'll bag him."

Not far from the jackal was one of the tall hills made by the white ants. As these are hard as rock and often eight or ten feet high they make excellent shelter for hunters. Critch caught up a gun and ran after Burt hastily.

When they reached the ant hill they located the jackal in a patch of brush below them. Only his head was visible, but the two boys aimed and fired together and he dropped.

"Bet I got him in the eye!" cried Critch as they ran toward the spot. "Got a dandy bead on him."

"Hello! What's that?" Burt stopped suddenly and pointed to a patch of trees a hundred yards farther on. Above the stunted growth they saw a number of little birds flying erratically about.

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"Look at that—golly!" whispered Critch. "What's that big black thing—"

"Elephant!" returned Burt fumbling at his gun.

"Elephant nothing! Look at the birds—ain't any birds on elephants—it's a rhino! Come on!"

An indistinct shape showed through the bush as they made their way forward but they could not

make out what it was and hesitated to fire. They knew that the rhinoceros is guarded by numbers of tick birds and concluded from the birds flying above the bushes that this was a rhino. They got to within eighty yards before alarming the beast. Then came a crashing and swishing of the bush and out stalked a big rhino, sniffing the wind and advancing slowly toward them.

"Get behind that ant hill!" exclaimed Critch. Separating, they took up positions beside two of the conical mounds. "Got your big gun? Go to it!"

Lifting his rifle, Burt fired. He had aimed at the shoulder of the great beast but to his dismay the shot seemed to have absolutely no effect. Instead of dropping, the rhino threw up its tail and ears, gave a little squeal and started for Burt.

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Burt fired again at fifty yards. His bullet struck the rhino in the head and glanced off, serving only to increase the rage of the brute. He broke into a lumbering gallop and Burt yelled to Critch to fire.

The latter obeyed but in his haste missed entirely with his first bullet and with his second only tore the rhino's left ear slightly. Burt raised his own gun and aimed at the eye. Again his shots had no effect, for he missed the delicate mark afforded by the eye and both bullets glanced from the armor.

"Duck!" yelled Critch, dancing up and down. "He can't see! Duck!"

Burt ducked, for the rhino was within ten yards and thundering straight at him. Dropping his gun he sprang behind the ant hill and around it. But the animal had seemingly anticipated this or had turned its charge at Critch, for Burt almost leaped on the tossing horn of the beast.

With one wild spring backward he ploughed headfirst into the grass. He heard both barrels of Critch's heavy gun. As he wriggled up he saw the rhino, not ten feet away, stop short as the terrific charge struck him behind the shoulder. For an instant he wavered, then sank to the ground dead.

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A wild burst of yells sounded behind as Burt arose. The Bantus had observed the affair and when they saw the rhino fall, ran forward with high glee, while just over the crest of the rise appeared the caravan.

Burt walked over to his chum with somewhat shaky steps and held out his hand without a word, for something kept him from speaking.

"Oh, shucks!" said Critch huskily. "You dog-goned idiot! You pretty near scared me to death. Didn't you hear me yell?"

"Didn't hear nothin'," Burt smiled weakly. "I was wishing I was back home and had never seen Africa. If you hadn't shot he'd got me—"

"Come out of it!" replied Critch. "He couldn't see you and was coming for me. Ain't he a big fellow?" As they walked over and stood beside the great black body that lay stretched in the grass with the Bantus around it, Mr. Wallace and Captain Mac ran up.

"What's this mean?" roared the former as he saw the body. "Haven't you two got sense enough to —"

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"Leave 'em alone!" shouted Captain Mac delightedly. "They've killed him! Hurray!" The exuberant Scotchman seized Burt and whirled him around in a wild dance as the excited porters came up. Burt gave the honor to Critch and when he told of his narrow escape Mr. Wallace at once directed camp to be formed.

"Now see here," he ordered as the skimmers collected around the body, "I've had enough of this business. After this you take Burt with you, Montenay, and I'll take Critch. Those young villains are crazy enough to do anything if we leave 'em alone. Understand, boys? If you chase off by yourselves you get sent back home."

Seeing that Mr. Wallace was thoroughly aroused and in earnest, the boys hastily promised that his orders would be obeyed in future. Then they examined the carcass of the rhinoceros carefully. Burt's first shot would have killed the beast in time but it was the two from Critch's rifle at close quarters that had proved fatal almost instantly. By that evening the Bantus had removed the skin from the rhino and were ready to pare it down for transportation.

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"That'll take a couple of days anyway," said Mr. Wallace that night as they sat around the fire. "I think we might as well establish a camp here for a week, Montenay. We are right in the game country and I can get hold of all the specimens I want to send home while we are here, and get them safely off. Then we can strike on after ivory and see what we'll find."

"Suits me," returned Captain Mac. "Ye've done vera well, lads! The horn o' yon beast is eighteen inches."

"I'd kind o' like to keep the head, uncle," said Burt. "Critch an' I had a hard time gettin' him. We don't want the skin but we could set up the head back home an'—"

"Sure!" returned Mr. Wallace heartily. "We'll keep the skin without paring it down, then. We can trade it to the natives for almost anything we ask. Aren't there some villages near here, Captain?"

Montenay called up the head Bantu and put some questions to him. They learned that there was a village several miles off where ivory might be found, and the Bantu was ordered to send a man over in the morning to bring back whatever ivory the natives might have to trade.

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The next day Critch and Burt superintended the preparation of the rhino head and the skins of a number of various antelope varieties which Mr. Wallace and the captain shot. On the day following the Bantu messenger returned with a score of blacks who bore two small fifty-pound tusks. These they gladly traded for the rhino skin, which they would use for shields, and for some tobacco, beads, and sweaters of blazing red.

On that same day Burt evened up trophies with his chum. In the afternoon Mr. Wallace and Critch went off together when the trading had been finished. Barely had they left when a Bantu ran in with the news that there was a herd of buffalo near the stream which ran a few hundred yards past the camp. Captain Mac immediately called Burt and the gun-bearers and on they went with all haste.

After half an hour's walking they located the buffalo at the edge of the creek bed in a thick jungle swamp. Holding their guns in readiness the explorer and Burt advanced slowly. They could see two or three bulls watching them, the rest of the herd being hidden. Not until the hunters were within a hundred yards did the buffaloes move. Their massive white in-curving horns shone against the black bodies, and their wicked little eyes were fixed sullenly on the men.

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Suddenly the nearest bull shook his head and began advancing. At this the gun-bearers scattered despite Montenay's shouted threats, and sought the shelter of ant hills. Captain Mac and Burt held their heavy guns and the former told Burt to take the first shot.

By good luck the boy's bullet struck the buffalo in the eye and penetrated the brain. Before Montenay could lift his weapon the others had turned and vanished.

"Well," laughed the explorer, "that's better than I expected. I was lookin' for a charge from 'em. Fine old bull too!"

The buffalo was a splendid trophy and the men at once began skinning him. That evening Mr. Wallace determined to finish the buffalo hide and then send back the specimens they had collected.

"I've got enough to stock the club for years," he laughed. "No use being a hog—hello, that's funny!"

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"What's the matter?" asked Montenay from across the fire.

"Why—why—yes, sir, it's gone!" Mr. Wallace arose, searching his pockets. Then his face hardened. "John, call up those boys who were with me this morning! My compass has disappeared."

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CHAPTER VIII

CAPTAIN MAC SUPECTED

Montenay and the boys gave an exclamation of surprise and Captain Mac leaped to his feet with excited questions. Mr. Wallace, however, replied nothing. Burt had never seen his uncle really angry before and now he realized why this man was respected all over the world. The strong face was more hawk-like than ever. Between the down-drawn brows were too deep furrows, the thin mouth was set grimly, and the piercing eyes were aflame with anger. Even Montenay quieted down suddenly when he saw Mr. Wallace's face.

John very respectfully brought up a group of a dozen blacks who stood in fear and trembling as the loss of the compass was made known to them. Falling on their faces one and all denied any share in the theft.

"John, call the headman." When the latter appeared, fully as frightened as his men, Mr. Wallace turned to him. "You see these men?" The explorer spoke so rapidly that Burt could not gather more than a few scattered words of French, but what he heard made him spring up with a cry of protest.

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"Sit down!" His uncle whirled on him savagely and Montenay nodded approval. The headman turned an ashy gray and bobbed his head against Mr. Wallace's boots while a howl of fear went up from the black boys, who returned to their companions, accompanied by John with a rifle.

"What'd he say?" whispered Critch anxiously. Mr. Wallace heard the words.

"I gave 'em ten minutes to produce that compass," he said quietly. "If they didn't do it by then I told 'em I'd bury those boys up to their necks in the swamp down yonder and leave 'em."

"What!" Critch was on his feet instantly. "Why—why—you—"

"Sit down, lad!" Captain Mac laughed and pulled him back. "It's only a bluff. Don't fash yerself over it."

"Was that all?" demanded Burt eagerly and his uncle nodded without a smile, to his intense relief.

"I'll be walkin' over yonder," declared Montenay rising. "I'll chat with 'em in their own tongue a bit, Wallace. It may do good." [Pg 99]

For five minutes not a word was spoken. Mr. Wallace stared into the fire while the boys looked alternately at him and at the fires of the blacks, fifty yards away. Then Captain Mac strode up and with a word tossed the gleaming silver-mounted instrument into Mr. Wallace's lap.

"She's broke," he said shortly. The American calmly examined the compass, as did the boys. The glass was shattered as if a stone had smashed it, while the needle no longer swung on its pivot.

"Who had it?" asked Burt's uncle.

"Mgoro, the hunter." Captain Mac spoke quite as a matter of course and Mr. Wallace's anger seemed to have vanished suddenly. "He said he found it just outside the camp and that it was already broke. I discharged him and told him to go back in the mornin' without his wages. He's lyin', o' course."

"Of course," agreed Mr. Wallace musingly. With this the subject was closed. In the morning Mgoro was sent on the back trail in disgrace, although he still his innocence. For two days more the camp remained in the same place. Then the buffalo skin was pared down and packed and a dozen porters were sent back to Makupa with the specimens. Mr. Wallace had already arranged with the Belgian there to send them on down to Boma. [Pg 100]

The only compass now in the party was that belonging to Montenay, who guided them. Usually Captain Mac and Burt went ahead to the right while Mr. Wallace and Critch went to the left, each party taking a number of hunters and gun bearers. Owing to their lack of compasses it was not possible to wander very far from the caravan. Every morning Captain Mac and the headman Moboro mapped out the day's march and at noon and at dark the two parties returned to the caravan.

For several days they did little shooting of any importance. Each party brought in two or three food-animals for the porters, and jackals were of course shot on sight. On the third day after leaving their "Specimen Camp," as Burt named their halting place, came their first adventure.

They are getting well into the lion country by this time and each camp was made as small as possible with plenty of fires around it. As Burt and Captain Mac returned to camp at noon of the third day they found the Bantus in high excitement and were greeted with the news that two lions had been sighted in a dense thicket just ahead. Mr. Wallace and Critch soon came in and all four went toward the thicket while a number of Bantus armed with spears and shields went around to drive out the animals. [Pg 101]

This was done by the simple means of setting fire to the dense clump of bushes. The party took up their position near an ant hill. With them were the gun-bearers and a dozen Bantu hunters. When the thicket was fired a dense cloud of smoke hid the nearer edge. Almost at once a tremendous roar was heard. The Bantus replied with a yell of defiance.

As they did so a great tawny shape flew out of the cloud of smoke and struck down a hunter. Mr. Wallace fired instantly and the lion whirled about and came for the party. The Bantus flung their spears, but the beast dashed them aside and not even the heavy, jacketed bullets stopped him. When he was ten yards away and crouching for his last bound the gun-bearers broke.

"I've got him," announced Captain Mac quietly. As the lion sprang he fired and the beast rolled over, clawing at the grass. At the same instant the lioness bounded out of the smoke. [Pg 102]

Critch broke her foreleg with his first bullet and his second brought her to the earth. She rolled over, then gave another spring. Burt followed Montenay's example and fired just as the beast left the ground. This time she stumbled heavily and lay still, for the bullet had found her brain.

The combat had been short but hot. The Bantus brought up their wounded comrade for attention. He had been badly clawed in the arms and shoulders but his shield had saved him from fatal wounds, and Mr. Wallace soon had him fixed up. The Bantus were hugely delighted over the success of the hunt. They danced about the bodies with waving spears and shields while Burt took some good pictures. Then the skinning began.

When the skins had been safely packed the caravan again moved forward, and two days later they came to a native village. When he heard the name of the place Mr. Wallace looked somewhat surprised, then consulted a map which he had procured at Boma. He folded it up without a word, however, and they entered the town. [Pg 103]

"We're in the elephant country at last," announced Montenay that night. "These fellows say that there is a small herd off to the east two miles. Suppose we go over to-morrow."

"To the east?" repeated Mr. Wallace. "Aren't we rather working away from our bearings? However, no matter. I'm after ivory and not particular where I find it. We'll go to-morrow."

Burt was just a little puzzled at his uncle's attitude. He said nothing definite, but the boy in some way got the idea that he was watching Captain Mac. At first Burt put aside the thought. Then he resented it, for he had a strong liking for the eccentric Scotchman. Finally he resolved to wait and see what turned up.

That night his suspicions were confirmed. He and Critch slept together in one of the small tents

and as they arranged the mosquito nets for the night Howard paused.

"Say, did you notice anything funny about Cap'n Mac lately?"

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"No," replied Burt. "Uncle George is acting kind of funny, though."

"You bet he is," nodded Critch. "He's just about got the goods on Cap'n Mac, too!"

"What!" Burt stared at his chum eagerly. "I knew it! Spit it out, old sport."

"It's that compass business. Anyway, that got your uncle going. When we was ridin' after that hartebeest to-day he comes out with it. This here place ain't on our line o' march at all. We're 'way east of where we ought to be!"

"East!" repeated Burt. "What's that got to do with Cap'n Mac?" He was still ready to stand up for his friend, though Howard's confident air sorely shook his faith.

"Like this. Your uncle says Montenay's been leadin' us wrong. He don't know what for and he's waiting to find out. B'lieve me, I'd hate to be Cap'n Mac when he does find out! Golly, he was mad to-day!"

"Does he think Cap'n Mac swiped our compasses?"

"You bet! Thinks that business with Mgoro was a put-up job, too. When we were out to-day we found a young eland lying dead. It had two o' the blamedest arrows in it you ever seen. Here's the head o' one."

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Critch produced a little bundle of skin from his pocket and very carefully unwrapped it. He laid a long many-barbed iron point in Burt's hand.

"Watch out for it. That black stuff's poison, your uncle says. It's a pigmy arrow."

"What's a pigmy arrow?" asked Burt. "Oh, you mean—" he stared at Critch, who nodded.

"That's what. We're over east near the pigmy country, 'stead of being up in the higher country where we ought to be. We'll be in the jungle in another day, your uncle says."

"What's he going to do about it?" asked Burt. "Here, take this blamed thing back." And he very gingerly deposited the arrow-point in the bit of skin.

"Nothing," replied Critch. "He says to lay low and keep your eye peeled. He ain't going very far into the jungle either."

Whether Montenay noticed anything in their attitude the next morning or not, he was as gay as ever when they started out after their first elephant. In fact, he had never appeared more open, frank and merry than he did this morning and Burt found himself involuntarily siding against his uncle.

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They were accompanied by a large force of trackers from the town. After a stiff two-mile walk into the deep forest toward the denser jungle one of these trackers returned with word that a herd was not far ahead. Soon afterwards the party came upon the spoor. In low places the tracks were big holes three feet in depth. They were always marked by shattered and broken smaller trees and torn branches.

Suddenly an elephant trumpeted close by and the boys jumped. Now they stole along quietly in single file, while they could hear the great beasts feeding and crashing among the trees not a hundred yards away. The party moved noiselessly in the tracks of the elephants, for their great weight had left no sticks or leaves to crack. Birds flew up in flocks and monkeys chattered all around. Then as the trail twisted about the boys saw their first wild elephant—a good deal closer than they could have wished.

Without the least warning the bushes and mass of tangled creepers at their left parted with a tremendous crashing and a big bull surged out twenty feet away. He was as much surprised as they and stood looking while the blacks fled. Mr. Wallace and Captain Mac fired almost together, one bullet taking him in the shoulder and the other just above the eye. Neither wound was fatal but for an instant the great beast was stunned by the shock and stood reeling. Then as he lifted his trunk, flapped his ears forward with his great in-curving tusks half raised and took a step toward the party, both men fired again and the immense bulk quivered and crashed down dead.

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The blacks raised a shout of joy but only for an instant. At the sudden firing shrill trumpeting and crashing had gone up from the herd in front, and another bull appeared in the path in full charge. Trees, matted creepers and bushes went down before him and for an instant the little group stood paralyzed with the sudden danger. Then Burt raised his rifle and fired. His bullet was wildly aimed but proved lucky, for it struck the elephant in the eye and penetrated the brain. He staggered forward another step and then rolled over just as the others fired.

"Good for you!" cried Mr. Wallace. He gripped Burt's hand and shook it heartily, as did Captain Mac. Critch pounded his chum on the back in an ecstasy of delight. The herd had crashed away and was gone, and as one of the bearers was carrying the camera, Burt and Critch got some views of the dead elephants, after which the hunters took out their knives.

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The hides were disregarded as not worth the effort of preparing. The tusks were cut out and the feet were taken off to be served up by John as the most delicate of jungle dishes. Then the local

blacks fell to work and cut up the rest of the carcasses for home consumption. It was about noon, so Mr. Wallace decided that they would return to their camp and follow the herd another day.

"This is good country," he said as they walked along. "Between hunting and trading we ought to get a nice lot of ivory together pretty soon. I think I'll make a permanent camp just outside the town and not go in any farther, Montenay."

Captain Mac merely nodded. He remained very silent, however, on the return trip. When they got home the tusks were weighed and it was found that the smaller bull, the first to appear, carried one hundred and ten pounds of ivory.

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The larger, which Burt had killed, was a good deal older and his tusks weighed twenty pounds more.

"That's big ivory, lad," said Montenay as they sat down to their postponed lunch in the afternoon. "It ain't often ye'll get beasts carryin' more'n a hundred thirty. 'Cept, o' course, some old chap who's wandered off by himself an' kept the blacks too scared to be huntin' him. I mind once I dropped just such an old bull down south an' got a hundred seventy—nigh to bein' a record."

"It was a mighty lucky shot," laughed Burt. "I just threw her up an' let go 'cause I was too scared to aim. Goin' out to-morrow?"

"Since ye're goin' to camp here permanent," returned Captain Mac, addressing Mr. Wallace, "I'm thinkin' I'll be takin' a little hike into the woods. I'll take a score o' the boys an' be back in a week."

"No, you won't." Without the least trace of excitement in his voice Mr. Wallace whipped out his revolver and covered the other. "Keep your hands on the table, Montenay! Burt, remove the captain's gun."

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CHAPTER IX

THE WHITE PIGMIES

As Burt obeyed it seemed to him that the Scotchman was taking the situation very coolly. The little thin man sat silently with his eyes on those of Mr. Wallace and only his quivering nostrils denoted the emotion that must have consumed him.

"Now, Captain Montenay," resumed Mr. Wallace when Burt was again seated, "let's have a little explanation." Burt saw that his uncle's face looked as he had seen it on the night when his compass disappeared. "In the first place you stole our compasses."

"I did not!" Captain Mac gave a harsh little laugh. "Ye have yer own, or what's left of it. I've got the other two in my pocket. I removed 'em temporarily so to speak. Be more choice in yer use o' words, man."

"Secondly, you've been leading us astray."

"Aye," retorted Captain Mac, "but I didn't give ye the credit for findin' it out so quick."

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"Now you propose to leave us here, on the edge of the jungle country," continued Mr. Wallace. "There are three things that are open to explanation, Captain Montenay. I am sorry to use this method of persuasion but it seems to be necessary." The little man's face lost its look of half-malicious mockery and for a moment he did not answer but stared over the head of Mr. Wallace at the afternoon sun.

"If I'm not wantin' to tell, man, I'm thinkin' ye'd have a hard job to make me," was his answer at last.

"If you won't tell," snapped out Mr. Wallace, "I'll tie you up here and now and carry you back to Boma. You know what you'd get there."

"Aye. Is that yer final decesion?"

"It is. Explain or go to Boma."

"Vera good. Gi' me the gun, lad." To Burt's vast surprise his uncle nodded and replaced his weapon. As Captain Mac quietly buckled the restored revolver about his waist his face broke into a wrinkled smile.

"It'll be a longish yarn, Wallace." There was no trace of animosity in his tone. "Let's finish eatin' an' when I get the old pipe between my teeth I'll feel like talkin'."

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Their meal was finished in silence. Before Captain Mac gave his explanation, however, a startling event happened. It seemed that a dozen men of the village had remained with the bodies of the elephants to remove more of the meat. Just as Captain Mac was filling his ancient and evil-smelling pipe a native rushed into camp shouting something that sent the pipe to the ground and the captain to his feet.

The native came up and fell on his face. After a hasty exchange of question and answer Captain

Mac turned to the others and Burt saw that a strange light stood in his dark and rather sad eyes.

"Get out the medicines, Wallace. We've got seven dying men on our hands. We may save one or two with serum and morphia."

"Why, what do you mean?" cried Mr. Wallace, giving a shout for John. When the trusty cook had been dispatched for the medicine chop-box Captain Mac explained further.

"Those chaps we left wi' the beasts yonder drove off some Wambutu pigmies, bein' utter fools and prob'ly ignorant o' what the dwarfs were. They got a shower o' poisoned arrows in return. A bunch from the village just found 'em an' are bringin' 'em in here." [Pg 113]

John arrived with the medicine case and Mr. Wallace got out his serums and syringes while the boys stared at each other in amazement.

"That's what them dirty little black arrow-points do," said Critch in a low tone. Just then a band of men came running into the camp. On their shoulders they bore rude litters which they set down before Mr. Wallace with gestures of despair.

On the litters lay seven men. All were gray with pain and sweating profusely. As they lay there Burt could see their naked breasts rise and fall with the increased palpitation caused by the poison. The matter of Captain Mac was forgotten on the instant, as all four went to work in a desperate effort to save the wounded men. The captain hastily loaded the hypodermic syringes and handed them to the other three, who injected the contents into the arms of the wounded as rapidly as possible. While this was going on the camp was surrounded by the villagers, and only the leveled guns of John and the other men held them outside. [Pg 114]

One of the men died just as Mr. Wallace was treating him, although neither of the boys noticed it until they had finished. Then the wounds were cauterized, a task which was not relished by the boys. In fact, the smell of burning flesh was nearly too much for Burt, who retired temporarily.

"There," and Captain Mac straightened up with a sigh of relief, "I guess that's all we can do, Wallace."

"Will they recover?" asked the American quietly, washing the syringe. The other shrugged his shoulders.

"Mayhap. Don't let the village people have 'em, John. The witch doctor'd kill 'em sure. They'll sleep till morning. If they wake they can be thankin' us for it."

Critch said nothing. He was pale and his knees felt shaky, for their task had been no pleasant one, and he fervently trusted that they would have no more poisoned arrows in future. A few moments later all were once more gathered about the table in the dining-tent, where Burt rejoined them. Montenay calmly refilled his pipe and began. [Pg 115]

"As I was sayin', Wallace, the yarn is a long one. I'm thinkin' it'll nobore ye to listen, though," and the Scotchman chuckled.

"Fire away," smiled Wallace grimly. "We have time to burn." For a moment the other puffed away in silence, his eyes fixed on the tent-wall behind Burt. Then he began his story, the strangest story which the two American boys had ever listened to.

"Two years ago, it was. I started out o' Nairobi wi' the most elegant bunch o' fightin' men ye could find. Took me nigh a month to select 'em. I laid it out as a scientific trip, to the British authorities, but the men knew better. I bought 'em all trade-guns wi' lots of ammunition, for I was after two things.

"Trip before that, I had met up with an Arab dealer called Yusuf Ben Salir, what misused me like a nigger. He was a slave-merchant on the quiet, an' would ha' sold me upcountry if I hadn't got away. I was after him first, and ivory next. We headed off for the Congo line, baggin' a little ivory as we went.

"One day we learned from the natives that Yusuf was twenty mile ahead of us wi' plenty o' tusks and a big trade-caravan. Two days later we caught up, formin' a zareba near his. He had twice as many men, but mine were picked, ye remember. [Pg 116]

"Well, the details o' what happened don't matter. We were busy for three days, and I will admit that Yusuf had his merits as a fighter. But at the last his nerve failed him, and when we rushed his zareba, he and his men made their getaway—leaving everything behind. While I was lookin' over his stuff I found two things wrapped up in oilskin.

"One was a queer shaped bit o' wood which I flung away, like a fool. The other was a bit o' cloth with Arabic written on it. I can read the lingo, and I made out that Yusuf had been down near the pigmy country an' had run across some yarn about white pigmies."

"White pigmies!" ejaculated Mr. Wallace in astonishment, while a look of keen interest swept across his face. "Then the story was so!"

"What story?" asked Montenay sharply.

"Why, a tradition I heard up in the Sahara, that there was a white race of small people somewhere down this way. The Arab who told me was mighty reticent about it, and I gathered [Pg 117]

that there was some queer religious feature to the tradition, if it was one."

"It was not," asserted Montenay, betraying signs of excitement for the first time, and leaning forward. "Wallace, it was fact! I found the white pigmies!"

"What!" A simultaneous cry went up from his three listeners and Mr. Wallace's eagle-face was bent sternly upon the narrator.

"Careful, Montenay!" he said with repressed eagerness. "Remember you are not talking to green hands!"

"Man, it's the truth!" There could be no doubt of Captain Mac's sincerity as he leaned forward and met the American's gaze. There was more than sincerity in his eyes. There was an appeal for belief, a conviction, that won over the others instantly. "The truth! But that's only the least of it."

"And your proofs?" inquired Mr. Wallace crisply.

"Proofs enough," rejoined the other, more calmly, "in their time. I didn't take much stock in the Arabic stuff, but I thought I'd take a shot at it. I sent half o' the boys back wi' the ivory and a plausible story o' how we came to get so much. Then I asked the rest if they'd go with me.

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"After the way we'd wiped up Yusuf, they were ready for anythin'. After all was fixed up we started, fifty boys an' me. We worked down slowly from the high country, takin' it easy an' gatherin' in spoils as we went. Finally we got down to the jungle an' touched the edge o' the pigmy country. Then it began.

"We had no trouble till we started inquirin' through some o' the pigmies that come in to trade. As soon as we asked about their white relations the camp emptied like a flash. The last little devil out turned an' put an arrow through one o' my boys.

"It was just a massacre, man. The boys were fair ragin' at the way they were shot down, and I pushed 'em ahead fast. We went through that jungle like a whirlwind. Finally there were only seven boys left, an' they refused to go any farther. Didn't do 'em any good, for the next day the pigmies rushed us. I was pretty well played out by that time, as ye can judge. When the smoke blew away five o' my boys were laid out, and I was tied up with the other two. If I hadn't been so obstinate about pushin' on we might ha' pulled out.

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"However, we put a good face on it. They treated us fine, but kept us on the jump for a week, movin' from place to place through the jungle. For another week we were stuck in one o' them pigmy villages. Queerly enough, they hadn't touched a thing belongin' to us except the guns an' chop-boxes an' general camp stuff.

"'Bout the end o' the second week they routed us out early one mornin', highly excited. When we got outside we found the whole village squattin' around ten new chaps, who were armed wi' trade-guns and seemed to boss things pretty general. But what struck me was that while they were of the same size as the rest, they were white."

"White!" exclaimed Mr. Wallace again. His thin cheeks were dashed with color, and his brilliant eyes showed that he no longer doubted the truth of Montenay's story. The latter nodded quietly.

"Not white like us," he continued, "but as white as an Arab or thereabouts. Their faces showed more intelligence than those o' the blacks, an' they seemed to be overlords o' the—"

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"Hold on!" Mr. Wallace broke in with a puzzled frown. "Surely you don't mean that, Mac! There could be no feudal system of that sort here in the very heart of Africa! The blacks haven't the brains—"

"Aye, but the whites have!" cried Montenay triumphantly. "These white pigmies ain't fools by any means, as ye'll see later. Now will ye quit interruptin' me?"

"Go ahead," laughed Mr. Wallace, and the boys saw that Captain Mac was really so interested in his own story that he was anxious to lay it before them without more delay.

"I meant to tell ye this yarn," he went on, "a bit later on, as ye'll see also. The party o' whites were in command of a young chap named Mbopo, an' we took to each other first crack. Well, they carried us off through the jungle for a week's trip. We must ha' been on the edge o' the pigmy country, for we traveled hard. At every pigmy village Mbopo seemed to get reports or somethin' o' the kind, an' also tribute in the way o' slaves. By the end o' the week there were six others besides oursel's.

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"Then we spent a day at the village o' the white pigmies. Man alive, ye should ha' seen 'em! They seemed to live on the blacks, just like the blacks live on the big tribes around, an' they lived well. Palm huts, o' course, but there seemed to be a system o' government that beat ever'thing I ever saw outside the Zulus.

"We passed through two more o' the white villages, then struck a big stream an' followed that for a day or two. Finally we got into a bit o' higher ground an' struck the biggest surprise of all. Just before sunset we came out o' the forest into a stretch o' yam patches along the river. Beyond these an' right ahead of us was the biggest village we had seen yet—three to four hundred huts, I'd say. Outside was the whole tribe waitin' for us. Off to one side, near the forest, was a good sized palm hut, and around it was a zareba."

"What's queer about that?" asked Mr. Wallace, as the narrator paused for a moment. The boys saw a smile flicker across Montenay's face.

"The zareba was made out o' ivory," was his quiet reply. Burt at once broke into a laugh, thinking that Captain Mac was joking. [Pg 122]

"Pretty good," he chuckled. "What'd they do—cut up the tusks into square blocks to make a six-foot wall?" But his mirth died away suddenly as his uncle made a silencing gesture.

"An ivory zareba," went on Montenay. "Made o' tusks, clear around the hut. They were set with points up, curvin' out. But I didn't get much chance to see it then. We were taken into the village and I was given a hut to myself. The young chap, Mbopo, reported to an old, wizened witch-doctor who was the boss. I judged he was speakin' in my favor, but the old fellow shook his head an' waved a hand at the separate hut. The whole crowd set up a yell o' 'Pongo!' Then they threw me into the hut.

"I stayed there for eight days, too. Ye'll mind that there were just eight slaves an' mysel' in the party. They treated me well, fed me fine, but every night I heard a big jamboree goin' on. On the ninth evenin' they brought me out. The village was surrounded by the usual thorn zareba, an' the whole tribe was gathered just inside the gates, feastin'. Mbopo an' three others tied me up an' carried me out halfway to the separate hut. Here they laid me on the ground beside a small fire. [Pg 123]

"The old wizened chap came out after us with a long iron which he stuck in the fire. Then he pulled off my shirt an' did—this." Captain Mac slipped down his shirt collar and exposed the scarred shoulder that Critch had seen on the boat. As the others gathered around with exclamations of astonishment, Burt could see that the scar was in the form of a cross, except that a long loop took the place of the head-piece. Besides this, the whole shoulder seemed a mass of cicatrices.

"Yon's the shape o' the bit o' wood I found in Yusuf's packet," went on Montenay, when Mr. Wallace interrupted him in wonder.

"Mac! Do you know what that symbol is?"

"It's the sign o' Pongo," returned the other. "From what I saw later it had to do wi' ancient Egypt —"

"I should say it had!" ejaculated Mr. Wallace, sinking back into his chair and staring at Montenay, who slipped his shirt back into position. "Why, that sign is the Egyptian cross, or ankh—the symbol of life, and the peculiar insignia of Maat, the ancient Goddess of Truth!" [Pg 124]

"So I found out, if ye'd given me time to finish," replied Montenay drily. "Mbopo an' the rest staked me out there an' left me. What wi' the burn an' the insects that settled down, I was pretty nigh gone inside an hour. The fire was out, an' just after moonrise I heard a 'pad-pad' o' steps near by. Then a minute later I caught one glimpse of a monstrous lion, just as he sprang an' grabbed me by the wounded shoulder. That finished me for sure, and I fainted." [Pg 125]

CHAPTER X

THE SACRED ANKH

"When I came to," continued Montenay, "I thought sure I was crazy. I was lyin' in a palm-thatch hut, on a floor littered wi' bones an' refuse an' smellin' to high heaven. To one side was a little dish full o' palm oil, with a lighted wick floatin' in it. Leanin' up against the wall, behind the lamp, was a big painted mummy. Layin' in front o' the mummy was an ankh, four foot long an' made out o' solid gold."

"What!" Mr. Wallace stared at the other, almost speechless. The two boys, fascinated by the deadly earnestness of Montenay's recital, were pale with excitement. "But go ahead, man. I can talk later."

"I was still trussed up like a turkey, but I wriggled and squirmed until I got loose. My shoulder was badly torn up," went on Captain Mac, "and I was nigh frantic wi' the pain. A little o' the palm oil helped, but wi' them things around me I thought sure I was crazy. I crawled to the door, an' found I was in the hut inside the ivory zareba. [Pg 126]

"The whole business must ha' gone to my head, for I don't remember very well what happened then. I know I went back to the mummy an' saw that his neck was torn open. There was somethin' shinin', and I grabbed at it. Just then I heard somethin' behind me, an' there was the big lion, standin' and lashin' his tail. I remember laughing, then I caught up the lamp an' flung it at him. The oil blazed up as the vessel smashed him fair between the eyes, he gave a roar, and I fainted again.

"Next I remember was Mbopo bending over me. The poor fellow had come to the hut in the mornin' an' found me. It seemed that I had been staked out as a sacrifice to Pongo. This Pongo was a combination o' the lion and ankh. The ankh was the real god, but the lion had taken up livin' in the hut, so the lion was called Pongo and worshipped as the reg'lar deity. In short, whoever had possession o' the ankh could boss the whole country. Pongo, which was the lion, had

carried me to the hut. I was in possession o' the hut an' was the first who had ever escaped the sacrifice.

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Therefore, I was sacred and in the way o' bein' a god mysel'. I didn't find this all out right off, mind. I stayed in that village for six months.

"I taught Mbopo some English an' learned some pigmy talk. No, I didn't bother none whatever wi' the lion. He showed up later an' took possession o' the hut again. My shoulder was a long time healin' and I guess my nerve was gone for a while. Man, but I wanted to carry off that gold ankh an' that ivory! But the thing was impossible. After six months I got a chance while I was out wi' hunters, and I lit out. I worked my way out by strikin' a bunch of Arabs who treated me white. That's the yarn."

There was a moment of silence. Burt and Critch stared at Montenay in fascination. Mr. Wallace was looking down at the table. Finally he glanced up and spoke, slowly.

"Mac, you said something about proofs."

"I did that." Captain Mac unbuckled his belt, and took a small silk-wrapped package from it. "I told ye that I grabbed something from the mummy. Here it is."

Mr. Wallace unwrapped the package, while the boys leaned over his shoulder in high excitement. From the oiled silk fell out three linked scarabs, set in wrought. Critch gave a gasp, but Mr. Wallace turned over the scarabs and held them closer to the light as he examined their inscriptions.

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"Hm!" he exclaimed at length. "Montenay, your proofs are pretty good. This seems to have formed part of a necklace belonging to one Ta-En-User, high priest of Maat. I should say the scarabs belonged to about the Twenty-first Dynasty."

"Ye're no child yersel'," chuckled Captain Mac in delight. "That's just what they told me at the British Museum. Now, here's another queer thing."

"Ye know more about old Egypt than I do, Wallace. From what I could learn from Mbopo, it seemed that long ago these white pigmies migrated from the east to where they are now. On their way they struck a half-ruined "City of the Gods," as Mbopo called it. They brought away a lot o' stuff from there, which they looked on as sacred. All that's left is the mummy and the ankh. Is that possible?"

"Possible," returned Mr. Wallace, "but hardly probable. They might have run across one of the extreme southern Egyptian cities, and indeed that would be the only logical explanation of the presence of these things so far west. Yes, the tradition must be true. It's a strange bit of prehistoric African history you've run into, Mac."

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"It is that," rejoined the other. "Well, for a year I've been tryin' to make up a party to carry off that ivory an' that gold ankh. I got hold o' Tom Reynolds at Cairo, an' put it up to him. He called me a plain fool. I found McConnell in London. He laughed at the yarn. I tried to find you, but ye'd vanished around Tripoli. So at last I came down to tackle the job alone."

"When I struck your party, I knew right off that wi' the laddies along ye'd never tackle it. Man, I was fair desperate! I determined to lead ye off to the edge o' the pigmy country, where we are now, an' then put it up to ye. There ye are, Wallace. Will ye come in wi' me an' try it? The pigmies won't hurt me, mind."

Mr. Wallace stared at the scarabs. Burt stole a glance at his chum, and the two waited in breathless interest, not daring to urge the project. At length Mr. Wallace sighed.

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"You've tempted me, Mac, tempted me more than you know! I'd like nothing better than to make a dash for that place with you—not only for the treasure, but for the discoveries we could make. But with the boys here it is impossible. I am responsible for them, and I dare not go off and leave them in this country. If you'd told me this back up the river I'd have left them at the trading station and made a dash in with you."

"Oh, uncle!" burst out Burt, dismayed. "Ain't it perfectly safe? Take us! Let's all go! Cap'n Mac says they won't hurt him; he's a kind o' god, an' he can fix it so's we'll all—"

"No," broke in his uncle decisively. "I refuse to take the risk, Burt. No use, lad. That's final. You'll have to trust to my judgment in this affair."

"Ye're right," nodded Montenay dejectedly. "I can't blame ye, Wallace. But do ye understand? Ye won't hold the compass business against me—"

Mr. Wallace sprang to his feet and held out his hand.

"Nonsense! Shake, old chap, and forget it!" And the two clasped hands silently, while the boys gave a shout of delight.

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"I knew it!" cried Burt joyously, dancing around the two men. "I knew Cap'n Mac was all right! Hurray!"

"I wish you'd take us an' get after them white pigmies, though," put in Critch disconsolately.

"I'd certainly like to get hold of that mummy," asserted Mr. Wallace, his eyes sparkling. "To say

nothing of the ankh!"

"An' to say nothin' o' the ivory an' gold," laughed Montenay.

"But," cried Burt excitedly, "why didn't you get after that lion an' kill him? I should ha' thought you'd do that right away!"

"No," and Montenay shook his head. "As I told ye, my nerve was pretty well gone, laddy. The pigmies had guns, but they were old trade-muskets. None o' them except Mbopo, mebbe, would ha' stood up to the lion. That chap Mbopo was a good sort. He stood by me right along, took care o' me when I was sick wi' fever, cured up my wounds, an' learned to speak passable Scots dialect. It was amusin' to hear the boy speak the tongue."

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"That feudal business interests me," said Mr. Wallace thoughtfully. "Was this Mbopo a chief?"

"I don't know, rightly," returned the other. "The old witch-doctor was the boss, but Mbopo seemed to be second in charge. The women o' the place cultivated yams an' plantains, while the men hunted. They didn't seem to use poison, like the black dwarfs. That's another queer thing. They had poisoned weapons, right enough, but they got supplies o' the stuff from the blacks. Ye mind, the Wambutu and other black dwarfs are simply parasites on the bigger tribes. Well, these white chaps were parasites on the black dwarfs, near's I could figure it out."

Critch related what had happened on the launch coming upstream, when the black boy had caught a glimpse of Montenay's shoulder. The eccentric explorer laughed heartily.

"They all know it," he said. "The whites couldn't draw it out o' them wi' tortures, but every tribe hereabouts knows what Pongo is, or think they do. It's mostly reputation. These niggers are mighty superstitious."

"Well, we ain't goin' to leave that white pigmy business without doin' anything, are we?" asked Burt. Captain Mac glanced at his uncle.

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"Not if I can help it," he smiled. "How about my original proposition, Wallace? Now that ye know the yarn, will ye wait here for me while I take a crack at the pigmies?"

"Why, yes," returned Mr. Wallace slowly. "But frankly, Mac, I think you would be foolish. We are on the edge of their country, but you'd have to get through the black fellows first. They wouldn't know you, and in any event would probably have forgotten all about you. By the way, in which direction is this place of Mbopo's?"

"Northeast from here," returned Montenay, "as near as I know. I'm pretty sure I'll be all right, Wallace. I can show the beggars my shoulder if necessary. Once I get to Mbopo with a few bearers, we'll bring off the ivory."

"If they'll let you," supplemented Mr. Wallace. "You're too cocksure about it, Mac. While I'd be perfectly willing to go along if I was alone, my personal opinion is that it's mighty risky."

"Nothing venture, nothing win," laughed Captain Mac gayly. "Man, but I'm eager to be done wi' the caravan and into the pigmy country! Now let's settle our plans. How long would ye be willin' to wait here?"

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"That depends on how long you'll be," answered Mr. Wallace, Yankee-like. "If you meet with opposition I suppose you'll come back?"

"That I will," responded Montenay. "Suppose ye wait here two weeks for me. If I don't show up by then, work up towards the Makua. If I get the stuff I'll hit the headwaters o' the Makua, get some canoes, an' come down. How's that?"

"Sounds all right to me," rejoined the American. "We'll give you two weeks, then. If we hear nothing from you by that time we'll move up slowly toward the Makua. It will be easy enough to learn whether or not you have passed downstream. We'll wait there another two weeks, which is all I dare give. That will make about six weeks in all."

"Vera good," announced Montenay with a nod of satisfaction. "Now about the boys. I'll take twenty, if that suits you. Some rockets might come in handy, too."

These rockets were some that Mr. Wallace had obtained at Boma, made so they could be fired from a gun or revolver. They were intended for signaling at night, but had not been used so far.

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"Half the caravan is yours," laughed the American. "You'll leave your guns here, I suppose?"

"All but my Express," returned Montenay. "I'll travel light."

"When will you start?" asked Burt.

"To-morrow morning," grinned the explorer, calling for John. When that worthy appeared he was instructed to make all arrangements and select a score of the best Bantus as porters. A bustle of excitement soon rose from the camp, while the four discussed the final arrangements. In half an hour John reappeared and informed them that all was ready for the start.

Before daybreak the boys were up and at breakfast. With the first streak of gray in the east Captain Montenay called his men together, and all left the camp. Mr. Wallace and the boys had

decided to accompany him for a mile or two in order to see him off safely.

The party started toward the northeast, in which direction the forest extended and dipped down into heavier jungle and lower ground. After two miles they came to a small stream, and here the farewells were said. Montenay shook hands all around, with no display of emotion. [Pg 136]

"If ye're no seein' me again," he said to Mr. Wallace, while the porters were fording the stream, "ye'll deliver the letter I gave ye last night?"

"I will," answered Mr. Wallace soberly. "And what's more, I'll ship the boys home and come back for you. So long, old man!"

"So long. Good luck to ye," and Montenay was caught up between two of his men and carried across the shallow stream. On the opposite bank he turned and waved, the three gave him a hearty cheer, and with his little band he was lost in the heavy foliage. [Pg 137]

CHAPTER XI

MVITA SAVES BURT'S LIFE

For three days after the departure of Captain Mac there was little hunting done. Silent and morose as he often was, the absent explorer more than made up for this in his moments of gayety. His was a strong personality, moreover, and his absence could not but make itself felt keenly.

There was plenty to occupy the boys, however. A number of heads and skins had to be prepared and packed. Then there was the native village to visit, and this was a source of never-ending delight. The chief, whose name was Mvita, gave a great feast in honor of the hunters—to which the hunters donated the greater share of the viands—and the moving-picture outfit came into play with brilliant effect.

Mr. Wallace took out the boys on a two-days' trip after animal pictures, also. By utilizing the natives of Mvita's village and also the Bantu porters as beaters, a bloodless hunt was held. In this the animals were surrounded and forced to pass before a white-ant hill on which Burt was posted with the camera. Excellent pictures of various antelope, zebra, an old and toothless lion, and an infuriated rhino were obtained. In this way a week was passed, and finally Mr. Wallace announced that on the morrow they would hold another real elephant hunt, as Mvita reported a herd of the giant beasts three miles to the north. [Pg 138]

As they were leaving camp at dawn, a number of the villagers hastened up, headed by their chief. With anxious face Mvita implored the honor of bearing the guns of one of the white men. John refused him, wishing to save the usual gifts and emoluments of the office. Burt, however, interrupted with a laugh.

"Let him carry our guns, uncle! We've never been waited on by a real king before, an' it's somethin' to boast of. He won't steal 'em, will he?"

"I guess not," laughed Mr. Wallace, nodding to Mvita. With evident delight the chief took Burt's heavy elephant-gun. He was clad in long flowing red cotton robes, doubtless his insignia of office, but when John suggested that he remove them for the journey he refused indignantly. He could speak a little French, but very little.

"Are we going to spend all day?" inquired Critch, as the camp was left behind and the red spears of dawn shot up in the east. [Pg 139]

"Can't tell," replied Mr. Wallace. "The elephants were reported as being three miles north yesterday. By this time they may be twenty miles away, or they may remain in the same place for a week at a time, until their food is exhausted. However, we ought to strike something before noon."

"Say," broke out Burt suddenly, "remember what Cap'n Mac said last night about his scrap with that Arab trader? Do you think he was giving it to us straight?"

"Of course," answered his uncle decidedly. "Why?"

"Well," responded Burt doubtfully, "it looked a whole lot like downright piracy to me, that's all. It might ha' happened five hundred years ago, but it's hard to realize—"

"Look here," broke in Mr. Wallace, "you've got to remember, Burt, that Montenay has spent practically all his life exploring. He has his bad points, like all of us, but he has his share of good ones also. I myself don't blame him a bit. That Arab, Yusuf ben Salir, was a slave dealer and pirate himself. Besides, it was a matter of personal revenge with Mac. He's just done a tremendously brave thing in setting out for the pigmy land alone,—well, he's a strange character." [Pg 140]

"Think we'll meet him?" asked Critch in a low voice. "Or rather, will he meet us?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Mr. Wallace. "He has only one chance in a thousand of making it. Hello! Look at that ant hill—the sunny side!"

Following his finger, the boys saw a huge snake stretched out, warming himself in the hot sun. All three were at the head of the beaters, and Mvita, the only gunbearer who noticed the snake, brought up his heavy gun rapidly. Mr. Wallace waved him back, however, drawing his revolver and putting a bullet through the serpent's head. Upon measuring him, the reptile was found to be exactly fifteen feet in length.

"Say, ain't he a beaut though!" observed Critch, gazing down at the bright green and gold body. "Is he hard to skin?"

"Not a bit," replied Mr. Wallace. "Not worth while, though. The colors won't last. The gold turns white and the green black."

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"I don't care," said Burt, "let's leave a couple o' men to skin him anyhow. Even black an' white ought to make a mighty fine trophy. Snake skin keeps better than fur, anyhow."

As Critch was also anxious to save the python skin, two of the Bantus were left to take it into camp while the party proceeded north.

They had marched for over an hour without any sign of elephant when one of Mvita's men appeared ahead. A number had been sent out from the village to locate the herd, if possible. The man, flourishing his spear, ran up and reported that before dawn he had heard loud trumpeting in the forest ahead, not over a mile distant.

"Good enough," exclaimed Mr. Wallace. "John, get these chaps spread out in a line across country, to drive in anything toward the center. You stick to me, though, and handle my guns."

"Yes, sar," came the reply. A moment later the party had scattered, the natives stretching out in a long thin line far to right and left. Once more the advance was taken up, and all trudged steadily forward for half a mile. It was exciting work, for at any moment the patches of small trees, high grass and rush might yield anything from an elephant to a lion. A very hopeful-looking thicket had just been beaten through without any luck, and the three whites sighted an open grassy glade which stretched away in front, when Mvita gave a low whistle and muttered to John. The latter instantly stopped his master. Parting the bushes cautiously and gazing out on the fairly open glade, all could see a good sized herd of wildebeest grazing a quarter of a mile away.

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"We must have one of them," whispered Mr. Wallace, as the boys stared at the weird, bison-like animals eagerly. "We're down-wind, so I'll stalk 'em. Come on, John."

The two stole out cautiously, and began making a slow advance over the open space, hiding behind the ant hills and among the tall grass. Only the waving tops of the latter betrayed their presence, but just as the boys were expecting to hear a shot, Mvita touched Burt on the arm. One of his men had approached silently, and his face portended big tidings.

"What is it—elephant?" asked Burt. Mvita grinned and shook his head, then murmured one word.

"*Simba!*"

"Lion!" echoed Critch, who knew the native term. "Come on, Burt!"

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Without hesitation the two boys turned away and followed the native guide. The latter led them to the right for some distance, and as no sign of lion showed up Burt became impatient.

"Where—" he began, when the native stopped, clicked his tongue, and pointed with his spear. Ahead of them the boys caught sight of a small lioness trotting away from a clump of thick bushes. Burt, grabbing for his rifle, ran forward eagerly. Critch's bearer was a Bantu, who handed over the heavy gun but refused absolutely to advance. The two boys ran forward in order to cut off the trotting lioness from a stretch of rushes for which she was making.

They were barely fifty yards from the clump of bushes when they both stopped short at a shrill yell from Mvita, who had followed them closely, at the same instant Burt saw something appear at the edge of the bushes. Then came a low, muttering growl, and a huge black-maned lion appeared, his red mouth open, gazing steadily at the hunters. Burt pulled up his rifle and fired quickly. The growl ended in a snarl, and the lion rolled over.

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"Hurray!" shouted Burt, "I landed him—"

"Look out!" yelled Critch, and the explosion of his rifle almost deafened his chum. As Burt had fired, three more lionesses had appeared among the bushes, following the first! Two disappeared, but Critch's shot stopped the last one, not killing her. He put another bullet into her shoulder and she lay still. While he ran forward to make sure of his prize, Burt, followed by Mvita, turned toward the lion. The great beast lay perfectly still. Three of the Bantus had run up, and were standing within a few yards of him.

They were gathered in a group near his tail, admiring and yet afraid to touch him. Burt remembered his uncle's warnings about the remarkable tenacity of life often shown by lions, and stopped when fifty feet away. The lion was still breathing, but lay motionless. Concluding that if he paid no attention to the chattering natives he would remain quiet for a finishing shot, Burt and Mvita ran onward, the chief displaying no fear whatever, unlike the Bantus.

They approached from his rear, and assuming that he was unable to rise, Burt stepped around for a good shot at the eye, which would not harm the pelt. The instant he came into view of the wounded beast, however, the latter revived.

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With one terrific roar he sprang to his feet as if uninjured. His green eyes blazed with fury, and his lips were drawn back until his long, yellow teeth were exposed in a snarl that struck Burt cold, for the boy was barely a dozen feet away. The men had fled instantly, only Mvita remaining beside Burt. The latter, taken by surprise, gave a step backward, lifting his rifle.

Just as the beast was in the act of springing, Burt fired. The heavy bullet missed the eye and glanced off the sharply backward-sloping head of the brute, but its terrific impact was sufficient to stop the animal for the instant. Burt heard a yell from Critch, and was tempted to turn and run. The lion was up immediately, however, and again Burt stepped back and pulled the trigger.

This time, however, his foot caught in the grass. The bullet went wild, and the terrified boy gave himself up for lost. A tremendous thud and crash at his side told him that the lion had sprung; then a quick flash of red caught his eye as he rolled over and gained his feet. [Pg 146]

The flash of red came from the robe of Mvita, whose faith in the white hunters had given way at the last moment. Seeming to realize all at once the danger of his situation, he turned and ran just as Burt fell, with a shrill scream. Beyond doubt this movement had saved Burt's life, for the brilliant red robe caught the eye of the lion, who at once gave chase to the yelling chief.

Burt, pale and excited, gained his feet just as the lion was catching up with Mvita. Lifting his rifle, he fired. To his dismay the bullet missed completely, throwing up the dust beyond Mvita. In a desperate effort to save the man before it was too late, Burt pumped at the magazine. At the same instant Mvita made a quick swerve. The lion also turned, coming broadside on to Burt. Just as Mvita was about to be brought down, the boy fired. The lion dropped in the middle of his spring, his back broken. A shot from Critch's rifle struck him as he lay, and Burt finally put a bullet through the lion's brain.

Relieved and rather weak-kneed at the imminent danger, Burt looked around for his chum. [Pg 147]

He was astonished to see Critch, who had hastily returned, give a gasp, then burst into a roar of laughter. Whirling about, Burt stared over the body of the lion and then went into a spasm of mirth.

The sight that met his eyes turned what was nearly a tragedy into instant comedy. There was Mvita, a dozen yards from the lion, earnestly bent upon scrambling up a thorn-tree in the shortest possible time! He never cast a glance below, as the roars of laughter went up from the boys and even from the natives, but only climbed the faster. He was nearing the top of the spiny tree; on every limb and thorn hung remnants of his gorgeous crimson robe, and by the time he reached the top he was fully as well clad as his humblest subject below.

In vain did the boys yell at him to come down. Mvita was taking no chances of a mistake again, and not until he had reached the very top branch that would bear his weight did the terrified chieftain glance down. Even the sight of his laughing subjects and the dead lion hardly reassured him, but once he was certain of his safety he took a speedy and certain method of restoring his lost dignity. Descending as quickly as he had gone up, he brought a long thorn-branch with him, and applied this to his subjects and the Bantus indiscriminately until their laughter was changed to howls for mercy. Only at the intercession of the gasping boys did the angry chief cease. [Pg 148]

The Bantus speedily gathered, and played like children about the dead bodies of the two beasts, which had been placed side by side. They proved themselves surprisingly good mimics, one taking the part of the lion and jumping with a growl at the others. Another took Burt's part, snapping his fingers as he stepped backward and finally fell; while a third played Mvita, running to the thorn tree with the lion in hot pursuit. At this instant an angry voice stopped the proceedings, and the boys looked around in alarm to see Mr. Wallace running toward them.

"Here, what is all this?" he shouted, waving his rifle. Before the boys could answer he caught sight of the two carcasses, and stopped short. "So you've been disobeying orders again!"

"Not quite that, uncle," returned Burt quickly. He then explained why they had left, together with all that had happened. As Mr. Wallace glanced at the almost naked chief, and then at the decorated thorn tree, his face relaxed and Burt knew there was no more to fear. [Pg 149]

"You spoiled a fine shot for me," was all Mr. Wallace said. "I guess you've had lesson enough. Get the boys busy on the skins, John."

"How about the elephants?" spoke up Critch.

"They're not far off, unless your shooting frightened them. We'll leave the Bantus to skin these beasts, while we go on with Mvita's men." [Pg 150]

CHAPTER XII

MONTENAY RETURNS

"We ought to provide Mvita with a new robe," suggested Burt with a grin. "He saved my life all right back there, whether he meant to or not."

"A few yards of cloth will fix him," returned his uncle, as they started off with the chief and his

men. "You'd better carry your big guns now yourselves. No telling what will happen."

One of the villagers led them forward at a brisk pace, straight onward for about a mile. They were now almost in the jungle, the open spaces and higher ground seeming to end abruptly with a small stream which they passed. Mvita's men were spread out in a wide circle, for the elephant herd had finally been located, and once the beaters got around them the animals would scent them and come up-wind toward the hunters.

Presently they came upon the elephant spoor, or trail—a wide swath ripped through the heavy undergrowth by the passage of the big animals. To one side of this Mr. Wallace and the boys took their stand, hiding amid the bushes. [Pg 151]

"Let them pass us," cautioned the explorer, "and when you have a clear shoulder-shot, make it fatal the first time. You take the first, Critch—"

He was cut short by a yell that arose ahead. This was followed by a loud trumpeting as the frightened animals crashed away from the beaters. Burt paled as he thought of what might happen should the elephants burst upon them through the jungle instead of following their own trail, but he had little time for reflection. Even as the thought came to him the first elephant appeared with a shrill trumpet of rage, his trunk flung high and his wide ears flapping forward. Behind him came more of the dim, gigantic shapes, and the boys pulled up their guns.

Not ten feet from them, the first elephant thundered past, the others crowding close upon him. Critch waited until he was sure of his shot, and then sent the first beast reeling into the opposite side of the trail with the force of his bullet. Almost instantly Burt fired at the second elephant, striking him just behind the shoulder. The others stopped for a second, giving Mr. Wallace a chance for a fine shot, then smashed into the jungle and were gone. [Pg 152]

"Hurray!" yelled Critch, leaping to his feet. "Mine's down!"

"So's mine," shouted Burt eagerly, gazing at the motionless form of the elephant, who had staggered and sunk into the grass at once.

"Come on," cried his uncle as the first of the natives appeared, "I hit mine badly, and he can't be far away."

Mvita came up on the run as they started, and all broke into the jungle on the trail of the wounded elephant, John carrying the spare guns. Only a hundred yards away they came upon their quarry. The elephant, mortally wounded, was standing beneath a large tree, half-hidden among the foliage. They could see him swaying from side to side, and just as Mr. Wallace was circling around for a finishing shot the huge bulk crashed down and lay still.

"Ain't it pretty near time to eat?" inquired Critch, after they had inspected the body.

"Just about," answered Mr. Wallace. "Where will we make camp, John?" [Pg 153]

"By de river, sar," was the reply, and John was busied at once with orders to Mvita and the natives, who had brought along a chop-box. The three elephants killed were all bulls, that of Mr. Wallace having only one tusk. While the ivory was being cut out and the bodies being dissected by the natives, who would make a grand feast that night, the three whites returned to the small stream which had been crossed half an hour before.

John had found a small spring of clear, sweet water near some high ground on the west bank. Opposite, there was a long stretch of marshy, low ground that gave upon the jungle proper. On their camping side, however, this fever-threatening swamp was entirely absent.

Before an hour had passed the three were sitting around their folding canvas table, doing full honor to the forest delicacies furnished by John and his assistants. More of the villagers trooped up to share in the elephant meat, until it seemed to the boys that the entire village was present. Suddenly Burt, who was sitting facing the stream, gave a startled exclamation and pointed to the low ground opposite. [Pg 154]

"What's that, Uncle George?"

Turning in their seats, the others saw the top of the high marsh-grass waving as if some creature were forcing its way along. John, who had over-heard the question, brought up the rifles at once but Mr. Wallace waved him back and took out his glasses.

"I don't know, Burt. Doesn't show up yet. It'd hardly be any animal, for we are up-wind and he would scent us. It might be a crocodile, although in that case he would not make so much commotion. What do you think, John?"

The gigantic negro took the glasses and gazed long and earnestly at the faint movement in the grass, which seemed to be coming toward the river. Then he returned them with a shrug.

"Not know, sar."

"Tell Mvita to send over some of his boys and find out," suggested Critch. Mr. Wallace nodded and John was off instantly. A moment later a dozen natives started crossing the stream, advancing cautiously, for they too had been puzzled and were taking no chances. Before they had reached the opposite bank Critch gave a cry.

"Look there! It's coming out!"

Through their glasses they could see a dark object crossing one of the more open spaces. Its method of progression was peculiar, because while it was undoubtedly coming toward the river, it seemed to be rising and falling, floundering in the marsh-mud, and at times lying motionless on the grass-hummocks.

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"It's a man!" exclaimed Burt in amazement. Critch uttered a scornful denial, but Mr. Wallace slowly nodded.

"I believe it is," he asserted. "I thought I could make out arms and legs but I wasn't sure. If it is a man, he must be in a mighty bad fix."

A sudden idea occurred to Burt and he glanced at his chum. Critch met his eye and read the unspoken thought. When Burt raised his glasses again his face was white.

Now the natives were surrounding the strange figure, and a moment later one of them waved his spear. The others could be seen lifting the creature, whatever it was, and speedily carried him to the river.

"Come along," and Mr. Wallace rose hastily. "We'll go down and meet them. If it's a man he'll need help. John, did you bring the small medicine case?"

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"Here, sar," and as if by magic the grinning black produced the required object. They all hurried down to the river, where the villagers were already crowding around in great curiosity. The little band of natives splashed across the stream, and suddenly Burt felt his uncle grip his arm.

"Burt!" and he had never before heard such tense horror in a man's voice. "Go up and get some water boiling right away! Hurry, lad, hurry!" Without pausing to ask questions Burt dashed off. As he went he could hear his uncle continuing. "John, make for the camp right away. Get out bandages, have hot water, make the hypodermics ready and mix some strong morphia and anti-toxin solution. That is Captain Montenay." John was off at a run instantly.

The last words struck Burt like a blow. With pale face he got the water heating, and met his uncle as the latter ordered the senseless form of Captain Mac set down. The explorer was unrecognizable. He was plastered with mud from head to foot and his whole body was swelled and poisoned until he bore small resemblance to a man. Mr. Wallace gave a glance around, then shook his head.

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"We can do nothing here. Boys, we'll have to work to save him. Looks to me like black wasp stings." Turning to Mvita, he ordered Montenay's body carried to the village at top speed. Instantly four natives caught up the senseless figure and made off at a lope.

Mr. Wallace and the boys dropped everything and followed. When they reached the camp after a hard march they found John bathing the swollen body of Captain Mac, and Mr. Wallace went to work at once with the medicines that lay ready. With the mud and dirt removed, Montenay's horrible condition only became more evident. Mr. Wallace went to work with the hypodermic while the boys aided John to cleanse the explorer's body, then handed the syringe to John to clean and turned to the bandages and lint.

The countless stings were washed with a weak solution of ammonia to take out the poison, and an hour later they left the Scotchman a mass of bandages but sleeping soundly.

"I gave him some morphia," explained Mr. Wallace as they washed up outside. "What he needs first is sleep. He must have been in absolute agony in there."

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It was after sunset before Captain Mac wakened from his sleep. The boys were at his side immediately, followed by Mr. Wallace.

"Well," cried the latter heartily, "how's the sick man now? Feel a bit better?"

"Gi' me a drink," whispered the other feebly. When he had taken a long draught from Burt's canteen he sank back with a satisfied sigh. "Where'd ye find me?"

"Down by the river," answered Mr. Wallace. "Feel able to talk?" Montenay nodded and fixed his eyes on the American. "I suppose the pigmies got after your men?"

"Into 'em's more like it," returned Captain Mac. "Didn't see one of 'em. Just arrows—arrows—arrows, day an' night." He paused for breath. "What day's this?"

"Friday," said Critch. "We found you this morning."

"Wednesday it was," went on Montenay as he gained strength slowly. "Last six men went in a bunch. Pulled off my shirt an' yelled 'Pongo.' Tried to talk to the deevils but they wouldn't show up. Started on alone an' they shot arrows all around me. Didn't dare hit me, I guess. So I came back."

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"Two days," mused Mr. Wallace. "You certainly looked nice when we found you!"

"It was the black wasps," said the other. "I fell into a nest that night an' it nigh finished me."

"Come along, boys," returned Mr. Wallace as he arose. "You get to sleep again, Montenay. You'll be more fit in the morning."

They adjusted the mosquito curtains for the night and returned to find dinner waiting for them. After dining sumptuously on eland tongue and hartebeest tenderloin Burt pushed back his canvas chair with a sigh of content.

"I s'pose we'll work up toward the Makua pretty quick, won't we?" he asked his uncle.

"You bet we will," replied the latter fervently. "Just as soon as Captain Mac's able to navigate. That'll be two or three days anyway. We have a nice little bunch of ivory and we'll get more in by trading as we go along. Mvita has four more tusks to bring in too."

"That ivory zareba'd mean a good bunch o' money, wouldn't it?" put in Critch. "I'd hate to go through what Cap'n Mac has, though." [Pg 160]

"By the way," said Mr. Wallace, "don't use all those chop-boxes. I want a couple of zebra and giraffe skins. We'll get 'em farther north on our way up."

"Mvita told me this morning," said Burt, "that there was some giraffe about five miles to the northeast of here. Why couldn't we get 'em and have a skin fixed by the time Cap'n Mac's ready to march?"

"We'd save time that way, but I don't want to leave him," returned his uncle thoughtfully. "However, I might send you two out with John. I'd trust him anywhere."

"Go ahead!" pleaded Critch excitedly. "That'd be great, Mr. Wallace!"

"John!" called the explorer with a smile. "If I send you out after giraffe in the morning with these boys, will you take good care of 'em?"

"Sure, sar!" grinned the big Liberian cheerfully. "John him be beri careful. Bring back safe!"

"All right. Get your stuff ready then. You can take my big rifle yourself." As John went off with a wider grin than ever Mr. Wallace turned to the boys. "I want you two to promise me that whatever happens you'll obey John and do just as he tells you." [Pg 161]

"All right, sir," replied Critch at once.

"So'll I," agreed Burt. "Five miles in this country won't be any joke, though!"

"It'll take a good day right enough," nodded Mr. Wallace. "John is pretty safe to be with and he'll take as good care of you as I would. If you find the giraffes don't bring down more than two. You might run across some zebra in the same country and if you do, you can get some of 'em too. But I guess there's not much danger of that, without horses."

"Now remember to obey John in everything. He'll be in my place for the day. Better fill your canteens with cold coffee before you go and take your heavy rifles. Let John have your compass, Burt. If you run across any waterbuck bring in a couple for the men. It'll be a good change of diet. Now get to sleep, for you'll be up before day."

After laying out a supply of heavy cartridges and some fresh clothes for the morning the boys tumbled into their sleeping bags on top of their cots. Each leg of the cots was placed in a dish of water to keep off ants and other crawling creatures which might wander in. Critch was half asleep when he heard Burt's voice. [Pg 162]

"Oh, Critch! Remember what Cap'n Mac looked like coming across that swamp?"

"Shut up! I don't want to dream about it."

"I was just thinkin' that we'll stick pretty close to John to-morrow, eh?"

"You bet your life we will! Go to sleep."

It was their last sleep in the comfortable tent for many a night. [Pg 163]

CHAPTER XIII

THE PIGMY VILLAGE

As Mr. Wallace had predicted, they were up long before the sun. After a hasty breakfast by candle light John discarded his role of chef and buckled on a cartridge belt. As their gun-bearers and a dozen porters assembled, two hunters came in from the village to guide them to the place where the giraffes had been seen and the boys bade Mr. Wallace farewell.

A five-mile walk through rough and thickly wooded African country is not a light task by any means. In the main they followed trails where heavy animals had beaten down the thick grass and left openings through the bush. They saw little game for the first hour, although once a big python slid across the path and Burt missed him.

"Won't we have a yarn when we get home?" said Burt, gleefully. "We'll run some great little old stories in the high school paper next year, eh?" [Pg 164]

"Bet your life!" replied Critch. "I'd like to bottle some o' them blamed little red ants and use 'em

for initiations. Wouldn't they make the fellows squirm?"

"Say, don't forget to swap some of Mvita's men out o' their stuff. We want to take home a good bunch o' them spears, Critch. A couple o' shields and knives'd go great too."

"No talk-talk now, massa Burt!" John turned to them warningly. "Him giraffe not beri far. Maybe hear."

The hunters had slipped through the tall grass and vanished. It was now two hours after daylight and the boys knew they must be getting near the hunting grounds. They were no longer in the plain and were advancing by a buffalo-trail through a low jungle-growth not far from a small river.

One of the hunters appeared in a highly excited state and John motioned to the boys to get out their guns. They now advanced more cautiously as they saw the Bantus in front gesturing to them and in another moment sighted two giraffes standing in an open glade ahead.

As the boys raised their guns something flashed out from the farther side of the thicket and both animals gave a leap. Without stopping to think what it was the boys fired. Burt hit the animal on the right and he dropped to his knees, then bounded off and the boy brought him down with his second barrel. Critch had hit the other giraffe in the brain and killed him instantly. [Pg 165]

The boys sprang forward with a shout of joy but were stopped by John's voice. "Come back!" cried the big Liberian. "Pigmies in there."

"What!" Critch whirled incredulously. "Where?"

"Them shoot arrows first. Maybe mad 'cause we kill giraffes. Go back quick—"

The hurried order was stopped by a frenzied yell from the Bantus. Dark objects flitted through the trees at their side and the hunters broke in wild fear. Before the boys could stir in their tracks they saw John reel and fall suddenly. At the same time something struck and threw them to the ground, and despite their struggles they were bound hand and foot while skins thrown around their heads made them gasp for light and air.

It was all done so swiftly that Burt hardly realized what had happened before he felt himself picked up and carried off. He could not know that Critch was close behind him and he was in an agony of suspense. Had his chum and big John been killed? He tried to call out but the skin around his head stifled him. He could hear nothing save an occasional guttural clicking word from his bearers and was forced to resign himself to his fate. [Pg 166]

It seemed that he was borne along for ages. His head was protected, but mosquitoes and gnats settled on his bound hands until his arms seemed to be dipped in living flame. Then he heard his captors splashing through shallow water and knew that they were crossing the river into the jungle beyond. After this they slipped through thorn-laden bushes that ripped his clothes to shreds, and once a black wasp's sting drew a groan of pain from the boy, for the touch was like hot iron to his hand.

He did not doubt for a moment that he was captured by pigmies. If only they had grasped John's warning an instant sooner! Burt groaned again as he remembered how the big Liberian had reeled and fallen. And what would his uncle do? The thought gave him sudden hope. His uncle would know he had been carried off, surely! But if Captain Mac had failed to penetrate the jungle even with his "pull," how could he look to his uncle for rescue? [Pg 167]

Suddenly Burt felt himself thrown roughly to the ground. His bonds were cut and the skin pulled from about his head. As he sat up a strange sight greeted his startled gaze.

Critch sat beside him, rubbing his inflamed hands grimly. All around them stood little men hardly four feet tall. They were armed with knives, spears and bows and were naked save for waist-cloths. Each man wore a square-shaped headdress and all were chattering away with their peculiar guttural clicks. Most of them had arm rings and neck rings of iron or brass.

Beyond them were a number of low huts four feet high arranged in a rough circle and in the center of this circle were the boys. When Burt glanced at the faces of the men around him he was surprised to find them not black but brown, with wide-set eyes and frank expressions. The village was set in the semi-gloom of the deep jungle. [Pg 168]

"Well," grunted Critch, "nice mess, ain't it?"

"What'll they do with us?" queried Burt anxiously. "Golly, my hands are fierce! S'pose uncle'll find us?"

"Search me," replied Critch. "What happened to John?"

"Don't talk about it. I don't know." Burt shuddered. "Wonder if they speak French?"

Burt addressed the pigmies in that language. They chattered excitedly in response but he could make nothing of their words. They seemed to be perplexed as to what disposition to make of their prisoners, for one after another chattered angrily while the rest shook their heads.

"Ain't a bad looking lot at that," commented Critch coolly. "High foreheads and good eyes, most of 'em. Look at their color, Burt! S'pose they're the white pigmies?"

"No," replied Burt. "Guess they're Wambutu. Cap'n Mac said they looked like this. By golly! I got it!"

Seizing a stick that lay beside him the boy attracted the attention of the dwarfs. As they watched him curiously he drew a loop in the ground with the end of the stick. From the loop he extended an arm and drew another across. A startled silence fell on the pigmies as they watched. [Pg 169]

"Pongo!" shouted Critch suddenly. "Bet she works, old man!"

At sight of the sacred emblem and at his shout something like a groan of fear and horror went up from the pigmies. Instantly one, who had a higher headdress and wore more ornaments than the rest, stepped forward and spoke excitedly. When Burt shook his head and repeated the sacred word a spasm of anger flashed across the pigmy's face and he motioned them to rise. One of the little men darted off into the jungle as the boys were led to a hut and made to enter.

They crouched down in the dark cramped interior and as they did so a pigmy thrust some roasted bananas in at the door. The boys got outside of these without delay and as they still had their canteens of coffee they began to feel more cheerful.

"That was a rotten poor idea," said Critch disgustedly. "Wish we'd shut up 'bout Pongo." [Pg 170]

"If we had we might be in the soup by now," laughed Burt. "Got that camphor bottle with you? Mine's busted."

Each of the boys carried a small bottle of camphor while away from the camp. The camphor was a good thing for bites and assisted in keeping off many insects. Critch found his bottle intact and they bathed their hands. Fortunately their pith helmets had not been knocked off by the skins thrown around them and these afforded their faces some protection, although the nets were badly torn.

"I'm going to try getting out of this," asserted Critch as the time passed on without anything stirring without. "Too blamed hot in here for me."

He crawled to the door and stuck out his head, then withdrew it so suddenly that he fell back over Burt. "Gosh!" he cried. "There's a fellow out there with a spear and he pretty near stuck me. It's got that black stuff on it, too! Guess I'll stay in here a while. You can go out for a walk if you want."

"No thanks," grinned Burt faintly. "It ain't exactly inviting outside, I judge. I put my foot in it all right when I mentioned Cap'n Mac's friend. Wonder what they'll do with us?" [Pg 171]

The afternoon wore away slowly and painfully and merged into night suddenly. More of the roasted bananas were thrust in at the door, together with some water and mashed-up beans. The little hut was barely large enough to allow the boys to stretch out and as it became evident that they were not to be visited that night they made themselves as comfortable as possible and finally got to sleep. They suffered little from insects because not only was the hut closely thatched and plastered with mud, but there was a fire outside the door.

Burt was awakened by a tug at his foot. Sitting up with a startled exclamation he saw a pigmy blocking the door. It was evidently long after daybreak, for even the darkest recesses of the pigmy village were showing some light. Burt aroused Critch and the latter followed him through the door.

Outside they found apparently the whole tribe assembled. Men, women and children stood or squatted around in a big circle and as the boys emerged they were greeted by a rippling click. Whether it was of fear or anger the boys could not tell. They stood and stretched their cramped limbs. [Pg 172]

"Seem to be looking for some one," said Critch. In fact the pigmies were many of them gazing expectantly toward the end of the village, where there was an opening in the circle of huts. As the boys followed their looks curiously Burt recognized the little warrior who had darted off the previous afternoon. He was advancing quickly from the jungle and behind him were a number of others.

"By golly, they're white!" exclaimed Critch.

"Can't be—yes, they are!" Burt cried in excitement. He saw that the six men who followed the pigmy were no larger than he, but they were of a distinctly lighter color. They were also better dressed and carried larger and stronger bows. The foremost was seemingly a very young man.

They advanced rapidly and when they reached the circle of villagers the latter struck their heads against the ground and clicked as if in fear. The white pigmies were first shown the two boys, then were taken to the sign of the *ankh* which Burt had scratched on the ground the day before. When they saw this the six gave low exclamations and the young one advanced to the side of the boys. [Pg 173]

"You know Pongo?" he said in English. The boys gave a shout of joy at hearing the words but repressed it as a dozen spears were poised.

"Yes!" cried Burt, sitting down again hastily. "Cap'n Mac told us. Say—"

"Hold on!" interrupted Critch excitedly. "Are you Mbopo?"

"Mbopo!" the young pigmy repeated with evident delight. "Where know that? You know Buburika Mac?"

"Yes," replied Burt. He spoke slowly and distinctly in order to make the pigmy understand and supplemented his words with gestures. "He's off that way. These people killed his party a few days ago and nearly killed him. They attacked us and brought us here yesterday."

"Hurt Buburika?" demanded the pigmy angrily. He turned and poured out a flood of words at the darker pigmies who howled and beat the ground with their heads. One of his own men stepped forward and spoke a few words and the young man turned to the boys again.

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"I friend," he said gently. "No can help much. You slave—go to Pongo."

"To Pongo!" cried Burt in dismay. But he quickly rallied. "Where'd you learn English?"

"Buburika," smiled the young fellow proudly. "Buburika—Leopard, little leopard. Him like me. Me help him. Help you maybe. Buburika Mac him Pongo too."

The other white pigmies chattered something and Mbopo motioned to the boys to follow them. The black ones brought out the guns taken from the boys, together with the cartridges and knives. These Mbopo's men took care of and with the young pigmy at their side the boys were marched away from the village of the brown tribe.

"No talkee," cautioned Mbopo. In a moment they were hidden from sight or sound of the village. All about them rose the dense jungle growth. Great trees stretched high above them with their boughs meeting overhead, matted with creepers and vines. Only an occasional ray of sunlight filtered through that vast canopy of foliage under which leaped and chattered flocks of monkeys. Tiny bees tormented them through the torn places in their nets.

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Every few yards they had to climb half rotted tree trunks studded with briary creepers and alive with ants. They passed stagnant swamps and pools covered with greasy green scum and emitting vile odors. Once or twice a black pigmy appeared silently, received a sign from Mbopo, and vanished again without a word. That vast silence oppressed the boys terribly and they were heartily glad when they arrived at a village similar to that they had left, and halted for dinner.

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CHAPTER XIV

THE SACRED LION

"Things might be a whole lot worse," said Critch as he stretched out after the meal. "I'd kind of like a change from roast bananas and beans, though."

"A little grub cheers a fellow up some, don't it?" returned Burt. "I hate to think of what's coming to us, though. D'you s'pose they'll brand us?"

"Search me," yawned Critch. "I reckon Mbopo'll help us if he can. We just got to grin and bear it, old sport. Ain't no use whining."

"Whining yourself, you red-head!" retorted Burt indignantly. "D'you reckon they're toting us for their health? If we could only swipe one of those guns and lay out the big lion! Here's Mbopo."

The pigmy approached and squatted down before them with a smile. His face was intelligent and well-formed. He had a row of cicatrices down each cheek like his fellows and wore a leopard skin hung across his shoulders.

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"Mbopo help," he asserted. "How Buburika?"

"Him good," replied Critch. "Good name for Cap'n Mac, ain't it, Burt? What are your people going to do with us, Mbopo?"

"White boys ju-ju," replied Mbopo. "Give Pongo."

"Is that the lion Buburika laid out?" exclaimed Burt. The pigmy looked blank and Burt repeated his question.

"Him lion," nodded the other. "Maybe him scared you too. Him scared white skin. Scared Buburika. What? Mbopo help. Aye, vera good."

The concluding words sent a twinkle into the boys' eyes but they were careful not to laugh. The very tone was an exact imitation of Montenay's voice.

"You bet that's good," replied Critch. "Can you get one o' them bang bangs? Guns?" He made the motion of shooting but Mbopo shook his head decisively.

"No got. Him stay here." The pigmy pointed to the chief's hut. "Come. We go. No fash yerself—Mbopo help!"

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Barely able to repress their laughter at the comical imitation of Captain Mac, the boys rose and Mbopo patted their hands encouragingly. He clicked and his men appeared from different directions. The boys saw that their guns were left behind.

"That don't look encouraging—" began Critch but Mbopo stopped him with a warning "no talkee" and the march was again taken up through the jungle. A number of black dwarfs accompanied them this time and the boys were amazed at the agility with which the little men swung through the trees or cleared a path through the jungle growths. They seemed perfectly confident that their captives would not try to escape. Both boys realized how useless it would be and had not even discussed the idea.

At nightfall they halted in a third Wambutu village. On the way the party of hunters with them brought in a wart hog and a small gazelle. On these the village feasted that night. There were no more bananas or plantains but plenty of the ground beans and some manioc and nuts like chestnuts which the pigmies ate voraciously but which did not appeal to the boys.

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They were left unguarded that night and tried to sleep in the open beside a fire. The insects proved too much for them, however, and they were glad to seek the shelter of a hut, cramped as it was. As their belongings had not been taken, with the exception of their weapons, Critch still had his compass. That evening they discussed the course of their march and agreed that it had been north by east.

"I've been watching the needle," said Critch. "We came north yesterday from the camp. To-day we've been traveling a little east of north. Golly, I'm tired! Guess we can't bank on your uncle finding us now."

"Guess not," agreed Burt hopelessly. "We only got one chance of ever getting out of this mess, Critch. If we can do what Cap'n Mac did we may work it."

"We got Mbopo to help," returned Critch. "I ain't looking forward to getting branded very eager. We got to get around that part of it, Burt."

"Don't see how," answered Burt. "It don't look like Cap'n Mac hurt old Pongo very much with his blazing oil. We ain't got a gun either. If we knew any conjuring tricks we might make a bluff on Mbopo's people."

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"I can pull a coin out of handkerchiefs," grinned Critch. "But we ain't got a coin and if we don't keep our hankies tied on our hands we'd be eaten alive. Try again."

"An electric battery'd be the stunt," said Burt. "Fellows in books always have batteries handy, or eclipses, or something. Guess we ain't lucky. What d'you s'pose Cap'n Mac would do if he was here?"

"Prob'ly tell you to shut your head and go to sleep while you can," grunted Critch. Burt accepted the advice.

They set out again in the morning and still traveled north by east. Mbopo said little to them that day. Instead of stopping at a village they camped out at noon and made a meagre meal of nuts and wild plantains. They were getting into higher country now although it was still jungle. The black hunters had not accompanied them and the six white pigmies were the sole guardians of the boys. At evening there was no sign of a village and when one of the men brought in another small wart hog the rest scattered and collected more wild nuts and berries.

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They camped that night in the center of a ring of fires. These smudges protected them somewhat from the clouds of insects, but nevertheless both boys suffered a great deal. Their mosquito nets were badly torn and their camphor was all gone by this time. Although the pigmies did not seem to mind the mosquitoes, they were very careful to avoid the hanging nests of the trumpet ants and the black wasps while passing through the jungle.

The next morning there was still the same desolate silence all about them as they marched on. Mbopo had said nothing the night before and the boys had been too dead tired to ask any questions. Toward noon they both noticed that their captors became more careless about keeping watch. The boys were nearly worn out by the terrible journey, but Mbopo pushed forward relentlessly. As the shadows lengthened the boys saw the reason for this.

They had left the lower and denser jungle behind, and seemed to be slowly reaching higher and freer ground. There was no restriction on their talking now, and as the sun touched the tips of the trees in the west Critch gave an exclamation.

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"Look over there ahead, Burt! That's a river, sure's you're born!"

"Mebbe it's the same one Cap'n Mac told about," returned his chum, catching sight of the silver thread that was partially higrin and fell back to their side.

"Mbopo help," he asserted again. "No fash yerself, lad."

"Thanks, old man," exclaimed Burt. "Is the village near?"

"Pongo," nodded the dwarf, and Burt gave up trying to talk to him.

Now two of the men darted ahead at a fast run. For another half mile they advanced along the river bank. Then the forest ended suddenly.

"Here we are!" cried Critch.

Before them lay a small yam-field, and beyond that the famous village of the white dwarfs. As

Captain Montenay had said, it was a very large one. Despite their plight, the boys looked eagerly for the hut of Pongo. [Pg 183]

"There she is!" exclaimed Burt, and Critch also gave a cry. Off to their left, almost at the edge of the trees and some distance from the village thorn-zareba, stood a large hut surrounded by something dark gray in the sunset. Their attention was soon drawn away from this, however, for a series of yells went up from the village and out poured the tribe to welcome them.

As nearly as the boys could guess, there were something like three hundred warriors gathered about the gate of the zareba as they came up. Mbopo saluted them with a few words, but his little party held together and pushed through the crowd. Behind the warriors and inside the zareba was a still larger assemblage of women and children. As they passed the gateway, the boys found themselves in the presence of the chief, no doubt the same whom Montenay so disliked, for he was an old and shriveled man whose countenance boded ill for the two captive youths.

Clad in a splendid leopard-skin robe, he was seated on a pile of skins. Ranged behind him was a rank of picked spearmen, larger than most of their fellows, and at one side were a dozen men with tom-toms made of hollow logs. As the party came in sight these men began beating their instruments, sending up a roaring clamor that amazed the two boys. [Pg 184]

Mbopo fell on his face before the chief, and the others of the party after him. Only the two white boys remained erect, facing the glittering eyes of the old chief while he listened to Mbopo's recital. At its conclusion he motioned to the latter to rise, and said a few words. The young dwarf replied and seemed to be expostulating, but the chief sprang to his feet in a flame of rage. Raising his arm, he pointed toward the separate hut, and both boys distinctly caught the one word "Pongo." At a sharp command Mbopo and another dwarf jerked the boys and led them away to one of the huts, leaving them inside without a word.

"Well," said Burt throwing himself down with a sigh of relief on some skins, "the old boy certainly has it in for us. He ain't exactly a nice specimen, is he?"

"Not much," ejaculated Critch. "Anyhow, I'm going to sleep, Burt. I'm too tired to care what happens." [Pg 185]

Burt stretched out likewise and immediately was lost in slumber. The day's trip had been a hard one indeed, and neither boy was able to resist the chance to snatch a little rest. When they awoke they were in darkness, and the voice of Mbopo was in their ears.

"All right," grumbled Critch. "Quit shaking me. What's up?"

"Him eat, vera good," came Mbopo's voice. Growing accustomed to the darkness, the boys found that a faint light flickered in through the entrance. By this they saw the form of Mbopo. He gave them some roasted bananas and a gourd containing a sweetish drink made from the banana. Burt got out his matches and struck a light, by which they found it was nearly eight o'clock. They had been sleeping only three hours, but even that small amount of rest had refreshed them wonderfully, and the food and drink made new boys of them.

When they had finished the last scrap, Mbopo motioned them to rise. Burt did so with a groan, for his muscles were stiff and sore, and a moment later they were outside. Here they could see a number of fires blazing in a vacant space near the thorn zareba, and toward this Mbopo led them. [Pg 186]

"Mbopo help," was his only speech. "Him lad kill Pongo mebbe. Him do like Buburika Mac."

"Don't see how," grunted Burt.

"Shut up," ordered Critch. "Our friend's got a notion in his head that we're here to kill the lion, I'll bet a dollar. Say, going to stand for that branding stunt?"

"Not if I know it," came the quick response. "S'pose we can't help ourselves, though. See what turns up."

"No talkee," cautioned their guide. They drew near the fires, and saw that the whole tribe was gathered around in a semicircle, enjoying a huge feast. In the center of this semicircle, not far from the thorn wall, the old chief reclined on his throne of rugs, the tom-tom beaters near him. Mbopo, who plainly stood in great awe of the wizened potentate, fell on his face in salute. Once more the boys calmly met the evil black eyes that stared at them, and Burt could see small hope in the malevolent glare of the chief. [Pg 187]

After a few murmured words from Mbopo the chief gave a sharp order. A dozen feet distant stood a small fire, over which hung some meat on spits. This was removed, and a warrior brought forward a long thin object that sent a thrill through Burt. It was a rudely-fashioned branding iron.

The warrior thrust one end into the fire. Burt moved closer to his chum, with fists clenched. He knew well how useless it would be to put up any fight, but he was determined not to give in to the torture without a struggle. The old chief smiled slightly at the action, and gave a motion. Four of the little warriors, only reaching to the shoulder of the boys, stepped forward with axes ready.

"No use, old man," said Critch quietly. "We'll have to take our medicine, I guess."

The four warriors led the boys to the fire. One of them reached up and deliberately tore Burt's tattered shirt from his shoulder. The pale-faced boy made no move to resist, and next moment the white-hot iron was taken from the fire, and the tom-toms rolled forth their thunder.

But at that instant even the noise of the great drums was drowned in an appalling roar that turned the eyes of all upon the thorn wall. The startled boys saw the latter bend, there came another terrific roar, then the stout thorn zareba was burst apart and into the enclosure rolled the form of an immense lion!

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Before a move could be made the cat-like animal regained his feet, gave one quick sniff of the air, and pounced on the old chief, who was struggling to rise. To the surprise of the boys the crowd fell prostrate; a murmur of "Pongo! Pongo!" went up, and a moment later the lion gave one bound and had vanished in the night, unharmed. And with him went the chief of the white dwarfs.

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CHAPTER XV

THE IVORY ZAREBA

The whole thing happened in less than a moment. As Burt recovered from his surprise the pigmies were still prostrate in the attitude of worship. Beside him lay the branding iron, unheeded. With a quick motion the boy stooped and caught it up, whirled it around, and sent it flying across the zareba. Then he turned to Mbopo.

"Now make good!" he exclaimed, as a murmur arose from the crowd at his action. "You're the boss, Mbopo!"

As though he had understood the words, the young pigmy sprang to his feet and began to speak rapidly in the clicking language of the dwarfs. For a moment there was a surge of the warriors toward the captives, then it was stopped. Mbopo spoke more and more rapidly, and finished his speech by seizing a spear from the nearest man and leaping on the throne of skins, where he stood in an attitude of defiance. For a moment the crowd seemed stupefied by surprise. Then went up two bark-like notes from every throat, and once more the pigmies sank prostrate in the dust, saluting their new chief.

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"Bully for him!" cried Critch delightedly. "Now we're all right, Burt!"

"Looks that way," replied the flushed Burt, who had feared a speedy retribution for his rash act. Mbopo said a few more words, and again the peculiar bark-like guttural came from the crowd. There was a movement, and a dozen of the largest warriors, those who had formed the bodyguard of the old chief, stepped forward and saluted the new chief with a prostration. Mbopo had seized the throne.

"Now I wonder what'll happen?" said Critch. "Say, did you notice that lion's head, Burt?"

"Sure," nodded his chum. "It was all scarred white. Funny the way he butted through that thorn fence, wasn't it? Just like he didn't see it."

"I'll bet the scar came from the oil Cap'n Mac threw at him!" cried Critch excitedly. "Mebbe it—"

"That's it!" exclaimed Burt. "He's blind! He couldn't see the zareba but he could smell all right. That's it; he's blind!"

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"Hurray!" shouted Critch. Before he could say any more a murmur from the crowd stopped him. The conversation of the two captives had not passed unobserved. One of the old men came forward, saluted the chief, and began to speak. The crowd signified their approval by repeated clicks and Mbopo also nodded while the wondering boys watched.

The old man finished his speech. Mbopo stood in silence for a moment and then gave an order. To the astonishment of the boys they were surrounded and bound hand and foot in a flash, and laid at the feet of the chief.

"No fash yerself, lad," came the familiar voice from above them in reassuring tones. "Mbopo help mebbe. Kill Pongo."

The bewildered boys lay silent. Burt tried in vain to reason out what was the reason for their seizure. He was convinced that Mbopo was their friend, and yet it might well be that the pigmies had demanded a sacrifice to Pongo from the new ruler and that Mbopo had yielded.

Then came another order, and the boys were picked up by a dozen hands. They were carried away from the fires and through rows of grass huts to the gateway of the zareba. This was opened, and Burt felt a thrill of fear as he realized that they were being carried outside. Were they to be staked out for the lion as Captain Mac had been?

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The two were carried forward side by side, and at length were dropped on the ground. Then followed a clicking conversation, then the warriors retired and Mbopo leaned over them, knife in hand.

"Kill Pongo," he whispered cheerfully as he cut their bonds. "Mbopo help. Old chief vera bad mon. Mbopo him chief."

"Well, of all things!" ejaculated Critch as he sat up and rubbed his wrists. "What does it mean, Burt?"

"Why," responded Burt slowly, "I guess Mbopo has a notion that we can kill the lion by magic."

We've run quite a bluff and I guess we'll have to make good, old man. What'll we do?"

Critch looked around. The night was oppressively silent save for the sound of drums and chanting from the village. They were sitting halfway between the town and the sacred hut, which could barely be made out in the starlight.

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"If we could only get inside that hut," returned the red-haired boy, "without finding the lion there, we might wait for him with some poisoned arrows. We'll never see our rifles again, that's sure."

"The lion is blind, I guess," said Burt doubtfully, "but I'd hate to stand up to him with nothin' but a bow and arrow. Besides, d'you remember what Cap'n Mac said? They don't use poison here."

"That's right!" Critch turned to Mbopo. "You got poison, spears, arrows?" He had to repeat the question several times before the dwarf could comprehend his meaning. When he did so, Mbopo shook his head, saying that he had none.

"I don't b'lieve he's got you yet," said Burt disgustedly. "Well, we got to make good somehow, Critch. If Mbopo gets the notion that we've been running a bluff it's good night for us."

"Are you game to tackle the hut?" asked Critch shortly. "We're taking a chance on findin' Pongo at home, but it's all I can see to do. Anyhow, Burt, he ain't very hungry just now."

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"I s'pose not," and Burt shuddered a trifle. "Come on then," and he rose to his feet. "Say! Why couldn't Mbopo bring us some weapons? If we had one o' them axes—"

"That's the talk!" burst out Critch. "If we had a couple o' men with axes, Burt, we could make a trap for the old lion! How's that?"

"Fine!" replied Burt hopefully. "Have to make it out o' pretty big logs, though. If the lion isn't inside, we can make a fire an' scare him off for a while anyhow."

"Lot o' good that'd do," grunted his chum. "He wouldn't know there was any fire there unless he walked into it!"

Burt turned to Mbopo. By dint of constant repetition and much patience he finally made the dwarf understand that he wanted another man or two and some weapons. Mbopo hesitated, then handed over a small axe that was slung at his waist.

"Me got bruder," he replied at length. "Bring him, bring plenty spear, hey?"

"That's it," exclaimed Burt. "Bring 'em over there, see?" and he pointed toward the sacred hut.

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"Mebbe so, pretty quick," asserted the dwarf, rather doubtfully. "Kill Pongo?"

"You bet," answered Critch, a good deal more confidently than he felt, patting the dwarf on the shoulder. "Chase along now, old scout. We'll kill Pongo right enough!"

"Vera good," replied Mbopo. The next instant he was lost in the darkness, and Burt turned to his chum.

"Well, we might as well die game," he said, with an attempt at a smile. "Ready?"

"I s'pose so," responded Critch, who had suddenly lost his confident manner. "Get your matches ready."

The two boys started toward the sacred hut. Both were extremely stiff and sore, and in sad need of sleep. The sound of chanting and the throb of tom-toms came from the village behind without interruption, while in front of them was the forest, silent and black and somber. Suddenly the black hut with its dull gray stockade loomed up before them.

"Who's goin' first?" asked Burt, half-heartedly.

"I will," volunteered Critch. Holding a match ready, he entered the narrow gate of the ivory zareba. The little enclosure around the thatch hut was empty, and before them loomed a small black doorway. Critch, with one swift gesture, scratched the match and flung it inside, stooping to look after it. The brief flame gave them a rapid vista of bare walls and floor.

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"Hurray!" whispered the red-haired lad hoarsely. "She's empty!"

Ashamed of his own timidity, Burt stepped past him without a word. As he went, he lit a match and held it on high. Tearing a piece of the loose thatch from the walls, he lit it and cast it on the floor and then the two boys looked around.

The hut was much larger than the other dwellings of the white pigmies. The floor was littered with bones, leaves, sticks and dirt of every description. Close inside the door stood three earthenware vessels, and while Burt threw more leaves and sticks on the little fire, Critch picked up one of these.

"Palm oil!" he cried. "Here's a light, Burt! Put a strip of cloth in each of these and we'll have elegant lamps."

In another moment each of the three improvised lamps was burning faintly, while the fire also flared up. As it did so Burt gave an exclamation.

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"Say, I clear forgot about the mummy! There she is, Critch."

He pointed to the wall opposite the entrance, holding up his "lamp." Both walked across the rubbish-littered floor, which smelt most frightfully. Before them, standing erect against the wall, was a large wooden mummy-case. Most of its paint was gone long since, only a few faint traces of gilding remaining to show what it must once have been. Beside this lay an object that brought a whistle of amazement from Critch.

"That's Pongo, Burt! The golden ankh, sure's you're born!"

The boys looked down in awe at this relic of an ancient people. About four feet long and nearly as thick as Burt's wrist, the symbol of the Goddess of Truth gleamed up with a ruddy yellow color from the dirt that half covered it. Fascinated by the sight, the boys stared in silence until at last Critch uttered a sigh.

"Well, we're wastin' time, Burt. We got to plan out that trap."

Burt turned away from the two relics, and threw some dry sticks on the fire. There was an opening in the center of the roof through which the smoke escaped fairly well. Burt's head was full of the mummy, and for the moment he paid no attention to his chum's remark. [Pg 198]

"It's kind of queer," he remarked, sitting down against the wall, "to think of Ta-En-User meeting us this way! Just think of his trip clear over from Egypt, and our trip clear over from—"

"Shucks," interrupted the more practical Critch. "I'm thinking of Pongo right now. Come out of it! We've got to frame up something before Mbopo gets back."

"I can't see what there is to frame up," retorted Burt hopelessly. "All we can do is to lay low. What kind of a trap you thinking of?"

"Well," explained Critch, frowning, "I kind of thought we could make one out of logs, like they use on bears out West."

"Why wouldn't it be better," suggested Burt, "to dig a pit like those Bantus do? We could dig it right out in front here, cover it over with grass, and stick a spear up in the bottom. That'd finish Mr. Pongo mighty sudden next time he came around." [Pg 199]

"Can't do that," replied the other. "It's a mighty big job to tackle, Burt. If you'd ever dug holes for fence posts you'd know."

"I wonder what Uncle George is doing right now?" said Burt suddenly. "Do you think he'll start after us?"

"He might," answered Critch doubtfully. "He'd never make it in a million years though. You know what the black dwarfs did to Cap'n Mac. Say, this is worse than any story book I ever read! We're right up against it solid, Burt. If we pull out of this hole it'll mean work. We ain't got your uncle to lean on or anyone else. Mbopo don't count for much, I'm afraid. Gosh, I wish we had a couple guns! We could clean up on old Pongo like a house afire."

"He was pretty big, just the same," said Burt. "Lot's bigger'n any we've bagged so far. Even if he is blind, which we aren't sure of, it wouldn't be any cinch to tackle him."

"Anyhow," retorted his chum, "we can't expect to lay around and wait for something to happen. We got to make it happen. We're in possession of the ankh, like Cap'n Mac was, so we're safe enough for the present. Mbopo's the only one who's game to go after Pongo, that's sure. If his brother is up to the mark we ought to do something." [Pg 200]

"That was fierce, the way the old chief got carried off," remarked Burt as he gazed around with a little shiver. Still the dull throb of the drums came faintly from without, but the chanting had now ceased. "It was mighty lucky for us, just the same. Don't it seem funny, that here we are plannin' to kill Pongo right after he's saved our lives that way?"

"There's a whole lot of things that strike me funny," answered Critch. "Wouldn't it be great if we could carry off all this ivory and the gold ankh."

"Huh!" grunted Burt. "Fine chance of that. It stumped Cap'n Mac to do it."

"Come on now, get down to business," said Critch, straightening up. "First, we got to figure on how many logs we'll need. I should think we might rig up something right here inside the ivory zareba, but I don't see quite how. We can't very well fix a trap out in the forest, because Pongo ain't liable to be hungry right away. It's queer that he didn't bring the old chief here like he brought Cap'n Mac. Mebbe he uses this more as sleeping quarters, and prefers to take his meals out in the open air." [Pg 201]

CHAPTER XVI

BURT LEFT ALONE

"Critch," said Burt suddenly, "that was a blamed good idea while it lasted. But it hasn't lasted. We can't do it." [Pg 202]

"Sure we can!" returned Critch hopefully. "Why not?"

"It'd take us a year to build a deadfall like that."

"We don't need to! Ain't Pongo blind? All we have to do is rig up a figure-four trap out o' logs."

"That'd be a nice easy job, wouldn't it!" retorted Burt. "He may be blind but he ain't foolish. No, sir, it won't work. We just got to kill that lion though. If we don't, Mbopo'll know we've been runnin' a bluff on him."

"What you goin' to do?" said Critch irritably. "Sit here and let him come?"

"Not much. Seems to me that if the lion's blind there ought to be some way of fixing him without any danger. We're safe enough from the pigmies while we're here with Ta-En-User, but not from the lion. Dust your brain off! Think!"

[Pg 203]

"All right," responded Critch briskly. "Here goes for the first thing." Without ceremony he got up and pulled over the mummy-case. "We got to fix Mbopo sure, ain't we? Well, take hold o' this—don't bust it!"

"What you doing?" exclaimed Burt as his chum began to pry open the mummy-case with the edge of the little axe obtained from Mbopo. Critch paused to reply.

"It's a pipe, Burt! We'll just upwrap Ta-En-User here, see? I guess he ain't in extra good condition but he'll do for a while. Then we'll fill up the case with leaves and the wrappings. These pigmies have never seen inside the case, remember. They don't know a mummy from a goat. Soon's we get him unwrapped an' laid out in his nightie, out go the lights and you get back in the corner.

"When Mbopo comes I'll tell 'em you did this to the ankh." Critch raised his axe and cut a deep gash on the cross arm in the soft gold. "Then I'll say that Pongo dried you up for insulting him. Get the point? That'll scare 'em stiff. We'll take the ankh, the stuffed case and the mummy back to the village."

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"Yes you will!" cried Burt hastily. "S'pose I'm going to stay here?"

"Sure you are!" grinned Critch. "I'd do it only I reckon the mummy won't have red hair an' it wouldn't work. You've got to do it!"

"But what for?" persisted Burt. "What's the use? S'pose the lion comes?"

"If he comes you can throw some blazing oil at him just like Cap'n Mac. That ought to scare him away. Soon's I get to the village I'll see if I can't locate some o' that poison. The whole tribe'll be scared stiff when they see the mummy, 'specially if he's kind of spoiled. You hide out here till morning and then I'll come back with what weapons I can get. I'll warn the dwarfs away from here first. That's the only way I see of gettin' what we need. We can't make Mbopo understand very well."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea if you was going to stay here 'stead of me," assented Burt dubiously. "S'pose we kill the lion. How'll you account for me coming back to life?"

"I'll tote the mummy in here and bury him," returned Critch promptly. "Then maybe to-morrow night I'll have them bring the ankh to the doorway. I'll go through a Latin verb and yell and you walk out. Why, man, I'll be no end sacred! We'll own the whole blamed tribe!"

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"It listens good enough," admitted Burt. "Tell you what you do. Send the stuff on with Mbopo and build a fire right in front of the door before you go. Leave me some sticks—these bones ought to burn too. Mebbe that fire'll keep the lion out."

"Hurray!" exclaimed Critch enthusiastically. "Now let's get the old boy unwrapped. It's been pretty damp for him here, I guess. He ought to be pretty well preserved in spite of that. He isn't torn up except at the neck. Off she comes!"

Critch set to work at the head and Burt at the foot of the case. It did not take them long to get the gaudily-painted wooden case apart. Then a heavy aromatic odor filled the hut. As Critch had said, the mummy was unharmed except at the neck. Here the case had been splintered open but when the lid was off the boys saw that only a few layers of the wrappings had been torn away. The whole mummy was wrapped in cloths.

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Burt and Critch lifted out the mass of wrappings to the mud floor of the hut. As they did so something tinkled and fell against the case. Their eyes fell on the remainder of the scarab necklace of which Montenay had obtained a part. Evidently it had been placed around the neck after the mummy was wrapped. Burt hurriedly stuffed it into his pocket.

"Got that anyhow," he remarked. "Hope Mbopo don't show up before we get through. Here we go!"

With the help of the keen-edged axe the mummy was soon unwrapped and laid on the floor. Intertwined with the wrappings the boys found six necklaces, each formed of gold beads of different shapes. The largest was formed of half amber and half gold beads, and held a large pendant in the shape of the ankh. This was left on the mummy, while Critch stuffed the others into his pocket. As he did so he gave a cry.

"Hello!" He picked up a tight roll of parchment, welded into a solid mass by the wrappings.

"Wonder what this is? Well, we can't waste time on her now. Go slow—that's all right. Now we got to hustle, Burt."

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"Lay him here this way—right beside the ankh," replied Burt. "Stick your axe in his hand. Can't do that either. Liable to bust off. Well, lay it handy here. I'd better keep it, so don't carry it off."

The boys then hurriedly stuffed the pile of wrappings back into the case and put the lid on as before. It had formerly been cemented with some kind of strong pitch and now the gaping seam at the side showed plainly.

"That won't do," cried Burt as they inspected it. "How'll we fix that, Critch?"

"Search me," replied his chum, puzzled. "They'd see that in a minute, 'cause we busted up that cement considerable."

"Cement!" exclaimed Burt. "Looks a whole lot like tar to me, Critch. Mebbe a little heat would fix her up fine!"

"That's the candy!" returned Critch. Each boy took a brand from the little fire and ran this along the seam. The black pitch-like stuff smoked, bubbled, and set them coughing, but to their delight it coalesced and it only remained to allow the cement to harden.

"Golly, I'm glad that's over!" sighed Burt as he wiped his streaming face and threw his brand back into the fire. No sound had broken in on their labor except a throbbing beat of tom-toms from the village, mingled once more with the shrill, steady chanting of the pigmy warriors. The boys had grown too accustomed to the night-noises of the jungle to heed the flickering far-off howls and cries that formed a faint background to the nearer sounds.

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"We'd better carry all the stuff near the door," said Critch. "We'll leave one light going so's they can see things right."

Between them they dragged the heavy ankh over the floor to the entrance. Then the mummy was set beside it leaning against the wall, two of the lamps were blown out and Burt lay down in the far corner. Critch threw some dead leaves over him and then sat down to wait with his head on his knees.

"Say, Critch!" grunted Burt suddenly. "Wonder what Uncle George'd say if he could see us? Do you s'pose he an' Cap'n Mac are on their way home by now?"

"Don't you believe it!" replied Critch grimly. "I'll bet a million dollars that they'll be hunting for us pretty quick in the jungle. Your uncle ain't goin' to shoot for home and leave us back here. He ain't that kind and neither's Cap'n Mac."

"Guess you're right," agreed Burt hopefully. "I wouldn't be s'prised if Uncle George ducked in here all by his lonely. He wouldn't have much chance against them poison affairs of the black dwarfs, though," he added more gloomily.

"You got to remember that we've only been gone a few days," replied Critch. "Cap'n Mac had to get well, too. Tell you what, pard, we're powerful lucky not to be in his fix just about now."

"Well, mebbe you're enjoying yourself a whole lot," retorted Burt, "but I ain't. Golly, don't this ol' place smell like all get out? You ought to be over here, Critch, with the bones and things. I wish Mbopo—"

"S-sh!" came a mutter from the other. "I hear something down the line. Here's my box of matches." An object fell near Burt's hand. "I'll be back just as soon—lay low!"

Burt, lying in the shadow cast by his chum, heard a light shuffle of feet and then Mbopo appeared in the doorway, holding another little figure by the hand, while a third followed reluctantly.

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"Him bruder," grinned the dwarf happily. "Him scared. T'ink Pongo kill. Kill lion—where bruder gone?"

The three dwarfs were standing within the entrance now, gazing fearfully at Critch and the dim surroundings.

"My brother very bad," answered the boy slowly, pointing to the ankh. "Him take axe, hit Pongo. Pongo hit him with fire, burn him up," and he moved the single lamp a trifle so that the light fell full on the mummy beside him.

Had the situation not been so serious Burt could have laughed at the sickly gray look which overspread the features of the pigmies as they fell to their knees. With one frightened groan all three buried their faces in the dirt. Critch knew it was time to act and rose to his feet.

"Get up!" commanded the boy sternly. He took the dwarfs by the hand and raised them up one by one. "Pongo him mad. Him say no kill lion yet. Him say take to village." Critch pointed at the village and the pigmies comprehended.

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Then he patted them on the back and smiled and little by little their fears were overcome. Taking a spear from Mbopo he passed it through the loop of the golden ankh and signed to the two brothers to raise it.

They obeyed after some hesitation, with frightened looks at the grinning mummy. Then Critch

picked up the mummy and laid him in the trembling arms of Mbopo and made shift to get the case on his own shoulder. He led the way out and a moment later Burt was alone.

He could hear the four stop outside while Critch lit a small fire in front of the entrance. Then the latter re-entered with an armful of large sticks and flung them down.

"So long," he muttered. "I'll put some logs up against the door inside the fire. If the lion gets through the smoke he'll stop at the logs mebbe. See you later."

"So long," murmured Burt and the other vanished. He heard a few sharp orders transmitted through Mbopo and then after five minutes three or four small logs were piled against the door. This was a decided improvement on his own plan of the fire, for now the opening was nearly blocked. [Pg 212]

Burt waited for a few moments and then rolled over and sat up. The single wick was still burning dimly and he picked up the box of matches and stowed them away beside his own. As he listened he could hear the deep throb-throb of the larger drums from the village mingled with the sharper and more staccato notes of the tom-toms. Over all rose the shrill monotonous chant.

Suddenly there came a change. The tom-toms ceased abruptly with one or two scattered notes. The chanting died away an instant later. Then arose a low, mournful wail of absolute fear that made the listening boy shudder. This was followed by silence for a brief space and then came two bark-like notes such as had answered the young chief earlier in the evening. Critch had triumphed! Otherwise, Burt well knew that he would have heard only one shrill yell.

Burt still had his watch in its safety-pocket and had kept it wound pretty regularly. He now drew it out and held it close to the blue flame. Two o'clock; the boy stared at the hands incredulously. Had all these events only occupied five or six hours? He had been sure it was nearly morning. As it was, there were still three hours until daylight. Three hours before Critch would come! [Pg 213]

For one moment Burt felt an insane impulse to rush from the hut and seek the village. The horror of the place rushed over him. The combined odors of the mummy, the burning oil, and the filth on the floor sickened him and he made a step forward. Then he paused abruptly. Critch was counting on him to fulfill his share of the task. His chum was doing his own share—it was no easy matter to face that village of pigmies. Was he to endanger everything at the last moment?

With a little sigh Burt drew back. He settled down among the dry leaves, leaving the light for companionship's sake. As he leaned back his eyes closed and a feeling of delicious rest stole on him, for he was very weary and tired. In another minute he was sound asleep.

He was awakened by something scratching and sniffing at the thatch behind him. [Pg 214]

CHAPTER XVII

THE DIARY

Burt leaped away with a yell of pure terror as he woke. He was answered by a deep growl that sent his hair on end with fright. The lion was outside and had smelled him!

There was silence for a moment and then came a scratching at the logs before the entrance. This was succeeded by one angry roar and Burt concluded that the fire outside was still burning. He pulled out his watch with trembling fingers. Three thirty! And the sun did not rise until after four!

A low mutter of growls and a swift pad-pad of feet came to him as the angry and baffled lion ran around the hut. Burt's first spasm of wild, uncontrolled fear gave way to courage born of desperation. There was no place for him to run to. If he did manage to get out he must get past the lion and face the pigmy village. His only hope was to fight off the blind beast until Critch should arrive. [Pg 215]

Burt got out his matches and lit all three of the jars of palm oil hurriedly. At the sound of his movements the growls outside increased in fury. Then the soft footfalls ceased and the next instant the whole hut quivered as the paw of the great beast struck it.

The thatch was very closely woven, however. Burt hesitated between using the axe or the oil and finally decided to reserve the former in case the oil failed to drive off the lion. Again and again the beast struck at the side of the hut. The thatch shredded away with a rustle and the hut shook beneath the strain. Then a piece of the wall a foot square came away and into the opening swept a great yellow foot armed with immense claws.

Burt did not hesitate. With a match ready lit he set fire to the oil in one of the jars. It sputtered, then broke into a burst of flame and the boy swiftly flung it at the great paw which was clawing frantically at the side of the opening.

A terrific roar responded, a roar such as the boy had never heard before in all his life. It drove the blood from his cheeks and left him gripping the handle of his axe, but outside he could hear the lion rolling over and crashing among the long grass between the hut and the zareba, and he knew that he was the victor for the moment. [Pg 216]

Another danger caught his eye and he sprang forward. Whipping off his coat he hastily beat out

the flames that were running up the side of the hut from the blazing oil, and scattered dust over the latter with his foot. That frail thatch was his only protection now!

He still had two jars of oil. One he was resolved to keep in case he had to use the little axe. At least he would have the advantage of sight. His hopes and courage rose somewhat as he listened to the blinded animal thrashing about in the grass. Then came silence outside.

Burt waited but could hear nothing. "I hope he's run off!" muttered the boy to himself. He hardly dared hope for that, however, and his fears were justified when he heard the swift pad-pad outside again. This time it was faster and heavier. Burt remembered the lions he had seen running like great cats across the plain and his heart leaped as he pictured the look of the animal outside.

Now came a furious attack at the corner of the hut beside him. So sudden and unexpected was it that Burt was caught napping. Before he could strike a match or catch up the pot of oil he was horrified to see a double row of fangs crash through the thatch, followed by a great tawny head. Across the face extended a broad white scar as of an old burn. [Pg 217]

With one strangled cry Burt lifted the keen little axe and brought it down in the center of the white scar. He saw a tremendous paw that ripped across his breast and hurled him backward, heard a maddened scream from the beast, and as he fainted his last memory was of the rocking, reeling walls about him.

He woke with the sting of cold water on his face and gasped. His first thought was that the lion was over him, and he struck out blindly and savagely.

"Go slow, old man!" sounded the voice of Critch. Burt looked up and saw the face of his chum. He sank back weakly, while Critch went on bathing his face. "Take it easy, Burt. Don't try to talk yet. Want a drink?"

Burt certainly did want a drink, and he half emptied the canteen of water at a draught, while Critch supported him. Then he struggled to his feet. [Pg 218]

"Let's get out o' here," he murmured. A shudder swept over him as he glanced around. There were gaping holes in the thatch walls, and before him was a pool of blood, black against the dirt. The two boys reached the doorway and Burt sank down gratefully in the warm morning sunlight, leaning against the wall of the hut.

"You must have had a fierce time," said Critch sympathetically. "Are you hurt?"

Burt glanced down and shook his head. His shirt had been ripped to pieces by that savage sweep of the lion's paw, but beyond one slight scratch he had escaped damage. He paled again at the narrowness of the escape. Then Critch thrust some roasted bananas into his hand, and the two boys made their breakfast together.

"I feel a heap better now," smiled Burt weakly as he set down the empty canteen at length. "Now we can talk."

"What happened, anyhow?" inquired Critch eagerly. "When I got here five minutes ago you were lyin' on your back. I thought you was dead, sure, when I saw all that blood and the wrecked hut." [Pg 219]

Strengthened by his sleep and the food, Burt gradually regained his self-control as he related the story of that terrible night to his chum. Critch listened with eager interest, then rose and dashed into the hut. An instant later he reappeared, frowning.

"The axe is gone," he exclaimed excitedly. "Think you killed him?"

"How do I know?" retorted Burt. "I hit him as hard as I could, and I guess it landed between his eyes, but that's all I can tell."

"You must ha' landed pretty hard, then," mused Critch, "judgin' from all that blood. Anyhow, we can follow him up—"

"Do it yourself," broke in Burt. "I know just about how Cap'n Mac felt now. I wouldn't monkey with that lion again for a million dollars cash. No sir!"

"Well, I will!" cried Critch excitedly. "I can get Mbopo—"

"Oh, how did you come out?" interrupted Burt, with new interest. "I judged from the sounds that it worked all right." [Pg 220]

"Work!" laughed Critch. "I should say it did work! Why, I've got the whole blamed tribe eatin' out o' my hand, Burt! Even Mbopo ain't quite sure whether he ought to kow-tow or kneel down when he speaks to me. It was easy!

"After we left here I had a lot of trouble trying to make the other fellows carry that *ankh*. They were scared to death of the thing. Before we got to the gate I fixed up the procession right. Mbopo went first with the mummy. Then come the two brothers carryin' the *ankh* between 'em on the spear. I come last with the mummy-case.

"The whole tribe was feasting and dancing and singing when we showed up. When Mbopo went through the gate and got into the firelight the bunch stopped all of a sudden. Then they saw the two boys with the *ankh*. The tom-toms quit work and everybody went down on their noses. Before

they had a chance to look up I fixed things right.

"I had Mbopo stand on that pile of skins. The *ankh* and mummy-case were set down right in front of him. I stood alongside him and took old Ta-En-User, setting him on his feet natural-like. About half the crowd was looking up by this time. They couldn't understand what was up till I nodded to Mbopo and he began to speak.

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"Well, sir, he hadn't said more'n about ten words, pointing to the *ankh* and the mummy, before them dwarfs let a howl out of 'em like they were all struck by lightning."

"Yes," broke in Burt, "I heard that. It sure sounded awful."

"I reckon they *felt* kind of awful," grinned Critch contentedly. "I was scared stiff at first, honest. It seemed so blamed foolish, Burt, to trot out a mummy and a hunk of gold and set up as a god on the strength of it! I soon got over being scared, though. I could be chief o' that tribe right now if I wanted to!

"Mbopo went on explaining how you happened to be all dried up that way. The crowd turned several degrees whiter while he was talking. It made me feel pretty mean for a minute to think o' them grown men an' women knuckling down that way to me. Then I got another idea.

"I set Ta down gentle and reached out for Mbopo's hand. It scared him, but he was game. I led him forward a step, then picked up the *ankh* an' stood it on end. When I took Mbopo's hand again his knees were shaking, but I grinned at him and placed his hand on the loop. When he found that nothing happened he just swelled up, an' looked at me so grateful and plumb happy that I couldn't keep from laughing. The crowd stared, but when they saw Mbopo standing there proud and confident, they hollered out their kind o' cheer—two sharp little barks."

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"Heard that too," nodded Burt. "Whew, I'd like to have seen all that, Critch! But didn't you get any sleep at all?"

"You bet I did!" was the reply. "Just as soon as I got things settled that way Mbopo made another speech. Then I got him to understand that I wanted some place to sleep. He had a fellow take me to an elegant big hut. There were lots of skins and stuff in there and I went to sleep right off. I was pretty near dead. I woke up at sunrise and got some bananas and water and came over here. That's all, I guess."

"Well, when are you going to resurrect me?" asked Burt. "I'm not going to hang around here, I can tell you."

"You got to," replied his chum earnestly. "If you showed up now it'd spoil the whole thing, Burt! You can stay out here in the shade, can't you? The zareba hides you from the village, as long as you keep away from the entrance."

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"All right." Burt struggled to his feet, himself again. "Let's have a look at that zareba, Critch."

The two boys walked across the little open space and halted in front of the row of tusks. Strands of thorn-bush were interwoven among the tusks, which were planted closely in the ground, but the zareba was so low that the lion would have had no difficulty in leaping over it. It was evidently intended more for show than for defence.

"Those tusks don't look as if they were worth taking away," said Burt disgustedly. "Look at how old they are, and all cracked up!"

Indeed, the tusks seemed very ancient. Their surface was not the smooth, white surface of new ivory but was gray and rough and pitted with holes worn by the weather and insects.

"They must have been here for a long time," agreed Critch. "But I don't know 'bout their not being worth taking off, Burt. You know when your uncle swapped Mvita for those old tusks o' his? They looked just like these, and your uncle isn't buying old tusks for his health. Besides, Cap'n Mac was crazy about these. If they hadn't been worth while he wouldn't—"

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"That's so," exclaimed Burt more hopefully. "Prob'ly they're all right on the inside. We're liable to make some money out o' this trip yet."

"You talk just's if we had it cinched!" laughed his chum. "Say, take some thorns and pin your shirt together. I got to get back to the village now. I'm going to bring out some weapons and some more grub, but I want to make sure that everything's safe. I'll have to warn Mbopo not to come near here, too. I guess we can fix things up to resurrect you by to-night, anyhow."

"You'd better," returned Burt, fastening his tattered shirt together after Critch's suggestion. "I'm not going to stay here another night, that's straight. Why don't you get Mbopo out after Pongo with some of the men?"

"Not yet," answered Critch thoughtfully. "I want to finish up your business first. That'll tie everything down tight. Then we can get busy with the lion. I believe we'll pull out of this yet, Burt!"

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"Sure we will," laughed Burt, his spirits fully restored by this time. "I'm going to get some more sleep here in the shade. Better go easy with Mbopo. If he gets a swelled head he might make trouble."

"No chance of that," replied Critch, pausing at the gateway. "He's a mighty good scout. Well, so long! Anything special you want?"

"Oh, nothin but a two-inch steak, a couple o' books, and a letter from back home," replied Burt. "So long!" And as his chum disappeared he flung himself down in the long grass under the hut wall, whose shadow would protect him from the sun. He had come to care little for insects by this time, and in any case he was too weary to think about them.

When he next opened his eyes the sun was in the west and Critch was shaking him vigorously. Burt sat up, yawning, to find his chum highly excited. Beside them lay a collection of axes, swords, knives and spears.

"Wake up, you!" cried Critch. "I got pretty near everything you asked for."

"You got what?" said Burt sleepily, staring at his chum. Then he remembered his parting words and laughed as Critch displayed a thick antelope-steak, a couple of baked yams and the refilled canteen. [Pg 226]

"I got more than that," exclaimed Critch. "I found a kid playing with something a while ago. Come to find out, it was this," and he threw the remains of a little red leather book into Burt's lap. The latter, who had already attacked the steak with the help of one of the knives, picked it up with interest.

The little book drew a gasp of amazement from Burt when he opened it, for on the inside cover was inscribed, in small and neat writing, "McAllister Montenay, V. C. His Diary."

"Is that straight?" asked Burt, looking up with flushed cheeks. Critch nodded.

"You bet it is. Get finished with the eats, while I tell you. I saw a kid trailin' that around in the dust, so I rescued it and took a look. You could have knocked me over with a feather when I saw what it was! There's a whole lot of it that you can't make out, but enough's left to do business with.

"Everything's lovely at the village. Some hunters brought in three wildebeest and an antelope this morning and the whole tribe's feasting up. That seems to be about all they do." [Pg 227]

Burt was not long in disposing of the provisions. After emptying the canteen, he picked up the little tattered red book once more and opened it, Critch close beside him. [Pg 228]

CHAPTER XVIII

BURT COMES TO LIFE

"Didn't know he was a V. C.," commented Burt, turning past the first page. "Say most o' this is spoiled!"

The pages were many of them torn, all were smudged and streaked with dirt, and ominous dark red stains covered a large portion of the booklet.

"Here's the first place you can read," and Critch turned over a number of unreadable pages. "Start in right here." Burt settled back and read aloud as follows:

"June 1st. Five men down. Yusuf cut off from supplies. Will rush to-morrow.

"June 2nd. Rushed. Lost thirteen. Finished Yusuf. Got lots of ivory, unmounted yet. Read burial service this evening. Big loot to divide."

"That next you can't read, most of it," broke in Critch. "There's something about Pongo, though." Burt nodded and continued:

"—with odd bit of wood. May be some truth in it. Must investigate. If the boys will have a go at it —" [Pg 229]

"That's all, there," announced Burt. "All that's about the time he cleaned up on the Arab caravan, eh? Let's see—there's five pages where everything's mussed up."

"Looks like blood," laughed Critch, "but it ain't. That's the red stuff the dwarfs use to stain their things with. See here, on this spear-shaft. There's a lot comes next that he wrote after he set up in Pongo's place—it was his left arm that was hurt, so he could write all right. But you can't make out more'n a few scattered words. Turn to the last page that's written on. There's where the big thing is."

Burt obeyed, turning over the pages rapidly. Most of the writing had been obliterated or stained over, but although the final page was half torn away, the remaining words were clear and legible.

"Dec. 16th. Impossible to carry off the stuff. Must slip away while out hunting if possible. Not much hope. River runs northwest. May find Arabs or English traders to the east or north. Will find from Mbopo whether—" [Pg 230]

"And that's all," announced Burt, looking puzzled. "I don't see what you mean by sayin' there's anything big there, though."

"Read it over again," suggested Critch with a grin. Burt did so, and once more glanced up with a wondering look.

"You got me, Critch. What are you getting at, anyhow?"

"Don't you see?" cried his chum excitedly. "That part about the river running northwest!"

"Well, what about it?" demanded Burt.

"Why, which way does the Makua run?"

"If I remember the map," replied Burt slowly, "it runs due west, joins the Loangi, and meets up with the Congo on the way south. Oh, I see!" he added suddenly. "You mean that this river out here runs up to the Makua?"

"Brilliant!" exclaimed Critch sarcastically. "Why, it's got to, Burt! That is, unless it switches off an' goes south. I don't believe it does, though."

"That won't do us much good either," responded Burt. "These dwarfs don't use boats, or Cap'n Mac would have gotten off that way."

"What do we want of boats?" demanded Critch. "After you're resurrected I'll be the boss of this tribe for fair. I'll set them to work on a raft, and away we go! If we hit the Makua we're bound to strike your uncle and Cap'n Mac sooner or latter."

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"Good for you!" cried Burt, staring at the other in wide-eyed comprehension. "And we can carry off this whole blamed zareba that way, with the *ankh* too!"

"Not much we can't," and Critch shook his head. "We could get off with the ivory, I s'pose, if Mbopo helps us. But not the *ankh*. That's their real god, you know. I don't believe we'd dare try that."

"Well, it's getting on toward sunset," and Burt glanced at the sun, just above the western tree tops. "You'd better chase back and get ready to resurrect me. I ain't anxious to be around here after dark. What's the program?"

"Why," replied Critch thoughtfully, "you keep hid till dark. As soon's it gets good and dark, say eight o'clock, I'll lead out the mob. I don't know just yet what I'll do, but I'll bring the mummy in here. You get a hole dug to bury him in. Then I'll lead you out and can shake hands with Pongo."

"With which?" exclaimed Burt.

"With the *ankh*—just lay your hand on him like Mbopo did," explained Critch, laughing. "Stick that book of Cap'n Mac's in your pocket. If we get out o' here he'd like to see it again, I reckon. So long."

"So long," answered Burt. "Don't keep me waitin' all night, now."

So Critch departed on his mission, while Burt lay back to think things over. If it was true that the river near the village ran northwest, then it almost certainly ran into the Makua, or a tributary of the Makua. In that case they would be perfectly safe in floating down. There would be dangers on the way, but by taking a few of the white dwarfs along Burt realized that these would be greatly lessened. On the other hand, should the river prove to turn and flow back toward the Aruwimi country, they would probably miss the caravan altogether. In any case, their whole future depended upon the issue of that night's "performance," as Burt mentally styled his bringing to life.

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The disappearance of the sun roused him to the fact that he had work to do. Taking a spear and a broad-bladed sword from the weapons Critch had left, Burt went inside the hut. Here he set to work energetically digging the hole for the final resting place of Ta-En-User, the High Priest of Maat. The tramped earthen floor was easily broken up by means of the spear, and as the dusk settled down over the forest Burt finished a shallow hole sufficient to hold the mummy.

"It's kind o' hard lines," he thought, wiping his dripping face as he returned outside. "Here old Ta was wrapped up carefully three thousand years back, meaning to lie quiet forever. He don't more than get comfortably settled down when along come the white dwarfs to rouse him up, and they carry him clear over here. Then he settles down once more, and we come along and finish him. If he'd been buried right in the first place—why, if they'd done things different three thousand years back there wouldn't be any Pongo!"

Burt was roused from his rather intricate calculations by a particularly savage mosquito settling on his ear. Having disposed of the insect, Burt daubed his face and hands with what remained of the palm oil. Then he beat down the grass at a spot where he could see between two of the tusks and settled down to wait. He was uneasy at the idea that the lion might return at any moment, and felt not the slightest temptation to drop off to sleep.

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The swift tropical night settled down over the forest, and soon Burt could make out the glow of the village fires. After what seemed an age he heard the sound of chanting mingled with the throb of the tom-toms. This continued for half an hour, then ceased. A few moments later a moving light appeared at the zareba gate, followed by others. Burt guessed that these were torches, and knew that the time was at hand.

More and more torches poured out of the gate, until by their light Burt could make out fairly well all that took place. It seemed that the entire tribe was leaving the village. At the head of the procession stalked Mbopo, with Critch beside him. Burt could see his chum carrying something wrapped in a skin, and knew this was the mummy. Then came the two brothers of Mbopo, carrying the golden *ankh* between them on a spear, while a third man bore the mummy-case. Behind marched the bodyguard of the chief, the rest of the tribe following in a mob.

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At the point where the boys had been left for the lion, halfway between village and hut, the tribe was halted. Mbopo arranged the men and women in a wide semicircle, evidently following the orders of Critch. The "drum corps" was then brought to the front, the greater part of the torches were extinguished, and Critch, Mbopo and the bearers of the relics moved forward. Burt saw his chum stop at a point distant about a hundred feet from the hut and directly in front of the gateway.

After a slight delay, a fire was lit here. This presently blazed up, Critch wishing to wait until plenty of light was cast upon the sacred objects and the gateway of the ivory zareba. At a signal from Mbopo the tom-toms began a steady, regular beat and the pigmies broke into a low chant that swelled at intervals until the echoes came back faintly from the forest. Burt watched the scene through his loophole in silent fascination. He had no fears as to its outcome, for the dwarfs were plainly under the dominance of Critch.

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Now the fire blazed up higher and higher. Burt saw his chum, whose flaming hair glowed out in the ruddy light, suddenly raise his hand. The drums and chanting stopped abruptly, and the dead silence that ensued sent a quiver through the boy behind the ivory stockade. Critch bent over, opened the skin bundle, and exposed the mummy to view. At this, one prolonged groan went up from the audience and the crowd went down on their faces, even Mbopo falling prostrate.

Moving a step forward, Critch faced the sacred hut and began to speak. His voice came faintly at first, but as he gained confidence it rang louder. The words came plainly to Burt. Critch first delivered all the French he could think of, then broke into Antony's oration, which he had learned at school the year before. Perhaps fearing that Mbopo might comprehend too much of this, Critch switched off abruptly and delivered a complete conjugation of the Latin verb "habeo," speaking slowly and distinctly in as deep a voice as he could assume.

Burt was doubled up in silent laughter, and he saw his chum pause at times as though struggling to repress his feelings also. But his face was away from the pigmies, and his voice remained firm enough. Burt could well imagine the effect produced by all this mummery upon the ignorant and highly superstitious pigmies, ridiculous as it might appear to him.

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Finally Critch ran out of words, it seemed, for he stopped suddenly. The firelight gleamed on hundreds of eyes behind his figure, and Burt wondered vaguely what would happen if the waiting tribe should by any chance see through their trickery. The thought made him collect all his forces, and at this moment Critch stooped again. Picking up the mummy, he touched it to the golden *ankh*.

At the action a ripple of sound rose from the pigmies, followed by what was almost a wail of fear as Critch straightened up, the mummy in his arms, and began walking slowly toward the sacred hut. Burt knew it was time to get inside, so he slipped in through the hole made by the lion, the doorway being in view of the crowd. A moment later the form of Critch darkened the entrance.

"Fine work!" whispered Burt. He was answered by a sigh of relief.

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"Take Ta, will you? I'm all in." Critch sank weakly down, and with some repugnance Burt caught the mummy. Placing it in the hole, he filled in the earth, tramped it down, and sprinkled leaves and bones over the place. "Say," went on his chum, "that may have sounded funny to you, but it was something fierce!"

"Never mind," murmured Burt. "You did it mighty fine, old man."

"It was awful to think what'd happen if I made a slip," confessed Critch. "Honest, Burt, I was so weak-kneed I could hardly walk over here! How you coming?"

"He's buried," responded Burt as he finished his task. "Do we go out now?"

"No use keeping them waitin'," said Critch. "I'm goin' to leave the *ankh* and the mummy-case in here for good. Are you ready? Give me a hand."

Burt helped his chum to his feet. Critch stepped into the doorway, holding Burt's hand. Then began a slow and solemn advance across the firelit space before the hut. As the figures of the two boys came into sight of the pigmies, an indescribable murmur of awe swept from the crowd. Then came a prolonged groan of unutterable horror as Burt's face stood out more clearly, and Burt, whose gaze was fixed on Mbopo, saw the pigmy chief go down in the dust, his extended hands trembling in the firelight. A moment more and the boys stood beside the *ankh*.

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Releasing Burt's hand, Critch caught the loop of the symbol of Maat and stood it on end. Then Burt placed his hand on it beside that of Critch. At this a click, seemingly of joy, arose from the crowd. Mbopo looked up, his face ashen gray, and wild amazement in his eyes.

Critch now beckoned the two brothers forward, and at his repeated gestures they trembling took up the *ankh* on the spear and awaited his further commands.

"Take one end o' the case," directed Critch. Burt obeyed, and the two boys led the way back to the hut. No sooner had they deposited the *ankh* than Burt chanced to touch one of the pigmies in the dark. The man gave a terrific shriek and dashed through the doorway, followed by his brother. For a moment a wild fear clutched Burt. What if the mob imagined that they were hurting the two men? The boys hurried out, and found the men prostrate beside Mbopo. Critch raised them up and Burt, needing no instruction, smilingly touched each of the shrinking men in turn. Finding that they suffered nothing, their fear gradually lessened, and as Mbopo grasped the hand of Burt there was a look of joy in the honest eyes of the young dwarf that told far more than any words could have done.

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Then Critch led the way to the village. The crowd, still prostrate, separated to let them through. Ten minutes later the boys lay side by side on a heap of skins in a hut, too much overcome by the strain to even speak. But as Burt fell asleep, he knew that they had won the fight.

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CHAPTER XIX

THE RAFT

When he wakened, it was hard for Burt to realize where he was. He stared up at the thatched roof above him and gradually collected his thoughts. A shiver swept over him as he recollected what had occurred the preceding night. He sat up, and saw Critch still asleep beside him. It appeared to be broad daylight outside, and he roused his chum at once. Critch rolled over and sprang to his feet, then stood blinking around with so puzzled an expression that Burt went into a shout of laughter.

"What's the matter?" he gasped.

"I was dreaming that old Ta was having a scrap with me," confessed his chum sheepishly. "He threw the *ankh* at me and just then Pongo come along and jumped him. Both of 'em rolled over on me and I woke up."

"Say, was last night all a dream?" asked Burt, soberly, as he stared at his chum. "Or did we really put it over—"

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"You bet we did!" cried Critch with a grin of recollection. "No dream about that, old man. We've only been here two days, but we've done a heap of things. Now we got to finish the lion. Then we can see about getting off."

"I'm not anxious to monkey with Pongo," stated Burt. "However, we might send out Mbopo to trail him. I'll take him over to the hut if you'll get some breakfast fixed up."

"I'm on," exclaimed Critch. Upon leaving the hut, the two boys found themselves objects of awed veneration from the pigmies. They met Mbopo, and Burt took him out to the sacred hut. Here he described the fight with Pongo in detail, not mentioning when it occurred and purposely leaving the dwarf rather confused. There could be no such doubt about the struggle itself, however, and Mbopo nodded understandingly.

They then left the ivory zareba while Mbopo made a cast around the place for the lion's trail. Burt accompanied him, and Mbopo soon uttered a shout of excitement. Running to his side, Burt saw the beaten spot in the tall grass where the lion must have alighted from his last leap over the ivory zareba after having been wounded. There was a speck or two of dried blood in evidence, and Mbopo found more blood farther on, as well as a clearly defined trail. The excited pigmy was for following it up at once, but Burt held him back. By dint of much patience he made Mbopo understand that Critch, whom the pigmies called "Mwanzi," or "Red-head," must accompany them, as well as some warriors. Burt had had one experience with a wounded lion and he intended to take no chances this time.

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The two returned to the village where Mbopo shouted forth his news, and Burt was instantly the center of an excited mob. He pushed through them, however, and found Critch with breakfast ready. Over the meal they discussed the matter of the lion, and decided to start out at once.

"Mebbe they'll go without waitin' for us," suggested Burt, glancing at the chattering crowd of warriors around the young chief. Critch shook his head.

"Not much. They ain't got the nerve. They'll do whatever we tell 'em, but they won't leave us out o' the game, take it from me."

As soon as they had finished, the boys joined Mbopo. Their first object was a search for weapons. Critch suggested taking two of the spears, whose blades were over a foot long and keen as a razor, but Burt objected.

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"We don't know how to use them," he said. "Let's see; didn't Cap'n Mac say something about trade-guns?"

"Mebbe he did," assented Critch, "but I haven't seen any sign of guns around here. Let's ask Mbopo."

They tried to make the young chief understand, but without success. Thereupon the boys took

matters into their own hands, and began a search among the largest huts. This was presently rewarded by the finding of an old Snider, wrapped in tarpaulin. There were three cartridges in the magazine, but no more. These were displayed to Mbopo, but he stated that there were no more weapons of the kind in the village.

"Well, she seems to be in pretty fair shape," remarked Burt, squinting down the barrel of the rifle. "Get some palm oil, Critch. Three bullets ought to do."

"Don't catch me around when you fire that thing," sniffed his chum disgustedly. "She's liable to bust. I'll bet she's twenty years old."

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"Better'n a spear at that," chuckled Burt, oiling the rifle until it worked perfectly. "We ain't so badly off, Critch. There, I guess that'll do. Ready?"

Critch armed himself with one of the spears, and at the head of twenty picked warriors they left the village. Mbopo led the way to the spoor already found, and Critch at once ordered the pigmy warriors to follow it up.

"Let 'em take the chances," he grinned. "They ain't scared now I'm along. If they find Pongo you can finish him with the gun—unless the gun finishes you."

"You're sore because you didn't find the gun yourself," retorted Burt. "Come on, they're quite a ways ahead."

The pigmies had started at once along the spoor of the lion, spreading out on either side and calling to one another continually. The boys followed more carefully with Mbopo. The spoor led them through the long rank grass into the forest, and was easy for the boys to read.

The lion had made only one leap after leaving the zareba. This had taken him almost across the grassy space. Upon reaching the first thicket he had crawled along and left a plain blood-marked trail for the hunters to follow. A hundred yards farther on they heard a shrill yell from ahead, and hurried on.

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Emerging from the thicket, they found the pigmies clustered about a clump of thorn-bushes. These were almost impenetrable save by the trail left by the lion. The pigmies reported to Mbopo, who turned to Critch.

"Him Pongo in there," he stated, pointing to the bushes with a grin. "Mwanzi kill? Vera good!"

Critch hesitated. He glanced at the waiting pigmies, who evidently had not the slightest intention of robbing him of the honor of going first.

"Come on," he muttered to Burt. "We got to pull the bluff through right here. Have your gun ready."

Burt nodded. The two boys, their hearts beating fast, advanced to the edge of the thicket. No sound came from the bushes, and Burt thrust the first branches aside as he entered. The thorns made sad havoc with their clothes, but the boys were too anxious to heed this. A moment later Burt gave a startled exclamation. Critch came to his side, and the boys saw a tawny shape lying ahead of them.

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"Is he dead?" whispered Critch.

"Can't see him plain enough," responded Burt. "If he jumps and I don't stop him, try to catch him on the spear."

A few steps farther on and the lion came into full view. He was lying on his side, stretched out, and something black hid his head. Burt levelled the gun, but as he did so the black object resolved itself into a swarm of flies, who buzzed up at the noise made by the boys.

"Hurray!" shouted Burt, flinging down the gun, "he's dead!"

"Look at the axe!" yelled his chum, pointing to the weapon that was almost buried in the skull of the beast. "Golly, you must have hit like fury! Hey, Mbopo!"

The pigmies were not far behind the boys, and at the shout they came dashing forward. A shrill yell went up as they saw the dead lion, then all remained silent and motionless, gazing down at the form of the beast which they had worshipped for so long. That he was blind could be easily made out, for the white scar ran across his eyes, which were not pleasant to see. Burt turned away with a shudder.

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"Leave Mbopo to skin him, Critch. I'm goin' back where it's cool."

His chum nodded, directed Mbopo to skin the lion and followed Burt back to the shade of the hut. There the two boys settled down for a talk.

"We got nothing to worry over now," remarked Critch, "except the getting away. How'll we keep the skin of Pongo?"

"Let Mbopo do that," replied Burt. "They can fix it so it'll keep long enough to get down the river with anyhow." He suddenly sat up. "Say, building that raft is going to be some job! Let's have a look at the river."

"Come on," and Critch sprang to his feet. "If we do get off, Burt, let's take a collection o' these pigmy weapons. Wouldn't they be swell in our rooms at home?"

"Right now I'd take the rooms without anything at all in 'em," grinned Burt, who was fast recovering his spirits in the fresh morning air. A few moments later they reached the village, which stood on the river bank, and descended by a well-worn path to the edge of the stream.

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"There's some big trees growin' handy," announced Critch. "How'll we make it?" Burt thought a moment.

"Why," he replied slowly, "take four big logs an' lash 'em in a square. Then put four on top o' them, with a platform. That ought to float pretty high even with a good load. Guess we'll have to make two rafts, though. We couldn't carry any men an' that ivory on one, 'less we made it almighty big."

"The river wouldn't stand for a very big one," suggested Critch. "Go an' get a bunch o' the men, Burt. We might as well pitch in right now."

Burt nodded and returned up the path, leaving Critch to inspect the trees growing at the edge of the river. He returned with a score of men, all of whom brought their little axes. They looked wonderingly at the two boys.

"Here's a good tree," declared Critch, pointing to one about two feet through. "We'll take an axe an' show 'em how to do it."

Shedding their upper garments, for the place was by no means cool, the boys fell to work on the tree. The pigmies comprehended at once, and also went to work on three other trees picked out by the boys. The latter, having started things satisfactorily, flung themselves down in the shade and directed operations.

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When the first tree was about to fall, they showed the dwarfs how to make it fall toward the stream, so that it lay half in the water. There seemed to be no crocodiles in the river, the men splashing about without fear. Then Burt took a spear and measured a straight section of the trunk for three spear-lengths, or fifteen feet. While Critch saw that this was lopped and cut rightly, Burt visited the other workers.

All this, however, was not done in a few moments. The axes of the pigmies were keen, but they were also very small. No sooner had the work begun than the whole tribe came down from the village to look on with wondering interest, and Mbopo shortly after arrived also.

It was well into the afternoon before the four trees were down, and not until noon of the next day were they cut into the proper lengths and trimmed. Finally, however, the logs lay end to end in the shape of a square, in the shallow water. Burt now explained to Mbopo that these were to be fastened together. The young chief comprehended at once, and with strips of tough hides had the first part of the raft completed by nightfall.

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The abundance of help lightened the work wonderfully, as the other warriors learned the work. They went at it like children, laughing and playing continually, until the two white boys wondered how they could ever have stood in fear of these pranking dwarfs who were so full of fun and laughter.

At the end of five days the first raft was finished to the satisfaction of the boys. Even when the platform was crowded with men it floated clear of the water, and with an ordinary load the platform would be at least a foot above the surface. The whole fabric was very strong, for the platform itself was formed of saplings which were lashed carefully, and no ordinary shock would break up the raft. A small bulwark was then run around the edges.

At the end of a week the second raft also lay completed, and now the boys had to face the somewhat difficult task of explaining their purpose to Mbopo. They took him over to the sacred hut, and Burt pointed to the ivory tusks, with gestures of uprooting them.

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"Take him to Buburika Mac," he explained over and over. "You go along. Come back afterwards."

Mbopo looked doubtful as he grasped the idea that the tusks were to be loaded on the rafts. Finally, however, he nodded and the boys drew a breath of relief. That they would be obeyed now they had no fear at all, for the pigmies were their devoted slaves in every way, and stood in evident awe of the two boys and especially of "Mwanzi."

This belief was confirmed when Mbopo addressed the tribe in a great council that night. The pigmies made not the slightest opposition, and the boys could see by his gestures that he was describing their desires.

"All right," murmured Burt as the two short guttural barks ascended from the audience, "it's all over but the shouting, Critch. S'pose we can get the stuff loaded up to-morrow?"

"We ought to," replied his chum. "We'll have to see first. Those thorns are tangled up with the tusks somethin' fierce."

Next morning the entire tribe left the village and approached the sacred hut of Pongo. Under the direction of Mbopo, who took matters into his own hands now, the work of uprooting the ivory was begun. This was difficult, but by evening the last of the great tusks lay in the pile by the river edge. All that remained was to load them aboard the rafts. This, however, would be no easy

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matter, for the tusks were heavy and the balance of the rafts must be preserved.

Critch took charge of the loading, while Burt attended to getting provisions together for the journey. There was dried meat in abundance, and plenty of fresh vegetables and fruits. The boys had a long consultation over loading the ivory, for even with the protection of the dwarfs a raftload of tusks would be too much of an inducement for the tribes they were sure to meet.

At length it was settled by making a layer of tusks, of which there were thirty-nine in all, on the platforms. Fifteen of the tusks had been discarded by the boys as worthless. Over the layer of ivory was placed enough dirt to fill in the spaces and hold the tusks steady. A top layer of skins completed the whole.

The young chief made no objection to taking the journey on the rafts, for the boys held out "Buburika Mac" at the end of the trip as a bribe, and Mbopo could not resist. He selected six warriors for each raft; he and Burt took charge of one and Critch of the other. Poles were cut for the "deckhands," as Burt named the crews, and at length all was ready.

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CHAPTER XX

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DOWN THE MAKUA

The start was made in the early dawn of a perfect day. The whole tribe assembled to see the party off, and it was plain that the pigmies, while not opposing the departure, did not like to lose "Mwanzi," for many gifts were brought to the boys, with gestures of good will. In their turn, Burt and Critch gave away all the small articles they possessed except those which they would absolutely need. Their collection of weapons was completed, and Burt carefully wrapped up the rifle with its three precious cartridges in the tarpaulin. As the sequel proved, it was well indeed for the boys that they had found the old rifle.

Finally all was ready. The warriors took their places on board, standing amid the piles of provisions and skins of water, for the boys dared not drink the river water.

"Cast off!" shouted Critch, throwing off the vine that bound his raft to the bank. Burt followed suit. A roll of tom-toms and a loud shout rose from the tribe, which was answered by a shout from the crews. Slowly the poles sent the rafts out into mid-stream, where the current caught them and swept them down. For half a mile they remained in sight of the village, then a bend swept all away. The perilous voyage was begun.

Burt's raft followed that of Critch at a distance of fifty feet. Neither boy made any effort to increase the speed of the craft, confining their efforts to keeping the rafts from turning around and around in the current. Both floated well above the water, and the pigmies were highly delighted with their novel situation.

The river was of good size and to the joy of the two boys it continued to flow steadily toward the northwest. They floated down between banks of heavy vegetation, but saw no signs of life. That night they camped on an island and the party seemed in high spirits.

The next day they received their first sign of the hidden life that filled the great jungles. There came a high shrill yell from one bank, to which Mbopo replied, and the boys knew that once more they were among the black dwarfs. This was repeated in the afternoon, but even by the aid of their glasses they could not make out who had hailed them.

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Only once did they meet with trouble. This occurred when Critch ran aground on a hidden shoal. The solid raft ran deeply into the mud of the river bottom and it took the efforts of both crews to get her off.

For three days more they floated down the river, but on the third evening both boys noticed signs of uneasiness among the pigmies. In the morning, before the start, Mbopo approached Critch.

"Where Buburika Mac?" he inquired, glancing around as if he expected to find Captain Montenay in their vicinity. Critch glanced at Burt.

"Him down there," and he waved his hand downstream. Mbopo looked doubtfully around.

"Mbopo no like vera good," was his reply. "Him Zwengi pretty quick."

"Zwengi?" repeated Critch, puzzled.

"Him vera bad," declared Mbopo. "Him big, much fight. Mbopo no like."

"Must be a tribe they're at war with," said Burt. He took up the rifle and turned to the chief. "Him kill Zwengi."

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"Mwanzi kill Zwengi?" asked Mbopo of Critch, plainly putting all his faith in the latter's prowess. Critch laughed and nodded. Mbopo turned and spoke joyfully to his men, who instantly lost their uneasy appearance and sprang aboard with a shout of delight.

"It's up to you," grinned Burt, and Critch nodded soberly.

"Plain bluff again," he said. "If we are held up, those bows o' the dwarfs ought to get in good

work, an' your three cartridges'll help a whole lot unless the Zwengi have guns. If they have, it's all up, I guess."

"The Makua can't be so very far off now," replied Burt. "The river's getting bigger and bigger, and the current's swifter. S'pose we could rig up any kind of breastwork on the rafts?"

"Better not waste time trying," dissented Critch. "I'm afraid of making them top-heavy. Well, let's be off. We ought to hit the Makua pretty quick now. If we don't meet Cap'n Mac I expect Mbopo'll be sore. That's what's worrying me right now."

It was worrying Burt too, but he jumped aboard his raft and cast loose without giving vent to his fears. He realized only too well that the Zwengi might have canoes, and if they were discovered and pursued their only hope was to beat off the enemy. [Pg 259]

For several hours they swept along the rapidly widening river without any sign of a foe. Toward noon the stream swept around in a great bend, and as Burt stared ahead he caught a wild shout from Critch.

"There she is!" and the red-haired boy danced around and waved his arms back at the other raft. "The Makua, Burt!"

Sweeping around with the current, Burt saw ahead of them two or three scattered islands. Beyond these was the sheen of water, and he could plainly see that their river formed a juncture with another and much larger stream. As he was staring down the river there came a sudden yell from his men.

"Zwengi!"

Whirling around, Burt saw them pointing to the right bank. At the same instant a yell of alarm went up from Critch's raft. It was answered by another shout from the right bank, and Burt saw three long canoes putting out, with a crowd of savage warriors pouring into others. He saw instantly that they had only one chance. [Pg 260]

"Make for the island!" he shouted to Critch. "Land and hold them off!"

Critch waved his hand, and both boys set the men to work frantically, trying to guide the unwieldy craft toward an island that rose straight ahead of them. Burt unwrapped the rifle, but did not wish to use it until he had to.

With a dozen paddlers in each, the big war canoes shot out across the river to head off the first raft. Now, the bows used by the white pigmies were larger than those of any other tribe the boys had seen. They were fully as long as the men themselves and of great strength. Burt saw Critch say something to Mbopo and take the pole from one of his men. Instantly he followed suit, directing the man he relieved to shoot at two of the following canoes which were heading toward them. As he did so a flight of arrows came over the water, all but one falling short, the one rebounding from the wet logs without sticking.

As Burt's man caught up his bow, the boy saw Mbopo and another warrior loose their shafts from the first raft. The arrows, driven by the full force of those tremendous bows, easily reached to the canoes. The bowman in the first canoe gave a yell and dropped his paddle; as he did so, the man behind him threw up his arms and fell back, overturning the canoe. At this instant Burt's man shot, and although his arrow missed, the pursuing canoes instantly ceased their approach and sheered off, paddling down ahead of the rafts. [Pg 261]

Their plan was evident. By reaching the islands ahead of the two rafts, which were still two hundred yards away, they could command the passages that led into the Makua. Realizing the danger as he saw one of the canoes turn and head for the island in front of them, Burt took up his rifle. He did not wish to shoot to kill and therefore took careful aim at the bow of the canoe, ahead of the bowman and just at the waterline. As the canoes were hollowed-out logs, a bullet there would shatter the whole bow.

Trusting to luck that the old rifle would hold together, Burt pulled the trigger. The sharp crack awoke a thousand echoes from the forest on either hand. At the same instant the bow of the canoe seemed to fly into splinters, a shrill yell of fear went up from the foe, and as the canoe filled, the others instantly turned back but still continued downstream. A moment later Critch's raft swept down toward the island, four of the pigmies sprang out, and drew her safely to shore. [Pg 262]

The other islands, however, were well within range of the Zwengi bows and to them the canoes dashed. Mbopo's men sent one whirling downstream by a flight of arrows that completely cleared the craft, but the others gained the shelter of the islands just as Burt's raft was landed beside that of Critch. Then the dwarfs made fast and sprang out.

"We're in for it," cried Critch, pointing upstream. "Look there!"

Pulling out his glasses, Burt saw at least a dozen other canoes slinking down close to the banks. Catching up his rifle, he aimed full at the bow of the first. It was a long shot, but as the echoes rose the boys saw the paddlers spring overboard, and the canoe filled and sank a moment later.

"Dandy shot," shouted Critch, "but they got us, Burt! Mebbe we can hold 'em off while our arrows last, but—"

At that instant something happened that caused the boys to whirl and stare at each other with

pale faces. Clear and sharp above the yells of the warriors, and coming from the left bank, the south bank, they had heard the report of a heavy rifle! [Pg 263]

"Hear that!" yelled Burt. "There's a hunter there!"

"Hurray!" shouted his chum, turning and hitting Mbopo a clap on the back that sent the dwarf staggering. "Mwanzi'll fix them, old scout. Hurray! Try another shot, Burt!"

And as a flight of Zwengi arrows poured into the island, Burt fired again, this time in the air. As if in answer there came another shot from the left bank, and a yell went up from the dwarfs as one of their foes on the neighboring island threw up his arms and fell back. A shriek of terror went up from the Zwengi, while the pigmy arrows played havoc among them as they fled back to their canoes. Next instant a canoe put out from the south bank.

"Look there!" shouted Burt, peering through his glasses. "White helmets! We're saved, Critch!"

"Yes," and Critch began to dance up and down, waving his arms like mad, "an' it's your uncle and Cap'n Mac! Hurray! Hurray!" [Pg 264]

A week later a small German Company steamer was making her way down the broad Makua River. In the shade of her awning reclined Mr. Wallace, Captain Montenay, Burt and Critch. John was busying himself forward, and the decks of the little craft were littered with long, curved packages that looked strangely like elephant tusks.

"Well, it was mighty lucky for us that you started after us that way," Burt was saying. "If you'd tried to strike right through the black dwarf country we'd have missed you. Ain't it queer how things worked out?"

"Not a bit," asserted Captain Mac quietly. "It looks to me, Burt, as if the hand o' Providence was in it."

The boys stared at the Scotchman for a moment in wonder. Suddenly Burt sprang to his feet.

"Oh, I forgot!" he cried. "I ain't showed you that roll yet!" Dashing off to the cabin, he returned with the tightly rolled packet he had taken from the mummy as he and Critch had unwrapped it. Mr. Wallace took it with an exclamation of pleasure.

"This is really something worth having, boys!" he declared, carefully unfolding the papyrus. "Hello! Let's see what it says." [Pg 265]

In spite of its age, the first part that unrolled showed clear and strong picture writing, in bright colors. The others gave a simultaneous exclamation, while Mr. Wallace bent his brows in the endeavor to read it.

"Well, it's nothing special," he announced, "merely being scenes from the life of Ta-En-User, with the story of his achievements. I think we'd better roll it up and keep it from the damp now; we can read it later. It'll make something great for your room, Burt! It's mighty few boys that can boast of having a relic like that hanging on their walls!"

"Well, I'm kind o' sorry we're going home," sighed Critch. "Won't this be a great yarn to write up for the school paper, eh, Burt?"

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Wallace sharply. "It's too big a story for that, Critch. Why don't you two chaps get busy and make a book out of it? I'll help you in the stiff places."

"Hurray!" cried Burt.

"Bully!" uttered Critch, delighted. "That's just what we'll do, Mr. Wallace! Say, won't it make a great yarn?" [Pg 266]

"An' if you do," put in Captain Mac with a quiet grin, "be sure an' send me a copy o' the thing, laddies! I'd like powerful well to see my name in a story book!"

"You bet we will!" said Burt, and Critch grinned happily. [Pg 267]

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