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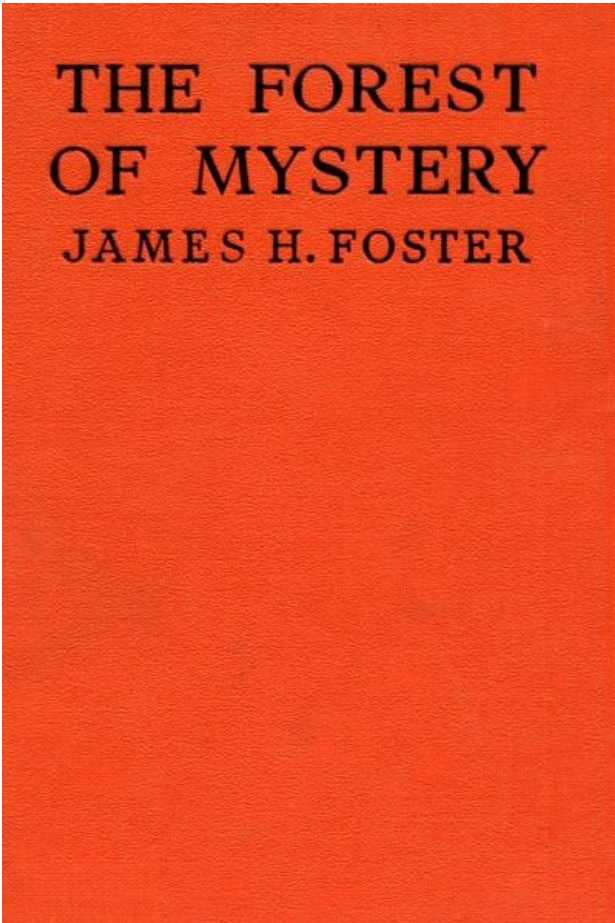
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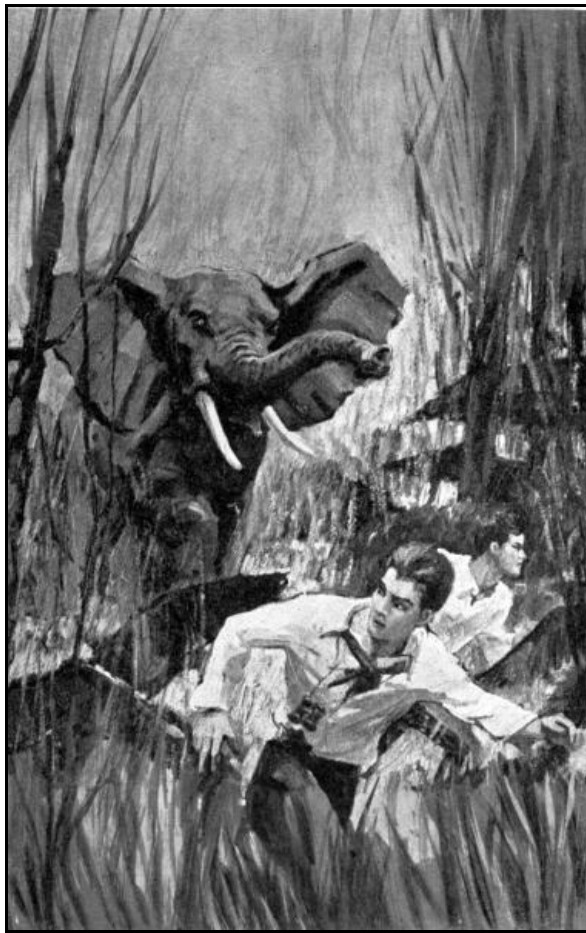
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THE FOREST
OF MYSTERY
JAMES H. FOSTER

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Not two hundred feet away was a huge elephant.

THE FOREST OF MYSTERY

JAMES FOSTER



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The Forest of Mystery

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THE EXPLORATION SERIES
By JAMES FOSTER
LOST IN THE WILDS OF BRAZIL
CAPTURED BY THE ARABS
SECRETS OF THE ANDES
THE FOREST OF MYSTERY

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CHAPTER I

The Chinaman

BANG! *Crash!*

"What was that?" Joe Lewis had turned suddenly, every nerve on edge. His eyes tried to penetrate the darkness of the San Francisco night.

"Sounded like an automobile accident," came from Bob Holton. "Come on. Let's go around and see."

The two chums dashed across the street and around the corner, hoping that nothing tragic had taken place. They passed several people who were hurrying to investigate the strange noise.

Reaching the thoroughfare, the youths drew back with cries of alarm, for the sight before them was fearful and unpleasant.

Lying on its top, wheels in the air, was a small automobile, which had evidently crashed into a pole near by. All about was broken glass, and water was still oozing from the radiator. The pole was dented severely, indicating that the car had probably been traveling rapidly.

As Bob and Joe looked on spellbound, a smothered cry for help came from the automobile. It was repeated several times in rapid succession.

With throbbing hearts, the boys ran over to the wreck, followed by several other people. In the darkness they could not see clearly inside the car and could only guess who was calling for help. A near-by street lamp, although bright did not illuminate the automobile sufficiently.

"Let's get this door open," muttered Bob. "Hurry. There isn't any time to lose."

Working feverishly, the chums reached through the broken window and tugged at the door. It had been wrenched severely and refused to open. What made the task still more difficult was the fact that broken edges of glass projected from the sides of the window.

With a mighty effort, the youths managed to pull the door open, although they almost lost their balance from the sudden impact. But now they were greatly relieved. They had had an uneasy feeling that perhaps the door would not yield.

Without hesitation Bob reached into the car, caught hold of someone, and pulled him out. Then, after making sure that no one else was in the car, he turned to the stranger.

The youths were a bit surprised to see that he was a Chinaman, a short, fat man of middle age. From all appearances he had not been injured in the accident. There was but one little scratch in the side of his face.

"You do velly well—get me out queek," he said to Bob gratefully. "I was fear I have to stay in machine long time."

"What was the trouble?" asked Joe, edging closer to the overturned automobile as the crowd of spectators grew larger. "Did a wheel come off or something?"

The little Chinaman laughed sheepishly.

"Nothing like that," he said. "My machine here it was velly new, and I was not good enough dliiver. It run loose and clash into this pole. Then it turn over."

"It was just luck that you weren't hurt," said Bob grimly. "Not many could have been in a smash-up like that and come out unharmed."

At this moment a policeman stepped up to obtain the man's name and address and the details concerning the crash. While the Chinaman talked, the officer wrote in a small notebook, on which he turned a flashlight.

"Don't you think you'd better see a doctor?" asked Joe, when the officer had finished. "You might be hurt and not know it."

The Chinaman shook his head.

"Not hurt, no," he assured them. "I come thlough without a scratch, as far as I know. But I velly much nervous."

"No wonder," said Bob. "That wreck was enough to shake anybody's nerves."

Bob and Joe remained at the scene for several minutes. Then, as they realized that it was nearly seven o'clock, they started to leave. But at that moment the Chinaman called them back.

"Before you go I want that you make me a promise," he said.

The youths looked inquiringly.

"I want that you promise you come to my shop tonight. Will you come?"

The boys were not a little surprised. They wondered what the man's object was in asking them to visit him.

"Yes," said Bob at last, knowing that his chum would also consent. "We'll come. But where is it? And just when do you want us?"

Bob wrote what the man told them on a piece of paper. The latter asked that they be there at nine

o'clock, although just why they could not guess.

"What do you think of it?" asked Joe, as he and his friend walked rapidly down the street.

"I hardly know," was the reply. "Maybe he wants to reward us for getting him out of the car."

"But—that was nothing. Anyone would have done it. No, I'll bet he has something up his sleeve."

"What would it be?" demanded Bob.

"More than I know. We'll see before long. And, say, he wants us to be there by nine o'clock, too. That doesn't give us much time. We'll have to get back to the hotel and see our dads first. We've been gone a long time, you know."

"Maybe they can tell us how to get to this Chink's shop," suggested Bob. "Do you suppose it's in Chinatown?"

"Where else would it be? Chinese here in San Francisco don't live anywhere else, do they?"

"Beyond me."

The chums reached the corner and boarded a street car for the business district. They knew it would not be necessary to transfer, and so relaxed in their seat.

"San Francisco is a swell place, all right," remarked Joe, after a short silence. "Sure has a lot of interesting things to see. Take Golden Gate Park, for instance. It's one of the finest in the country."

"You could get lost there," smiled Bob. "Why, it's as big as a small city. And full of interesting attractions. I'd like to spend a whole day there some time. Won't have time on this visit, though."

When they were well into the business district, the boys moved toward the exit of the car. At a corner directly opposite the hotel at which they were staying, they left the street car.

Anxious to see their fathers, they went to the building without delay. In the elevator they were hurried to the tenth floor, where their rooms were located.

Mr. Holton and Mr. Lewis were waiting for them. The men had returned earlier in the day and had remained inside to discuss business matters.

"How do you like San Francisco by now?" inquired Bob's father quizzically. "Seen much of interest yet?"

"Plenty," returned Joe. "Sure is a busy place, isn't it? We ought to know. We've been about everywhere."

"Took in the sights, did you?" asked Mr. Lewis. "Well, there are many here. Howard"—referring to Bob's father—"and I, however, haven't had much time to look around. All our time has been occupied in talking with this Thompson, the man we came out here to see."

Bob and Joe looked up with interest. All day they had wondered what would come of their fathers' conversation with Thompson. The latter was a noted naturalist, who had just recently returned from Africa. There was a chance, the youths reasoned, that he could interest their dads, who were themselves naturalists, in making an expedition to the Dark Continent to collect specimens of animal life. And of that expedition, if there should be any, Bob and Joe hoped to be a part.

"What did you find out?" inquired Bob anxiously. "Did he come across anything unusual in the way of animals and birds?"

"Did he?" Mr. Holton smiled happily. "He shot several creatures that were previously unknown to civilized man."

"It seems that Thompson's expedition penetrated a region that has been invaded by very few whites," explained Joe's father. "Oh, it was worth their while, all right."

"Sounds interesting," grinned Joe. "Go on."

Mr. Holton looked up suddenly.

"What do you mean, 'go on'?" he asked suspiciously.

"Oh, nothing." Joe made an attempt to be casual.

The naturalists chuckled.

"Nothing, huh?" laughed Mr. Holton, who at the start had grasped the hidden meaning in Joe's words. "You weren't by any chance thinking of another expedition going to Africa, were you?"

Joe started. He wondered how his chum's father had caught on so quickly.

"You're a mind reader, if there ever was one," the youth grinned. "But how in the dickens did you get wise?"

"You just told me," Mr. Holton answered whimsically. "I'm a mind reader."

"Come out of it, Dad." Bob was becoming impatient. "Cut out this stalling. Is there going to be an expedition to Africa?"

"What do you think?"

"How are we to know?" countered Bob. "We're not the head naturalists."

"Listen to that, Howard," teased Mr. Lewis. "Not the *head* naturalists! It beats all how these young squirts get ideas in their heads that they're actually scientists. Why, they——"

"All right, we take it back." Bob was tiring of getting nowhere. "Once more, is there going to be an expedition to Africa?"

"Want to know, do you?" his father persisted. "What for?"

"Oh-h, nothing! Come on, Joe. We might as well give it up as a bad job."

The youths turned to leave for their room, but Mr. Lewis called them back.

"I'll tell you," he said seriously. "We may go to Africa. There's a chance that we will. But there is also a very big chance that we won't. We just wanted to come out here and see this Thompson about the strange animals he saw. Whether we go will depend on how the museum heads look at it. Now, are you satisfied?"

"Sure," answered Bob with a smile. "When, if you decide to go, will we leave?"

"There you go with that 'we' stuff," came from Mr. Holton. "Aren't you fellows taking a lot for granted?"

"Oh, I don't know," returned Joe. "Judging from the past we're not. You will take Bob and me along, won't

you? That is, of course, if you go."

"We can't say just now," his father returned. "It might be arranged. All that can be decided later."

"Hurrah for Africa!" cried Bob with enthusiasm. "We'll—"

He stopped quickly, as he happened to glance at a small clock that was on the dresser.

"Past eight!" he cried. "Wow! We've got to be in Chinatown by nine!"

CHAPTER II

A Grim Discovery

"**C**HINATOWN!" repeated Bob's father, while Mr. Lewis looked up quickly.

"Yes," answered Joe. "That is, I suppose we should go there. Here's the address. I jotted it down while we were in the street car coming to the hotel."

"But—but what's it all about?" asked Mr. Holton, taking the slip of paper Joe handed him. He added: "Yes, it's in Chinatown. Grant Avenue."

"It happened this way," explained Bob. "Joe and I got a Chinaman out of an automobile he turned over. He asked us to come and see him tonight at nine, and we told him we'd be there. That's all there is to it."

"You say he turned his car over?" queried Mr. Lewis. "Was he hurt?"

"Luckily not," returned Bob. "But it was a pretty narrow escape. Big wonder he wasn't killed."

There was a short silence. Neither of the men liked the prospect of the youths going to the Oriental settlement at that late hour.

"Don't you think it's rather dangerous?" inquired Mr. Lewis. "Most anything might happen at such a late hour."

"I don't see why it should be," returned his son. "Bob and I are old enough to take care of ourselves. If we could come safely out of the jungles of Brazil, the Sahara, and the Andes, we surely ought to be able to watch ourselves here in America."

"Well, maybe so. Chinatown, after all, isn't like it used to be," admitted Mr. Holton. "But be on the lookout. Any idea what time you'll be back?"

Bob shook his head.

"We won't stay any longer than we have to," he assured him. "And don't worry. We'll be all right."

The chums left the hotel without delay. They realized that they had barely a half hour to get to the Chinaman's shop, and they knew this would mean some hustling.

"The trouble is," said Joe, "we're too near Grant Avenue to take a street car and too far away to walk."

"That is a problem," laughed Bob. "But if we hurry I think we'll get there in time."

The boys hastened down busy Market Street in the direction of the Ferry Building, amid the crowd of pleasure seekers. As they walked, they took in the sights of the great city. Lights, lights. Tall buildings. Four rows of street cars. An ever-moving procession of pedestrians. This was San Francisco.

It did not take the two long to reach Grant Avenue, and up this they turned. Then their eyes were given another treat.

Northward for many blocks stretched a line on both sides of the street of pagoda-like structures that were distinctly Oriental. Many of the shops displayed colorful electric signs, often in Chinese. On the sidewalks were more than a few people of the yellow race.

"So this is Chinatown." Bob was taking in the scene with interest.

"Sure is different," observed Joe. "Even New York doesn't have anything quite like this."

The youths walked on until they came to a little shop that exhibited the words "Pong Lee Co." Here they stopped.

"This must be the place," said Joe. "At any rate, it has the same street number that I have down on this paper."

"O. K. Let's go in."

As the boys make their way through the curious doorway, let us have a word about them and their experiences up to the present, as related in the preceding volumes of *The Exploration Series*.

Bob, usually the leader of the two, was a shade over six feet tall, with huge, powerful shoulders that were now bronzed from his life in the open. His bright blue eyes and regular features displayed a frank, open disposition that won favor with everyone.

Joe, about the same age, was of medium size, with a dark complexion that was now still further darkened by the tropical sun. He was of much lighter build than his friend, but was tough and wiry. He seldom started a task without finishing it.

The chums lived next door to each other in Washington, D.C., where their fathers were employed as naturalists by a large museum. Much to their delight the boys were permitted to accompany their fathers to the jungles of Brazil, where they encountered wild animals and treacherous natives. Their thrilling

experiences on this expedition are told in the first volume, entitled *Lost in the Wilds of Brazil*.

A little later, when they had graduated from high school, they left for another little-known region—the Sahara Desert. Here they endured terrible sand storms, went for days without water, and fought hostile Arabs. These and many more adventures are related in the volume *Captured by the Arabs*.

Scarcely had the chums and their elders returned from northern Africa when they were given another opportunity to penetrate the unknown. In the Andes Mountains of South America they had still more exciting experiences. How they were guided by an old scientist along a narrow secret trail and met with not a few breath-taking adventures is told in the third volume, entitled *Secrets of the Andes*.

Back in America, the youths were making preparations to enter college the coming fall, when their fathers announced that they were going to San Francisco to see a naturalist, Thompson, of whom something has been said. Bob and Joe asked to go along, and the request was granted.

Now, as we return to the youths, we see that they are facing a small Chinaman, the man they had met earlier in the evening.

"Ah, I glad to see you," he said, recognizing them at once. "Come. We go back to room behind store."

The chums followed their host through the shop, noting carefully the wares for sale.

Those wares were a motley mixture, including everything from bottled herbs to Chinese adding machines. Never before had the boys been so interested in a store. They found themselves lagging behind the man to examine the many objects peculiar to the Oriental.

At the rear of the building, separated from the shop by a queer curtain, was a little room. Here it was apparent that the Chinaman, Pong Lee, lived.

"Sittee down," he directed his visitors, pointing to two crude chairs. "I want talk with you."

The boys did as told, wondering what was meant.

After a short silence the little man continued.

"You did me gleet good—gettee me out of upset machine," he began. "For that I want give you something to bling you much good luck."

"Good luck?" repeated Bob wonderingly, and then watched the Chinaman walk over to a tall cabinet in the corner of the room.

The latter opened a drawer, looked about carefully to see that no one other than the boys was looking at him, and then took out something.

"Here," he said, unfastening the lid of a tiny box, "are two good luck rings. I want you wear them—all ttime. They bling you much good luck. Wear them and you will keepee away flom all evil."

He handed the boys each a grotesque ring, which was engraved in many queer Oriental figures. Bob's ring was particularly odd. On it were depicted two curious dragons, one of which was spouting fire.

"Why—thank you very much." Joe was delighted. Of course, he had no faith in the charm the ring was supposed to have possessed, but he appreciated it as a rare piece of Chinese jewelry.

"You velly welcome," Pong Lee said. "But there is a secret about those rings. You must know."

"A secret?" Bob leaned forward in his chair. His friend looked up interestedly.

"Bleeg secret," Pong Lee answered, nodding vigorously. "You must guard those rings velly close. There are much men after them."

"You mean someone else wants to get these?" asked Joe, intensely interested.

"Yes. Much men want them. I have gleet many more. I not tell how I get them. But I say for you to watch them close. They worth much money."

"What do these people want with them?" inquired Joe. "Are they so valuable as all that?"

Pong Lee nodded.

"They worth gleet deal," he said. "Much times men come in here after them. They know I have a velly lot in little box. But I play tlick on them. They not find rings. I keep them hid—where no man find them. Moy Ling—he one of dangerous people. He keel you queek if he gettee chance, yes. You guard rings. They bling you much good luck."

He arose and walked over to the corner of the room.

The youths looked at each other. They had been greatly impressed with what the little man had said.

"What do you think of it all?" asked Joe in a low voice.

"It's a mystery to me. Wish he'd tell us where he got the rings. I'm curious to know."

Suddenly Joe sat up with a start. His eyes were fixed on the curious curtain that separated this room from the store.

Bob's eyes followed those of his chum.

"That curtain—it moved!" whispered Joe, a queer feeling of fear creeping down his spine. "There's somebody hiding there. Maybe it's one of those fellows that want these rings."

"I'm going out there." Bob had gained his feet. "No, don't!" his friend pleaded. "They might shoot you—or maybe do worse."

Bob hesitated. He finally decided to remain where he was.

"But if that guy wants these rings, he'll get fooled," the youth said decisively. "We'll—"

He was interrupted by Pong Lee, who had returned to his chair. The Chinaman was not aware of what had happened.

"Do you have anyone else working in the store?" asked Bob, his eyes still on the curtain.

"No one else but me, Pong Lee, no. Why you ask?"

"Well," Bob faltered, his voice lowering to a whisper, "there—there's someone in there, near the curtain. I don't know who it is. Looked like they were listening to us."

Pong Lee was panting. His eyes were wild with fury.

"The rings!" he cried. "It is someone after the rings! They will keel us!"

"Not if we can help it they won't," Bob said grimly. "They——"

He stopped suddenly as he noticed a pistol in Pong Lee's hand. How the man had produced the weapon so quickly he never knew.

"What are you going to do?" asked Joe. "Better not go out there. It isn't safe."

The Chinaman, paying no attention to the warning, slipped silently over to the end of the curtain, near the wall. His little mouth was rigid; his eyes glared. The gun he held in readiness.

The curtain he pulled back so slowly that only the movement of the cloth was not noticeable.

Bob and Joe, annoyed by the suspense, waited breathlessly.

CHAPTER III

Good News

WHEN he had made an opening barely large enough to see into the store, Pong Lee stepped forward and peered out, holding the pistol with a grip of steel.

For the first time Bob and Joe saw how dangerous this harmless-looking Chinaman could become. They were indeed glad he was their friend and not their enemy.

Bob cautiously glided over beside the Chinaman, although well aware of the grave danger. The youth looked through the opening, and then his jaw dropped.

There, running rapidly but quietly toward the door, was a tall, slim Oriental, a plait of black hair reaching halfway down his back. It was evident that he knew he had been discovered, for he ran in desperation.

Bang! Bang! Pong Lee's pistol spoke twice in rapid succession but without result. The intruder escaped unharmed.

The moment he disappeared through the doorway, Pong Lee dashed out into the room.

"We must shoot him!" cried the little Chinaman, reaching the outside.

Bob, hesitating to follow because of the peril, watched closely until Pong Lee was out of sight. Joe too had parted the curtain to see what was going on.

They heard several pistol shots, but no other noise followed. Apparently Pong Lee's aim was not true.

A moment later the Chinaman returned, holding the smoking weapon.

"Gone, yes." Pong Lee was facing the boys. "Man he leave queek. I not gave a chance to shoot him."

"He sure went out of the store quickly," commented Bob. "Must have been barefooted or something."

The remark provoked a smile from Joe, but not from the Chinaman. That the latter was still greatly worried was clear to the youths.

Had the invader, whoever he was, seen where the valuable jewels were kept? Did he intend to return later? Pong Lee's mind was in a whirl. He felt that it would be necessary to find another hiding place for the valuables, one that could not be located by anyone.

"I should think this fellow, or someone else, would come in and make you tell them where you keep this stuff," remarked Joe. "Even threaten to kill you if you didn't tell."

The Oriental shook his head.

"They know I not tellee, even if I get killed," he explained. "That do them no good, no."

"Then you ought to feel fairly safe," laughed Bob. "Your life isn't in any great danger, anyway. Do you wear any of the jewelry?"

"I keepee good luck ring on finger all ttime," Pong Lee returned. "Only once I had bleeg excitement."

"How was that?" asked Joe.

"I was knocked down by a man that he want ring. I get run flom him. He thlow hatchet at me. It miss my head by many few parts of inches."

"A close shave, all right," said Bob grimly. "Here's hoping Joe and I don't have such an experience tonight."

The youths remained in the building for nearly an hour talking with the amiable Chinaman. Then, as they realized that it was past ten, they departed, after having again thanked the man for the rings.

While still in that vicinity they remained quiet, slinking along like wolves. They feared all too much that the sinister Moy Ling, of whom Pong Lee spoke, might cause them trouble. But as time passed they lost their apprehension and became their natural selves again. Thus far no Oriental had stopped them.

"I had a hunch that Chink wanted to give us something," remarked Bob, breaking the silence. "But of course I had no idea what it would be."

"Wouldn't doubt that these rings are really worth a lot," Joe said.

"You don't mean they'll actually bring us good luck?" asked Bob, very much amused.

"Not that," was the answer. "I mean worth something in money. Pong Lee said they were. Do you suppose they're gold?"

"More than I know. I'm not going to sell mine, though. I'd rather keep it to remember this experience with Pong Lee."

"I'll bet you really think it will bring good luck," teased Joe.

"Quit your kidding. I'm not unusually smart, but I've got more sense than to believe that."

There was a general laugh.

"Do you know," began Joe, a little later, "I'm beginning to wonder something."

Bob glanced up expectantly.

"Pong Lee said there is a big secret connected with those rings," Joe resumed.

"That's right. He did."

"Then—there's a chance that they are worth more than their actual gold value. Get my point?"

Bob's face lightened.

"Golly, Joe. You may be right. But what could the secret be?"

"That's the mystery of it all. Maybe," Joe continued, struck with a sudden thought, "there's a piece of paper or something concealed in the rings. I'm going to find out. It's light here under this street lamp."

"Don't, you sap!" cried Bob, whirling his friend around. "Why, there might be a dozen Chinks spying on us. It would about be our finish if you'd go to examining that ring here at this late hour."

Joe laughed sheepishly.

"I must be crazy," he smiled. "Funny, but I never thought of that. We'll wait till we get back to the hotel."

Although it was late, the friends walked idly along Grant Avenue, desiring to see everything that had previously escaped their eyes. They wanted to "go off the beaten path," as Joe expressed it, to see a part of Chinatown that was not spoiled by the Occidental. But as it was late they knew this could not be done.

The chums finally came to Market Street and turned toward the hotel, walking along silently.

The naturalists looked up quickly as the boys entered. They regarded the latter quizzically.

"We're anxious to know just what that Chinaman wanted of you," said Mr. Lewis with a smile. "Sit down and tell us."

Bob removed the good luck ring from his finger. He passed it to Mr. Lewis.

"He just wanted to reward us for getting him out of that wrecked automobile," Bob explained. "Gave us rings. And, say, there's some secret connected with them. He wouldn't tell us, and we haven't been able to find out."

"Hmm." Joe's father examined the ring eagerly while Mr. Holton looked over Joe's.

"No secret openings in them, are there?" inquired Bob.

"Apparently not," his father returned. "Each has a lot of Chinese letters and figures on it, though. Perhaps if you knew what they mean you could solve the mystery."

Joe yawned and stretched.

"Whatever it is, I'm not going to stay up any longer to find out, even if I could," he said.

Without further discussion all retired, eager to get all the sleep the night would afford them.

Late the next morning, Bob and Joe were awakened by their fathers.

"Whazzamatter?" demanded Bob drowsily.

"We have some news for you," Mr. Holton said, his eyes twinkling. "Thought maybe you'd like to hear it."

All the sleep knocked out of them, the chums sat up quickly, wondering what was meant.

CHAPTER IV

Seeing the Sights

"Do you remember what we said yesterday about making an expedition to Africa?" asked Mr. Lewis as the youths sat up in bed expectantly.

"Why—you said you might go," Bob answered.

"Well, there isn't going to be any 'might' in it," Mr. Lewis said. "We're going."

The youths bounded out of bed in wild excitement.

"You mean we're actually going to Africa?" cried Joe, falling over himself in enthusiasm.

The naturalists laughed significantly.

"We're not certain how that 'we' will work out," chuckled Mr. Holton. "But we're almost sure of one thing: Ben [Mr. Lewis] and I are going. How many more will make up the expedition we haven't decided as yet. In fact, it was only this morning that we came to a conclusion."

"Oh, you've got to take Joe and me," Bob begged. "We always have wanted to explore in the Dark Continent. We're plenty old enough to take care of ourselves. You see how we made short work of dangerous wild animals in the Andes and in Brazil. Well, we could do the same with lions and elephants."

"Don't be too sure of that," said his father gravely but with twinkling eyes. "There's scarcely anything

worse than a charging elephant.”

“Just the same, we’d take care of the situation,” said Bob boastfully. “They wouldn’t stand much chance before the Lewis-Holton expedition. Why we’d mow ’em down right and left. But seriously, Dad, Mr. Lewis, why can’t Joe and I go with you?”

“We’d like to have you,” his father assured him. “But of course you’ll have to reckon with your mothers. Suppose,” he went on, “we don’t say anything more about this matter until we get back to Washington. You see, there’s a chance that the museum heads will have something else for us to do. In that case, we won’t go.”

“I’m betting you will,” smiled Joe, who felt there was a big chance of an expedition.

“Perhaps,” smiled Mr. Holton. “Right now, though, let’s think of something else. We want to leave for Washington tomorrow morning. We’d go today if Ben and I didn’t have some more business to look after.”

“Had breakfast yet?” inquired Joe.

“Breakfast? You mean lunch?” Mr. Lewis laughed. “Boys, in case you don’t know it, it’s nearly ten o’clock.”

“Wow!” cried Bob. “If Joe and I get to see any more of old San Francisco we’ll have to do some hustling.”

“Be careful that you don’t get in any danger. Don’t be carried away on some ship,” Mr. Holton said, grinning. “And now,” he added, “we’re leaving. Be back about three this afternoon. Take care of yourselves, boys. And be careful.”

“We will. So long, Mr. Lewis, Dad.”

The youths had been dressing during the conversation with their fathers, and now they were ready to get breakfast. After the meal, they would start out to see more of San Francisco and perhaps visit other cities across the bay.

A half hour later they were walking down Market Street toward the Ferry Building, having decided to see the busy waterfront.

It was no short distance to their destination, but they moved rapidly, dodging in and out among the crowd of shoppers. They were so interested in the sights about them that they found themselves almost without knowing it at the Ferry Building.

“Now let’s go around to the docks,” suggested Bob. “I’d like to see the boats coming in from the Orient.”

“Ought to see some,” Joe said. “There are a lot of steamship lines here.”

Directly in back of the building were the ferry slips. Bob and Joe stopped a few minutes to watch passengers board a boat to Oakland. Then they continued around to the docks, where scores of vessels were anchored.

Beside one dock was a huge liner almost ready to embark for Honolulu. The gangplank was being pulled in, ropes were loosened, and a general scene of excitement prevailed. Relatives and friends of the leavetakers waved hearty farewells as, with long blasts of the whistle, the ship slowly left the wharf.

Bob and Joe watched closely as it steamed majestically out into the blue Pacific. Not far out there was the Golden Gate. Beyond this was the Orient, with all its lure, its beckoning.

“I sure would give a lot to sail out on the Pacific,” sighed Bob, turning and walking on with his chum.

Away on around Embarcadero Street the boys came to Fishermen’s Wharf, where their eyes met with a sight slightly different. At a miniature harbor were scores of Italian fishing vessels. Their crew were busily engaged in preparing the boats for sailing, or in unloading the huge cargoes of fish.

“Look over here,” called Joe. “They’re selling fresh crab sandwiches. Let’s get some.”

“O.K. What do they taste like?”

The chums soon found out. A short, exceedingly fat man who always smiled served them with tempting steaming sandwiches in return for a meager sum. After the eventful morning they tasted delicious.

As they ate, Bob and Joe walked back down past the docks, their eyes always ready to single out the unusual. Although they had been in many interesting cities, never had they been more captivated than now.

Soon their attention was attracted by a coarse whistle, and looking around they saw a large freighter steaming up to the dock.

Ordinarily the boys would have paid little or no attention to the ship, for they had often watched vessels arriving and departing. But this time they looked up in wonder.

The freighter was listing badly to starboard and looked as though it were partly filled with water. How it kept from going over on its side was a puzzle to the chums.

When the ship had entered the dock and was moored by several men who stood by waiting, the gangplank was lowered, and the captain walked down, followed by others of the crew.

One of the men paused at the foot of the gangplank, and Joe took advantage of the opportunity.

“What was the trouble?” the youth asked, desiring to know what misfortune had befallen the ship.

“Struck a derelict,” was the reply. “It was an old clipper that was about rotted through. We can’t see yet how it got through the hull, but it did.”

“But how did it happen that your ship didn’t sink?” Joe inquired, his curiosity thoroughly aroused.

The sailor laughed.

“Be pretty hard to sink the *Southern Cross*,” he said. “She’s got watertight compartments. When she gets a leak, all we have to do is close up the doors. It—Hullo, Red. Let’s get goin’.”

With another of the crew, for whom he had been waiting, the seaman left the youths and moved on over to the dock.

Bob and Joe stood for some time looking at the unfortunate vessel. Then, as nothing of further interest happened, they walked on around the harbor, absorbed in thought.

The last few days had indeed been eventful to the chums. What did the future hold in store?

CHAPTER V

A Welcome Announcement

“WELL, boys, we’re leaving San Francisco tomorrow,” said Mr. Lewis as he greeted the chums late that afternoon.

“I’ll be glad to get back to Washington,” remarked Bob. “Of course, I’ve had a good time here—saw a lot of interesting sights and the like. But, after all——”

“There’s no place quite like home,” chimed in his father with a smile.

“Especially with a trip to Africa in prospect,” Bob added.

“Ah! That accounts for your ardent desire to leave, does it?” asked Mr. Lewis. “I wondered why you made that remark about wanting to get back to Washington.”

Bob and Joe smiled.

“That partly accounts for it,” came from Joe. “But, honestly, Dad, you don’t blame us, do you?”

The youth hoped to corner his father, but the latter was more clever than he had imagined.

“Not in the least,” Mr. Lewis answered quickly. “I would want to go to Africa if I were you.”

Again the boys found themselves “stumped,” and again they were forced to drop the matter regarding the expedition to the Dark Continent. They could only hope for the best, remarked Bob as that night he retired.

Early the next morning the chums and their fathers were up making preparations for the journey across the continent. They had everything in readiness by eight o’clock.

In the hotel garage they were shown to Mr. Holton’s sedan. A porter had followed them with their grips, which were placed in the car’s trunk.

The chums gazed out fondly at the last views they got of San Francisco. Then they settled themselves down for the long ride.

Nothing of significance happened during the journey, and at last, after stops had been made at Denver, Kansas City, and a small city in Kentucky, they pulled into Washington.

At their homes, which were located next door to each other, the four received a warm welcome from the youths’ mothers, Joe’s sister, and Bob’s small brother.

“I sure enjoyed our stay in San Francisco,” remarked Bob that evening, as he sat on the porch with his father and chum.

“Especially right at this time,” put in Joe. “I’m glad to get back.”

“Why right at this time?” inquired Mr. Holton.

“Because,” explained Joe, “there’s a circus in town. And as I haven’t been to a circus for quite a while, I’m going. How about you, Bob?”

“It’s a go,” said Bob at once. “Let’s you and I drive over tomorrow in my new coupé. It’s a pip, all right.”

“What, the circus, or the car?” grinned Mr. Holton.

“Well, I don’t know about the circus,” said Bob. “But I know the car is. Anyway, I’d like to take a look at wild animals that were brought from Africa. Lions, leopards, and the like. Don’t you and Mr. Lewis want to go, Dad? We can put you in the rumble seat.”

“Rumble seat, huh? Hmm. I’d want better service than that.” The naturalist viewed his son critically though with twinkling eyes. “No, we men won’t go to the circus,” he added with a grin. “But you boys can.”

“Listen to that!” cried Bob, squaring his powerful shoulders. “I guess you men enjoy it about as much as anybody does. Now, you might,” he went on, struck with a sudden thought, “take Tommy. Of course, he’d like it. That would give you an excuse to go.”

“Maybe your little brother would rather play baseball,” suggested Mr. Holton. “He finds that interesting now, you know.”

“Nix,” countered Bob. “Tommy’s all for a circus. He’d rather see the wild animals than eat. And to tell the truth, Dad,” he added mischievously, “you’re about the same way. Don’t deny it, now.”

Mr. Holton smiled.

“I see you’re putting me up a tree,” he said. “But say!”—in a tone of dismay—“come to think of it, Tommy is going to Baltimore with his mother tomorrow.”

The naturalist’s face was a perfect picture of disappointment. Bob and Joe burst out in loud laughter, and Bob gave his father a shove.

“Now who can you take?” Bob chuckled, very much amused at Mr. Holton’s plight.

“That settles it,” the naturalist said. “Ben and I won’t go. We have some work in the museum that must be attended to, anyway.”

Bob gave his father an odd glance, and then, at a call of “dinner,” the little party disbanded.

The circus was on its second day in the city, and because of several unusual attractions was receiving considerable attention. One thing being featured was an immense gorilla which had just recently been brought from western Africa. It was supposedly the largest specimen in captivity.

The next morning Bob and Joe left for the circus grounds. There they found that a large crowd had already gathered to gain admittance.

“Suppose we go to the menagerie tent first,” suggested Bob. “We have some time yet before the performance opens. I want to take a look at that big gorilla.”

"And if what we've heard is true, he's a whopper."

This was no exaggeration, as the chums found a little later. The big ape seemed the very personification of power. His huge chest was several times as big as a man's. His long large arms looked capable of crushing an enemy into a shapeless mass. The little beady eyes were defiant, moving from one to another of the spectators.

"How would you like to meet that fellow in a wrestling match?" said Bob with a laugh.

Joe smiled unwillingly.

"He wouldn't leave a grease spot of you," he said. "Fifteen or twenty champion wrestlers wouldn't have the slightest chance in the world with him."

There was a far-away look in Bob's eyes, which Joe noticed as he happened to turn about.

"What's got into you?" the latter asked. "You look like a great scientist that's just made a wonderful discovery."

Bob roused himself and laughed.

"I was just thinking," he said.

"About what?"

"Africa. Gorillas like this fellow here. Lions. Wild elephants. Tall forest giants. Adventure."

"Wow!" cried Joe. "You'll have me running around in circles. You know," he went on more seriously, "it's up to us to get our dads in the notion of going to Africa very soon now. And we'll have to make them let us go along. They——"

He stopped abruptly and smiled sheepishly as he caught sight of two men standing beside him. Those men were none other than Mr. Lewis and Mr. Holton.

"What th——" cried Bob, who had also seen.

"Didn't expect to find us here, did you?" asked Mr. Holton with a grin.

"And you said you weren't coming!" roared Bob. He looked about.

"Tommy didn't come," his father said. "He went with his mother. But," with a glance at Mr. Lewis, "Ben and I decided to take a look at this whale of a gorilla here. What do you think of him, boys?"

"Biggest I've ever seen," came from Joe. "Wonder how he was captured."

"It wasn't an easy job," said Mr. Lewis. "I once saw natives in Africa capture a gorilla. Was in the Mountains of the Moon. They used a peculiar trap consisting of a circular hole in the ground. When the animal fell into the hole, a noose was tightened around its neck."

"You say you were there?" asked Bob. "How long ago has it been?"

"A good many years—four, to be exact. Howard and I went together on a big expedition. We brought back several unusual specimens of animal life."

"Then," began Bob with a smile, "you'll probably go again in the next few days, won't you? Back in San Francisco you said you were going."

Mr. Lewis and Mr. Holton exchanged amused glances.

"Shall we tell them, Ben?" asked Bob's father.

"Tell us what?" cried Joe, sensing that something was in the wind.

"Simply that we're leaving for Africa Friday," was the quiet answer from Mr. Lewis.

CHAPTER VI

The Business Card

AT Mr. Lewis's words, Bob and Joe stood mouth agape. They stared at the naturalist for several seconds in sheer surprise. Then they were overcome with joy.

"You're not kidding, are you?" cried Bob, finally managing to utter the words.

"Not a bit," said Mr. Lewis. "In fact, as soon as we put the proposed expedition before the museum heads, they were captivated by the idea. Said they greatly desired new specimens from Africa, and if we could get them it would be perfectly all right. They're going to fix everything up for us."

"Man alive!" cried Joe. "It'll be a wonderful opportunity. Of course," he went on, "there's a chance that Bob and I may go with you, isn't there?"

"Let's not discuss that matter just now," Mr. Holton said. "Of course, you know there are others besides Ben and I who have a say. But we'll give it a thought, boys."

"And now we're off for the museum," announced Joe's father.

"Aren't you going to stay for the circus performance?" asked Bob in some surprise.

"Really we haven't the time, Son," answered Mr. Holton. "With this African mission on our hands we'll have to do some hustling. We just came down here to take a look at this big gorilla. Well, we'll see you later, boys. Be good."

With this the naturalists took their leave, while their sons glanced at each other.

"A trip to Africa!" cried Bob joyfully. He picked his chum up and danced around with him in happiness.

"Better cut this stuff out," advised Joe. "As soon as you calm down a little you'll lose some of that excess strength—and then maybe you'll let me drop."

Bob released his chum and stopped his dance of joy, as he noticed that people were beginning to trickle into the tent. But his face retained its look of exultation.

The boys still had some time before the performance was to start and amused themselves by looking about the grounds.

Later, in the main tent, the chums enjoyed the show immensely. Perhaps, however, as Bob said, they could have enjoyed it still more had they not been so absorbed in the coming expedition to Africa.

"We'll just have to go with you," pleaded Joe when the two had gone to the museum to join their fathers. "Why, you know it wouldn't be complete without us."

"Perhaps not," came from Mr. Lewis, "although we hadn't thought of it in that light."

"You know we can take care of ourselves," Bob defended himself and his friend. "And we're both good shots. Remember the time when we potted off those gazelles on the Sahara?"

"Sure thing," said Mr. Holton, nodding. "And you've brought us many other valuable specimens, too. But to tell the truth, boys, we're not anxious for you to go with us this time. You see, we have orders to shoot some very dangerous game. Lions, rhinos, buffaloes, and the like."

"Better and better!" exclaimed Bob, his eyes brightening still more. "Just where do you intend to explore?"

"In the middle of the Congo Basin," returned his father. "Our ship will take us to Mombasa. From there we'll take a train——"

"Train?" interrupted Joe, greatly puzzled. "Do they have trains in the heart of Africa?"

"Not exactly in the heart of Africa," Mr. Holton answered. "But there is a railroad running from Mombasa to Lake Victoria. As I was saying, we'll board a train and go as far as it will carry us. Then we'll have to organize a safari."

"Exactly what is that?" inquired Bob. "I've often heard the term, but never was quite clear about its meaning."

"Safari means practically the same as expedition," Mr. Lewis explained. "It is an Arabic term that is used quite frequently in Africa. A safari is composed of the explorers, the native police, bearers, and the like. It may vary from just a few people to several hundred. In our case, however, we won't need a large number of carriers. If we do need more, we can engage them in the jungle to carry our specimens back to the coast. The money that they charge is only a very meager amount."

"Just what animals do you want especially to bag?" asked Bob. "Of course, you want lions, don't you?"

"Lions, yes," returned his father. "And other dangerous game. But we also want to investigate reports of several strange animals that are at present generally unknown. Whether we'll find them we have yet to see—if nothing with sharp teeth stops us," he added with a smile.

"Nothing will," said Bob conclusively. "But just what is the most dangerous game of Africa?"

The naturalists glanced at each other.

"Better not ask that question, or you'll start a heated debate," laughed Mr. Lewis. "Howard and I are very much in disagreement about it."

"Why?" persisted Bob.

"Your father is inclined to place the rhino as the most dangerous, while I would say the buffalo comes first. But to settle the argument, both are bad enough when they're after you."

"But what about the lion?" demanded Joe. "Isn't he dangerous?"

"Very much so," answered Mr. Holton. "However, he isn't considered anything like the two animals that Ben mentioned. That doesn't mean, though, that it's advisable to go out and pick a quarrel with the king of beasts," he added whimsically.

"Let me get a map of Africa, boys," said Joe's father, rising. "Then we can see exactly where we intend to explore."

He went over to a bookcase in a corner of the office, returning a moment later with a large cloth map of the Dark Continent.

But at that moment the telephone rang, and Mr. Holton stepped over to answer it.

A few seconds later he uttered a cry of surprise. His brow wrinkled, and his face took on a look of dismay.

"Why, it can't be!" he cried excitedly. "Stolen! Gone!"

At the scientist's ominous words Mr. Lewis looked up in wonder. The boys too listened intently. They were growing impatient when Mr. Holton again spoke.

"Stay where you are," he directed the person at the other end of the line. "We'll meet you at once."

With these words he hung up and turned to the others.

"Those specimens that we bought from Thompson in Chicago—they've been stolen!" he explained in a worried voice.

"What!" cried Mr. Lewis angrily. "Do you mean that?"

"Every word of it," was the response. "We must go at once. If we get there in time we may be able to find the culprit."

The naturalists grabbed their hats and dashed out of the office and through the building to the outside. Bob and Joe followed them, although without knowing where they were going.

All got in Mr. Holton's car, which was parked near the museum.

"Now we must hurry," Bob's father said, starting the engine. "The robbery took place but a short time ago, and there is a chance that we can overtake the thief."

"Weren't the specimens covered by insurance?" inquired Joe.

Mr. Lewis shook his head.

"But even if they were," the naturalist said, "this is a case where insurance could not replace the loss. Such rare birds and animals as those can be procured only with great patience and labor under a hot sun. You fellows know what a job it is to stalk wild animals. And it isn't likely that we'll find others like them in Africa."

With a roar and a rush the automobile shot out into the street and was soon caught in the midst of heavy traffic. Although Mr. Holton greatly desired to travel at a rapid pace, he found it impossible to do so.

"Where are we going?" asked Bob. "We've been so interested in the robbery itself that Joe and I haven't thought to inquire where the specimens were when they were stolen."

"In a railroad freight yard," returned his father. "The museum sent one of its trucks after them as soon as they arrived. I don't have the details about the happening, but the box of specimens must have been stolen while the truck driver was not around. Apparently the robber was familiar with the contents of the box. Perhaps he had carefully planned the theft in advance. Heard us talking about the specimens, maybe."

"Well, he won't get away with it if we can help it," said Bob with determination. "We'll catch him somehow."

"Let's hope you're right," Mr. Holton said gravely as he pushed the accelerator still nearer to the floorboard.

After what seemed like hours they pulled up at their destination—a railroad freight yard.

Inside the main building they found the truck driver awaiting them, on his face a look of deep anxiety. His features relaxed a little as he caught sight of the two naturalists.

Mr. Lewis at once demanded an account of what had happened and urged the man to relate every detail.

The driver explained that he had loaded the box of specimens on the truck and, not doubting that they would be safe, had gone into the freight office for a brief stay. When he returned to the truck, he found, to his astonishment, that the box was gone. It was only then that he fully realized what had happened.

"If I'd only seen the guy that took them we might catch him," he finished.

The scientists were greatly vexed at the driver for not taking better care of such valuable goods, but they managed to keep their temper.

They walked out to the truck to discover, if possible, the thief's means of escape.

"He probably had another automobile waiting to take those specimens," remarked Joe. "Maybe we can find its tracks. The ground here is soft after the recent rain."

A careful survey of the roadway was not in vain, for soon they saw wide tracks of automobile tires which possessed a very odd tread.

"Here's a clue, anyway," said Mr. Holton. "Every little thing counts, you know."

Bob had gone a piece toward the street. Now he came running toward the others.

"Look!" he cried excitedly. "I've found something. Let's see what it is."

CHAPTER VII

The Thief Turns Up

AS the others crowded around him, Bob held up a small business card. It had apparently been dropped near the museum's truck, perhaps by the thief himself. On it was printed the name Thomas Jordan.

"Thomas Jordan!" exclaimed Mr. Lewis, reaching for the card. "Why, he's a wealthy sportsman. Practically everybody has heard of him. Of course it couldn't have been he that stole those specimens."

Bob's father agreed with him.

"Scarcely anybody is more respected," he said.

"You say he's a sportsman, huh?" said Joe thoughtfully. "What does he do?"

"A lawyer by profession," Mr. Lewis returned. "But in addition he heads a private museum, merely as a hobby, I guess. Has a very wide collection of fauna from all parts of the world. He charges a small admission fee. Makes a lot of money at it."

"Where does he get his specimens?" inquired Joe.

Mr. Lewis looked puzzled for a moment.

"Why, from different sources," the naturalist replied. "Goes after some occasionally, buys some—"

"Buys some, does he?" Joe still spoke in a very thoughtful voice. "Then might it not be possible that he will buy those that were stolen—get them from the thief, I mean?"

"By George!" exclaimed Mr. Holton, his eyes brightening. "You may be right, Joe. Strange that none of the rest of us thought of that now. Yes, it's quite possible for such a thing to happen. Perhaps the thief has already made arrangements with this Mr. Jordan to sell him the specimens."

"I suggest that we hunt up Jordan immediately," came from Mr. Lewis. "But I refuse to think that he had

a part in the robbery.”

“I don’t think so either,” put in Bob. “From what I’ve heard, he’s considered one of the leading citizens. But it’s possible that the thief could disguise himself as a dealer in wild animals and easily sell them to Jordan.”

“Chances are that is what will happen, if we do not interfere,” Mr. Lewis said. “So I believe we should look up this fellow at once.”

Bob’s father, having instructed the truck driver to return to the museum, led the way to his car. He desired to lose no time in calling on Mr. Jordan, who must be informed of the theft in time to prevent the sale of the stolen specimens.

The object of their remarks lived in a very fashionable residential section, which was at the very edge of the city. His private museum was located but a few squares from his home.

“If we can’t find him one place, perhaps we can another,” said Bob. “That is, if he hasn’t left the city.”

“In that case we’ll have as good a chance to see him first as the thief,” laughed Joe.

Some time later the four pulled up in front of a spacious home in an exclusive residential district. They left the car and moved up to the house.

A butler took the card Mr. Lewis handed him, standing aside a moment later for them to go in. Then, after taking their hats, he disappeared into another room.

The visitors had not long to wait. They had barely taken the chairs offered them when a tall erect man walked up to them.

“You are Mr. Jordan?” asked Joe’s father, rising.

“Yes.”

The naturalist introduced himself and his friends and then lost no time in getting to the point. He told of the theft in the freight yard, then of finding the attorney’s card.

“Naturally we resolved to hunt you up,” he said. “It is entirely possible that this thief has been to see you about buying specimens from him. Of course, you probably did not in the least suspect him. Or, if this is not the case, he got your card from some other source.”

Mr. Jordan was silent for several moments, as if in deep thought. Finally he turned to the others.

“I think I know the very man who stole them,” he announced.

“Good!” cried Joe impulsively.

“A very well-dressed chap,” the lawyer resumed, staring hard at the floor. “He came here about a month ago and said he dealt in all descriptions of specimens. But there was something about him that aroused my suspicions at once. Perhaps it was the way he acted. At any rate, I didn’t trust him. Appeared to be one of these, ah, slick, well-dressed rascals that you see so much of. I told him I desired nothing at present but rare specimens from Africa. He wore a blank look for a minute; then suddenly he gave a start and turned to me with a queer smile. ‘I’ll find you something,’ he said. ‘I think I know where I can get exactly what you want.’ I gave him one of my cards.”

“Perhaps that’s the very man we’re looking for,” said Bob. “Possible, anyway. Has he called you yet?”

“No. But if we think correctly, he may very soon now. Of course, though, he might wait till after the news of the robbery gets in the papers and has died down a bit.”

Mr. Holton shook his head.

“I’m of the opinion that he will sell those specimens before the news gets in the papers,” the naturalist said. “Perhaps he will pick today to do it. The sooner he gets them off his hands, the better chance he’ll have to get away without being found out.”

“Suppose you give me a description of them—the specimens, I mean,” Mr. Jordan suggested. “Then, if the thief comes, I’ll know at once and have him arrested.”

“That will be fine.” Mr. Lewis tore out a sheet of paper from his notebook and wrote down the names of each animal included in the collection. He handed the paper to the attorney.

“I shall be glad to do this for you,” the latter said. “If the thief comes, I’ll slip away somehow to a telephone.”

“We don’t know how to thank you enough,” Mr. Holton said gratefully. “In doing this you will be performing an invaluable service for the museum—”

He stopped abruptly as he noticed the butler entering the room.

“Mr. Henry Overton to see you,” the servant announced, as the attorney arose.

Mr. Jordan took the card the butler handed him. He pondered for several minutes before speaking. Finally he turned his gaze upon the naturalists and their sons.

“Gentlemen,” he said with a smile, “I think the time is at hand. The thief, I believe, is here now.”

There were looks of surprise and astonishment on the faces of the visitors.

“Suppose we four hide in an adjoining room while you talk to this man,” suggested Bob Holton. “Then we can hear what’s being said.”

“You’re fairly sure the caller is the man we were talking about?” asked Mr. Lewis, hesitating a moment before following Bob’s move.

“No, not sure,” Mr. Jordan responded. “But he is a collector of wild animals. And that seems suspicious enough, doesn’t it?”

“Tell you what,” he continued. “Suppose you four do as suggested—hide in this room and listen in on us. If it happens that the man is someone else, no harm will have been done.”

The naturalists and their sons needed no urging. They hurried into the next room and hid near the entrance. There was a curtain separating them from the reception room, and all crouched near to peep through.

Their hearts were in their mouths when a minute later a stranger was admitted.

"Doesn't look much like a crook," whispered Joe, as he noticed that the man was dressed handsomely.

"Look at his eyes, though," returned Bob, also keeping his voice very low.

The four listeners strained every nerve to catch what was being said in the next room. They were delighted beyond expression when they found that they could make out every word of the conversation.

"I was here a good while ago," the stranger was saying. "No doubt you remember me. You told me to let you know as soon as I found some rare specimens from Africa."

"And you've found some?" asked Mr. Jordan rather impatiently.

"Ah, yes. You will be delighted when I tell you what they are. The rarest of the rare. Mounted beautifully by one of my expert taxidermists."

He opened a small black satchel which he had carried. After a few seconds of nervous fumbling he removed a small leather notebook.

"Here," he said, handing the book to Mr. Jordan. "The complete list of specimens is here. Each is described carefully. All told, there are five of the most unusual wild creatures imaginable."

"Only five!" whispered Mr. Holton, appearing suddenly angered. "Why, there were ten in the box that was stolen."

Almost at once the attorney broached the same matter.

"Five are all you have for sale?" he asked casually. "Why, that is only a small handful, so to speak."

"Well, ah—" the stranger hesitated before speaking—"I might be able to secure more for you."

Mr. Jordan looked up suddenly.

"Is that so?" he asked quietly. "It's rather surprising that you can have them so readily. Of course"—he laughed to relieve the tension—"you don't go after them yourself, do you?"

The alleged buyer and seller of specimens faltered for a brief period, but at last looked up.

"These I was able to secure from a collector friend, who went on an expedition merely for the pleasure it afforded him, and not for the advancement of science."

"Oh, yeah?" whispered Bob to his friends who were hiding like himself. "He got 'em from his 'collector friend' like I got 'em off a hot-dog stand."

"No wise-cracking," grinned Joe. "You might get me to laughing."

The next few moments of conversation convinced the youths' fathers that the man in the adjoining room was the thief. A few descriptions of the specimens, which Mr. Jordan purposely read aloud, were sufficient to convict the stranger in the minds of Mr. Holton and Mr. Lewis.

From then, the conversation appeared uninteresting, although Bob and Joe, as well as the naturalists, were anxious to see how the attorney would dispose of the stranger.

"And," continued Mr. Jordan, "what are you asking for these five specimens?"

"The small sum of a hundred dollars," was the reply.

Mr. Jordan gasped in astonishment. Only a hundred dollars for what should be worth a great deal more than that!

Meanwhile, in the next room, Joe had decided on a plan of action.

"Now that we are convinced that this man is the thief, we are free to do almost anything," he began, speaking in a very low whisper.

The others looked at him inquiringly.

"My scheme is this," Joe continued, "I'll go out—"

"If you're doing anything, I'm in it with you," interrupted Bob.

"All right, then. We'll go out to this man's car. It's probably parked in front—"

"Perhaps he came on a street car," suggested Mr. Holton.

"In that case, my plan won't work," Joe said. "But if his car is out there, we'll look inside it and see if we can find anything that will tell us where he lives. Then we'll come back. What do you say?"

"Suits me," returned Bob at once. "We'll find something if there's anything to be found."

"And while you fellows are gone," began Mr. Holton, "we'll find some way to get Jordan in here to have him detain the thief as long as possible. But you be careful. There may be someone else in the car."

As silently as they could, Bob and Joe made their way out of the room and in a roundabout manner found the front door. One glance across the spacious lawn told them that a roadster was parked at the curb. A more careful look convinced them that no one was in the car.

"Now's our chance," said Joe, leading the way out to the street. "Of course, this automobile might belong to someone else, but the chances are that it is owned—or at least run—by the man in the house."

With a cautious look over their shoulders, the chums walked up to the parked car.

CHAPTER VIII

After the Specimens

“THERE should be a certificate of title somewhere,” said Joe Lewis, as he peered inside the parked automobile. “Or if there isn’t, maybe there’s a letter or something else that has his name and address on it.”

“Here’s a driver’s license,” announced Bob, who had reached into the pocket of the door. “Issued to Harry Walker, and the address is rural route. Let’s see the description. Height, five feet-eight; weight, one hundred-forty; eyes, brown; hair, black; age, fifty-one.”

“That’s the thief, all right,” said Joe conclusively. “It fits him to a T.”

“But the name,” argued Bob. “How do you figure *that* out? The fellow we think is the thief gave his name as Henry Overton, while this driver’s license has the name Harry Walker.”

“Maybe that was only an alias, or false name,” suggested Joe. “He could easily have changed that. But what do we do now, Bob?”

“More than I know. What do you suggest?”

“Suppose we go back in Jordan’s house and see our dads. We’ll have to hurry, though, or this thief will beat us to it.”

“To what?”

“As I was saying,” resumed Joe, “we’ll go back and get our dads, and the four of us can go out to this thief’s house and be there when he gets there.”

“Then what?”

“Easy enough. We’ll arrest him and make him get the stolen specimens.”

“But can we do it?” demanded Bob. “Will we be allowed to?”

“Sure. We’ve got the goods on him, haven’t we? We know that the specimens that Mr. Jordan read off are the stolen ones, don’t we?”

“All right. Lead the way.”

As quickly as they could, Bob and Joe went back in the house through a rear entrance. Then quietly they found the room in which Mr. Holton and Mr. Lewis were hiding.

The boys found their fathers waiting anxiously. The frown on their faces gave way to a smile as they caught sight of their sons.

“What did you find?” inquired Joe’s father.

Bob told of their desire to drive to the thief’s residence before the man could himself do so.

“I’m willing,” said Mr. Lewis, who was more than anxious to recover the stolen specimens. “While on our way we’ll stop at a police station and pick up an officer. I’d sort of hate to carry out your plan without doing that.”

Before leaving the house, Mr. Holton instructed the butler to inform Mr. Jordan of where they had gone. Then, with his son and friends, he hurried out to his car.

Mr. Lewis knew exactly where to find the residence of the thief, or at least the address that was on the driver’s license.

“It is several miles from here, but we’ll probably have a good start ahead of the thief,” Joe’s father said, as the automobile was driven out into a main traffic artery.

Before the four left the city limits, they stopped at a police station and secured the services of an officer. Now, with the protection of the law, they felt safe to continue the venture.

A half hour’s ride over a narrow country road brought them to a large house set back in a wide lawn.

“This must be the place,” observed Mr. Holton, bringing the car to a standstill. “I wonder if anyone is at home?”

“Better not leave the machine here,” warned the policeman. “If the guy we’re after should see it, he probably would not show up for us to catch him. Drive it farther toward the house, out of sight of the road.”

“Glad you reminded me,” Mr. Holton said, and drove still farther on.

All stepped out and made their way over the wide lawn. As a precaution against possible danger, the officer kept a ready hand on his revolver.

“You can’t tell who might be there to bump us off,” he said, his eyes on the house. “There could be several more outlaws waiting there.”

They reached the dwelling safely, however, and then knocked on the heavy door.

But either no one was there, or else they refused to admit the strangers, for the door did not open.

“No use keeping this up longer,” said the policeman. “We’d better hide around the side of the house and wait for the fellow we’re after. Feel sure he’ll come here?”

“We don’t know,” returned Bob. “This may not even be where he lives. He might have stolen the car he had from someone who does live here.”

They took places beside the house, at a point where they could command a good view of the road and driveway. How long it would be before the thief would show up, if at all, they had not the slightest idea. They hoped, however, it would not be long, for darkness was not far off.

Hardly five minutes had passed when Bob caught the arm of the policeman, who was nearest him.

“Listen!” the youth hissed. “There’s a car coming. Hear it?”

Sure enough, the faint sound of an approaching automobile was breaking the evening silence. Whether the vehicle was that of the thief, the hiding forms did not know. Their hopes were high, though, as the purring became louder.

Those hopes were not shattered, for a minute later the same car that had been parked in front of Mr. Jordan’s estate turned in the driveway.

“Look!” breathed Joe. “It’s the man we’re after, all right. He’s stopping. Sees our car and wonders why it’s here, I guess.”

At word from the policeman, the four stepped out and advanced toward the man. As they went nearer, the officer displayed his revolver.

"You're under arrest," he said. "Throw up your hands and tell us where you put those stolen goods."

The man raised his arms and moved toward them. But he refused to further comply with the command.

"You are wrong—entirely wrong in your thinking," he said in a crafty voice, a faint smile coming over his face. "You have made a terrible mistake and picked out one who is innocent. I know nothing about any stolen goods."

"None of your monkey business," snapped the policeman, advancing toward the man. "We've proof of your guilt and want the stuff you stole. Now, get it and get it fast, or I'll be tempted to pass a .45 through your ribs!"

"But I say," persisted the alleged thief, raising his voice to a high-pitched drawl, "I know nothing about what you are talking."

Bob advanced toward him.

"What about those specimens you offered to sell to Mr. Jordan?" the youth demanded, never taking his eyes from the fellow. "Just where did you get them? It didn't happen that you stole them out of a museum truck, did it?"

"Why, you—I'll knock you over that fence!"

He moved toward Bob, but soon decided not to carry out his threat.

The policeman became even more impatient.

"Did you hear what I said?" he snapped, prodding the man with his revolver. "We want that stuff you stole, and we want it right now. You'd better talk!"

Much to the surprise of all, the man no longer denied his guilt. Instead, he motioned them to follow him up to the house. Whether he had been frightened by the officer's terse command, or intended to resort to some means of escape, they did not know.

He produced a large bunch of keys and opened the heavy door, at the same time beckoning for his unwelcome visitors to follow.

"I'll take those keys!" The policeman held out a hand.

The accused man hesitated a moment, then handed them over.

"What you want is in the basement," he said, as he led the way through the large room. "I will get it for you, never fear."

When almost at the rear of the house, he stopped and opened a narrow door. Then, switching on a light, he went down a steep flight of stairs, the others at his heels.

They were in the basement, threading their way between rows of boxes, when something unexpected happened. The light suddenly went off, leaving them in total darkness. The eyes of the pursuers, unaccustomed to the blackness, could make out nothing around them. It had happened so quickly that there was a short period of fumbling about.

Bob Holton felt a form brush past him rapidly, as if in wild haste.

The youth's fist shot out and caught the form squarely with such force that he fell at once with a groan.

"I got him!" Bob cried. "Now to switch on the light."

During the next few minutes there was a wild scramble in an attempt to find the concealed switch. At last, when it became apparent that it could not be found, Joe bent his efforts on finding the stairway, at the head of which Joe knew there was a switch.

A thrill of hope passed through him as he felt his foot touch the top step. Now there would be light, the youth thought.

Meanwhile, the others were still vainly searching for the concealed switch.

"I give it up," sighed Mr. Holton, straightening out hopelessly. "Our only chance now is to find the switch at the head of the stairs."

The words were barely out of his mouth when suddenly the light came on.

Bob uttered a wild cry of surprise.

"For the love of Pete!" he exclaimed. "I've knocked out the policeman!"

CHAPTER IX

Failure

AT Bob's words of surprise, Joe burst out laughing. Mr. Holton could not help joining him, although he tried to restrain himself.

"That was about the craziest thing you ever did, Son," Mr. Holton said, as soon as he could get his breath. "I'm afraid friend policeman will never forgive you."

Bob grinned.

"I—Wait. He's coming to." The youth bent over the prone man.

"W-w-what happened, boy?" he demanded, sitting up and rubbing his jaw. "World come to an end?"

His friends laughed still harder.

"You—you tell—him, Dad," pleaded Bob, as soon as he could manage to utter the words.

Mr. Holton sobered himself as best he could.

"There's been a mistake," he said, keeping his face straight with difficulty, "a terrible mistake. It seems that Bob here mistook you for the thief, He was the one that knocked you out."

The officer stared for a moment at Mr. Holton. Then his gaze fell on Bob, who was wondering just what would be the outcome of his misdeed.

"I'm sorry," the youth apologized. "When I felt you rushing past me so wildly I thought sure you were the thief running away. I should have made sure, though."

The policeman continued to gaze at Bob.

"Well, all I can say, boy," he began at last, still rubbing his chin, "is that you whip up a wallop of a punch. You're the first bird that's ever put Pat Callahan cold, and that's something. I ain't no runt, you know."

"I hope you'll forgive me, sir," Bob said. "I'm terribly sorry."

"Forget it." The officer gained his feet. "We'd better be thinking about that thief," he went on, looking about the basement, "though I suppose he's miles away from here by now."

Joe ran hurriedly up the basement steps and dashed on through the house. He reached the front door in but a few seconds, and then looked out over the lawn.

Then he uttered a cry of anger, as he caught sight of the thief running madly toward his automobile.

"Stop!" Joe commanded, running in that direction.

Exerting himself to the utmost, the boy pursued the fleeing man. He was but a short distance away when the latter jumped into his car and started the engine, a moment later shooting away toward the road.

Joe made an unsuccessful attempt to mount the running board, but failed. Then, criticizing himself for not arriving at the scene sooner, he watched the car turn up the road.

Impulsively, he jumped into Mr. Holton's sedan, but found that the key was not there.

"We're licked," he moaned. "No use going after him. His car could run circles around Mr. Holton's, anyway."

He waited a little while for his father and friends to appear, but when they did not, he again went into the house.

"Joe! See anything of the fellow we're after?" The speaker was Bob, who had appeared at the top of the basement stairs.

"Yeah, but it didn't do me any good," the other youth answered, and then told of his pursuing the escaped man.

"So he got away, did he?" said the policeman. "Well, we'll fix him. There's a telephone in that front room there. I'll call up headquarters and tell them to stop him."

"Maybe the wires have been cut," suggested Mr. Lewis.

Somewhat to their surprise, the telephone was in working order.

After calling the police station and giving a complete description of the fleeing man and the car he was driving, the officer moved that they make a thorough search of the house in the hopes of finding the stolen specimens there.

"We men will look in the basement," said the officer. "You younger fellows can search the upper floor. If you find anything, let us know right away."

"Leave it to us," chuckled Joe, as he led the way up the stairway. "If that stuff is up there, we'll find it."

"Maybe he took it with him in the car when he left," said Bob. "He was a long time in leaving, you know."

The chums searched the upper floor thoroughly but could find no trace of the stolen specimens. They went back over the rooms once more, but could again find nothing.

"I'm afraid we'll have to admit defeat," Mr. Holton said, when the chums had made their way downstairs. "We've looked all over the place, but it's no use. One thing seems apparent: the thief took the specimens with him when he escaped."

The situation was indeed most disappointing. They had come to this isolated house confident that they could recover the box of stolen specimens. Then, when they were about to find them and arrest the thief, the tables were unexpectedly turned. It was most disheartening, to the naturalists especially.

Although they had searched every section of the house, they resolved to look once more, even though it had become necessary to switch on electric lights. They also looked through several outbuildings.

An hour later, however, it became evident that nothing was to be found. Tired and downhearted, the five left the house and got in Mr. Holton's car, ready to admit defeat.

The policeman took his leave at the police station, and then the others drove on home.

"The last we'll see of those valuable specimens, perhaps," moaned Mr. Lewis, as he brought the automobile up in front of the houses.

"Don't be too sure of that," spoke up Bob, assuming an air of optimism. "Like that officer said, with radio and all the latest inventions, police can trail anyone nowadays."

"That's right," agreed Mr. Holton. "I certainly hope he's caught."

"And that they do it before we leave for Africa," added Mr. Lewis.

"Africa!" repeated Bob longingly. The coming expedition to the Dark Continent had been absent from his mind all the afternoon and evening. "You will take Joe and me with you, won't you? Please say that we can go. We'll do all we can for the expedition and won't cause any trouble."

"There's no danger of your doing that," Mr. Holton said at once. "In fact, there have been times when Ben

and I were glad you were near. But the hazard of it all, boys!"

"You know, Howard," began Mr. Lewis, "I've been thinking this thing over, and I believe the trip to Africa would do the boys a world of good."

"Hurrah!" cried Joe impulsively.

"They are plenty old enough to look out for themselves," Mr. Lewis resumed. "And we'll have to credit them with a lot of initiative. Personally, I am in favor of letting them go with us."

Joe looked at his father hopefully, although in some surprise.

Bob seized upon the opportunity at once.

"That's the way to talk, Mr. Lewis," he said. "You see how we came out on that expedition into the Andes Mountains. Were successful in about everything. And the moving-picture house was well pleased with the pictures we took. There'll be another opportunity to make money taking movies of Africa—if we can go."

Mr. Lewis rose from his chair.

"Suppose we talk the matter over with their mothers," he suggested. "And it won't be easy to get their consent, either. But we can see what they think of it."

Mr. Holton was very much undecided about the matter of allowing Bob and Joe to go, but he consented to do as Mr. Lewis suggested.

"Then," he said, addressing the chums, "we can let you know later how things stand. All right?"

"Sure," Joe answered. He felt that there was a big chance of things going in his favor. "But please don't talk against it to our mothers."

Mr. Holton smiled, and then, at a call from the Lewis residence, the little party disbanded.

CHAPTER X

Off for Africa

"HIP-HIP-HOORAY! Zowie! Rah! Rah! Rah!"

"For crying out loud!" exclaimed Bob Holton. "What's got into you, Joe?"

Joe danced around in wild delight, throwing his hat high into the air and catching it as it came down. He stood on his head, turned a somersault on the grass, and performed other feats.

"Wow!" cried Bob. "You'd have a circus daredevil green with envy. But why all this jumping around? You act like a wild man."

"Wild man! Hurrah for wild men! And wild animals!"

"Keep it up, old boy," sang Bob. "When you come back to your senses, maybe I can get something out of you."

Joe continued his acrobatic stunts, which ended very abruptly as he came up against a tree that he did not know was so close.

"What's the big idea?" he growled. "Having a tree right in my way. Wait till I go get an ax."

Joe gained his feet and made a dash toward the house. But in one bound Bob brought him to the ground with a flying tackle that he had used so advantageously on the football field.

"Come clean!" roared Bob. "What's the big idea, anyway? You'd better talk."

"Not till I finish my stunt," said Joe stoutly. "Not—Hey! Cut it out!"

Joe became choked with laughter as his chum's hand pressed against his ribs. For Bob knew only too well that Joe was not a little ticklish.

"If I can't get it out of you one way, I will another," said Bob, never giving his chum an inch.

"Say! What are you ginks up to?"

On the instant Bob released his hold and wheeled about. Then a look of combined bewilderment and delight came on his face.

"Chubby Stevens!" he cried wildly, getting to his feet.

"It's Chubby as sure as I'm born!" added Joe, displaying even more surprise. "Why, when did you get here?"

The new arrival was a short, exceedingly fat youth, with twinkling eyes and a pug nose. Bob and Joe had made his acquaintance while in South America on their Andes expedition and had taken a great liking to him.

"Just happened to be in Washington and thought I'd drop around and see you bozos," Chubby explained. "We came by airplane. Left Houston last night."

"Boy! Am I glad to see you!" said Bob. "Of course, you're going to stay awhile, aren't you?"

"Only till tomorrow," the fat little fellow said. "Dad came here to see the President, I guess," he said with a chuckle. "Things ain't goin' to suit him in his business. He's awful hard to please, Dad is. If the dough ain't rollin' in to suit him he thinks there ought to be something done about it."

"Same old Chubby," said Bob with a laugh. "Are you sure you're telling the truth?"

"Well—the fact is, he didn't make it clear just what he came for. Anyway, he came. And I went with him."

"Ever been to Washington before?" inquired Joe.

"Nope. I got to within a half a mile of here once. But just as we were about to hit the city limits, Dad turned off on another road."

Bob and Joe laughed.

"Well, then," began the latter, "suppose we spend the day looking around. We can see the city and go to the museum and take a look at the specimens we brought back from the Andes. That is, unless you'd rather do something else."

"I'd rather do that than anything," Chubby said at once. "But—" he hesitated—"if you gazooks have anything else to do—"

"We won't have anything to do for several days," spoke up Joe.

"What are you goin' to be up to then—after those several days are up?" demanded Chubby.

"Plenty," returned Joe. "Ever hear of Africa?"

"Let me think." The fat youth rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "The word sounds familiar," he said at last. "What is it, a new kind of dog food?"

"Cut the comedy," said Joe, suppressing a smile. "The thing is that Bob and I are going there."

"To Africa? No kiddin'!"

"Not a bit," returned Joe. "We'll be leaving in a short time now."

"Wait a minute," snapped Bob. "How do you know you and I are going? They haven't told us yet."

"Oh, no? Well, just for your own benefit, Dad told me a little while ago that our mothers have given their consent. We can go on the expedition."

Bob stood for several minutes as though transfixed. Then, as though the full meaning of his chum's words had been suddenly released, he jumped up with a shout of joy.

"Africa!" Bob cried. "Hurrah!"

"And still you wonder why I did all that jumping around a while ago," grinned Joe.

"So that was it?" asked Bob. "Well, why didn't you tell me?"

"So you're going to Africa, are you?" came from Chubby Stevens. "Gonna start a circus?"

"Hardly," returned Joe. "Dead animals are bad enough to bring back, let alone live ones. But right now, Chubby, come in the house. The lawn isn't any place to visit."

The remainder of that day Bob and Joe spent in entertaining their friend from Houston. The three visited the museum and had a long talk with Mr. Holton and Mr. Lewis, who at once took a liking to Chubby. Then, after viewing the many specimens of animal life that had recently been brought back from the Andes, the three drove around the city, noting the United States Capitol, the White House, Arlington National Cemetery, and many other notable attractions.

Very late that afternoon Bob and Joe let their friend out in front of the hotel in which he and his father were staying. Chubby explained that, as they were to start back to Houston before daylight the next morning, he could not remain longer with his friends.

"Watch yourselves while you're in Africa," he warned, as parting words. "Don't get on the inside of a lion."

"We'll try not to," laughed Bob, and then, with a final farewell, he sent the car homeward.

That evening Bob and Joe thanked their parents warmly for allowing them to prepare for the African expedition. They promised their mothers that they would be unusually careful and not take chances while in the jungle.

"And now," began Bob the next morning, "we'll have to do some hustling, because we leave Friday. This is Monday, you know."

"And how I wish it were Friday now!" groaned Joe.

The youths were far from idle during the week. They found that there was much to be purchased in the way of outdoor equipment, for although they had been on several previous expeditions, never had necessity demanded so much as now. Much of the equipment, however, could be furnished by the two naturalists, who had a large collection of rifles, cartridges, outdoor clothing, tents, kits, and various other articles.

"Here's something that might interest you, boys," said Mr. Lewis one evening, as he caught the chums on the back lawn.

"What is it?" inquired Bob, noticing what the scientist held. "Looks like a kind of club."

"Hardly that," laughed Mr. Lewis, "though it might be used as a club. But the thing is, boys, that this is a flashlight without batteries."

"A—a what?" demanded Joe in surprise. "Flashlight without batteries? What are you talking about, Dad?"

"I thought that would get you," Mr. Lewis laughed. "But no joking, this is just what I said. You see, it contains a small generator. As you turn this crank, it makes electricity, and the bulb lights."

"What a contraption!" said Bob. "But, say! Speaking of turning cranks, that reminds me. Joe and I haven't notified the Neuman Motion Picture Corporation that we're going to Africa. And they told us to let them know when we left for a little-known land. If we're going to take movies of Africa, we'll have to telegraph them at once and maybe go to Philadelphia to see them."

"I've already sent them word," said Joe. "Forgot to tell you about it. As soon as our mothers said we could go, I went down and telegraphed. They said they'd send the cameras and film at once by express."

"You did?" asked Bob in astonishment. "Good old Joe. Gotta hand it to you, all right."

But despite what the Neuman Corporation had informed Joe, the motion-picture cameras and film had not arrived Thursday evening, as the youths and their fathers prepared to retire. On the morrow—Friday—they were to leave for Baltimore, whence they would embark on the steamer *Zanzibar*.

"Doggone it, anyhow!" exclaimed Bob Holton, who was fairly fuming at the mouth. "What will we do? We

haven't time to go to Philadelphia now."

"Looks like you fellows aren't going to take movies of Africa," remarked Mr. Holton, who also felt the youths' bitter disappointment.

"But—but they would be better than any we've ever taken," mourned Joe. "No," he went on, "we'll have to arrange it some way. It might be best for you men to go on and let Bob and me take another ship. We——"

"I'm afraid you couldn't do that, boys," said Mr. Lewis, shaking his head. "We've already made reservations for you, and those could not easily be broken. A contract is a contract, you know."

"The only thing for you to do," came from Bob's father, "is to telegraph Neuman the first thing in the morning to send the cameras and film on to Africa if they haven't sent them yet. Of course, if they have, your mothers can forward them on to Africa by another ship."

That night Bob and Joe were far from hopeful. Since they had been engaged on their first expedition, to Brazil, to take moving pictures of the strange places and animals they saw, the chums had longed for a chance to photograph wild life in African jungles. Now, to be leaving for those mysterious jungles without taking motion pictures was unthinkable.

But despite these grave thoughts, the youths slept soundly and awoke the next morning in high spirits. After all, they were going to Africa. What if they could not go? That would really be something to cry over.

The four adventurers tore themselves with difficulty from the breakfast table and arranged their belongings together. The boys' fathers drove the family cars around in front.

"Let's get started at once," urged Mr. Holton, looking at his watch. "The train leaves for Baltimore in little more than half an hour. That means we'll have to hurry."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when an express truck drove up and stopped just behind the two cars. Out of it stepped the driver, who carried a large tightly sealed box.

"The motion-picture cameras!" cried Joe in extreme joy. "They're here at last!"

CHAPTER XI

An Amusing Acquaintance

"**H**ow was that for timing it to a dot?" laughed Bob, after the express driver had left.

"Couldn't have been better," said Joe. "Boy! Am I glad that stuff got here!"

Bob placed the big box in the Holton car, and then all made ready for the drive to the railroad station.

They reached their destination with fifteen minutes to spare and at once set about having the baggage sent up to the tracks.

The leavetaking was painful to all, for it was as hard for the four explorers to go as it was for those staying at home to give them up. But finally, with last warm farewells, the youths and their fathers left for the tracks.

"Bring me a lion cub!" called Tommy, Bob's small brother, shouting to make himself heard.

"I might surprise you, Tom, old man," Bob shouted back, laughing in spite of himself at his brother's remark.

With one last wave, the youths and their fathers headed for the tracks, where the Baltimore express was waiting. Red-capped porters brought their baggage up in the rear and placed it on the train. Then the adventurers themselves boarded.

Before long, with a clanging of bells the express puffed out of the station and steamed in the direction of Baltimore. At last the long journey had begun.

For some time both Bob and Joe were silent, watching the country as it whizzed past them. Then, almost before knowing it, they pulled into Baltimore.

Mr. Lewis hailed a taxi, and they were whirled through the busy streets to the docks, where, at some point, their steamer, the *Zanzibar*, was anchored.

"What do you think of her, boys?"

It was Mr. Holton's voice as a little later the four explorers found themselves peering ahead at the ship on which they were to embark.

"I hardly know," returned Bob, who was somewhat disappointed at sight of the vessel. "Suppose you answer that question, Dad, Mr. Lewis."

"I'm afraid we're a bit stung," muttered his father, gazing at the *Zanzibar*.

The steamer was far from modern in appearance; its sides were beginning to look rusty, and the cabin was badly lacking in paint. About two hundred feet long, it looked as though it had seen many years' service.

"Will that take us all the way to Africa?" demanded Joe, who was almost at the point of anger.

"We'll probably get there," returned his father. "But how!"

"Why didn't you pick a better boat?" asked Bob. "The passage wouldn't have cost any more, would it?"

"This happened to be the only one sailing soon," was the answer from Mr. Lewis. "I took for granted that it would be satisfactory."

They went up the gangplank, having resolved to make the best of a bad matter.

"Anyway," said Bob, "it's far better than not going at all."

The vessel was not to lift anchor until late that afternoon, and so the youths had some time to walk about the docks.

"Whatever you do, get back here in time," warned Mr. Lewis, as the chums left down the gangplank. "It would be a terrible thing to be left behind."

"We'll be there," returned Bob.

He and Joe spent some time in looking around. They saw many strange and interesting people and things at the waterfront, and would have liked to stay longer. But at one o'clock they decided to take no chances and boarded the *Zanzibar*, although it was still several hours before sailing time.

The youths were shown to their stateroom, which went somewhat beyond their expectations, it being large and well appointed.

"Maybe this old boat doesn't look very well on the outside, but she's O.K. inside," remarked Bob, as he left with his chum for the outer deck. "Couldn't ask for much better."

On deck the two found their fathers eagerly waiting for the ship to move out to sea. The men were becoming more restless with every passing minute.

Then at last the longed-for moment came. A cry of "All ashore!" A chugging of tugs. A mad scramble of visitors down the gangplank. Then, with a clanging of bells and a groaning of hawsers, the *Zanzibar* began to move away from the dock.

"We're off!" exclaimed Joe Lewis, waving mechanically at the crowd of people who were there to see the steamer leave.

Slowly the vessel threaded her way through the heavy water traffic. It steamed out through the Patapsco River and then at last turned into Chesapeake Bay.

Bob and Joe remained on deck with their fathers for some time, noting everything worthwhile that was visible about them. Finally Bob turned to his friend.

"Suppose we go below," he suggested. "I'd like to take a look at the ship."

The boys spent the remainder of the day in exploring the *Zanzibar* and were greatly interested in everything they saw. But they knew at once that the ship had been in service for many years.

The ocean voyage was not novel to them, but, nevertheless, they enjoyed it immensely. The days passed pleasantly enough, the chums seeking amusement by swimming in the ship's pool, playing various deck games, and reading in the library.

One morning they were leaning on the rail, watching the rolling of the waves, when a high-pitched voice roused them. Looking around, they saw a tall, very slim young man of perhaps twenty, with light wavy hair and an unusually light complexion. His features were very delicate, and his voice very much resembled that of a lady.

"I say there," he greeted, extending a shapely white hand. "Really marvelous weather we're having, don't you think?"

"Why—yes," returned Bob, after a moment of hesitation. "Yes, the weather's swell so far. I sure hope we don't run into a tropical storm."

"A what?" The slender young man turned a shade paler. "Did you say storm?"

"Yes," returned Bob, inwardly amused. "I heard the captain talking this morning. He seemed to think there's a chance of striking a hurricane."

"Goodness gracious!" cried the strange young man. "That would simply be horrible. Could there not be something done about it?"

"Well—" Bob hesitated—"I don't know of anything. Just have to go through it, I suppose. But perhaps after all there won't anything happen. I'd like to reach port under a clear sky."

"And so would I, my dear chap. Are you seeking pleasure by traveling?"

"To a certain extent we are," Bob answered him. "My chum here and myself are with our dads to collect specimens of animal life and photograph the country," he explained. "Holton is my name—Bob Holton. This is Joe Lewis."

"Most delighted to know you," said the white-faced youth. "Cecil Purl Stone is my name. A real pleasure to know you. I'm—traveling just for the fun of it," he said with a foolish little laugh. "I do consider travel as one of the most gorgeous ways of enlightening oneself. It is—so very amusing," and he laughed again, this time even more girlishly.

"Yes, it is," said Joe, keeping back a smile. "But the fact is, Bob and I won't have much time for travel in the true sense of the word. We'll be too busy hunting and photographing."

"Hunting? Gracious sakes! Don't tell me you are permitted to carry firearms!"

Bob and Joe smiled instinctively.

"Hunting is great sport," said the latter. "But we never kill anything just for the pleasure of killing it. We have a good reason whenever we shoot an animal."

"Ugh!" exclaimed Cecil with a shudder. "I never could bear the thought of a gun. Believe me, they certainly give me a creepy feeling. Once I went with Mamma to India. We intended to travel through a part of the country that was a little—dangerous, but when they told us we had better carry firearms I revolted right then and there. The very thought of such a horrible thing made the cold chills creep down my back."

"But there isn't anything bad about a rifle," Joe told him. "That is, if you know how to use it. My friend and I may find our guns very useful when we get among such animals as gorillas."

"Gorillas! A beastly word. But don't inform me you are going to search for such terrible things!"

"Well, not exactly," answered Bob. "But if any come our way we'll probably bring a few down for specimens. And we'll also be on the lookout for other dangerous game. Lions and leopards, for instance."

"Gracious!" Cecil Stone's mouth was wide open. "And you expect to return from that horrible country alive?"

"We hope to," returned Joe with a smile. "And you—what do you intend to do in Africa?"

Cecil Purl removed a bright blue comb from its case. He fixed his hair very carefully before he again spoke.

"We wish to visit the cities," he told them, "and mingle with the socially prominent people. It will be most enlightening, believe me. We hope to be invited very often to tea. Perhaps——"

"Cecil! Come with Mamma now. You must dress for dinnah."

"Fer gosh sakes" murmured Bob, under his breath.

A very tall, smiling woman was beckoning to the young man, who obeyed her without delay.

"Really, I'm most charmed to have met you chaps," he said, turning to leave. "I sincerely trust that we may meet again soon."

With this he walked lightly down the deck with the woman.

Bob and Joe watched the pair closely until they closed the cabin door behind them. Then the youths burst into laughter which lasted for well over a minute.

"For the love of Mike!" cried Bob, as soon as he could get his breath. "Talk about sissies. That fellow's at the very top of the list."

"'Mamma' sure has him under her thumb, all right," grinned Joe. "It's a wonder she doesn't put dresses on him. But come on, Bob. It's about time for dinner to be served. Unless I miss my guess, Cecil won't last very long at the table. Boat's been rolling lately, you know."

The chums went to their stateroom to wash and comb. Then, accompanied by their fathers, they went up to the dining saloon.

The food tasted good, both youths eating heartily. Evidently they were now seasoned sailors, for neither felt the slightest signs of seasickness.

But with someone else, seated near them at another table, it was entirely a different matter. For Cecil Stone's face was beginning to turn a sickly yellow, and with each bite of food he was visibly becoming more affected.

"Dear me!" the chums heard him say. "I really can't take another bite of that beastly salad."

"Perhaps you would feel bettah if you would go to your suite, Cecil darling. Appahantly you aren't feeling well today."

"There he goes," whispered Bob, his eyes following the tall, stooping figure. "He can't take it."

CHAPTER XII

A Disappointing Announcement

MUCH as Bob and Joe expected, Cecil Purl Stone did not put in his appearance the remainder of that day. Nor did he appear in the cabin the next. In fact, it was two days later that he was seen walking down the promenade deck. Even then he was unusually pale and haggard looking.

At a suggestion from Joe the chums walked purposely up to the young man.

"How do you like the way the ship's rolling?" Joe asked him, with a wink at Bob.

"Oh, it's simply deplorable!" returned Cecil, rubbing his forehead. "There certainly should be something done about it. Don't you know, I'm terribly afraid that if this continues much longer I shall become ill again."

"Ill? Were you ill?" inquired Bob, with an attempt at innocence.

"Oh, it was horrible!" moaned Cecil Purl. "I declare I never experienced anything quite like it before. I do not see how I ever escaped alive!"

"But you've taken ocean voyages before, haven't you?" asked Joe.

"I most certainly have, my dear chap. But, don't you know, I never have escaped that dreadful seasickness. Not even as much as once."

"That's too bad," said Bob sympathetically. "But, then, some people aren't as lucky as others. It's a fortunate thing, though, that the weather has remained calm."

"Will it last, though?" queried Joe, keeping an eye on Cecil Purl Stone. "For all we know, there may come a violent storm tonight."

"Gracious!" the slender young man gasped. "What should I ever do if that should happen? I believe I would surely go distracted."

"He'd probably go to his suite," laughed Bob a little later.

Contrary to Joe's remark, there were no signs of a storm that night. In fact, the weather was most delightful, and many of the passengers spent the time on deck, taking advantage of the cool night breeze. Bob and Joe and their fathers were among those passengers.

"There's nothing like the spell of the ocean," murmured Mr. Lewis, as he sat staring up at the star-

studded sky.

"Wait till we get to the tropics," Bob's father reminded him. "This won't be anything then."

"Right you are, Mr. Holton," came from Joe. "But just where do we land in Africa? I know it's somewhere along the east coast, but the particular city I don't know."

"We'll pull into Mombasa," his father explained. "It's a place of considerable importance and is the eastern terminal of the Uganda Railway. We won't stay there any longer than we can help. Howard and I would, however, like to look up an old friend whom we haven't seen for some time. But as soon as we can we'll get started into the interior."

"I suppose from what you said that we'll take a train as far as possible. Right?" asked Bob.

The naturalists nodded.

"That railroad was made to order for us," said Mr. Lewis. "If it weren't there, it would mean a long and painful hike through a region that is unimportant to us."

"Unimportant? Why?" inquired Joe.

"Simply because we are not permitted to shoot any animal in the protectorate," Mr. Holton explained. "You see, the English have made this a sort of park for the benefit of those who wish to view wild creatures in their natural habitat. For that reason—and also there are others—we intend to penetrate deep into the Congo forests."

Several days later the *Zanzibar* steamed through the Strait of Gibraltar and passed into the Mediterranean, going so near the famous huge rock that it was plainly visible in the thin morning air.

"Isn't that a sight for your eyes, though!" remarked Bob, gazing ahead intently.

"If it were night they would probably play searchlights on our boat," said Joe.

"What? Searchlights? What are you talking about?"

"Dad told me that there are several forts at the rock," Joe explained, "and the authorities there have the searchlights to light up the strait. In case of war, I suppose they would come in handy."

As time passed, the ship steamed on through the Mediterranean, past shores that were famous in ancient history. Although the *Zanzibar* had not yet entered the tropics, the heat was becoming unbearable, the chums and their fathers seeking the cool retreat of the swimming pool.

Then one clear morning they were able to make out the form of a lighthouse, and a little later they pulled into Port Said, at the Mediterranean end of the Suez Canal.

"Look out for the heat now," laughed Mr. Lewis, when they were again on their way.

"Heat's no word for it," groaned Bob some time later, as he loosened his necktie. "It's torture."

Hemmed in on both sides by two of the hottest deserts in the world, the Red Sea proved to be a veritable inferno. So hot was it that even the swimming pool did not offer a haven of refuge.

"Here's hoping the Red Sea doesn't close in on us," laughed Joe. "It did on Pharaoh's men, you know, in Biblical times."

"Guess there isn't any danger," came from Bob, fanning himself vigorously. "We haven't anything but good intentions."

Cecil Purl Stone also found the heat torturing.

"Why don't you take off your coat?" asked Bob. "You'll smother to death."

"Mamma says I just must leave it on," was the reply. "There are ladies on the boat, you know."

"Phooey!" muttered Joe, under his breath.

At last the *Zanzibar* emerged into the Indian Ocean, after having steamed through the Red Sea for six days.

Once Bob and Joe were standing at the rail, watching the schools of porpoises, the occasional flying fish, and the less frequent fins of sharks, when they suddenly heard a stamping noise coming from around the promenade deck. Wondering what was meant, they turned and waited.

A moment later appeared Cecil Purl Stone, running awkwardly around the corner.

"Why, what's the matter?" questioned Joe, trying to refrain from laughing at sight of the slender young man.

Cecil Stone groaned.

"Oh, it is beastly!" he said, stopping for a moment to face the chums.

"What?" demanded Bob. "Tell us about it."

"That horrible captain just told me there may be a storm," he explained, wiping the perspiration from his white face.

"Storm? You don't say!" broke out Joe. "I— Wait. Where are you going?"

"I intend to go to bed without further delay," answered Cecil promptly. "I tell you, I just can't stand that dreadful seasickness any more. I'm going to have Mamma give me some medicine."

The next instant he was gone.

Bob and Joe wanted to laugh, but they had done so so often that they restrained themselves.

"Not wishing him any bad luck, but a guy like that ought to be seasick," grunted Bob. "He's the worst I've ever seen."

"But, say, Bob, he said the captain told him there might be a storm, didn't he? Do you suppose there'll be one?"

"I can't see any signs of it," the other youth returned. "Who knows but that the captain was joking with Cecil? Perhaps he just wanted to get him worried. It's natural to pick on a sissy, you know."

Whether Bob was right in his opinion they never knew. But, at any rate, all the remainder of that day and the next passed without any atmospheric disturbance.

"Well, boys, we'll reach Mombasa tomorrow about noon," remarked Mr. Holton, moving with Joe's father

up to where the chums were standing.

"Hurray!" yelled Bob. "I've enjoyed this voyage, but I'll be glad to get to Africa."

"Wonder where Cecil Purl will head for?" laughed Joe.

"Probably straight to the best hotel in the city," answered Mr. Lewis with a smile, for he also had been amused by Cecil's feminine traits.

The next day Bob and Joe, together with their fathers, took places at the rail, awaiting their arrival at Mombasa. Several other passengers were already there, and still more came soon after.

Eleven o'clock came. Eleven-thirty. Noon. But no Mombasa.

"Wonder what's the trouble?" mused Bob, his keen eyes searching the horizon. "We should be there by now."

"True," answered his father. "But don't forget that a ship isn't exactly like a train. It is much harder to stick closely to time tables on an ocean voyage."

Notwithstanding this, two o'clock rolled around without any sight of the city of their destination. Many of the passengers were beginning to worry, for they could not conceive of straying so far from the schedule.

Even Mr. Holton and Mr. Lewis were starting to wonder. They remained anxiously at the prow, straining their eyes to make out the outlines of the city.

Suddenly, when a heavy cloud lifted, Joe gave a cry of delight.

"It's land!" he exclaimed, pointing far out over the water. "It won't be long now."

Gradually the outlines of the shore line became more distinct, and at last the passengers could make out luxurious tropical vegetation.

"But where's Mombasa?" demanded Bob, scanning the landscape.

"Looks like it isn't there," answered Mr. Lewis.

"What do you mean, Dad?" Joe inquired.

Mr. Lewis was at the point of making a reply when the captain of the ship strode up, on his face a scowl.

"It seems that there has been a slight mistake in our reckoning," he said. "We are seventy nautical miles to the north."

CHAPTER XIII

The Lost Scientist

THERE was a buzz of muffled conversation among the passengers, and before anyone could ask anything further, the captain had disappeared into the cabin.

"This is a fine howdy-do," snorted Joe Lewis, peering out at the shoreline. "What do they take us for, a bunch of livestock?"

"Jove!" exclaimed one of the passengers, looking up through his large glasses. "The bally ship is a good half day's journey from Mombasa."

"It's a horrible shame, that's what it is," came from Cecil Purl Stone, who also was at the rail. "Here I am in perfect readiness to look upon Mombasa, and this had to happen. I'm going straight to my suite."

"Wonder how it all happened?" inquired Bob.

"That we don't know, Son." Mr. Holton's temper was also being tried. "But now that it has happened, there's no way out, only to wait."

"I took for granted the *Zanzibar's* navigators were competent," said Mr. Lewis. "However, such things do happen occasionally."

Although the naturalists and their sons were disappointed, there was nothing they could do but wait. Just how much longer it would be, however, they did not know.

To the vexation of all, the *Zanzibar* steamed for the remainder of that afternoon and evening without sighting the city of its destination. It was not until eight o'clock that night that Mombasa could be outlined in the distance, and then, of course, only the lights could be seen.

Bob and Joe, together with their fathers and many other passengers, stood at the prow of the ship, waiting for land to come up to meet them.

The broad beam of the vessel's searchlight illuminated the water ahead perfectly. At last the *Zanzibar* was making directly for the harbor.

"Not much to be seen at night," observed Joe. "But I guess we'll be able to look around in the morning."

They watched interestedly as the ship moved slowly into the harbor. Aside from a few small ships and native dhows, there was no water traffic in sight. Neither was the dock easily visible.

"Suppose we turn in, boys," suggested Mr. Holton. "If we get to bed early, we can be up early. And the sooner we put ashore and make arrangements for our exploration venture, the sooner we can be on our way into the heart of Africa."

The heart of Africa! Bob and Joe thrilled at mention of this. Often had they longed for such a venture into

the Dark Continent, but not until now had that longing been satisfied.

The chums needed no urging to follow Mr. Holton's suggestion to retire, for they desired to be up early the next morning.

"I don't know whether I can sleep or not, though," laughed Bob, as he and his friend walked to their stateroom. "I'm afraid I'll be thinking too much about Africa. Think of it, Joe. We're here—in Africa!"

"Not quite," Joe reminded him. "We're still on the *Zanzibar*, don't forget."

"Gosh! That's right. I almost forgot."

The boys slept soundly, but because they had set their "mental alarm clocks," as Joe called it, they awoke before six in the morning.

But if they considered themselves "early-birds," they were to throw away the title promptly when they caught sight of their fathers standing on deck with their baggage.

"How in the dickens did you manage to get up so early?" demanded Joe. "You must have got out of bed at four to have brought all that stuff out here."

"We'll have a big day before us, boys," said Mr. Holton. "Let's leave the ship at once."

But before doing so the youths walked out to the rail to view their surroundings.

The sight that met their eyes made them gasp, so different was it from anything they had previously seen.

Before them was the new port, which contained numerous docks, warehouses, and the like. To one side they saw the old harbor with its numerous native ships and boats. Beyond the waterfront were the prominent buildings of the city, while not far away was the old Portuguese fort. Farther away was the bright green of endless tropical vegetation.

"So this is Africa," muttered Bob. "What do you think of it?"

"Pleases me, all right," grinned Joe. "I'm longing to get into the jungle."

"Come along, boys." It was Mr. Holton's voice. "Gather up your baggage and come back on deck. Do it as rapidly as you can."

During the next ten minutes the youths worked furiously, attending to such things that they had not already packed. On their way down the hall they stopped at Cecil Stone's suite to have a parting word with that young man. But apparently he had left, for no one answered the knock.

"The last we'll see of him, maybe," remarked Bob, picking up the cases he had been carrying.

On deck, Bob and Joe found a large number of passengers amassed ready to move down the gangplank. There was an exchange of parting words, and the chums left with their fathers and made their way to a hotel, in which they had previously engaged rooms.

"What's next?" inquired Joe, after they had had breakfast.

"Ben and I want to look up an old friend," said Mr. Holton. "A Mr. George Seabury. He used to be a mighty hunter."

"Used to be?" queried Bob. "What do you mean, Dad? Is he old or something?"

"What I meant, Bob, is that several years ago he was charged by a rhino and has not had full use of his legs since. He can walk, but doesn't do it any too well. Suppose," he continued, "you and Joe come with us. There's no question but that you'll like him at once."

The youths were more than willing, and, led by their fathers, they walked over to a section of the town that was inhabited only by Europeans and Americans.

At a rather attractive-looking house they stopped, and Mr. Lewis knocked on the door.

The door was opened by a large, swarthy man of anywhere between fifty and sixty. One glance at Mr. Lewis and Mr. Holton was enough.

"By Jupiter!" he cried, overjoyed at sight of the naturalists. "Come in, you old rascals."

Mr. Holton smiled and gave his friend an affectionate pat on the back.

"But we've brought our sons with us this time," he said, indicating Bob and Joe. "George, meet Joe Lewis and Bob Holton. Boys, this is Mr. Seabury."

There was a shaking of hands and general greeting, and in the end the chums felt perfectly at home.

"Husky fellows," observed Mr. Seabury. "Look like they could take care of themselves, all right."

"They certainly can," affirmed Mr. Lewis, and then outlined some of the boys' experiences in Brazil, the Sahara, and the Andes Mountains.

Their host listened intently. By the time Mr. Lewis had finished he looked upon the boys with even more respect.

But soon his brow wrinkled.

"Africa is somewhat more dangerous than any of the places they have been," he said slowly. "There are evidences of that everywhere. In fact, there is evidence of it right here in this house."

"Referring to yourself, perhaps," put in Mr. Lewis grimly.

"Just that," Mr. Seabury returned. "Being charged by a rhino is anything but pleasant. Fortunately, I escaped, but the terrible beast put its mark on me for life."

There were grim looks on the faces of everyone. Especially were Bob and Joe touched, for they realized for the first time that Africa was a land of tragedy.

"Is there nothing that can be done? Will you always be lame?" inquired Mr. Holton.

Mr. Seabury looked even more grave.

"Medical science cannot help me," he said at last. "I'm afraid my hunting days are over." For several moments he retained the same expression. Then suddenly his face lightened, as though he had resolved to forget the matter. "Just what fauna are you after this time?" he asked the naturalists. "But first, before anything more is said, I have something that I want to put before you."

"What is it, a surprise?" smiled Mr. Lewis.

"Well—you might call it that," was the response. "Here's the whole thing: Over six months ago my brother Thomas went into the Congo region to study the primitive tribes there. He was to come back in three months. As yet he hasn't returned. I fear something has happened to him."

"That's too bad," said Mr. Lewis. "We'll make it a point to search for him. Just where did he intend to go?"

"It is a very remote region," Mr. Seabury told them. "Has been called the Forest of Mystery."

"The Forest of Mystery!" repeated Mr. Holton. "I've heard of it. In the central Congo country, isn't it?"

George Seabury nodded.

"It is said to be full of unexplainable phenomena," he said. "Has been frequented by only a very few whites."

Mr. Lewis brought his fist down on the arm of the chair.

"That's the region we'll explore," he said, while Bob's father nodded. "Have you any idea how to get there?"

"No," their host responded. "But I know of two natives who have. They live in Mbarara. You men left from there on your last safari in this part of Africa."

"Yes," came from Mr. Holton. "But who are these two natives?"

"One is named Noko and the other is Kaika——"

"Kaika!" interrupted Joe's father. "Why, he was our head bearer on our last safari."

"That so?" asked Mr. Seabury, somewhat surprised. "Well, he and Noko have been to the Forest of Mystery and know how to get there."

"Fine." Mr. Holton smiled happily. "That's the very place we'll set out for. And we'll certainly keep on the lookout for your brother."

"You don't know how much it will mean to me if Thomas is found," said Mr. Seabury. "Of course, I am in no condition to go in search of him, and it would be next to impossible to engage some stranger to do it. So if you will keep on the watch for him, it will certainly ease matters."

"We'll be more than glad to do it," Mr. Lewis told him. "It will be strange if we don't run across some trace of him."

For the next hour they talked on indifferent matters. Then, with a parting word, the explorers left Mr. Seabury's house and went to the hotel.

"Now what?" asked Joe.

The answer was without hesitation.

"We'll start into the unknown as soon as we possibly can," said Mr. Holton. "That is, of course, if we can get a train. It may be that we will have to wait several days before one leaves."

"Boy!" cried Joe, deeply touched. "Into the heart of Africa! I can hardly wait."

CHAPTER XIV

Disaster Ahead

“WHAT did you find out, Dad?” inquired Bob late that afternoon. Mr. Holton had just returned from the railroad station of the Uganda Railway.

His father smiled happily.

"There is a train leaving tomorrow morning," he said. "From all accounts we'll be the only passengers on it."

"I don't mind that," came from Joe. "But, say, Mr. Holton, what does the train look like?"

"You'll be surprised," smiled Mr. Lewis.

"Perhaps you'll tell us just where it will take us," said Bob.

"All the way to Lake Victoria," his father returned. "We'll spend a day or so looking around there. Then we'll organize a safari and plunge into the jungle."

There was a little time left before darkness would close over them. Bob and Joe used it to further explore Mombasa and see its inhabitants.

They found that the city was situated on an island several thousand acres in extent. There was a channel that divided it from the mainland, spanned by a causeway. In the old section of the city the chums found many things of interest in the way of odd native huts, curious carvings, and the native market. The new section contained a number of attractive homes in which lived Europeans and Americans.

"And there seem to be representatives of all races here," remarked Bob, when they returned to the hotel. "Whites, blacks, browns—all colors."

"You're in for a surprise tonight," said Mr. Lewis, as the youths retired.

"What is it?" asked Joe.

"Wait and see," smiled his father.

The "surprise" did not make itself known the first part of the night. In fact, Bob and Joe forgot all about

what Mr. Lewis had said so soundly did they sleep.

But about two in the morning they were awakened by a hideous noise which was unlike anything the youths had ever heard before. That it was the call of some wild animal they did not doubt, but just what creature could cry out in such tones they had not the slightest idea.

The noise was repeated again and again, always nearer. Finally Bob jumped out of bed and bounded to the window.

"Of all things!" he cried, gazing out intently. "Joe, come here—quick!"

Joe needed no urging. Like a flash he had joined his comrade.

"Why—it's a hyena!" he gasped. "And there's another—and another. Gosh! They're right out in the middle of the street."

A brilliant moon made the animals easily visible. They were unusually large specimens, that from all appearances could tear a man limb from limb.

"I guess they're too cowardly to attack even a very small animal," remarked Bob. "But they sure look mean, don't they?"

"This must be the surprise Dad was talking about," said Joe, never taking his eyes from the scene. "And it really is a surprise, too. Who'd expect to see wild animals out in the main street of a town, even in Africa?"

The chums could hardly tear themselves away from the window. The whining, screaming hyenas were something that they had never seen except behind bars, and they naturally looked out with great interest.

"Come on, Joe." Bob at last went back to bed. "We want to get a little more sleep before morning. We'll have a lot to do tomorrow."

Shortly after daybreak Mr. Lewis appeared at the doorway.

"Come along, boys," he said, noting that they were awake. "The train leaves in two hours."

They dressed as soon as possible and secured their breakfast. Then, with their fathers, they went to the railroad station, carrying most of their baggage.

As there was nearly an hour remaining, all four took a short walk about the city, in search of anything unusual.

Before long they found themselves at the city fish market, which was a colorful place displaying practically all kinds of sea food. There were sharks, swordfish, crabs, crayfish, sardines, and many other queer denizens of the near-by waters.

"Quite a market," mused Joe, as they moved back to the railroad station. "Ought to be able to find anything you'd want there."

The train arrived at last, and the explorers lost no time in boarding. They found the coach very comfortable, although it appeared rather old.

"You were right, Howard. As yet we are the only passengers," observed Mr. Lewis.

Before long the train started moving, slowly at first, picking up speed later.

"We're off!" cried Joe, gazing out of the window with interest.

After a short stop at Kilindini they crossed the channel and passed through luxuriant tropical vegetation—coconut palms, mangoes, and countless other trees and plants.

"When do we see the herds of wild animals?" asked Bob, after an hour had passed. "This is a game reserve, isn't it?"

His father nodded.

"We should see some before long now," he said. "But, of course, there won't be any great numbers until we get farther along."

Soon the train left the coastal belt and reached a region of bush. For several hours it sped through a monotonous country, at last coming to the town of Voi.

From then on the journey was rather uninteresting, until the explorers pulled into Makindu. Here they got off to spend the night.

Late the next morning the train resumed its journey, leaving the region of bush behind and entering a vast plain.

Suddenly Mr. Holton sat up with a start.

"Look over there!" he exclaimed, pointing to something several hundred yards away.

Bob and Joe looked.

"Why—it's a herd of zebras!" cried Bob, struck with amazement. "There must be fifty of them."

"What do you know about that!" Joe was also gazing out with profound interest. "They—over there! A herd of strange antelopes."

"They're impalla," pronounced his father. "Sleek, beautiful animals, aren't they?"

As they went farther the explorers saw other kinds of game. Bright-colored birds fluttered past; towering giraffes could often be seen; hartebeests and other varieties of antelopes appeared everywhere. Once a troop of impalla, upon hearing the locomotive whistle, ran gracefully at right angles from the train.

"The world's greatest menagerie," murmured Mr. Lewis, speaking with decision. "The British certainly have done a great good here. There is nothing like this protectorate anywhere."

Half an hour later the train stopped at a small but attractive station. Here the explorers got off to stretch their legs and look around.

Bob and Joe happened to be near the locomotive when a voice made them turn about. Looking up, they saw the engineer motioning to them.

"How would you like to see the wild beasts better?" he asked the youths.

"Why—what do you mean?" inquired Joe wonderingly. "See them better? How?"

"Easy enough," laughed the engineer. He climbed down from the locomotive. "See that? It's a seat on the

cowcatcher. If you like, you and your dads, or whoever that was with you, can perch yourselves there. It's every bit as safe as in the car."

"Say!" burst out Bob, delighted at such an opportunity. "That's just what we'll do. There's plenty of room for all four of us, and no danger of falling off. Thanks for telling us."

The boys found their fathers on the opposite side of the train.

"It's time Joe and I were springing a surprise on you," said Bob, with a wink at his chum.

There was a quizzical look on the faces of the naturalists.

"Very well," smiled Mr. Lewis, his eyes twinkling. "What is your surprise?"

"How would you like to see the wild beasts better?" asked Bob, repeating the question asked by the engineer.

Mr. Holton answered on the moment.

"We'd like it so well that we intend to occupy the seat on the cowcatcher of the engine," he said casually.

Bob groaned hopelessly.

"Good-bye surprise," he snorted. "Doggone it, Dad. You two are away too wise for us. We ought to tell you something about the Amazon jungle, I guess, instead of picking on Africa. We ought to be able to. We were lost in it long enough."

"I get it," laughed Mr. Lewis. "You were going to tell us about the wonderful possibilities for sightseeing while seated at the front of the locomotive. Why didn't you keep still, Howard, and let them have their fun?"

"Sorry," grinned Mr. Holton. "Next time I'll be as mum as a giraffe."

At a word from the engineer, the four explorers climbed up on the cowcatcher and sat down on the wide seat, their hearts light as they eagerly anticipated what was coming. As for Bob and Joe, it was the most unusual opportunity they had ever been offered.

"What do you have there?" inquired Joe, trying to make out what his friend held under his arm.

"A motion-picture camera," returned Bob, holding it in view. "I opened the box and brought it out. We haven't taken any movies since we started, you know."

"Glad you thought of it," Joe commended. "This is sure a swell chance for rolling it off."

The sound of the locomotive's whistle made the explorers sit up in eager anticipation.

It was a novel sensation to the youths—sitting on the cowcatcher of the engine. As the latter picked up speed, they experienced a feeling of real exhilaration. For seeing the shining rails slip by and watching the scenery move toward them was most unusual indeed, especially here in Africa.

The farther they went the more plentiful wild life became. On one occasion Joe almost caught a bright red bird with his hands as it flew across the path of the oncoming train. At another time a cat-like animal darted across the track, almost under the wheels.

"That fellow had a narrow escape," breathed Bob, whose heart was beating rapidly as he saw the near-tragedy.

Still later the boys and their fathers saw literally thousands of beautiful Thompson's gazelles, gnus, ostriches, giraffes, hartebeests, water bucks, and many other creatures.

"Such a sight!" said Bob, cranking the motion-picture camera frequently. "Never saw——"

He stopped abruptly, and the reason was very apparent.

Not two hundred feet away, directly on the track, was a huge elephant, which paid not the slightest attention to the oncoming train!

CHAPTER XV

A Wonderful Sight

“WE'LL hit it, sure!" cried Joe, rapidly losing his nerve as he gazed fearfully ahead. "Oh, I guess this is the end!"

Already the shrill whistle of the locomotive was shattering the silence. But even the loud warning was futile. The elephant remained where it was, not as much as moving an ear.

Bob and Joe and their fathers were gripped with fear as they saw themselves speed closer toward the huge brute. Let them once strike the animal, and their doom would probably be sealed!

The explorers heard a wild shout from the engineer. Then there was a creaking and grinding noise, and the train's speed was checked somewhat. But even with the application of the emergency brake the heavy engine plunged on.

"Jump!" cried Mr. Lewis in a wild voice. "It's the only way to escape!"

Obeying the command at once, Bob and Joe watched their chance and leaped far over to the left of the train, while their fathers went to the right. The train was not traveling rapidly, and so there was no danger of injuring themselves.

The youths rolled over on the soft ground, not receiving as much as a scratch.

"Look, Joe! Look!" yelled Bob.

The locomotive slid on and with a tremendous crash struck the massive elephant. The impact knocked the front trucks of the engine completely off the track, while the huge beast went to the ground with a resounding thud.

The force of the collision literally brought the train to a complete stop. But the scene of the mishap was one of frenzied disorder.

Kicking and trumpeting horribly, the elephant vainly tried to get to its feet. But, despite its frantic efforts, it could not do so. Apparently it had been injured severely.

Mr. Holton ran around to the youths, followed by Joe's father.

"Boys! Are you all right?" the latter asked anxiously.

"Yes," Bob reassured him. "But, say, that was a whale of a smash-up, wasn't it?"

"The elephant appears to be mortally wounded," Mr. Lewis said, with a shake of his head. "It seems only humane to put it out of its misery."

He unstrapped his rifle and took aim at the animal's heart. A moment later he pulled the trigger.

The naturalist never fired a more accurate shot. With a horrible groan, the great beast collapsed into a heap—dead. The high-velocity bullet, following its previous injury, finished it instantly.

Long before, the engineer and fireman of the locomotive had joined the explorers and were viewing the scene with a terrible awe.

"We're in a fine mess," groaned Bob, directing his gaze at the dead elephant.

"Mess is right, fellow," came from the engineer. "It's up to me now to get word back to Mombasa to send out a relief train. We're in luck, too. There's a station only a short distance up the track."

He left the others and hurried ahead, intent upon telegraphing as soon as possible.

In less than an hour he was back, and announced that another train would arrive from Nairobi, a city less than sixty miles away. Relief was expected inside of three hours.

"While we're waiting," said Bob, speaking to his chum, "suppose we take a short jaunt into the surrounding country. We ought to see plenty of interest."

"Be careful, boys," warned Mr. Holton. "And remember. Don't shoot any animal unless, of course, you have to. This is a game preserve, you know."

Delighted at such a chance, the youths strode off through the high grass, keeping their eyes ready to single out anything of interest.

Almost at every step they saw some strange and interesting creature. Birds of brilliant plumage flew overhead, large herds of sleek, agile antelopes coursed across the plain, and at one time the boys caught a glimpse of a buffalo.

"Strange that there aren't any lions," mused Joe. "Where there's so much of everything else, looks like there ought to be at least a few."

"I suppose they keep their distance," said Bob. "Been hunted so much, maybe."

In little over two hours, Bob and Joe returned to the train, to find their fathers sitting on the cowcatcher of the engine.

"What did you see?" Mr. Lewis inquired drowsily.

"Plenty," answered Bob. "There's about every kind of animal imaginable in this region. But we weren't able to stir up a lion."

"I don't wonder," Mr. Holton said. "The king of beasts is keeping his distance at present."

"What do you mean, 'at present'?" inquired Joe.

"The natives around here have been up in arms against lions," Mr. Holton explained. "You see, the fact that this is a protectorate has made the lions very bold, and so the natives have taken steps to kill off a few that have been causing the most trouble. It seems—"

He was interrupted by the sound of a distant locomotive whistle and peered up the track expectantly. Undoubtedly this was the relief train, and that was what the two naturalists desired above all else just at this time. For every moment of delay was maddening to them.

At last the train came in sight and in a short time had stopped not far from the dead elephant. The engine was in the rear of a flat car on which was a huge crane.

"Now for the fun," smiled Joe, looking doubtfully at the crane. "Looks to me like it would take more than one of those things to move that elephant."

But much to Joe's surprise the crane proved very effective, lifting the elephant slowly but surely off the track. It was also used just as effectively to place the front truck of the engine back on the rails.

"All over," laughed Bob, placing the motion-picture camera back in his pocket. "I took some movies of that, too. Ought to be plenty good." He climbed back on the cowcatcher of the locomotive.

"I don't know whether it will be safe to sit there, Bob," said his father. "We might strike another animal."

"Ah, gee, Dad," came from Bob pleadingly. "This is a wonderful place to watch the scenery."

The engineer came to his rescue.

"You don't need to fear anything more happening," he told Mr. Holton. "This elephant smash-up was the first to bother us this year. Go ahead and sit on the cowcatcher."

The naturalist took hope from the trainman's words and decided to risk it. For, if the truth be known, he and Mr. Lewis were as anxious as the boys to ride at the front of the locomotive.

Ten minutes later they were speeding along toward Lake Victoria, following the wrecking train.

Nothing more happened until they reached Nairobi, the halfway point on the way to the lake. Here their journey aboard this train came to an end, and they were forced to wait for another.

The next morning they were again on their journey, this time aboard another train, the engine of which

did not have the convenient cowcatcher seat. But Bob and Joe didn't mind. They became so absorbed in the unusual sights about them that they completely forgot it.

A short distance from Nairobi they got their first glimpse of really primitive natives. A group of blacks, led by one big fellow who was undoubtedly the chief, waved a friendly greeting as the train passed.

"Did you notice their teeth?" asked Joe, when the natives had been left behind.

"Yeah. They were filed to sharp points. And did you see their hair?"

"Hair? That's a good one," laughed Joe. "They didn't have any. Was every bit shaved off."

At last the train entered a region of misty rain forests. Occasional mountains became visible, their peaks towering into the distant skies.

The time passed slowly but brought much of interest. Then one day the explorers found themselves in Port Bell, at the edge of famed Lake Victoria.

Bob and Joe went with their fathers down to the water's edge to get a glimpse of the lake.

Then their eyes almost burst from their heads.

CHAPTER XVI

Off for the Unknown

FAR into the distance, as far as the eye could see, stretched the boundless water of Lake Victoria, resembling nothing so much as a vast ocean. Even at the far-away horizon there was no trace of land.

"Wow!" gasped Bob, who was taken totally by surprise. "You're not kidding us about this being a lake, are you?"

Mr. Holton laughed.

"We thought it would get you," he said. "Boys, you're looking at one of the largest lakes in the entire world. Covers an area of nearly twenty seven thousand square miles, and is over two hundred and fifty miles long."

"Biggest I've ever seen," remarked Joe. "And right here in the heart of Africa."

He had brought a motion-picture camera and now removed it to roll off a fair amount of film.

"What's that away over there?" inquired Bob wonderingly, pointing to a dark cloud that hovered near the surface of the water.

The others gazed intently for several moments. Then, when the dark mass was slightly nearer, Mr. Lewis uttered an exclamation.

"If I'm not mistaken, that cloud isn't a cloud," he said, removing his binoculars from their case.

"Then—what is it?" demanded Joe.

A moment later his father confirmed his own opinion.

"Just as I thought," Mr. Lewis said, peering out through his powerful glasses. "That isn't a cloud at all. It is a big mass of insects."

"Insects?" repeated Bob. "You mean that what looks like a cloud is nothing but a lot of insects flying together?"

Mr. Lewis nodded and passed the binoculars to Bob.

It required but a second for the youth to observe that his chum's father was right.

"Man alive!" he murmured. "There must be millions of those little creatures. I sure wouldn't want to get in that swarm."

"I shouldn't imagine it would be very pleasant," said Mr. Holton dryly.

They spent several more minutes in walking along the banks of the lake and then turned back into the town.

"What will we do now?" asked Joe, as they walked along the main street.

"We're going to take an automobile," answered his father.

"Oh, come, Dad," Joe broke out. "What are you talking about?"

"Just what I said," answered Mr. Lewis. "Howard and I engaged an automobile. We'll drive to a town called Mbarara—that's a good day's journey to the southwest. From there we'll start into the jungle on safari."

"Or to use the common African term," laughed Mr. Holton, "we'll 'push off into the blue,' which means start into the unknown."

The automobile that the naturalists had engaged was a well-known American make and had seen many miles of service but was still in good condition.

It was still early when the four placed their paraphernalia in the automobile and climbed in themselves. Mr. Holton took the wheel, sending the car ahead at a good pace.

The road was little more than a clearing cut out of the dense jungle, and in the rainy season would have been impassable. Now, however, it was in good condition.

"We're out of the protectorate now, aren't we?" inquired Bob, fingering his rifle.

"Yes. But to tell the truth," began Mr. Holton, reading his son's thoughts, "I'd rather you wouldn't shoot anything along here. We'll have plenty of that to do later."

As a result of this, the chums refrained from using their rifles, although they saw numerous wild creatures that could have been brought down easily.

Just before nightfall, the little party of explorers chugged into Mbarara, which was a mere village at the edge of the primeval forest.

Here the explorers were welcomed by a huge Negro, to whom the automobile belonged. He was well acquainted with Mr. Holton and Mr. Lewis, having met them on their previous visit to this town.

"Boys," said Mr. Lewis, addressing the chums, "I want you to meet Migo, an old friend of ours," indicating the native. "Migo, this is Bob Holton and this, Joe Lewis."

"Very glad know you," greeted the native. He was a man of considerable importance in the country about Mbarara, and had picked up several languages, all of which he spoke well.

The chums exchanged the greeting and then made ready for anything that would be said.

"You gon' org'ize another safari?" Migo asked the naturalists.

"Yes," returned Mr. Lewis. "And we want you to help us find bearers. Will you do it?"

The answer came at once.

"I will," the native said. "How many will you need?"

"We have come to the conclusion that twenty-five will satisfy our needs, at least for a while," responded Mr. Holton. "If we need more we can pick them up at villages along the way. By the way, Migo," he went on, struck with a sudden thought, "is it possible to get the guide we had last time? Kaika was his name. Knew every inch of ground for miles around."

Migo's face darkened. He shook his head slowly.

"Him not here any more," he said in grave tones.

"Why—I don't understand," came from Mr. Lewis. "Where is Kaika?"

"Dead," was the ominous response.

There was a short silence, during which the naturalists stared at Migo, hardly knowing what to say.

"I'm terribly sorry to hear that," said Mr. Holton at last. "What caused his death?"

"He killed by a lion," was the answer from the black. "It was a big man-eater. Kaika, he was in a village one day. Big man-eater he slip up on Kaika. Break Kaika's back. He die in little time."

The news sobered the Americans somewhat, for they began to realize anew that Africa, although a land of romance and adventure, was also a place of tragedy. Especially were Bob and Joe stirred by Migo's words. This was the second casualty they had heard of since landing at the Dark Continent, the first being the case of Mr. Seabury in Mombasa.

"I sincerely hope nothing happens to our expedition," said Mr. Holton gravely. "Especially since the boys are with us."

The naturalists were delighted when Migo announced that he could secure the services of Noko, the native that Mr. Seabury had mentioned. For he was one of the very few who knew of the Forest of Mystery. He had recently returned from guiding another safari into a region far to the south. Migo assured the whites that he was unusually brave and daring and knew exactly which men to pick out for the expedition. He lived in a little hut at the edge of Mbarara.

"We'll go there now," said Joe's father. "Migo, will you come with us? We may need your help."

The native was more than willing, and together they went afoot, except for Mr. Holton, who drove the car. The automobile was now filled to capacity with supplies to be used by the expedition, several necessary additions being furnished by Migo, who kept a store.

In a small thatched hut they found an unusually tall coal-black native, who nodded as he greeted them.

"This Noko," Migo introduced him. "This man his name Holton, this man name Lewis. These Bob and Joe."

The towering native smiled broadly and bowed. Then he listened to what Migo had to say.

"They want you guide them into unknown land," Migo resumed. "They want shoot, hunt. Will you do it?"

"Yes, *bwana* [master], I will go," Noko said to the naturalists. "Where you want hunt?"

"In the Forest of Mystery," said Mr. Holton. "You know where that is, do you not?"

Noko nodded vehemently.

"Yes, *bwana*," he told them. "Noko been there two time. It ver' strange place. See strange things. Strange animals. There some bad men dere. Use long spears. They kill hunters. Noko not see them, but hear about them. *Baya sana* [very bad]!"

"That is indeed unfortunate," said Mr. Lewis. "But we are willing to take the chance, if you are."

Noko bowed.

"It well, then," he said. "Noko will go into strange forest. Noko not afraid."

"And you can furnish the bearers?" asked Mr. Holton. "We'll probably need about twenty-five, perhaps more."

The tall native nodded. He explained that inside of two days he could complete preparations for the expedition and would let the whites know when he was ready.

After a few more words with Noko the naturalists and their sons left his hut and with Migo drove the automobile to a large clearing just off the roadway. Here they unloaded their supplies and pitched a tent.

"We'll stay here until Noko has things ready for us to start into the jungle," remarked Mr. Lewis, lifting a big box to carry it into the tent.

Late the next afternoon the Americans were resting under a large tree beside their temporary camp when

they heard a shouting and yelling. Looking around they saw Noko and a large group of other natives heading toward them.

"Hurrah!" cried Joe. "Noko sure has acted quickly. Has everything ready for us."

The natives were all capable of carrying loads of sixty pounds apiece. And Noko, as the *neapara*, or headman, assured the explorers that they could be relied upon.

Last-minute preparations were made. The naturalists saw that each porter was carrying his share of the provisions. Then, picking up their guns and handing them to their bearers, the scientists and the youths waved a farewell to Migo and several other natives who had gathered to see the expedition depart.

Led by Noko, the safari made its way toward a distant jungle.

They were off—off for the little-known Forest of Mystery!

CHAPTER XVII

Peril Ahead

"**H**ow long will it take us to get to this Forest of Mystery?" inquired Bob Holton, as he and his chum followed the naturalists over the grassy plain.

"Many, many days," answered Mr. Lewis. "It is in the very heart of the vast Belgian Congo and is inaccessible by way of roads and railways."

"So much the better for us," laughed Joe. "We'll probably find things there that no one else has seen. At least, no other white men."

"Let's hope you're right, Son," came from his father. "Howard and I would like to discover some totally unknown animals. But," he added significantly, "we'll have to watch our step. Who knows what perils may be hidden in that mysterious forest?"

The afternoon was rapidly wearing on, and although the explorers were still on the open plain, Noko announced that he desired to get beyond it before nightfall. In the distance they could see a dark jungle, through which they would soon be passing.

The grass under their feet was tough and wiry and yielded reluctantly. Occasionally small animals darted out before them and disappeared under cover of the grass. None of the large cats, however, showed itself.

"Wish we could get a look at a lion," remarked Bob, tightening his grip on his rifle. "What I'll do to one if I see one!"

The naturalists looked back and smiled.

"Maybe it would work the other way around," chuckled Mr. Holton. "What would the lion do to you?"

"Oh, I don't know, Dad. I'm not a bad shot. You know that. And I've met wild animals before."

"True, Bob," came from his father. "But none happened to be as ferocious as old *felis leo*—"

"I thought the lion is called *simba*," interrupted Joe.

A burst of laughter followed.

"It's very apparent," said Mr. Lewis, "that you need to brush up on your natural history."

"Why?" inquired Joe, somewhat surprised. "What was funny?"

"Still don't get the point, huh?" laughed Mr. Holton. "Well, we'd better tell you before you spring that one before some of our naturalist friends. *Felis leo*, boys, is the lion's scientific name. *Simba* is the name given to him by the natives."

The boys laughed also when Mr. Holton had finished.

"*Simba* fits him better," mused Joe. "Of course, it's less distinguished, but, just the same, it's easier to say."

At last they found themselves nearing the jungle, after having left the long stretch of veldt behind. As it was almost sundown, the naturalists greatly desired to stop for the night. Noko, however, for some reason wanted to plunge into the jungle without delay. Perhaps he feared the invasion of wild beasts if camp should be made on the grassland.

Before long they plunged into the woodland, and their rate of travel was necessarily reduced somewhat. For with all the many sharp-pointed thorns, low bushes, tangled vines, and other obstacles, the adventurers found it difficult to maintain a rapid pace.

"Keep a sharp lookout," cautioned Mr. Holton, glancing back for a moment. "This region shouldn't be particularly dangerous, but you never can tell."

"Only thing I'm especially afraid of," began Joe, "is poisonous snakes. Can't tell just when you might step on one."

"Leopards are also dangerous," put in his father. "At any minute one might leap down from a tree and make for us. Still, the animals are likely to be frightened by such a large safari as ours."

At frequent intervals Bob and Joe took turns in "shooting" the country with the motion-picture cameras. These latter were not the type that require a tripod, but were relatively simple in design and easy to operate, it being necessary only to press a button as the lens was focused.

The jungle was becoming more tangled with every passing minute. Huge forest trees were everywhere, many of them having parasitic vines wound tightly around their trunks. Strange, odd plants grew about in profusion. Bright-colored flowers were everywhere and often diverted the youths' attention from the path.

Many varieties of butterflies, frequently beautifully marked, fluttered about. Once Joe was lucky enough to catch one with his hand and at once passed it to Mr. Holton, who was nearest him.

They had trekked for over an hour when suddenly there arose a commotion in the rear ranks of the line of carriers.

"What's that?" burst out Bob, turning on the instant. "Sounds like something's the matter."

Mr. Holton ran back down the path, followed by Bob, Joe, and the latter's father.

Then they saw the cause of the disturbance. A veritable army of tiny red ants was attacking the bare feet of the bearers and was doing the job right. There must have been tens of thousands of the little creatures, for they were crawling about in great masses.

Noko shouted something in the native language, motioning and frowning indignantly. What he said the Americans never knew.

"Look at them," said Joe excitedly. "Isn't there anything they can do to beat them off?"

The natives were becoming frantic with fear and discomfort. They jumped about wildly in attempts to escape from the countless menacing hordes. Despite the seriousness of the matter, Bob and Joe could not help laughing at the actions of the natives.

"This ought to be a swell scene," laughed Bob, focusing the movie camera on the dancing mob. "And it's all genuine, too. No acting about it."

The filming was shortly interrupted, as the attacked bearers rushed madly up the path, apparently intent upon running from the red ants. Bob and Joe took to their heels with the rest and at last were sufficiently far from the scene to be out of danger. All were panting and perspiring after the short but tiring run.

"Are we rid of them?" inquired Bob. He had not seen a red ant since he had started running.

Noko nodded.

"They gone," he said, stopping for a moment and facing Bob. "Heap bad. Bites hurt."

"I shouldn't imagine it is very pleasant to be bitten by them," said Joe.

"The natives steer clear of them," put in Mr. Lewis, as the cavalcade again took up the journey. "Not infrequently red ants invade villages and drive the entire population to some place of refuge. Howard and I have often come upon deserted villages that had been left for that very reason."

Just before nightfall the party came to a wide stream of muddy water, which wound itself through the dense jungle. From all appearances the stream was very deep.

The chums saw that fifty feet farther along there was a log spanning the creek, probably placed there by natives.

"Wonder if we'll have to cross that?" mused Joe, looking with distrust at the improvised bridge.

"Looks like it," his friend responded. "The path quits off there, you know, and continues from the other side."

The words were scarcely spoken when Noko stopped and turned to the naturalists.

"Cross here," he told them, indicating the log. "Must be care. Not slip."

"Wow!" cried Bob suddenly.

"What's the matter?" asked Joe.

For answer, Bob pointed to the stream.

There, lurking sluggishly on a flat shelf, was a huge crocodile which looked as if it were waiting for one of the adventurers to plunge into the dark water.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Terrible Crocodile

JOE stared at the stream in terrible fascination, half expecting to see many other of the repulsive reptiles make an appearance. But if any more were there, they failed to come in sight.

"One's enough, though," mused Joe.

Mr. Holton motioned for Noko to lead the way. True, it promised to be a trying experience, crossing that slippery log, but the sooner over the better.

A rope was handed to each of the whites, who grasped it thankfully. The natives, however, had little need for this aid, accustomed as they were to jungle life. Even with the heavy packs, they went easily across to the other side.

Mr. Lewis and Mr. Holton also stepped across without difficulty. Bob, the next to try it, demonstrated his skill by not making a single misstep. Joe, who was last, gripped the rope a little more tightly than had the others, for he had never considered himself good at balancing.

"Take it slowly," cautioned his father, looking on anxiously from the other side. "Don't look at the water. It might make you dizzy."

Joe was more than halfway across when a terrific splashing sound made him glance around impulsively. Then his expression changed, and he suddenly grew pale.

His foot was slipping—slowly, to be sure, but slipping!

Suddenly the youth gave a wild cry of fear and then went plunging into the muddy water!

There were anxious shouts from the opposite shore as Mr. Lewis and Mr. Holton pulled desperately on the rope. Bob and Noko also lent their efforts, and together the four drew Joe slowly but surely toward the bank.

"Hurry!" cried Joe frantically. "The crocodile!"

The huge reptile hesitated a moment as it gazed intently at the broken waters. Then, as though suddenly grasping what was taking place, it swung into action and swam toward Joe.

The latter was some fifty feet away, and, aided by the stout rope was swimming rapidly. But the crocodile also was moving at no slow gait!

"Quick!" shouted Mr. Lewis, pulling with all his strength. "In less than a minute it will be too late."

He placed his section of the rope in the hands of a bearer and grasped his rifle. A second later he pulled the trigger.

Bang!

The sound of the gun was followed by a terrific thrashing about as the crocodile gasped out its last breath. Then the motion ceased, and the great saurian disappeared into the dark water.

"Thank goodness!" breathed Bob.

By now Joe had reached the shore and was scrambling up the steep bank. He was a sorry-looking sight as he faced the others.

"Thought I was a goner," he said, with a ghost of a smile. "But that rifle shot did the trick, all right."

"It certainly did," said Mr. Holton. "Ben never fired a more accurate shot. Strange, but it never occurred to me to use a rifle. I was only thinking of pulling harder on the rope."

"I wasn't sure that I could hit the crocodile," Mr. Lewis put in. "I imagine I wasn't any too steady after the terrific strain. But through luck, I guess, that bullet penetrated the brain."

Joe was watersoaked to the skin, and mud was caking on his clothes.

"Better put on something dry," advised Mr. Holton, and Noko, understanding, nodded.

"Get heap sick," the native said, using the English he had picked up. "Um fever here. Soon come night. Then be heap cold."

"I guess you're right," Joe admitted. "Then too, it doesn't feel very pleasant with these wet clothes on."

It did not take him long to change, and he was soon ready to continue the journey.

Noko urged that they make unusually good time from now until dark so as to get to a certain clearing before nightfall. Of course, they could have stopped and made camp at many places, but the native did not wish to do so.

As the guide had hoped, they reached the place he had in mind just as darkness was beginning to enshroud them.

During the next few minutes all worked hurriedly, so as to complete making camp before the blackness would handicap them. For night in the tropics comes quickly, there being little or no twilight.

The tents were fastened securely to the stakes, the provisions unpacked, and a roaring fire was built.

"Now for what's coming," grinned Bob, smacking his lips. "And am I hungry!"

Before long a tempting odor filled the air, one that was entirely new to the youths. Just what food was being prepared they could not even guess.

The taste was excellent, however, as they found a little later.

"Trust the natives to pick out what's good," remarked Mr. Lewis, when the meal was over. "They know of many edible wild herbs, roots, and berries that we whites have never tasted."

Darkness had overtaken them, a darkness that was filled with mystery. From afar came some terrifying scream, uttered perhaps by a wild animal in its death struggle. Soon there came another that was even more blood curdling.

"Listen!" hissed Mr. Holton, straining his ears to make out the distant cry more distinctly.

"What is it?" inquired Joe.

"A lion," was the answer. "He seems to be coming closer."

"Gee. Maybe we can get a shot at his lordship," grinned Bob, picking up his rifle.

But if the lion was near the camp he failed to cause a disturbance. Perhaps the brute had sensed that someone had invaded his domain, but had also sensed that it would be dangerous to interfere.

"What's that over there?" demanded Bob, making out something just beyond the fire.

"Why—it looks like two red lights," observed Joe. "And they seem to be coming closer."

The naturalists' eyes followed those of their sons. Then Mr. Holton reached for his rifle.

"Keep quiet," he whispered, taking careful aim at the red "lights."

Then he fired, the report being followed by a terrible screeching and wailing noise. With one last groan, the animal, whatever it was collapsed.

"Hurray!" yelled Joe. "Got him, Mr. Holton. But what was it?"

The victim proved to be a huge lemur, an animal that looked like a cross between a monkey and a cat. It was about three feet long and had an unusually long tail.

"But, say, Dad," came from Bob, "where did that bullet strike? It didn't smash his face."

"That's part of the trick of shooting," laughed Mr. Lewis. "Howard saw its eyes in the darkness, and so aimed below at the body."

The animal was carefully skinned and the skin placed in preservative. Then, this task being over, they sat idly around the fire and chatted merrily.

At frequent intervals they could hear cries of wild animals, including the trumpeting of elephants and the mournful groan of hyenas. Once they heard a horrid growl that Mr. Lewis said was made by a leopard.

Despite the clamor of the African night, Bob and Joe slept soundly and awoke the next morning greatly refreshed.

"Drink deeply of this cool air," said Mr. Lewis, stopping for a moment at the boys' tent. "Along towards noon, as you already know, the sun will be far too hot for comfort."

The natives were astir, attending to the many tasks that went with breaking camp. Breakfast was at once followed by pulling up the stakes, folding the tents, and loading the provisions and other articles in their proper places on the backs of the bearers.

Soon the expedition was again penetrating deep into the dense jungle. Although the traveling was necessarily slow, every hour saw them a little nearer the unknown Forest of Mystery.

Along towards noon Noko called a halt. It was wholly unwise to continue in the terrific noonday heat of Africa. They stopped at a little open space which was devoid of vegetation except for tall grass.

Everyone rested in the shade of a huge tree, whose branches extended out over a wide area.

Bob and Joe, however, soon tired of remaining so long in one position, and finally decided to explore the country in the immediate vicinity of the safari.

"We won't be gone long," remarked Bob, speaking to the naturalists. "Just want to look around a little."

"Be careful, boys," warned his father. "Always be prepared for dangers."

There was a narrow trail that wound toward a little elevation not far away. Along this the youths walked, keeping their eyes open for anything unusual.

"I wouldn't mind meeting something dangerous," grinned Joe, gripping his rifle the tighter. "Somehow I want action."

"Didn't you get enough of that yesterday when you fell in that stream?" asked Bob.

"It was enough for yesterday," returned Joe. "But this is today."

Suddenly the chums caught sight of something that filled them with wonder.

CHAPTER XIX

A Promise of a Thrill

NOT ten feet away, at the point where the trail branched, was a huge mound of earth that must have been at least thirty feet high. It was conical in shape, gradually tapering up to a sharp point.

"What do you call that?" asked Joe, staring in amazement at the formation.

"If I'm not mistaken, it's an ant hill," Bob answered, moving closer to the mound of earth. Often Bob had heard of this phenomenon, but until now had not seen it.

"A what? Ant hill? You don't mean to say that ants built that, do you?"

"I guess they did," returned Bob. "Dad says ants have been known to heap up the earth to a height of forty feet or more."

"Of all things!" Joe could hardly believe what his chum said. "How do they do it, anyway?"

"More than I know. They're busy little creatures, though."

The boys examined the ant hill with a great deal of curiosity. It seemed almost incredible that ants could construct such a huge piece of architecture. Why, it must have required the efforts of tens of thousands of the little creatures!

But although greatly interested, Bob and Joe did not spend too much time here, for they desired to explore a bit longer before returning to the safari.

Everywhere they went they saw brilliantly colored birds, which often fluttered so near that the youths could almost touch them. Luxuriant flowers were also in abundance.

The chums trekked on for a distance of perhaps a half mile, then turned back toward the expedition. When they reached the clearing, they found Mr. Lewis and Mr. Holton ready to continue the journey.

"See anything of interest, boys?" inquired the latter, signaling to Noko to lead the way.

"Plenty," returned Joe. "An ant hill, for one thing. And was it a whopper! Must have been thirty feet if an inch."

"That was only a taste," grinned Mr. Lewis, with a wink at Bob's father. "Howard and I have often seen them forty feet or more."

As they penetrated deeper into the jungle, the vegetation became denser and consequently more difficult to pass through. Often the sun was entirely hidden from view by the thick canopy of foliage above, and the

explorers found themselves in a sort of twilight. At other times they would emerge from the leafy depths and make their way over wide plains under the fierce tropical sun.

But despite many difficulties of the trail, the expedition made good time and by night had covered a good many miles. They camped beside a narrow, winding stream, which looked as if it were several yards deep.

"Bet there's fish in there," remarked Joe, peering into the dark water of the stream.

Noko overheard the remark and understood.

"Um big fish dare," the native said, his eyes following those of Joe. "Dey good eat."

"That's an idea," mused Bob. "Why not try our luck at fishing?"

"Sure." Joe was more than willing.

The youths got out their tackle and fashioned crude poles out of tree branches. Then, sitting a short distance apart on the bank, they waited silently, while the naturalists looked on with interest.

Suddenly, when it had been in the water but a few minutes, Joe's float was drawn completely under the water with such force that the pole was almost snatched out of the youth's hands.

"Pull!" exclaimed Bob in a loud whisper.

Joe obeyed, but found that to do this was harder than he had anticipated. But with the aid of his chum the catch was drawn out easily.

All uttered startled exclamations at sight of it.

"A tiger fish," pronounced Mr. Lewis. "Only a small one, though."

"Small one?" cried Joe, wheeling about. "What are you talking about, Dad? Bet that fish weighs ten pounds!"

"Maybe so," Mr. Lewis returned. "But it isn't uncommon to catch tiger fish that weigh as much as twenty pounds. In fact, Howard hooked one in the Zambezi River that tipped the scales at forty-two."

"No!" Bob and Joe both looked up in amazement.

"That's right," vouched Mr. Holton. "It was the biggest I've ever caught."

During the next fifteen minutes Joe caught four more of the big fish, none, however, being as large as the first one. Then, using the knowledge gained on other exploration ventures, he dressed them and placed them over the fire.

"Doggone the luck!" growled Bob. "I didn't get a single bite. This big bum here walks off with a whole river full."

"Cheer up," consoled Mr. Holton. "You can at least share the eating of them."

"Yeah," put in Joe. "You can take a whiff at them."

The tiger fish proved good eating and were a welcome addition to the usual menu.

"And now," began Mr. Lewis, stretching out to retire after two hours of chatting, "we'd better get to sleep. Noko says we'll run into a native village tomorrow. That may delay us for a while."

Shortly before noon of the next day the explorers heard a chorus of shouts and yells, which came from around a bend, and they soon found themselves facing a large group of natives.

Noko at once fell into conversation with the chief, with whom he was well acquainted. They talked for several minutes, and in the end the chief motioned for the safari to follow him into the village.

That village the two youths found very interesting. It was made up of several rows of thatched huts, about which sat natives dozing or conversing. Apparently there was no work being done, the natives probably resting to escape the terrible heat of the sun.

The chief escorted the safari to his own huge hut, where he asked that they remain for a while. The bearers were glad to do as requested, so as to get out of the fierce heat. And as Mr. Holton and Mr. Lewis were also reluctant to continue the journey at this time of day, they also consented.

Both the naturalists had picked up a good knowledge of the native language on their frequent trips to Africa and so had no difficulty in taking part in the conversation. They translated occasionally to Bob and Joe.

During the course of the talk the chief mentioned something that was of great interest to Mr. Lewis and Mr. Holton, and also to the chums. The section around the village was being made unsafe for hunting by a huge, bad-tempered buffalo which would charge any of the natives on sight. One man had been killed and two others severely wounded by the beast, and although numerous parties had set out to kill it, they had so far been unsuccessful in doing so. For some reason the animal never would wander far from a certain spot near a stream. So dangerous was the buffalo that the villagers were afraid to go to the stream to get water and had to follow a roundabout trail.

When the chief had finished, Mr. Lewis spoke up at once.

"We"—indicating Mr. Holton, the youths, and himself—"will make a special effort to kill that buffalo," he told the chief in the native tongue. "We would like to kill the animal and take it back to our own country to show the people. Will you help us?"

The head native was delighted. Certainly he would help. If the bad animal could be killed, he would be very grateful to the whites, and would present them with several wild animal skins.

"It is agreed, then," Mr. Holton said to the chief. "We will set out this afternoon."

"This is going to be good," mused Bob, giving his chum a nudge in the ribs.

CHAPTER XX

The Buffalo Charges

AFTERNOON did not come any too soon for Bob and Joe. By one o'clock the youths had their cameras and rifles in readiness and were eagerly awaiting word from their fathers to begin the hunt.

At last the word came. The chief of the tribe had organized a party of ten natives, of which he was the head. They intended to do all they could to aid the whites in seeking out the buffalo.

"Stick close, boys," advised Mr. Lewis, speaking to Bob and Joe. "There's no telling how dangerous that animal may be."

The Americans were led by the chief, who directed them out of the village and toward the stream near which the beast stayed. The trail they followed was overgrown somewhat by the heavy plant growth, indicating that it had not been in use for some time.

Joe carried a camera, while Bob, as the best shot of the two, had a high-powered rifle. Both youths looked ahead in eager anticipation.

"Here's hoping I can get a good picture of him," said Joe, keeping his camera in readiness. "Movies of a buffalo hunt! Sounds good, doesn't it?"

"And I'm going to try to be the gink that pots him off," came from Bob, inspecting his rifle. "He won't live long if he gets one of these high-velocity bullets in his hide."

Mr. Holton looked around.

"Don't take any chances, Son," he warned. "Better not fire till Ben or I give the word. There's nothing quite as bad as a wounded buffalo."

Bob looked at his chum and groaned.

"Guess the honor won't go to me after all," he said.

It was a distance of about a half mile to the stream. The hunting party made good time, reaching the stream before anyone had expected.

"Now where's that buffalo?" queried Joe, as he pushed the release on his movie camera.

"Shhh!" hissed Mr. Holton. "I thought I heard a grunt just then. Listen!"

"You're right, Howard," murmured Mr. Lewis. "There's something over in those bushes."

They had not long to wait. Suddenly there came a loud grunt, and a moment later a huge buffalo appeared and faced them. Huge and ferocious looking, it seemed a very symbol of power.

"He's going to charge!" cried Bob, raising his rifle. "Look out, Mr. Lewis!"

Joe's father acted on the moment, aiming and firing with unusual rapidity. He pumped still another shot into the tough hide.

But the buffalo is possessed of an enormous amount of vitality and often retain enough energy to make a fatal charge, even though mortally wounded. So it was with this beast. It lunged toward Mr. Lewis, who had fired the second barrel of his rifle.

"Get him, somebody!" shouted the naturalist, preparing to run. "Hurry! I can't reload in time."

Just then Bob decided on a plan of action. He rushed wildly toward the animal, shouting at the top of his voice, hoping to divert its attention from Mr. Lewis, who, unarmed, would be in terrible plight if the beast should charge him.

His plan worked—to a certain extent. Instead of rushing at Mr. Lewis, the infuriated animal singled out Joe. The latter was operating the camera, and at first did not notice the oncoming foe.

"Look out!" yelled Bob. "Get out of the way, Joe! Quick, or you're a goner!"

Joe heard just in time to step quickly to one side, his eyes wide with an awful fear.

Bang! Bang! Two reports rent the air, and each bullet found its mark. Mr. Holton and Bob stood with smoking rifles awaiting results. They made ready to fire more if necessary.

But the four cartridges proved more than the brute could stand. Suddenly it collapsed in a heap, almost at the feet of one of the natives.

"Whew!" gasped Joe, wiping the perspiration from his forehead. "That was what I'd call a close call."

"Close is right," added Mr. Lewis. "If Bob and Howard hadn't come across with those two shots—well, it's pretty hard to say just what would have happened."

"How did it happen he didn't fall when you hit him, Mr. Lewis?" asked Bob. "Both of your bullets went to a vital spot."

"What a buffalo can't stand is hard to mention," Joe's father responded. "In addition to having a tough hide, they can take almost any kind of punishment."

The blacks looked at the hunters with intense admiration, for they had accomplished a deed that had not been thought possible by natives in that vicinity.

The naturalists bent over to skin the animal. Then, observing something, Mr. Holton uttered a word of surprise.

"Look here," he pointed out. "There's part of a native spear in the buffalo's side."

The naturalist had made no mistake. From the tough hide of the brute a native spear protruded out several inches. It was rotting with age, having been wielded many weeks before.

The chief fell into conversation with the scientists, telling them that one of his warriors had thrust the weapon into the buffalo some time before, but apparently without result.

"That accounts for his unusually bad temper," said Mr. Lewis. "He was probably aggravated by the wound caused by the spear and was ready for trouble at the slightest chance."

The skinning process was completed at last, and the skin was carried back to the village by the natives.

On arriving at the settlement, the Americans were given a royal welcome by those who had not gone on the hunt. The simple blacks danced around the explorers happily, rejoicing that the dangerous buffalo had been killed.

"*Mbogo okuri!*" seemed to be the prevalent words spoken by the blacks.

"What are they saying?" inquired Bob.

"That means 'the buffalo is dead,'" explained his father.

The chief did as he had promised and gave the naturalists several valuable animal skins which he or his men had secured. Among them was that of a leopard, an ant bear, and a serval cat. And in addition the naturalists had the buffalo skin.

"Fortunate for us that we arrived in the village when we did," smiled Mr. Holton. "As a result of timing so well, we got several worth-while trophies."

"And had a lot of fun at it, too," put in Bob.

"Speaking of fun," went on his father, "we'll have plenty of that tonight."

"How's that?" asked Joe.

"The chief is going to prepare a feast in our honor," was the answer.

"A feast?" repeated Bob. "What will there be to eat?"

Mr. Holton laughed.

"Perhaps it would be better not to know that," he chuckled. "But we'll have to eat a little, or at least to make a big show of it. The buffalo meat won't taste so bad, though."

The short remainder of the afternoon passed slowly, the boys and their elders resting in the hut furnished them. They did not care to do anything now but take it easy until nightfall. And while they sat they tried to fancy just what would take place at the coming feast.

Darkness came at last, and with it the usual chill of night. The explorers were glad indeed when some of the chief's men built huge roaring fires, about which the celebration was to take place.

At a call from the head native practically all of the simple villagers assembled in the great open space beside the fires. The reflection made bright perhaps a hundred black faces, all solemn.

The noisy chattering ceased abruptly as the big chief took his place before the group. Even Bob and Joe were impressed by the solemnity of the ceremony.

During the next five minutes the head native delivered a long speech, to which everyone listened closely. Bob and Joe, however, could not understand a word. They were tiring of listening when the chief stopped and took his place in the center of the group.

"Wonder what's coming next?" mused Joe.

His question was answered a little later. A large number of natives rose and moved over to the fires. Soon they engaged in a wild dance, one that the youths had never witnessed before.

Bob had fitted a camera with a night lens, and was "purring" away at the yelling throng, delighted at such an unusual opportunity.

The dancing lasted for nearly an hour. Shortly after, the food was served, consisting of wild herbs, berries, and roasted meat. Although Bob and Joe were ignorant of the exact contents of the various courses, they ate of practically everything, not finding the taste as bad as they had anticipated.

Following the meal there was another wild dance, which ended with a loud burst of applause. Then, after a few more short speeches, the celebration came to an end.

"What did you think of it?" chuckled Mr. Lewis, as he prepared to retire.

"It certainly wasn't tame," answered Bob with a smile.

"Got it all over a football game," added Joe.

Early the next morning the explorers were up making preparations to leave the village and continue their journey. They had everything in readiness by eight o'clock, and bidding the chief and his people good-bye, the safari made its way up the path.

"Now towards the Forest of Mystery," said Mr. Lewis, glad to again be on the trail.

They hiked steadily for several days without anything of note happening. The jungle became denser as they penetrated deeper toward the little-known regions. And with this luxuriance of plant life came an abundance of wild animals and birds. The naturalists and Bob demonstrated their skill with a rifle often by bringing down not a few unusual specimens, while Joe usually stuck to his movie camera.

On one occasion they had been traveling over a wide plain, one that was several miles across, and were nearing a jungle when suddenly Joe caught sight of something lying in the tall grass beside the jungle.

He started to move over to the object, but Mr. Holton called him back.

"Wait," cautioned the naturalist, raising his rifle. "Don't go over there without a gun. It might be a lion."

They advanced slowly for several rods. Then they became aware of an unpleasant odor.

"I think I know everything now," said Mr. Lewis, and Bob's father nodded. "That's a dead animal—probably an antelope. It has been killed by some other animal—a lion, maybe."

As they advanced they kept their eyes open for any dangerous creature that might return to the carcass, but saw nothing.

Mr. Lewis had surmised correctly. The kill was a wildebeest, a member of the antelope family. It had apparently been dead only a short time, and only a little of the flesh was torn from the body.

"What do you suppose killed that?" asked Bob.

"*Simba* [lion]," spoke up Noko at once.

"You think so?" queried Mr. Lewis.

Noko nodded vigorously.

"*Simba* he come back night. Eat all *simba* want of *nyumbu*."

"He may come back tonight," said Mr. Lewis, "but he won't eat all he wants."

CHAPTER XXI

Two Ferocious Specimens

"**W**HAT do you mean by that remark, Mr. Lewis?" asked Bob wonderingly. "Why won't the lion eat all he wants?"

"Simply that he won't live long enough," was the answer.

"What? You mean we're going to shoot him?" persisted Bob.

"Exactly," Joe's father said. "We'll build a *boma*—that's a thorn enclosure—and hide behind it. Then when the lion comes to devour this carcass we'll pot him off. Howard and I would like especially to have a good lion skin, and this seems to be a wonderful opportunity. Of course, the museum wants several, but whether they get that many we'll have to wait and see."

Under the naturalists' directions they set about constructing the thorn enclosure. They built this but a short distance from the kill, so as to get a good view of the lion when and if the latter should return. The task was completed just before dusk.

A cold supper was served, so as to prevent the possibility of a fire frightening the lion if it should be in that vicinity. Then, rising from the meal, the explorers made their way to the *boma*.

"You know," began Mr. Holton uneasily, "I feel a little ashamed to hunt that animal this way. This sort of thing is generally considered unsportsmanlike."

"True," Joe's father said at once. "But still, chances like this don't come often. And when at very infrequent intervals they do come, I'm in favor of taking advantage of them."

As the darkness closed in on them, Bob held his rifle tighter, Joe focused the movie camera. Mr. Lewis and Mr. Holton, too, waited breathlessly.

Soon a majestic moon rose over the vast wilderness, making it almost as light as day. The rustling of the wind gave way to a chorus of wild animal screams.

Suddenly Bob and Joe heard something that struck terror to their hearts. It was the most hideous sound they had ever listened to.

"Wh-what was that?" demanded Joe breathlessly.

"Only a hyena," returned his father. "That's what they call the laughing of the hyena. It isn't often that one can hear it."

Mr. Lewis pointed to something not five feet away.

There, making its way slowly toward the carcass, was a large jackal, which was soon joined by three others. They were moving stealthily, as though undecided whether to sample the dead wildebeest.

"Look," whispered Bob. "There are two hyenas. They're going to risk eating, I guess."

The jackals and hyenas formed a circle about the carcass and began to tear away at the flesh. Near as they were to the *boma*, they could easily have been shot by the hunters.

"If the lion doesn't hurry there won't be anything left for him," whispered Bob.

"Maybe he's forgotten all about coming," suggested Joe, who was filming the scene.

Mr. Holton shook his head.

"He'll be here," the naturalist said. "Just taking his time, that's all."

As the minutes wore on, the waiting hunters were becoming more impatient. They twisted about uneasily, hoping that before long something would happen. Then it did.

"Listen!" hissed Mr. Holton. "Something's coming this way. Hear it?"

"What is it?" inquired Joe.

Before anyone could attempt to answer, there came a terrible growl, and the next moment a huge lion broke through the foliage of the near-by jungle. It rushed angrily at the circle of jackals and hyenas.

The latter saw it coming and at once took flight, all escaping but one big hyena.

With a tremendous blow of one of its huge claws, the lion broke the hyena's back and sent it rolling over the ground. With a convulsive twitch it straightened out, dead.

The breathless hunters had watched the tragedy with a terrible fascination, keeping on the alert for any emergency. All knew there was a possibility that the lion might catch their scent, even though there was little or no wind. It was this that made the naturalists and Bob tighten their grips on their rifles.

With a deep, vibrating roar that seemed to roll along the ground, the lion looked around defiantly. Then, apparently satisfied that nothing was near to disturb him, he bent his efforts toward eating the carcass.

"Get ready," said Mr. Holton in a very low whisper, throwing his gun to his shoulder. "When I give the word, fire."

Bob aimed carefully at the beast's heart; Joe cranked away at the movie camera.

"Fire!" said Mr. Holton in a loud voice.

Three rifle shots rent the air. The lion turned on the instant, then collapsed in a heap.

"Hurrah!" yelled Joe, jumping to his feet. "Killed him dead as a door nail. Good——"

"Look out!" shouted Mr. Lewis suddenly. "There's another. A lioness!"

Bob worked furiously to push the bolt on his rifle. But before he had done so, the guns of his father and Mr. Lewis spoke.

The bullets stopped the brute for only a second. Then, with a horrible roar, it plunged toward the *boma*. Before the two naturalists could again aim and fire, it would be upon them!

Then, when things hung in the balance, Bob pulled the trigger.

There was a convulsive leap as the lioness groaned out her last breath. She fell to the ground with a dull thud and lay still.

"Good work," commented Joe. "That bullet of yours came in just at the right time."

"It certainly did," put in Mr. Lewis. "Of course, Howard and I might have gotten her, but then again, we might not."

As an added precaution, the naturalists put another bullet into each of the lions. After waiting a few moments for any more of the big beasts to appear, they went out to examine the ones they had killed.

"Whoppers, all right," remarked Joe. "This big one here must be at least nine feet long from the tip of his nose to the end of his tail."

"Both are unusually fine specimens," declared Mr. Lewis, as he removed his long hunting knife.

The Americans were soon joined by Noko and several of the bearers, who were attracted to the scene by the rifle shots.

Noko uttered a cry of surprise at the sight of the beasts.

"Um big *simba*," he said, his eyes on the dead lions. "Dey bad *simba*. Um very bad."

"Bad's the right word for it," said Joe gravely. "They wouldn't have left a grease spot of us if given the chance. But they'll not cause any trouble now."

It required a long while for the scientists to complete the task of skinning the lions, but at last they finished and moved back to camp.

The whites received much praise from the bearers, who recognized at once that the brutes had been unusually dangerous. The blacks' respect for the hunters appeared to be increased greatly. For anyone who could bring down such vicious adversaries as these must be fearless and daring.

The youths and their fathers did not remain up much longer. After the strenuous day they were more than ready for a good rest.

"Sleep well," was the last Mr. Lewis said as he repaired to the tent.

But somehow Bob did not sleep well. Try as he did he could not divert his thoughts from the exciting lion hunt. True, he was sleepy and somewhat tired, but notwithstanding this he could not keep his eyelids closed.

He thought of going out to join the *askari*, or native guard, who was keeping watch some thirty feet away. But he changed his mind and decided to make another attempt to fall asleep.

Suddenly he sat up with a start, straining his eyes to make out the jungle more easily. What was that he had heard? It sounded like stealthily moving feet.

"Maybe there's another lion prowling around," the youth thought, picking up his rifle.

CHAPTER XXII

A Pitiful Sight

WITH the passing moments, the padding noise grew louder. Bob raised his rifle to fire. If any wild beast was intent upon charging camp, he would be ready to give it a royal welcome, the youth thought.

Then he caught sight of what resembled two luminous beads. They were slowly moving closer to the camp.

As Bob watched, he saw that a huge hyena was making its way toward the two lion skins. The beast probably intended to grab the trophies in its powerful jaws and flee.

"Here goes," Bob murmured, and taking careful aim at the hyena he fired.

At once the brute stiffened out and then lay still. The bullet had done its work well, entering the brain.

Mr. Lewis and Mr. Holton came running out, followed by Noko and several others. They looked inquiringly at Bob.

"What happened?" asked Joe, who had also been aroused.

"Nothing much," laughed Bob. "I shot a hyena, that was all. It was going after those lion skins."

"Hmm. Good work, Son." Mr. Holton stooped over to examine the body of the hyena.

"Thought you were asleep, you rascal," chuckled Mr. Lewis.

"Somehow I couldn't keep from thinking about shooting those lions," said Bob. "I had a notion to get up

and walk around a little, but finally decided to stay where I was. Then I heard the hyena."

The youths and their fathers again retired, after the latter had instructed the guard to keep a close watch for any other night marauders.

But nothing further disturbed the peace, and they awoke the next morning ready for anything the day might bring.

Breakfast over, the safari again took up its long journey.

As the explorers penetrated deeper into the African wilds they saw new and marvelous sights: strange rocky formations; tall, flowering trees; unusual animals. It seemed to Bob and Joe that every minute was a bit more exciting than the one preceding it. One day they left a long stretch of jungle behind and found themselves on a wide level plain.

"Look over there and tell me what you see," said Joe to his chum.

"Why—it's a herd of elephants!" gasped Bob. "Look, Mr. Lewis, Dad!"

"Wonderful sight, isn't it?" Mr. Holton gazed in interest.

The naturalists decided to make camp on the plain, so as to get a short rest before again entering the jungle. Then, when the hot afternoon sun would become less oppressive, they would plunge on toward the Forest of Mystery.

"While you're resting here, suppose Joe and I explore around a little," said Bob, picking up his rifle.

"We'll—all right, boys," returned Mr. Holton, with a look at Joe's father. "But don't take any chances. And don't wander too far from camp."

Glad of the chance to be on their own, the chums walked over the plain toward the herd of distant animals.

"Maybe we can plug an elephant," grinned Joe, "purring" the movie camera.

"Maybe," came from the other. "But then maybe not. It would be dangerous to tackle that herd single-handed. Suppose they'd charge us. Then where would we be?"

"Probably on our faces in the dirt," Joe said. "Or perhaps"—grinning—"flying through the air."

"Doesn't sound very nice, does it?" asked Bob. "No, we'd better be content to watch those elephants from a safe distance."

"Shucks!" Joe frowned. "I want pictures of them. How am I going to get them without getting close?"

"All right. Have it your own way. But I'm not going to take any chances."

Cautiously the boys stalked through the high grass toward the elephant herd. Luckily the wind was blowing in their faces, so that the elephants did not catch the human scent. And as these huge brutes have comparatively short eyesight, the chums were able to move very close.

"How's this?" asked Bob.

"Up a little farther," urged Joe, holding the camera ready.

They were within twenty yards of the huge lumbering beasts and were naturally looking on with great interest.

There was a thick growth of tall bushes a little to one side. Joe suggested that they plunge into this so as to be able to get nearer to the elephants.

Then they heard a loud crashing noise, the sound of a heavy body plunging through the brush. It was coming from around a bend in a narrow trail.

"What's that?" Bob stopped and listened.

"More than I know. Maybe some wild animal. Sounds—— Look out, Bob! a big elephant!"

There was terror in Joe's voice. He looked to his chum to use his rifle.

A second later the huge head of a charging elephant appeared, its trunk thrown into the air, its eyes glaring. It must have been over ten feet high, for it towered far above the two youths.

Acting on the instant, Bob and Joe darted quickly to one side, their only thought being safety from grave danger.

Bob threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired.

"You got him!" cried Joe. "But it doesn't seem to stop him."

"Hide's too tough," his chum said.

The charging beast could not turn as quickly as did the youths. It went plunging on through the bushes. Apparently it had no intention of seeking out its enemies, for it continued through the heavy growth and disappeared behind a low spreading tree.

Bob and Joe were in a state of high excitement after their thrilling encounter. Perspiration was dripping from their bodies; their breath was coming in short gasps.

"Too bad I was too scared to take movies of that charge," moaned Joe. "They'd sure have been interesting."

"You ought to be glad you're here," said Bob. "Let's get back to the safari."

The chums had not gone far on the plain when they met their fathers and Noko, who had set out to secure a better view of the distant herd of elephants.

"We heard a rifle shot," said Mr. Lewis. "What was the meaning of it?"

The youths looked at each other. They had been a bit foolish in moving so close to the elephants, especially since neither carried a rifle large enough to be effective against such large brutes.

"An elephant charged us," said Bob at last.

"He did? Tell us about it." Mr. Holton's interest was aroused at once.

Aided by his friend, Bob related the encounter as accurately as he could.

When he had finished, the naturalists looked grave.

"You shouldn't take chances like that, boys," Mr. Holton said. "Luck can't hold out forever, you know."

They trekked back to camp, where they remained for a few hours longer. Then, thoroughly refreshed, they resumed the march.

Farther on, the youths caught sight of a large group of giraffes which towered above the small, stunted trees about them. Other, more graceful, animals could be seen.

The explorers emerged from a dense growth of bushes when they suddenly saw something that moved them to pity.

Standing unsteadily, its legs trembling, its eyes glazed, was a large eland, which was evidently at the point of death. The poor animal remained on its feet only with the greatest of difficulty.

But something else caused the explorers to be still more touched. Three vultures were circling around the stricken animal, waiting for it to fall.

"Look over there," murmured Bob, pointing to something at the edge of the bushes.

A trio of hyenas was also waiting silently for the eland to die. They never took their eyes from the animal, although they made no move to action.

"There's work here," said Mr. Lewis, raising his rifle. "We must put that poor animal out of its misery."

"And I'm going to plug those doggone hyenas," muttered Bob.

CHAPTER XXIII

Moments of Horror

Two reports rent the air. Without an outcry the big eland collapsed. A hyena, too, had been hit by Bob's rifle.

"One good turn done," said Mr. Lewis, handing his rifle to his gun bearer.

"Wait till I shoot the rest of those hyenas," came from Bob, who was taking aim with a high-velocity .22 rifle.

"Um get bigger gun. No kill um with little gun." Noko was watching Bob curiously.

"Watch me and see," smiled Bob.

Using his knowledge of marksmanship, the youth killed all of the hyenas by sending bullets through the eye to the brain. The stupid animals had not made the slightest move to flee, even though they saw their companions go down.

But scarcely had the cloud of smoke lifted when the explorers saw something else making for the body of the eland. Three large black vultures perched on the carcass.

More carefully aimed bullets from Bob's rifle finished them instantly.

"Ready now?" chuckled Mr. Holton.

"Sure," Bob answered. "That job's over. Somehow I couldn't leave without letting those hyenas and vultures have it."

A little farther on, the adventurers came to a narrow trail that wound through the tall grass. As it headed in their direction, they followed it.

For the last ten minutes Bob and Joe had fallen to the rear of the safari. Now, when they returned to join their fathers, Mr. Lewis turned to them.

"Noko says there may be a native village a little farther on," he said. "Howard and I think it might be best to make for it, because the blacks may be able to tell us of some big game in this vicinity. We'd like especially to have a fine leopard skin."

"Leopard! Boy! Sounds exciting," grinned Joe. "Here's hoping we see one—or more, for that matter."

They trudged on for over an hour. Then, when they were beginning to fear that no village was near, they rounded a bend in the bushes and found themselves facing a group of thatched huts.

"Came to it at last," mused Bob. "But—where are the people? Looks like nobody's at home."

"Maybe they've gone visiting," remarked Joe with a laugh.

Mr. Holton suggested that they move on into the village to see if there was any evidence of recent human habitation.

Leaving the bearers at a little clearing to wait, the four Americans and Noko walked toward the grass huts, keeping on the alert for anything human or animal.

"Looks like it's deserted, all right," remarked Joe. "Not a soul anywhere."

"What's that?" cried Bob suddenly, stopping at once.

"What?" questioned his chum.

"Sounded like—— Come on, Joe. Let's go around this hut and see what we can see."

The youths left the naturalists and Noko and made their way to the other side of a large thatched house.

Then, horror stricken, they saw what had caused Bob to utter his sudden exclamation.

Coiled but a few scant feet away was a long black mamba, the most poisonous snake of Africa. It was

eyeing the human invaders staringly, apparently with evil purpose.

For one awful moment the youths gazed in terrible fascination, unable to take their eyes from the hideous reptile. Then, sensing the need for flight, they turned to leave. But they hesitated.

"It's going to strike!" gasped Joe. "And neither of us has a gun!"

Bob looked about wildly for some club or other weapon with which to defend himself and his friend, but saw none. For a second he thought of turning to run, but he soon realized that the deadly snake could probably move much faster than could he.

What greatly puzzled the youths was why the mamba appeared to be taking the aggressive. Perhaps, however, it was angered because frightened.

Just then the youths heard a shout from Mr. Lewis and then the report of a rifle.

The snake's head was shattered into a horrid pulp, which almost sickened the boys. It writhed about feebly, then was still.

Mr. Lewis and Mr. Holton rushed toward their sons.

"You sure fired that shot in time," said Bob with a shudder. "I was beginning to think it was all over with us."

"It was a terribly narrow escape," breathed Mr. Holton, wiping the perspiration from his brow. "We should have warned you about mambas."

"Why?" asked Bob. "They aren't here any more than anywhere else, are they?"

"Yes," returned Mr. Holton emphatically. "A deserted village nearly always contains at least one mamba. For some reason they like to pick on such a place. But the main thing now," he added, "is that you're still alive."

With one last glance at the dead reptile the explorers turned toward the safari. As they passed through the village they kept a close watch for any more of the dreaded snakes, but saw none near. They did see another quite a distance away, although it did not apparently catch sight of them.

"I've been wondering just where the villagers are and why they left their huts," remarked Mr. Lewis, when they had rejoined the others of the expedition.

"Maybe those mambas drove them out," suggested Bob, but Noko shook his head.

"No rain now, and dey go to place where is water," was the opinion voiced by the head native.

"By Jupiter! Perhaps you're right, Noko," exclaimed Joe's father. "Well, then, if that is true, there is no use waiting for them to return. Let's go."

Under the expert leadership of the veteran Noko, the expedition was making good time toward the little-known Forest of Mystery. If their luck should hold, they would reach it in but a few days.

"According to Mr. Seabury, back in Mombasa, we should come to a very wide, shallow stream. A little beyond this is the Forest of Mystery," said Mr. Holton, as that night they were camped at the foot of a little knoll. "We should be nearing that stream now."

Mention of this out-of-the-way place revived the name of Thomas Seabury, the missing brother of the man in Mombasa.

"Wonder if we'll find him," mused Joe, gazing off into the dark depths of the jungle.

"Hard telling," returned his friend. "About all we can do is to ask natives if they have seen or heard of him. And if they haven't—well, it doesn't look like there'll be much chance of coming across him."

"You're right, Bob," affirmed Mr. Lewis. "Africa is a very large place, and he might have left that unknown forest long before. But we'll certainly do all we can to locate him."

For two successive days the safari plunged on steadily without coming to the stream.

Late in the afternoon the explorers were crossing a stretch of open country when suddenly Mr. Lewis called a halt. He pointed to something that was coming toward them.

It was an impala, a species of antelope, and was evidently in the last stage of exhaustion. Running wildly and without aim, the animal was a pitiable sight.

Then the adventurers saw something else. Two African hunting dogs were pursuing the impala and were gaining rapidly. In but a short time they would be upon it.

"Quick!" exclaimed Mr. Holton, grasping his rifle from its bearer. "We must shoot those dogs before they get that fine big antelope. Ben, you take the one ahead. I'll pick the one behind. Now!"

Bang! Crack!

The sound of the guns was mingled with a last cry from one of the hunting dogs as it rolled over. The other had been killed instantly.

"Two less pests in the world," murmured Mr. Lewis, and then, turning to Bob and Joe: "All the hunters in Africa couldn't kill off as many beautiful harmless animals as the African hunting dog."

"Why? How do they do it?" inquired Joe.

"They usually hunt in packs," his father replied. "And the antelope or other animal that they go after is as good as doomed. They never give up till they get the one they're after. Worst thing is, they kill new animals every day and eat only a small part of the flesh. Then they single out more."

"The pests!" growled Bob. "From now on I'm going to plug every one I see. They——"

He did not finish, for just at that moment the party emerged from a thick jungle growth to see a wide stream just ahead. Beyond it was an endless mass of towering trees, which grew so close together as to form a veritable jungle.

Bob uttered a cry of delight.

"The Forest of Mystery!" he broke out. "We've found it!"

CHAPTER XXIV

Into the Forest of Mystery

“I BELIEVE you’re right, Son,” observed Mr. Holton, his eyes scanning the landscape. “This is certainly the wide stream that George Seabury said we’d see. Then too, Thompson, that naturalist we saw in San Francisco, mentioned it.”

“That distant forest sure looks mysterious,” remarked Joe, gazing ahead at the mass of towering trees. “How large is it?”

“A good many miles across,” Mr. Lewis answered. “In fact, several score. And all heavy, untrodden wilderness.”

“So much the better for us,” smiled Bob. “But say. How are we going to cross this wide stream? Must be nearly a quarter of a mile to the other side.”

“Hardly that,” laughed his father. “But to answer your question: if the water isn’t too deep, we’ll ford it; but if this isn’t possible, we’ll have to build rafts.”

Noko thought it advisable to cross before night and make camp on the other side.

The head native walked down to the bank and waded out into the water. Much as the explorers had expected, it was shallow, not reaching to the waist.

The whites donned their hip boots and, led by Noko, waded out into the stream. They were followed by the bearers and guards.

Although the water was sluggish and dirty, the going was good, and the adventurers reached the opposite bank in rapid time. There Bob and Joe and the naturalists removed their high boots and made ready to pitch the tents, as darkness was not far off.

“I can hardly wait to get into that Forest of Mystery,” said Joe, stopping for a moment to glance toward the west. “Something tells me we’ll see sights, all right.”

“Perhaps,” came from Bob. “But then, maybe not. It might not be much different from what we’ve already passed through.”

As the darkness enshrouded them, several of the natives built huge fires which sent their warmth far afield. The cold of the African night was soon forgotten.

Before long the odor of delicious food made the chums smack their lips in anticipation.

“Tomorrow,” remarked Mr. Holton during the meal, “we may see sights for sore eyes.”

“And tomorrow can’t come any too soon for me,” put in Joe.

Nothing happened during the night. The next morning all were up early preparing to plunge into the little-known forest. They had their belongings packed in record time and were soon again on the march.

They covered the distance to the forest sooner than expected. All felt the blood tingle in their veins as they entered the dense leafy depths. For in the fastness of this unexplored place could be almost anything.

“Keep your guns in readiness,” warned Mr. Lewis. “There’s no telling when we may need them.”

“Wish we’d see a gorilla—like that big one in the circus,” mused Joe.

“Gorillas live only in certain places, chiefly in mountainous regions,” explained Mr. Holton. “It is very unlikely that we’ll run across any. But of course we can’t be sure.”

If the jungle had been dense before, it was almost impenetrable now. More than once the explorers received cuts and bruises from sharp thorns. Their high shoes protected them from most snakes, the dreaded mamba being one exception. So, although there were difficulties of the trail, the adventurers forgot them in their eagerness to explore.

Farther on they came to something that made them gasp in wonder.

Before them, in an open space, was a large hill of earth that must have been at least forty feet high. Very wide at the base, it tapered up like a cone.

“Don’t tell us this is an ant hill,” muttered Bob, as he and the others stopped to examine it.

“It is just that,” smiled his father. “Whopper, isn’t it?”

“Biggest yet,” pronounced Joe. “And just think, it was built by countless little white ants.”

As he stood looking at the hill, Joe noticed his chum going around to one side.

“What are you going to do?” Joe inquired.

Bob answered the question by climbing the side of the hill. Apparently he found the task easy, for he was soon halfway to the top. In a short time he had reached it and was looking down at his father and friends.

“Fine view,” he smiled, gazing off into the depths of the forest. “That is, it would be if there weren’t so many trees around. One good thing, though: I can see over the bushes and jungle growth.”

“Anything worth while around here?” queried Joe.

Bob did not answer for a moment. Then suddenly his gaze remained fixed on something off in the distance.

“I believe—yes, that’s what it is.”

“What?” demanded his father impatiently. “I take it that you see something of interest.”

“There’s a big rhino away over there,” the youth said, keeping his eyes glued to the distant object.

“A rhino? Where?” Mr. Lewis looked up suddenly.

"Down that narrow trail over there," was the answer. "It seems to be coming this way."

"Climb down from there, Son, and we'll investigate," said Mr. Holton, taking his rifle. "A rhinoceros hide is what we want above everything."

Led by the naturalists, the party followed the narrow trail that Bob had pointed out. It was well beaten, being probably long used by wild animals.

Joe, holding a movie camera, was ready to film any encounter that they might have. Bob, as usual, carried his rifle.

But when, fifteen minutes later, they saw no traces of the rhino, the explorers were ready to give up the chase. For even in that short time they had gone farther than Bob said the animal had been.

Just when they were at the point of retracing their footsteps, Joe burst through a mass of foliage and at once called the others.

"Look what I've found," he said proudly. "A water hole where wild animals come to drink. See the tracks on the ground?"

"Jove!" exclaimed Mr. Holton. "That's exactly what it is. Looks like about every animal imaginable comes to this place. Here are monkeys' footprints. And over here are leopard tracks. Wild pigs and buffaloes have been here, too."

Joe regarded the naturalists quizzically for a moment.

"Are we in any special hurry to go on?" he asked.

"Not especially," returned Mr. Holton. "Why do you ask?"

"I'd like to take movies of the animals when they come here tonight to drink," went on Joe. "Why can't we make camp near here?"

"Hmm!" Mr. Holton considered for a minute.

"Why not do it, Howard?" asked Joe's father. "After all, this is a wonderful opportunity for the boys to take movies. And while we're waiting here, you and I can look around for new specimens."

"I'm willing," Mr. Lewis said. "We can pitch our tents a few hundred yards from here so as not to be too near and frighten the animals."

Noko found a suitable camping spot quite a distance away. After the tents were erected he set out with Mr. Lewis to explore the surrounding country for wild life. Bob and Joe remained behind with Mr. Holton to "take it easy," as Joe remarked.

Late that afternoon Mr. Lewis and the native returned with several interesting specimens, among them being a peculiar bird that so far as the naturalists knew was unknown to the civilized world.

"Now's when our work comes in," remarked Bob, as he and Joe started down the path. "We're going to construct a thorn enclosure near that water hole. Then we can hide behind it and wait for animals to come tonight to drink. That way we can take moving pictures of them without their suspecting us."

"Good idea," said his father. "Need any help?"

Bob shook his head and with his chum walked to the water hole. There they built a *boma*, behind which they could hide. They made it look very natural, so that animals would not become suspicious.

After an early supper the naturalists and their sons went to the water hole to wait, leaving Noko behind with the safari.

Twilight came, and with it a brilliant moon. Darkness soon fell over the vast forest.

Their hearts beating rapidly, the two youths waited. They held the movie cameras ready for instant action.

"Hark!" said Mr. Lewis suddenly. "What's that noise?"

"I didn't hear anything," said Bob, straining his ears to listen.

Then suddenly they heard a most unearthly sound, unlike anything they had ever known. It was repeated again and again, always more blood-curdling. Then at last it died away in horrible moanings.

It was some time before anyone spoke, for all had been not a little frightened by the uncanny cries.

"Was that a wild animal?" demanded Joe, who had almost turned pale.

"I've never heard any wild animal that could make that kind of a noise," returned Mr. Holton, and Joe's father shook his head.

"It didn't sound like people, either," came from Joe. "Ugh! Gives me the shivers. Maybe it was a ghost."

Mr. Lewis tried to laugh.

"Use your reason, Son," he said. "There aren't any such things as ghosts."

For the time being another much different sound made the explorers forget the mysterious cries. It was a loud trumpeting that seemed to come from but a short distance away.

"Elephants," pronounced Mr. Holton. "They're coming this way."

CHAPTER XXV

The Fury of the Storm

WHILE all waited silently, the sound of moving footsteps could be heard. A little later two huge elephants broke through the foliage and made for the water hole. They drank great draughts of the refreshing liquid, and then with their long trunks sluiced themselves thoroughly.

Bob and Joe watched interestedly. They had but one fear. What if the purring of the movie cameras could be heard by the huge brutes? Would they charge the little hidden group, or would they immediately take flight into the dark recesses of the jungle?

As the moments passed, the adventurers grew more hopeful. Thus far the elephants had not heard. Perhaps, after all, the noise was not loud enough.

"Listen!" hissed Bob, catching his chum's arm. "Something else is coming."

He had scarcely spoken when from another direction emerged a troop of wildebeests, followed by three zebras. Still more wild creatures showed up soon after, including an oryx, Thompson's gazelle, hartebeest, and numerous monkeys.

"Isn't that a wonderful sight?" whispered Mr. Holton, never taking his eyes from the scene.

"Best ever," came from Joe.

A little later they heard a series of strange grunts, and a huge wart hog moved in a slow, awkward gait toward the water hole.

"A drinking place is the best spot there is to see a number of different kinds of animals side by side," remarked Mr. Lewis, also speaking in a very low whisper.

"They don't seem to notice each other," observed Joe. "They just keep on drinking as though nothing else were there."

Again footsteps were heard, and with them the sound of a heavy body crashing through the underbrush. Then there suddenly appeared but a short distance away a monstrous buffalo, which was also intent upon satisfying its thirst.

"Be trouble now," said Bob.

"Wait and see," smiled his father.

Much to the boys' surprise the buffalo paid not the slightest attention to the other animals. It found a place at the pond and began drinking.

"That's a new one on me," whispered Bob, and Joe nodded. "Looks like there'd be trouble, with all those different kinds of creatures there at once."

"You see they have a common interest: to quench their thirst," explained Mr. Lewis. "In such a case peace reigns."

But ten minutes later the explorers—and very obviously the animals—heard something that was not so suggestive of peace. It was the deep, vibrating roar of a lion, which seemed to be coming nearer.

The effect was immediate. Uneasiness prevailed among the more harmless animals; some of them turned about and disappeared into the jungle depths, while others pricked up their ears and listened.

But there was no mistaking the distant roar. A lion was abroad stalking for prey.

As the minutes passed, Mr. Lewis and Mr. Holton held their rifles ready for instant action. At every second they feared that the lion would appear. Bob and Joe, although realizing that perhaps their lives were in danger, continuing to film the scene, delighted at the unusualness of the occasion.

Suddenly the explorers' eyes opened wide, for the thing that they beheld was exceedingly large and powerful.

A great maned lion moved slowly toward the water hole!

Their hearts in their mouths, Bob and Joe half expected to see the beast make toward their *boma*. But it did not.

Long before, the horde of animals that had been drinking had vanished, leaving the pond to take refuge from the king of beasts. The great lion seemed to sense that this had taken place. It uttered a tremendous roar of defiance, then bent its head to drink.

"Good chance for a shot," murmured Bob, barely making himself heard.

But the naturalists shook their heads.

"One animal is enough to shoot from a *boma*," whispered Mr. Lewis. "Somehow I feel that it doesn't give them a fair chance."

They watched the lion silently until the latter finally turned and left, making its way stealthily over the carpet of twigs and rotting vines. Then Mr. Holton suggested that they get back to camp.

"That ought to be about the most interesting scene we've filmed," remarked Joe the next morning, as with the others he prepared to leave.

"No doubt you'll get others when we penetrate deeper into this forest," said his father.

Late the next afternoon Noko cast uneasy glances up at the distant sky. There was a worried look on his face as he led the safari farther into the unknown.

"Um big storm coming," he said with a frown.

"A storm?" breathed Bob. "Do you think it will be here today?"

Noko nodded, his face grave.

"Um storm him not wait," the tall African said. "Storm come much soon. Sky it getting dark."

Indeed, the signs were most threatening. The distant horizon was colored a sickly yellow, which seemed to shine ominously. Dark clouds were forming overhead and were joining slowly but surely.

"It certainly looks bad," murmured Mr. Lewis. "We must find shelter somewhere. Where do you suggest going, Noko?"

"We find um cave or um-um hollow," returned the head native. "That only way we get out from um

storm.”

A weird silence hovered about. Birds had ceased their calls; monkeys were no longer chattering in the trees. Not the slightest suggestion of a wind played through the leaves.

Under the leadership of Noko they searched about desperately for some place that would serve as a refuge from the approaching storm. But as time passed they were still moving through the forest as before.

Mr. Lewis suggested that they erect their tents, but the tall African shook his head vigorously. A storm as bad as this one promised to be, said Noko in the native language, would most certainly tear the frail tents loose almost at once. For, he reminded them, the new rainy season was not far off.

With every passing minute the clouds banked tighter. An odd twilight enveloped the adventurers, making the task of escaping even more difficult.

At one time Bob and Joe caught a glimpse of several monkeys huddled closely together under a gigantic leaf. The little creatures would under other circumstances have inspired a smile from the youths.

“Must hurry,” urged Noko, increasing his pace still more. “Must find um cave um quick.”

Then suddenly, with the fury of a battle, the tropical hurricane was upon them!

CHAPTER XXVI

Waiting in Dread

“**A**BOVE all, we must try to keep together,” warned Mr. Holton, speaking to the natives as well as the whites. “It might spell tragedy if any of us should get lost from the rest.”

The rain was falling almost in torrents, soon drenching the adventurers thoroughly. Wet and miserable, they were haggard-looking creatures as they stalked through the fastness of the forest.

Great flashes of uncanny lightning streaked across the sky. They were followed by ear-splitting bursts of thunder, which resembled nothing so much as the discharging of heavy cannon. Wind—violent, ruthless wind—all but blew the explorers to the ground.

Their hearts beating rapidly, their breath coming in short gasps, they rushed as fast as possible in a wild search for some shelter from the elements. And all knew that they must find some place quickly; they could never withstand the full fury of the storm very long.

As time passed, the sky grew still darker, until it was utterly impossible to make out what was ahead. It was only when a violent streak of eerie lightning would illuminate the sky that they could see each other.

“This is terrible!” moaned Joe, struggling to brace himself against the violent gale.

The sound of his voice was drowned out, however, in the uproar of the elements. Nor could anyone else have been heard.

Bob clutched his friend’s arm and held on firmly. They would stick together through it all, he thought.

Suddenly the sky was lighted as brightly as day, and there followed a terrific clap of ear-splitting thunder. It seemed so near that the travelers jumped back instinctively.

Then they heard a great forest giant groan and creak and split at the base. It was very near them, and, not being able to see it, they feared that perhaps it would fall on them.

“Look out!” shouted Mr. Lewis, as lightning made the sky bright. “It’s coming down on us!”

Obedying the command at once, all turned and ran for their lives. It was torture unthinkable, for in the twilight it was most difficult to avoid stumbling over vines or running into trees. Still side by side, Bob and Joe followed their elders desperately, until they thought the danger was over.

Barely a few seconds later there was a terrific crash as the forest giant fell to the ground. It literally shook the earth, so violently did it strike.

“A narrow escape!” breathed Bob. “Wouldn’t have been much left of us if that had struck us.”

The youths were a little to one side of the safari and were falling behind. Realizing this, they hurried to catch up.

But just at that moment Bob’s foot caught in a creeper, and he sprawled to the ground before he could catch himself. When he fell he took Joe with him, and together they rolled over on the wet carpet of leaves and twigs.

“Hurry!” urged Joe, shouting to make himself heard. “The others are far ahead of us.”

He helped his friend to his feet and then started off toward where he thought the safari should be. But Bob called him back.

“I—I can’t make it, I guess,” Bob said, wincing with pain. “Sprained my ankle.”

Joe bent over anxiously and felt of the injured foot.

“Isn’t broken and doesn’t seem to be dislocated,” he said, straightening up. “Can’t you walk at all?”

Bob made a heroic attempt but could not move a single step.

“No use,” he said. “Just have to wait a moment, I guess. Maybe—” he stopped as a clap of thunder drowned out his voice—“it’ll quit hurting before long.”

Joe shouted at the top of his voice to his father and Mr. Holton, hoping that they would hear and stop. But it was useless. In that uproar sound would not travel any distance to speak of.

He removed his revolver from its holster and pulled the trigger. But no report followed. In some manner water had found its way to the cartridges.

Still hoping that Bob would soon be able to walk, he waited, listening to the pattering of the rain and the bursts of the thunder. If possible, the hurricane raged even more furiously than before.

A little later Bob announced that he was able to walk. With his friend he set off, slowly, of course, but surely.

But by now the chums had lost all sense of direction. They had not the slightest notion of where they could find the safari. Perhaps, for all they knew, it was moving in just an opposite direction.

Even when the surrounding forest was illuminated by streaks of lightning the boys could not see far because of the trees.

"Looks like they're gone," mourned Bob.

"What'll we do?"

"Nothing that I know of, only keep on going. It seems to me that they were traveling this way, but I'm not sure."

Blinded by the torrents of rain, bruised and cut by the countless pointed thorns and brambles, the young explorers moved along painfully, hoping against hope that they would meet up with their elders or some of the blacks.

But luck was not with them that day. With every step they were unknowingly moving farther into the depths of the unknown forest, instead of following a set course.

"Looks like we're not going to find them," said Joe, panting for breath. "But we won't stop now."

All the remainder of the afternoon the hurricane continued as violently as before. Then very slowly it began to subside, although the rain continued to fall. But at least the terrible gale was no longer blowing, and this was what had bothered the chums most.

"But where are we?" asked Joe, looking about as the darkness gave way to dim light.

The region they were in was one of the wildest they had yet seen. Gnarled, twisted trees grew in profusion; deep gulches broke the ground in a number of places; strange, odd plants, including huge ferns, were everywhere. Once they caught sight of an unusually queer animal slinking through the underbrush.

"Maybe we're miles and miles from the safari," said Bob in a voice of hopelessness.

"I'm afraid of hostile natives," his chum put in. "It wouldn't be funny to be captured and carried off into some unknown village."

The rain had stopped completely now, but darkness was beginning to close over them. The friends dreaded the coming of night in that wild country. Alone and unable to build a fire, they would be at the mercy of savage jungle beasts.

"Suppose we stop here for the night," suggested Joe. "I'm all in after fighting that hurricane."

At a little elevation the youths sat down on a rotting tree trunk, glad of the chance to rest. They knew there was no use continuing the search for the safari, for the night was not far off.

Bob had a few matches in a waterproofed case, but he knew it would be useless to attempt to light a fire.

"Guess we'll have to stick it out without anything to eat tonight," he told his chum. "Then maybe tomorrow we'll find our dads and the others."

Secretly the youths feared that for them tomorrow might not come. For they were alone in the great African jungle and would be easy prey for lions and other dangerous beasts. But both had their revolvers strapped to their sides, and, although not nearly as powerful as rifles, they might spell the difference between life and death.

Soon the short-lived twilight came, followed shortly by darkness. Then the moon rose, and it was possible to see fairly well.

"I'll take the first watch," remarked Joe, an hour later. "You turn in and sleep for three hours or so. Then you can stand guard."

Bob asked that he be given the first watch, but Joe would not listen. Grudgingly Bob agreed to do as suggested and was soon fast asleep.

As the night wore on, Joe heard a distant yapping of jackals. He also could make out the howls of hyenas and other animals. Then he heard another sound, and he sat up with a start.

A low growl was issuing from behind a patch of jungle growth. It was repeated again and again, always louder and more defiant.

Joe grasped his revolver thankfully and remained silent. If the creature were dangerous, he could only hope that it would keep its distance. The prospects of killing a lion or leopard with the revolver, Joe knew, were very slight.

As the minutes passed, he was beginning to think that the animal had retreated, when he suddenly became aware of stealthily moving feet. They seemed to be padding slowly toward him.

An awful fear seized Joe. If some dangerous brute were stalking him, intent upon prey, it might well be his end. But, the youth thought, raising the revolver slowly, it wouldn't get him and Bob without being at least wounded.

The seconds went by slowly, painfully. Then, horror-stricken, Joe made out the huge body of a powerful leopard which was advancing toward him.

CHAPTER XXVII

The White Pigmy Elephant

JOE'S mind was in a whirl. He thought of jumping up and firing point-blank at the oncoming leopard, but then he suddenly remembered that he had not been able to discharge the revolver. Perhaps the cartridges were still wet. If they were and would not fire, it would probably spell his finish.

He thought, too, of waking Bob, but he knew that this would cause a commotion, which might make the leopard charge without delay. No, Joe thought, neither of these plans would work.

Suddenly his face brightened somewhat. A wild scheme was in his mind. Would it work?

As undisturbing as possible, the boy reached into his pocket and removed the little case of matches. Protected by a tightly fitting cap, they were unaffected by the rain. His movement had been so cautious that apparently the leopard had not noticed.

Knowing that the heat of the atmosphere had dried out his shirt to a considerable degree, he resorted to a desperate measure. With a quick movement he tore the shirt from his shoulders, struck a match, and lighted the cloth.

Almost at once the tiny blaze of the match increased in size until it was quite large. When satisfied that the cloth was burning sufficiently, Joe tied it to a twig and, with all the strength he could muster, threw it at the leopard.

There was a howl of fear and pain, and then the sound of retreating footsteps. The beast had vanished into the blackness of the jungle.

Meanwhile, Bob had jumped to his feet, having been aroused by the howl. He looked inquiringly at his friend.

"Anything wrong?" he queried, removing his revolver.

"Nothing now—I hope," Joe returned, gazing off into the forest. "A leopard was stalking us. I think he's gone now."

"Really? Is it gone? What did you do?"

Joe told of what had happened. When he had finished, his chum regarded him admiringly.

"Good for you, old boy," praised Bob, patting his friend on the back. "I'd have never thought of doing anything like that. But now suppose I take up the watch for a while. I'll keep on the lookout for that leopard."

But Joe refused, saying that his watch was not yet over.

"I'll call you later," he said, and Bob again retired.

Toward the end of his guard Joe heard a mysterious cry, similar to that he had heard several days before. It was most blood-curdling, sending chills down his spine. Whether it was of animal or human origin the youth had no idea.

Bob too heard the unearthly sound later during his watch, and was as frightened as his chum had been.

"The Forest of Mystery!" he breathed, looking about rather fearfully. "Certainly seems mysterious. Things could be happening right at this minute that nobody knows anything about."

At the first streak of dawn Bob awoke Joe, although the latter was still very sleepy.

"Let me wait a little bit longer," pleaded the latter, rubbing his eyes.

But Bob stoutly refused.

"We'll just have to get going again," he said. "Have to find our dads and the others as soon as we can."

Joe knew that this was necessary, and so arose without saying anything further.

The boys were obliged to begin the day without any breakfast, although both were ravenously hungry. They saw several small animals dart across their path, but decided to lose no time in shooting them. Delay, they knew, might mean tragedy to them.

They had not the slightest notion of which way to go in search of the safari, but they agreed to strike out to the west, as that was the direction previously taken.

Along toward noon Bob called his chum over to a little clearing.

"Look at that strange track," he pointed out. "Was that made by a wild animal?"

"Search me," Joe said. "I never saw anything like it before. Looks like the footprint of a person, only it's much larger, and there aren't any toe marks."

The youths recalled the different animals they had come in contact with and read about. But none, they were sure, could make footprints anything like this.

"I'm sure that couldn't have been a monkey—even a gorilla," said Bob, "because there would be marks of its toes."

"Let's get out of here," murmured Joe a bit fearfully. "Who knows what kind of a creature that might have been?"

They left the spot and plunged on through the forest. Bob removed his revolver and fired two shots, hoping that they could be heard by the safari. He refrained from firing more because of the possibility of needing the bullets in an emergency.

All morning they hiked on, paying little or no attention to the country they were passing through. They observed with interest, however, the results of the hurricane. Tall trees were lying about, having been struck by lightning; numerous small dead animals could be seen.

By noon their hunger had become almost unbearable. Joe managed to shoot a large duck-like bird, which was at once roasted over a fire. To the two starved boys, the taste was delicious.

They stopped only long enough to eat the meal, for every minute of delay was maddening to them.

"We've just got to find our party today," said Bob, gritting his teeth. "If we don't, they'll move so far away that we never will find them."

Joe nodded.

"But then," he reminded his friend, "maybe they'll stick around this vicinity. They're probably looking for us, too, don't forget. We'll just—"

He ceased abruptly and suddenly turned pale.

The reason was not far to seek. A huge spear had whizzed past his head, missing it by only a very few inches!

For some time neither of the youths spoke. They stared fearfully into the green depths of the forest whence the spear had been thrown.

Then, seeing no signs of natives, Bob broke the silence.

"What do you think?" he asked in a low voice, never taking his eyes from the jungle.

Joe waited a moment before replying. He had not yet recovered from the horror that had seized him.

"I—I don't know what to think," he said tensely. "Savages, cannibals, maybe."

"But why don't they attack us?" asked Bob, greatly puzzled.

"More than I know."

The youths remained where they were for several minutes, fearful to move on for fear of being struck from behind. But when after quite a while nothing more happened they concluded it was safe to go on.

All through the afternoon they kept a close lookout for savages but saw none. Nor did they see any traces of human habitation. With every step they became more mystified. Who had thrown the spear? What was the object in throwing it? Why had the chums not been attacked?

"This doggone Forest of Mystery gets on my nerves," said Joe, as late that afternoon they stopped beside a small spring. "Oh, if we could only find our safari!"

After replenishing their water bottles, which were strapped tightly over their shoulders, the young adventurers continued their frantic search.

At a little open space they suddenly caught sight of something that made them gasp in wonder.

Moving awkwardly from behind a low hill was the strangest creature they had ever laid eyes on. It was an unusually small elephant—all white!

CHAPTER XXVIII

Finding One Lost

"**W**HAT do you know about that?" muttered Joe Lewis, staring at the animal. "A white pigmy elephant! Wouldn't our dads be tickled if they could see it?"

"That's an idea," said Bob quickly. "Why can't we shoot it for them?"

Joe laughed.

"Impossible," he said. "Why, these revolver cartridges wouldn't even stop it, let alone kill it. Not much chance of doing that. Then too, we want to find our party."

But Bob persisted.

"I tell you we can get that elephant some way," he went on. "As for finding the safari, well—I don't believe a few minutes' delay would make much difference. And I feel sure we'll find them before long. But right now let's get that elephant."

"But how?" demanded the other.

The animal was about twenty yards away and seemed not to notice the human invaders. And the wind was blowing away from it, so that it could not get their scent.

As silently as they could the boys crept along through the tall grass, keeping their revolvers in readiness. Bob led the way, confident that he could manage to get an effective shot.

When within five yards of it, the young hunters stopped and waited. The little elephant had its back toward them, making it impossible to fire.

Then it turned and faced them, perhaps sensing danger.

"Now!" said Bob, and together the youths fired, aiming at the eyes.

Without an outcry the elephant fell, writhed about for a second, and then was still.

"Yay!" cried Bob. "Killed it instantly. Both of those bullets found their way to the brain. And," facing his chum, "you said it couldn't be done."

"I'm sorry," grinned Joe. "I guess there isn't anything we can't do, eh, Bob?"

The youths hardly knew what to do with the carcass. They could not take the time to skin it, and yet they

knew hyenas and vultures would soon appear if it were left where it was.

Finally they decided to do a quick job of skinning it, although perhaps they could not perform the task as well as it should be done.

Using their hunting knives, they hastily ripped off the white hide, which they were finally able to move several yards from the carcass. Then they gathered thorn bushes and surrounded it by an impenetrable *boma*. Over the hide as well as around it they placed several thicknesses of thorns and brambles.

"Maybe that'll keep the vultures and hyenas away," said Joe, as he turned to leave. "Now, if we can just find the safari."

For a half hour the boys trudged on, their hopes slowly becoming lessened. At frequent intervals they fired their revolvers, stopping shortly after to listen.

On one occasion Bob thought he heard a shout but was not sure. Again he fired, and again he listened.

Sure enough, a faint cry was breaking the vast stillness. It was repeated again and again, and then came the sound of a rifle shot.

"It's our party!" cried Joe happily. "They've heard us."

"Come," said Bob, setting off at a rapid pace. "Let's hurry."

Five minutes later the chums broke through the foliage and faced none other than Mr. Lewis and Mr. Holton.

"Boys!" cried Bob's father, his joy beyond words. "We've found you at last!"

Mr. Lewis was equally affected.

"We were afraid something happened to you," he said, patting them affectionately. "We didn't see how you could possibly go through this forest unharmed. Especially with all the strange things here."

"Just what do you mean by that?" demanded Bob, wondering if the naturalists had also seen or heard unexplainable phenomena.

"What I said," returned Mr. Lewis, his face grave. "Howard and I heard all kinds of mysterious noises from the depths of the forest. We haven't any idea what they were. And there's something else that we haven't been able to explain."

"What was that?" inquired Joe, thoroughly interested.

"Last night we saw a strange phosphorescence very near our camp," his father resumed. "It shone quite brilliantly, and we weren't able to tell what caused it. We played our flashlights on it, but could make out nothing. Some trick of nature, I suppose."

"You weren't the only ones to see mysterious things," said Joe, and then told of the peculiar footprint and of the long spear that had so nearly ended his life.

When he had finished, the naturalists looked grave.

"You boys certainly had a thrilling experience," Mr. Holton said. "Of course," he went on, "there's an explanation to everything that has happened. Whether we'll be able to delve into it we have yet to see."

"But there's something else that will interest you," put in Bob. "Joe and I shot a white pigmy elephant."

"What? Not fooling us, are you?"

"Come, and we'll show you," said Bob, and led the way through the forest.

When they finally reached the spot, they found the *boma* just as they had built it. The carcass, however, had been torn to pieces by vultures and hyenas.

The youths removed the thorn and bramble bushes from the enclosure and then turned to get the elephant skin.

To their great surprise, it was gone!

"Of all things!" exclaimed Bob, rubbing his forehead in perplexity. "That skin has disappeared as if by magic!"

Joe glanced at his chum, then at the *boma*. He looked around the other side, but the white skin was nowhere in sight. Finally he straightened up, a look of supreme bewilderment on his face.

"Gone sure enough," he said.

"Are you certain you put it there?" inquired Mr. Holton.

"Certainly we did," Bob assured him. "What I can't understand is why the *boma* wasn't torn to pieces. If some wild animal—"

"Maybe it wasn't a wild animal," put in Joe.

"Then—what could it have been?"

"Beyond me." Joe had no suggestion of an idea.

The two naturalists took up where their sons had left off and searched the vicinity of the *boma*. But they had to admit defeat.

"Another mystery to add to our already long list," commented Mr. Lewis. "It seems that there is no end to them."

"Perhaps," suggested Mr. Holton suddenly, "natives got that skin. They could have been watching the boys place it there. And they could have covered up the thorn enclosure just as it was."

"Possibly," came from Mr. Lewis. "But now let's get back to camp. We'll have some busy days before us."

Noko and the other natives gave Bob and Joe a royal welcome on seeing them alive and well. For none knew better than the blacks the dangers of a tropical hurricane.

The two naturalists had already collected a large number of specimens. During the days that followed they added more, many of which were unknown.

Bob and Joe did their share of collecting, bringing down not a few curious wild creatures. They also spent their time in taking motion pictures of the wild country about them.

On one occasion they left camp on an all-day trip, taking two of the bearers with them. They hoped to

photograph unusual scenes and perhaps solve some of the mysteries that so bewildered them.

They were following a strictly compassed course, so as to take no chance of becoming lost from the others. Their previous experience had taught them to have even more respect for the great African forest.

When the sun was overhead, they sat in the shade of a great raffia palm, to escape the heat and partake of lunch.

Joe gazed off rather absently through the trees. Suddenly his jaw dropped.

"What's the matter?" asked Bob in surprise. "What do you see?"

"Look away over there," Joe pointed out. "See that high ant hill?"

"Why—yes. And look. There's a hut on top of it. Who do you suppose lives there?"

"Let's go and see."

Together the young explorers trekked through the forest until they came to the ant hill. The latter was all of thirty feet in height, and built firmly on its summit was a small thatched hut.

"Boy, this is a mystery," murmured Bob. "Shall we go up and investigate?"

"I'm willing."

There was a crude ladder running up the side of the ant hill. Up this the chums made their way. They feared at every moment that the ladder might collapse with their weight.

"Keep a hand on your revolver," warned Bob. "There's no telling what may be in that hut. Maybe some savage is asleep there, for all we know."

When halfway to the top, they heard a shout from below.

Looking down they saw a man—a white man!

CHAPTER XXIX

Angry Natives

"THOMAS Seabury!" cried Bob and Joe almost in one breath, recognizing the man from a picture his brother had shown them in Mombasa.

They scrambled down the ladder in all haste, forgetting danger, forgetting everything.

"My name!" the man exclaimed in a bewildered voice. "How, may I ask, did you young men get hold of it?"

Mr. Seabury was rather a small man, with long gray hair and a heavy beard. His fine face bore the look of a scholar.

"We've been hunting for you," Joe told him. "Your brother, back in Mombasa, asked us to be on the lookout for you."

"Then—he is not here?"

"No," returned Bob. He did not think it wise to add that George Seabury had been injured by a rhino. "He couldn't come with us, but we promised to be on watch for you."

The man reeled as if to fall. Then he got a grip on himself.

"At last," he murmured, breathing heavily, "I have seen a white person."

"Were you lost?" inquired Joe.

"Lost, yes. And worse than lost," returned Mr. Seabury grimly. "I was captured by hostile savages and was about to be sacrificed in their horrid rites. But I managed to slip off in the night and escape from their village. It was a horrible experience—wandering through this trackless forest. I had given myself up for lost when I happened to find this hut. Who built it I do not know. But it had food stored away, and I ate it at once."

"How long have you been here?" asked Joe. "In this vicinity, I mean."

"Only two days," Seabury replied. "Though it seems more like two years. I held not the slightest hope of seeing any white person. In fact, I fully expected to die a slow death from hunger. But now," he continued in a lighter tone, "I am saved."

"It was just luck that we found you," Bob said. "My friend here— Wait. Pardon us for not introducing ourselves. This is Joe Lewis, and my name is Holton—Bob Holton."

Thomas Seabury extended a hand, which the youths clasped warmly.

"As I was saying," resumed Bob, "Joe happened to see this ant hill. We came over to investigate."

"I am only too thankful that you did," the man said. "But how did you happen to be here? What are you doing in Africa?"

"We're with our dads," Joe told him. "Came to collect specimens of wild animals and birds. And now, Mr. Seabury, suppose we go back to camp. That is, if you're ready."

"I am more than ready," was the answer. "Camp is a word that sounds better to me than 'most any I can think of."

They found the two natives waiting. The latter displayed unusual surprise at seeing another white man in that vast jungle. Mr. Seabury fell to talking with them, telling them in their own language of his experience.

Back at camp, which they finally reached, Mr. Lewis and Mr. Holton met them.

"But look who we've found," said Joe happily. "Thomas Seabury."

"Well, what in the——" Mr. Lewis could hardly believe his eyes, while Bob's father was no less surprised.

Joe introduced Mr. Seabury to the naturalists and then told of how he and his chum had found the missing man.

"Good for you, boys," praised Mr. Holton. "If you hadn't found him, perhaps he wouldn't have been found."

"I wonder if I am dreaming," said Mr. Seabury. "If I am, I never want to wake up."

The youths' fathers spent the remainder of the day in telling of their experiences since leaving Mombasa and in listening to Seabury's.

But the next morning all were up early preparing for an extensive hunt for specimens. Bob and Joe with their cameras, and the scientists with their rifles, left camp and headed southward, with several of the bearers following.

They had not gone far when they became aware of a deep drumming noise, which seemed to roll along the ground.

"What's that?" asked Bob, becoming worried. "Savages?"

Mr. Seabury, who was with them, nodded.

"I have often heard the noise," he said, "and I believe it is made by natives. But they are probably a great distance off. I don't believe we are in any danger."

All during the hunt the adventurers could hear the deep vibrating of drums, but as it seemed to get no nearer they thought no more about it.

Back at camp they saw a group of strange natives, their faces streaked with white paint, talking with Noko and the bearers. At first the explorers hesitated to move on into camp for fear that trouble was at hand. But they finally concluded that it would be safe.

"What's up, Noko?" inquired Mr. Holton.

The tall black seemed glad his masters had returned.

"Him want sell you um *kidogo* [little] white elephant skin," Noko said.

"A white elephant skin?" demanded Bob suddenly. "Let's see it."

The natives seemed to regard the youths in some surprise. But they soon did as asked, producing the white elephant skin.

At sight of it Bob and Joe uttered startled exclamations.

"Why, that's the one we killed!" cried Bob angrily. "See. There's where our bullets entered the head."

"You're right, Bob," said Mr. Lewis, after a moment of examining the skin.

"Ask them where they got it," said Joe.

The naturalists put the question before the natives in their own language. They replied that they had speared it several miles from there, and, having heard of the safari, went to see if they could sell it.

"They're big liars!" stormed Bob, when this had been translated. "That white elephant skin belongs to us. And," he added with determination, "we're going to have it without pay!"

"Tell those savages to get out of here, Noko," he said. "Tell them that if they don't they'll wish they had." He removed his revolver from its holster and, as Noko talked, flashed it before the savages.

When Noko had finished translating, the savages grew furiously angry. They advanced threateningly toward the explorers, paying no attention to Bob's gun.

CHAPTER XXX

An Old Mystery Is Cleared

ONE big native made a grab for the white elephant skin.

But his hand never reached it. With a powerful blow, Bob sent the man crashing to the ground so hard that he was put in a daze. Then, raising the revolver, the youth fired three shots into the air.

They had the desired effect. The savages turned on their heels and dashed off, leaving their downed companion behind. Before long he too had disappeared.

"Well, you certainly made quick work of them," laughed Mr. Seabury, who had been impressed by the rapidity of Bob's action. "Couldn't see them for the dust."

"They were glad enough to get out of it," grinned Joe. "Old Bob would have cleaned up on the whole bloomin' bunch."

Everyone had to laugh, now that the danger was over. Even Noko joined in.

"Um strong fella," he said, feeling Bob's arms. "You make um leave ver' quick."

The naturalists examined the elephant skin and were delighted with it. For they knew that it was one of the rarest of the rare.

"Here's hoping we shoot another pigmy white elephant," said Joe, "and a lot more new specimen's besides."

During the weeks that followed they did shoot another of the strange elephants, and in addition brought down a large number of other wild creatures. The latter were carefully skinned and labeled by the naturalists.

Bob and Joe found themselves constantly occupied in working at some interesting task, such as photographing the mysterious forest. They exposed several thousand feet of motion-picture film.

On one afternoon a heavy drizzle fell, making it impossible for the adventurers to go on with their work. And many of the days that followed were not without their thunderstorms.

"Now that the rainy season is at hand," remarked Mr. Lewis one morning as he sat in a tent, "I suggest that we start back to the coast. We've collected more than enough specimens, and the boys have taken scores of motion-picture scenes."

The explorers attended to packing their belongings, assembling the specimens, oiling their firearms, and the like. It required nearly a week to complete preparations, but at last they were ready for the return journey.

Through the dark Forest of Mystery and then over the many plains and wooded tracts they hiked, at last coming to Mbarara. From there they went by automobile to a terminal on the railroad, and then by train back to Mombasa.

In this city the youths and their fathers were induced to stop for a week at George Seabury's house. That gentleman fairly hugged his brother at seeing him alive and well. He thanked the explorers, particularly Bob and Joe, again and again for finding him and bringing him back with them.

The Americans finally succeeded in obtaining passage on an American ship. Bob and Joe in particular found the return voyage very interesting, even though they had made it before.

They were sitting on deck one morning in the midst of a row of passengers when a stranger leaned toward them.

"Beg pardon, fellows," he said, "but I wonder if you'd mind telling me where you got those rings you have."

"Rings?" asked Bob. "Oh, those. A Chinaman back in San Francisco gave them to us."

"Let me take a good look at them," said the stranger, whose name was Walker.

He examined the rings carefully for several minutes.

"Why?" asked Joe. "Is there anything wrong?"

"Wrong? Absolutely not," Walker said, straightening up with a nod. "You fellows are most fortunate in possessing such rare pieces of jewelry. Those rings once belonged to an emperor of China."

"What!" cried Bob, while Joe's eyes opened wide. "How do you know this?"

"By the inscriptions that are on them," Walker returned at once.

"Inscriptions?" Bob looked baffled. "Can you read those?"

"Most assuredly," was the answer. "I can speak and read seven languages. Chinese is one of them."

At once the youths were all excitement.

"But," began Bob, when the hubbub of chattering had subsided, "I thought China was a republic with a president. Then how do you explain this emperor stuff?"

"At one time China was an absolute monarchy, governed by rulers," Walker told them. "The rings, unless they were faked—and I do not think they were—were once the property of one of the emperors."

"Then—that explains everything," murmured Joe.

"How is that?" inquired Walker, very much interested.

Joe told him how much the rings were desired by numerous Chinamen.

"I shouldn't wonder that they are coveted, considering their worth," the man said when Joe had finished. "Chinese especially would prize them very highly."

The chums sought out their fathers and told them the good news.

"That puts a glorious climax to everything," said Mr. Holton. "With this ring mystery cleared up, you can feel much better."

"But there were others that we weren't able to solve," remarked Bob.

"What do you mean?" inquired Joe.

"Those in the Forest of Mystery," returned Bob.

THE END

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Except in cases of obvious typographical errors, archaic and inconsistent spelling has been retained.

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