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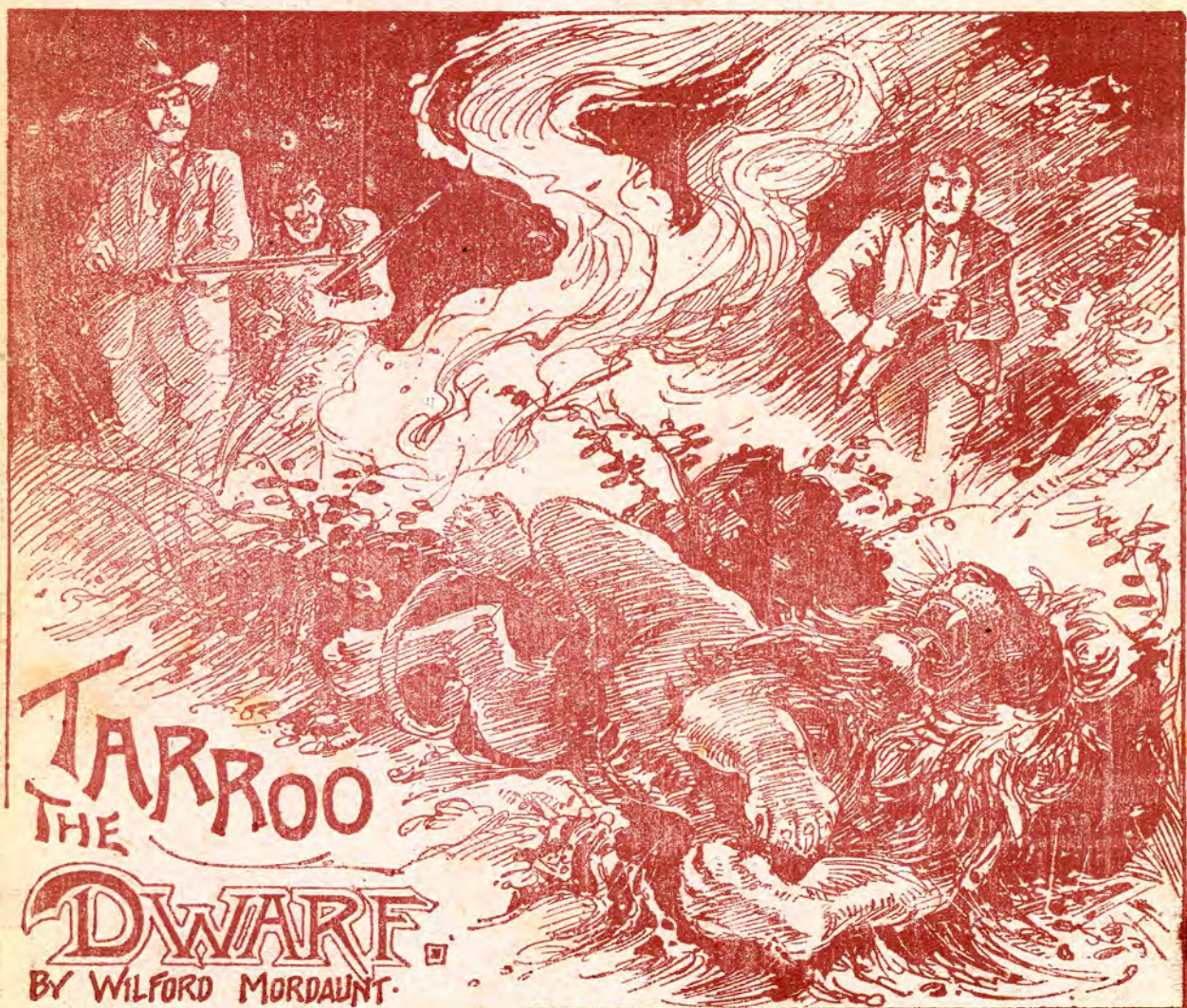
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TARROO THE DWARF.

BY WILFORD MORDAUNT.

The great beast writhed on the ground in agony, tearing at a huge wound in its flank.

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TARROO THE DWARF.

By WILFORD MORDAUNT.

CHAPTER I.

BAD NEWS—AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY—THE STRANGE PASSENGER — THE MYSTERIOUS PAPER—A LISTENER.

One dull, cold November evening, three people sat around the fire of their little sitting-room, talking occasionally in subdued voices.

They were Mrs. Maurice, a widow; Mabel, her daughter, a girl of seventeen; and Edmund, her son, a tall fellow of twenty.

"Mother," said the lad at last, speaking with an effort—"mother, I don't want to add to your troubles, but Messrs. Simcox suspended payment to-day. We were all called into the office, and dismissed with a month's notice."

"Oh, my boy!" cried the poor woman, "what is to become of us, the winter before us, too?"

"I have worked once," said Edmund stoutly. "I can work again; don't fear, mother. Hark! there is uncle calling."

A loud tapping on the floor above recalled Mrs. Maurice to herself. She rose, and hurried upstairs.

"How is he to-day?" continued Edmund, addressing his sister. He gets gradually weaker; the doctor does not think he can live more than a week, poor old fellow!"

"Who is a poor old fellow?" asked a cheerful voice from the door. And, turning, the brother and sister eagerly welcomed a bronzed and smiling youth about the same age as Edmund. "I hope you are not pitying either of us, though we shall be among the unemployed this day month?"

Mabel smiled, though rather sadly. She knew what poverty meant only too well.

"No; we were alluding to uncle upstairs."

"And who is he?" asked the new-comer again. "Remember I have not seen or heard anything of you for the last three weeks."

"Of course, you do not know," said Mabel. "Just the day after you went to Liverpool we heard a ring, and when the door was opened, there stood an old man—a porter carrying his boxes. He was father's uncle, the boy who was lost sight

of years ago, and whom everyone thought dead. He had traced us out, and came, saying he was only in England on a visit, that he meant to return to South Africa. However, he was taken ill, and now there is no possibility of his ever returning, for he is dying."

There was silence for a few moments, only broken by the murmur of voices in the room above.

Almost immediately afterwards Mrs. Maurice re-entered the room.

"I wish you would go up to uncle, dear boy; he is asking for you."

Edmund rose immediately.

"Come with me, Moore," he said, turning to his friend. And together they disappeared.

An old man, whose sunburnt face contrasted oddly with his snow-white hair, was lying on a comfortable easy-chair by the fire. He spoke with difficulty, brightening when he saw the two enter.

"Sit here," he said, pointing to some seats near. "I have been talking to your mother, and I cannot get anything like a reasonable answer from her; perhaps you will have more sense. What are you both doing by way of earning a living?"

The young men looked at each other in some embarrassment.

"We are at present both in Simcox's Bank; but it has suspended payment to-day."

Uncle Egerton's eyes glittered.

"So much the better," he remarked. "In this paper," he continued, holding up a folded sheet, "are full directions for the recovery of a fortune—my own—which, with the exception of a few hundred pounds, I foolishly left behind me. My land was just on the outskirts of the Wettefontein diamond fields. I sold it all to Julius van Dork, a Dutchman—all excepting Primrose Cottage and garden, where I hoped to end my days. One morning I accidentally came upon diamond-bearing strata while I was digging. I kept the discovery to myself, as in richness it surpassed all I had ever heard of. I concealed some of my find beneath the flooring of the cottage, marked the ground for future operations, and let the whole to a Kaffir of the better class to care for till my return, for I was seized with a sudden longing for home. Well, here I am, a dead

man in a week. Do you think I didn't hear that doctor talking? I am sharp enough, I assure you. Now, this Van Dork was always on the watch. He wondered, I suppose, where my money came from, for I was a struggling farmer till then. But I kept my secret. No one knows of it to this day. If you will go and get the box which lies hidden there, I will make a gift of it to you and to your family. I've made my will. Here it is," He laid his trembling fingers on another paper. "If you work the strata remaining, you will be a rich man, and your troubles ended. But you must give me a promise. Remember, your mother is poor and in a month you will be without employment."

"I do remember," said Edmund, rather bitterly; "but what is to become of my mother and sister during my absence, supposing I do as you wish?"

The old man took a leathern case from the pocket of his dress ing-gown.

"Give me the promise I ask for, and your mother shall have these," extracting three notes. "I suppose three hundred pounds will support her till your return? Now will you go?"

"Yes," said Edmund firmly "I will go!"

"Good boy, good boy," said Uncle Egerton, rubbing his hands. "And what about your friend?" turning to Moore.

"I have nothing to keep me



In an instant Maurice had sprung from the berth, and thrown himself upon the man.

in England. Where Maurice goes, I go too!" he responded quietly.

Uncle Egerton fairly chuckled in his delight.

"So much the better," he said again. "Two heads are wiser than one. You must be ready to start in three days, and one thing I must impress upon you, do not allow the smallest hint of my illness to reach Van Dork, or your trouble will be in vain. Here is money for your outfit. Now you may go."

The astonishment of those waiting downstairs may be more easily imagined than described. It exceeded that of the two young men themselves, and the idea of having her anxieties swept away by the timely gift of the notes brought tears of thankfulness to Mrs. Maurice's eyes, although it involved a parting.

"I will go and thank uncle," she remarked, seeing the friends quite absorbed in their coming journey. And accordingly she left the room. A sudden cry of alarm brought the three younger ones in haste to the invalid's chamber. Uncle Egerton lay back in his chair quite dead, his thin hand still clasping the paper of instructions which he had refused to give up till his nephew was on the point of starting. But on the worn face there yet lingered the pleased smile with which he had received his promise of obedience.

The evening after the funeral, Cyril Moore came into Mrs. Maurice's sitting-room, looking considerably puzzled.

"Someone is watching this house," he remarked, after helping Edmund to strap his portmanteau, for they were to leave next day.

"Watching the house," said Mabel in dismay. "What do you mean?"

"It is quite true, I assure you," he answered. "As I crossed the road I saw a tall man standing against the garden-wall opposite. He was watching the door of this house, and half started forward when he saw me come in, as if he wished to speak to me."

"Someone who has lost his way, perhaps," said Maurice indifferently, and the subject dropped.

When once they were safely on board the "Tuscan," bound for Port Natal, it cropped up again. They were well out into the Channel, when Moore joined his friend in the cabin assigned to them, where he was busily occupied in storing their belongings.

"There is one strange person on board this vessel, as I have already discovered—looks like a colonist returning," he remarked; "but why I think him odd is that he persistently shadows me. While we were on deck together, he was always close by. After you left me, he literally dogged my footsteps. When once I turned sharply upon him, he looked caught, and slunk away."

Maurice looked up with a flash of recollection.

"Does he remind you in any way of the man whom you saw watching our house?" he asked eagerly.

"The very man!"—excitedly; "tall and lanky."

"Then depend upon it, it is either Van Dork, or someone in his employ, who has been hunting up poor old Uncle Egerton."

"I wonder if he knows of his death?"

"Probably not, as we kept a sharp look-out, and saw nothing more of him."

"It is a mystery," said Maurice again. "I can only imagine that this person is some enemy of Uncle Egerton's; may, perhaps, indeed have heard of the box."

"Whoever or whatever he is, he is distinctly shady, and after no good. We'll announce that we are on our way to the diamond-fields, which, indeed, is perfectly true. And, after we have read the instructions carefully, we must find some safe place of concealment for the paper. It may be that he wants it."

"Possibly; but all I can say is that he will not get it with my consent. Let us read it once through, and then I will put it in my belt here. There no one will take it."

He opened the sheet, but his face immediately showed signs of extreme dismay.

"There are no instructions, only a rough plan. See, a square, with two trees sketched lightly, and between them a cross in red ink."

"I suppose this is really the cottage-garden, and the cross indicates the place where we must look."

"Yes; but there is no name. Nothing to tell us where to look for the garden itself. We are left quite in the dark, and, naturally, anything so vague, alters our prospects considerably. Here is also a short line of faint, black dots, leading up to the red cross. I cannot imagine what it all means. How are we to find the place?"

"We may as well see the matter out now we have embarked upon it. We should have thoroughly examined the paper before leaving. Our difficulties are increased tenfold, and our return naturally a far-off event. However, it is of no use anticipating, when we reach our journey's end we can do that."

I remember uncle called it Primrose Cottage. Meanwhile, I'll put the paper in my belt, where it will be quite safe."

A man in the adjoining cabin rose from the floor, where he had been kneeling with his ear against the partition, and rubbed his hands together with every sign of elation.

"Just as I thought!" he muttered delightedly. "Van Dork, my boy, you are not such a fool as you look. I'll soon stop the little game of these two fools. It won't be a particularly troublesome task, I expect."

CHAPTER II.

A MIDNIGHT THIEF—FIRE!—AN AWFUL FATE— DESERTED—THE SEA ROVER—PRISONERS—RUN DOWN.

Two days passed quietly away. Whether he imagined he was noticed or not, the strange man did not push himself so persistently into the society of the two friends, though they often ran against him. His name they heard was Smith, and they also discovered that he occupied the cabin adjoining their own. On the second night, Maurice awoke from a sound sleep, fancying he heard something moving near his bed. He was drowsy, however, and, after listening a minute or two, concluded he had been mistaken, and lay back again. Just then a broad beam of moonlight poured through the porthole, showing a dark figure near the door. In an instant, Maurice had sprung from his berth, and thrown himself upon the man, calling to the still slumbering Moore as he did so. The intruder turned with a savage snarl upon his assailant, and Maurice saw that his head was wrapped in a silk handkerchief, completely hiding the face. The short struggle was soon over, a heavy blow flung Maurice stunned upon the floor, and when Moore awoke sufficiently to come to his assistance, the fellow had slipped through the door, shut and locked it on the outside, and left the two prisoners. When Moore succeeded in restoring Maurice to his senses, dawn was breaking, and as soon as he could do so, he called a steward, who released them from their captivity. The young men deemed it best to say nothing till they laid the case before the captain, who immediately asked whether they had lost anything. Maurice looked for the belt, in which was the precious paper.

"How was it I never missed it till now?" he exclaimed. "My belt is gone!"

"Well, what of that," said the captain, who was inclined to treat the matter as a practical joke on the part of some of the passengers. "So long as you have lost no money, never mind. I dare say it will turn up again."

"But the belt contained papers of great value," said Maurice. "It is absolutely necessary that we should find them!"

The captain fidgeted.

"I'm really sorry I cannot help you at present. Keep a sharp look out, and come to me if you see or hear anything at all suspicious. If you cannot recognise the man, I'm afraid it's a hopeless task, unless you know of anyone who has reason to want the papers."

This was cold comfort; but the best they got. Beyond suspecting that the so-called Smith was the thief, they could do nothing. One thing only they immediately observed, which was that he no longer pestered them with his society, seeming rather to shun them, a circumstance which in itself served to heighten their ideas of his complicity in the night attack.

Just ten days after this all was terror and confusion on board the "Tuscan." The screaming of the passengers, the hoarse shouting of the seamen, and the ever-increasing roar of the flames, which earlier in the morning had broken out in the hold, all added to the horrors of the moment.

In vain were streams of water poured upon the blazing cargo, till, despairing at last, the order was given to take to the boats.

Maurice and his chum, smoke-begrimed, dripping, and half-suffocated, stood together, eagerly helping to hand over the terrified passengers to the craft already swung over the side. Two boats were safely drawn away, and a third was on the point of leaving, when a waterspout, which had approached unobserved, burst with an overwhelming crash upon the vessel. Agonised shrieks filled the air as the enormous mass of water swept the decks, carrying seamen and passengers into the sea, upsetting the two boats, and nearly swamping the third, and almost wrecking the remains of the "Tuscan."

Maurice and Cyril Moore were flung violently across the ship, nearly under a roll of sailcloth, and here, clinging with all their strength to the cordage, they managed to escape with their lives. Bruised and battered, they were a sorry spectacle when at length they found strength enough to crawl from their refuge, and look about them. Not a single living soul appeared to have been spared but themselves; the dead body of a little boy lay near the broken deckhouse, and the screams of the drowning were stifled for ever. Away on the horizon was the boat, the third one. They could but discern

a man standing in the stern. Was he leaving them to perish on the wreck? Maurice stood upon the smashed woodwork, and waved his handkerchief; but the boat sped on, his frantic appeal was unheeded.

Meanwhile, Moore returned from the scene of the fire.

"We are safe so far," he remarked. "The hold is half-full of water, and the fire completely extinguished. We may toss about for weeks, unless we fall in with some ship."

"There is a man in the boat, and he leaves us to perish!" cried Maurice, still endeavouring to catch the attention of the solitary voyager. "He has seen us, but he will not turn, almost as if he were escaping from us."

Nevertheless, he would not relinquish his efforts till the boat vanished from sight.

"How or when shall we reach England again?" he said, staring blankly at the sky, as if he could there read the solution of the problem.

"It's no use giving up," said his friend. "Come with me below to find some food, after that we can consider our next proceedings."

It was wise advice, and when they discovered that a great quantity of stores yet remained in the drifting wreck, their spirits revived considerably. It was quite possible they would soon be rescued, if, in the meantime, they had fair weather, and did not get out of the way of passing vessels.

This last was a dread idea, and neither of the young men cared to dwell upon it. They kept themselves fully occupied in manufacturing a raft on which, if the worst came to the worst, they could take refuge.

For two days and nights they drifted helplessly, seeing nothing, and hearing nothing save the dull wash of the waves. On the third day, Maurice exclaimed that he sighted a vessel, and, wild with excitement, they hoisted another signal, and brought up fire in an iron pot with which to make a thick smoke.

Gradually the tiny speck resolved itself into a large steam yacht; and now, for the first time, the two were assailed by some misgivings, for the deck of the yacht was full of men who looked like anything but honest British seamen—dark-faced, red-capped ruffians, armed to the teeth. Nearer and nearer they came, till at length a boat-load put off, and the wreck was boarded before the castaways could do more than assume an attitude of defence. The new-comers dashed immediately upon the young men, who were disarmed, and led up to the one who appeared to be in command.

"More here?" he demanded fiercely.

"More what?" asked Maurice, who had received an ugly knock on the head in the struggle, and did not feel much inclined to knock under quietly.

"More men?" said the leader, with a ferocious gesture.

"We are alone," returned Maurice, "or we should not be in your hands!"

The fellow stared as if only half comprehending; then, with a brief word of command, the friends were duffily handcuffed together, and lifted bodily into the small boat. Here they were left, while the crew of the yacht looted the wrecked steamer, bringing away quantities of stores, passengers' luggage, and all the arms they could lay hands upon.

When the little craft was laden almost to the water's-edge, the ruffians returned and rowed away to the yacht, where the pander was quickly transferred, and the Englishmen roughly hustled on board. The leader, who was addressed as Don Luiz by the others, held a long confab with his men, who presently requested the friends to go below.

Resistance was useless. Neither of them understood the language of their gaolers, which they thought was either Spanish, or a patois of Spanish, so they complied. They were ushered into a small and filthy cabin, roughly furnished, with one porthole; and as they crossed the threshold the door was slammed and locked directly.

"Well," said Moore, "it looks as if we were in for adventures. Where do you suppose we are?"

"Indeed, I don't know," was the reply. "Nor can I imagine why we are kept prisoners."

Maurice had time and to spare to indulge his wildest surmises. Food was brought to the young men at regular intervals by a taciturn, sullen steward, and on two or three occasions loud voices and hurried movements denoted some disturbance going on outside; but save for this they might have been immured in some lonely fortress, so little notice was taken of them. Days passed on, and the prisoners were almost frantic with the suspense and monotony of their existence.

At length one evening the door opened, and Don Luiz, the leader, entered. He was not long in making his errand known, so far as his broken English would permit. It was to this effect.

They were now within a day's journey of Cape Town, and he requested both of them to write urgent letters to friends at home requesting that a ransom of two thousand pounds each be forwarded at once. They were to say that they had fallen into the clutches of a secret society, and unless the

money was forthcoming, their lives would be the forfeit. Full directions would be given as to the address to which the cash was to be sent. All this Don Luiz propounded with a grave countenance, and as if it was a matter of daily occurrence.

When he had recovered a little from his amazement, Maurice quietly informed the Spaniard that "it was impossible, quite impossible. He would not, nor would his friend, write any such letters."

Then Don Luiz lost his temper.

"You will!" he hissed; "you will, or——" he choked with passion.

"We will not!" returned Maurice, angry in turn. "You are nothing but a thief and a robber, and neither my friend nor myself will have anything to say to you!"

The Spaniard glared at them in speechless fury, then dashed out, slamming and locking the door behind him.

"This is preposterous!" said Maurice impatiently. "We must escape!"

"So we have said a thousand times," returned Moore, "and how much nearer are we to accomplishing our desires?"

A sudden cry from Maurice interrupted him, as the other darted forward, stooped, and picked up a long shining knife from the floor.

"See!" he said exultantly, waving the knife above his head, "here is our deliverer. Don Luiz must have dropped it from his belt."

"What will you do with it?" demanded Moore.

"I shall loosen one of the panels in the door when we reach Cape Town, if it is true what that rascal has just said that we are close upon it. Then at night we must creep through, drop overboard, and swim to land!"

Voices in the passage approaching warned him to be silent. It was Don Luiz, probably searching for his lost weapon. Presently the sounds died away, to the infinite relief of the listeners. No sooner was silence restored than Maurice fell to work upon the panel. It proved a much easier business than he had imagined. In a very short time it was quite loose enough to be removed whenever necessary, and after carefully hiding the knife, the two waited till they could hear the stopping of the engines. No one came with either food or water, and as they had had nothing since early morning, Maurice came to the conclusion that Don Luiz and his myrmidons meant to starve them into submission. When night had completely fallen, and all was still, he ventured through the door, and soon after returned to his anxious comrade with enough ship's biscuits to prevent them feeling absolutely starved.

"I dared not take more," he observed; "but among other things in the next door storeroom are our portmanteaus. I took the liberty of opening mine. I have the key, and helped myself to my own money. We shall not be utterly destitute when we reach land."

"Don Luiz is sure to visit us again," said Moore, "see if he doesn't."

He was right. Before the next day was many hours old, the leader presented himself, carrying in his hand pens, ink, and paper, which he placed upon the table, and pointed at significantly.

"I refuse absolutely!" said Maurice, folding his arms.

With a scream like an infuriated tiger, the Spaniard flung himself upon the young man, striking him repeatedly with a dagger, which he had concealed in his dress. Moore dashed to the rescue of his friend, and between them they threw the man to the floor, where, knocking his head against a wooden chair, he lay insensible. The scuffle, save for the one cry given by the Spaniard, had been almost noiseless.

"Now is our time," said Maurice, springing through the door. "Come, let us make a dash. Nothing venture, nothing have!"

They locked the cabin-door upon the unconscious Don Luiz, and, as they crept cautiously along the narrow passage, the vessel suddenly ceased moving.

"Is it possible?" whispered Moore, looking at his companion. The same thought had crossed both their minds, the yacht had reached Cape Town, and escape was not impossible.

The idea gave them fresh strength. Warily they crept upon deck, only to find, alas! that they were at least a mile from shore. A small cutter danced at the stern, and to this they clung as their salvation. Maurice was over the side in a moment, and Moore after him; but not before a red-capped ruffian caught sight of the fugitives. Once in the boat they rowed away for dear life, expecting every minute to hear the report of firearms and the whistling of bullets over their heads. To their amazement, save that the whole crew rushed to the stern, no notice was taken of their flight.

Nearer and nearer they got to land, when with a thrill of horror, Maurice awoke to a new danger. They were now half a mile away from the yacht, and, bent upon haste, awoke when too late to the knowledge that a huge passing liner was just upon them. The ship was starting upon a fresh voyage, and the small boat was under her bows before the occupants

had time to draw back. There was shouting, screaming, and a wild whirl of waters, then all was blank.

When Maurice opened his eyes again, he was lying upon a clean, white deck, his clothes dripping with water, and a curious circle standing around watching the surgeon busy administering restoratives to the half-drowned men, for Moore was beside him, propped up by a deck-chair, and, to all appearances, they had had a narrow escape. Before long both were able to go below and get into the dry clothes kindly lent by the various officers. Then they went to the captain, who informed them that the small boat was crushed to splinters, and both had been flung into the water. Life-belts were thrown, to which they clung till a boat was manned to pick them up.

Maurice admitted he could not remember much of what had taken place, and then proceeded to account for being in such a predicament. The captain showed growing signs of astonishment as the story was unfolded.

"Why, you have been caught by the 'Sea Rover.' Really the scoundrel should be followed and punished. He is a rascally Spanish-American, who cruises about as a man of property, on his own yacht. Directly he sees a vessel disabled, or in any difficulty, he boards it under pretence of rendering assistance. What becomes of the crew we can guess. They are mostly murdered in cold blood. The stores are taken to replenish their own, for they seldom dare touch at a port. All money and valuables are confiscated, and should there be any passengers on board supposed to be possessed of wealth in their own country, the fellow Don Luiz generally extorts a preposterous ransom. This has been paid in several instances; but no one has ever succeeded in catching the leader of the gang. Johnson"—to the mate—"just see if the yacht is in sight."

The man came back, reporting that the pirate was going westward as fast as full steam could take her.

"Ah! just what I expected. Sure to clear off if anything awkward turns up. Now, gentlemen, I fear you must make an unwilling voyage to Port Natal. I am behind already, and cannot afford the time to put back to land you at the Cape."

"If you are going to Port Natal," said Maurice, "we shall be most happy to accompany you, for that is the place of all others we desire to reach."

The captain laughed. "Diamond mad, I suppose," he said good-humouredly. "Well, I hope you will enjoy the trip; you deserve something after your most unpleasant experiences."

CHAPTER III.

ON THE VELDT—IN THE HANDS OF RUFFIANS—THE CAVES OF BONDARU—TARROO THE DWARF—BURIED ALIVE.

Just a fortnight after this, two young Englishmen, none other, in fact, than Maurice and his friend Moore, were trudging wearily across a barren stretch of sun-baked veldt. After paying their passage, which they felt bound to do, and investing in sundry articles of clothing, Maurice found so little of his money was left, that if they meant to reach their journey's end they must walk part of the distance. They had now been steadily trudging forward for three days, and were both footsore and wearied. Suddenly Moore stopped and looked around.

"I am afraid we have lost our way!" he said aghast; "there is no trace of the track here, and no one mentioned our crossing so large a stream." He pointed before him, and there Maurice saw a wide rivulet, with steep and precipitous sides, though they were not more than twenty feet in height.

"We are off the road, certainly," returned Maurice. "Wait here till I see if I can pick it up again."

He returned the way they had come; but soon became bewildered among the monotonous array of scrubby shrubs, rocks, and boulders.

"I cannot find it!" he shouted, turning to his comrade. To his amazement, Moore was nowhere to be seen. Rushing back

to the place where he had left him, Maurice called again and again; but still there was no answer. The young man had silently and mysteriously disappeared. For hours Maurice wandered about the spot without result. When night came on, he lighted a large fire to keep off savage beasts, and cooked himself a bird, which he had shot earlier in the day. Wearied and anxious, he could not sleep; but as dawn approached, his fatigue overpowered him, and he fell into an uneasy slumber.

From this he was rudely awakened by the sound of many guttural voices, and the feeling that he was being dragged down a height. Frantically he tried to break the ropes with which he was bound, and to turn his head.

"Keep still!" said a harsh whisper beside him—"keep still, or it will be the worse for you!"

Another minute, and Maurice found himself close by the water's-edge, in the grasp of four savage-looking villains.

"It is useless your imagining I have either money or diamonds upon me," he said. "I am on my way to make a fortune. I have nothing for you to take!"

"Spare yourself the trouble of talking," said one, the tallest of the four. "It's you we want, not your property."

"Is this Smith's work?" cried Maurice angrily, his vexation



With a scream the wretched creature crashed down into the sea below.

TRY "PLUCK" TO-MORROW.

overcoming his discretion, and making him hazard a wild guess.

A blow was the only reply, which threw him senseless at their feet. When he opened his eyes again, he was in a cave, hewn or hollowed in the side of the river-bank. The men were clustered around the entrance, and Moore sat by him, waiting for him to awaken. At the first whisper, the men turned and roughly bade them be still. There was nothing, therefore, to be done but to listen to the conversation of their captors, from which Maurice quickly gathered that his surmise regarding Smith was perfectly correct, albeit a wild one.

There was no doubt he had escaped from the "Tuscan," and, by some means, made his way to Port Natal, where, fearing he might lose what he had risked so much to gain, he instructed this band of desperadoes to keep watch on all who entered the place by land or sea, and, if they discovered anyone answering to the description of the two young Englishmen, they were to be followed and intercepted, while he went back with his find, hoping to turn it to good account. They were to be largely rewarded on producing their prisoners, so Smith had evidently feared they might still be living.

The ruffians already, however, seemed on the point of quarrelling over the sum they hoped to gain; but the leader speedily quelled the dispute, saying they must be off. The friends were ordered to rise, and then began a long and exhausting march. The prisoners were separated, one being placed between each two of their captors.

"What is the meaning of this? and by what right do you take upon yourselves to act as if we were criminals?" demanded Maurice, when he stoutly resisted having his hands tied behind his back.

"You are in our power, young man," said the tall fellow, whom his comrades addressed as Ben; "and I reckon you had best just go along quietly, if you don't want to be left behind without the trouble of being buried."

"Remember, I shall report this outrage!" said Maurice furiously.

But this only provoked a peal of insolent laughter from the ruffians. To avoid possible detection, they proceeded along the bed of the river—a rough and troublesome journey, each footstep raising clouds of mosquitoes, while the sun blazed down directly over their heads. Towards afternoon, however, even the endurance of the older men was seriously taxed, for the scanty vegetation gave way to dense clusters of prickly cacti and bushes, from which came an occasional rush, which betokened the presence of some large animal. At length, upon a partially cleared space, a halt for the night was determined upon, and one of the men started off after game for the evening meal. He had not long been gone when the report of his rifle was heard, followed by a terrible and agonising scream. The others started up instantly, and after a few hurried words, two of them dashed off in the direction from which the cry had come. Maurice and his chum had been standing together, and when they saw that only one man was left in charge, they felt the moment had come to attempt escape.

"I'll go first," said Maurice, who showed his hands loose—he had been patiently working at his bonds for the last hour—"you follow me."

He darted forward, and before his guard could attempt a defence, he was lying prostrate upon the short turf, gagged and bound, unable to move a finger.

"Come, then," said Maurice, appropriating the fellow's revolvers and rifle, along with his bags of ammunition." And he slid through the undergrowth, closely followed by his friend. On he went, winding in and out among the shrubs, till a mile or more was placed between them, when he paused in his headlong rush. They had reached an open space, where on one side of the rivulet the banks were merged in the brushwood; the other was a sandy precipice, honeycombed with caves.

"We'll hide in one of these," suggested Moore. And in a few minutes they had made their way into the nearest. A stealthy rustling warned them that snakes were about; but not till Moore had struck a match were they aware of their strange surroundings. The cave had evidently been partly or wholly excavated by human hands, being an almost square chamber, with shelves of rock along two sides. On these, in a ghastly row, were squatted the dried and shrivelled bodies of some strange and weird race of aborigines. The roof, high above their heads, was festooned by the fluttering wings of countless bats disturbed by the unwelcome light. Maurice cautiously explored the farthest recesses.

"There is another!" he exclaimed, indicating an arched doorway, almost concealed by the darkness. "Let us go on," he added: "we may as well see where it leads to, it's getting exciting!"

Moore lit another match, and from it a torch of dry wood, and together they passed on to the inner chamber. This presented all the features of the first, the same terrible grinning rows of mummies, the same swaying fringes of bats. Moore, shuddering, would have turned to leave; but Maurice, in whom

the passion for exploration was rife, urged him forward. Yet another chamber of death, and then they heard the sound of rushing water pouring in a torrent through the gloom. Continuing, they saw that a deep, but narrow stream rushed tumultuously through the rock, the water glowing with a faint green fire, sometimes rising, sometimes falling, but always present. In the light of this river of flame stood a native, probably a bushman, who surveyed the intruders, with club upraised, and with savage ferocity written in every feature. On his skeleton-like form hung a robe of antelope skin, on his head a long-pointed cap of the same material, the dress possibly indicating he was a member of some particular tribe, or held some responsible office. It was the face though which chilled the young men with horror, so old, so worn, and so wrinkled was it that, save for the fierceness which blazed in the sunken eyes, it might have been that of an animated mummy.

"Who and what are you?" said Maurice, when he had collected his scattered wits.

Before he could speak, a harsh cry resounded through the cave, and both the young men were knocked senseless to the ground. When they recovered, they found themselves in a large and spacious cave, not dark, but lighted by an orifice in the roof. A fire smouldered in the middle of the floor of some smokeless material, which Maurice afterwards found was charcoal. The walls were hung with drinking cups, and vessels for cooking, all of solid gold; and silently surveying them was the extraordinary figure they had at first seen, accompanied by another—a dwarf of the stature of a child, but with the strength of a Hercules in his stunted limbs.

Maurice essayed to sit up, but found he was firmly tied to a post fixed in the ground. He turned to Moore, who was close by, to see him in the same predicament.

"My dear fellow, I was wrong to lead you into this mess," said Maurice. "How on earth are we to get out of it?"

As he spoke, the dwarf started forward with a wondering gesture; but the elder addressed him in a furious tone, and he fell back submissively. However, he had approached near enough for the young men to discover that though his skin was burnt copper-colour by exposure to the sun, his features were those of a European; and, greatly excited, they subdued their overpowering curiosity, and lay silently awaiting their fate.

On this point, they were not long left in doubt. Taking down one of the golden cups from the wall, the priest, for so Maurice dubbed him, mixed several powders in it with a thin wand which he carried, finishing by pouring in water from another vessel. The mixture was divided, and, after waving the wand over the two cups, and uttering sundry unintelligible incantations, he slowly approached the captives, carrying one in each hand. The young Englishmen watched all this with curiosity, not unmingled with impatience, till the priest, in a fierce voice, indicated by signs that they were to drink the potions. The dwarf, who followed closely behind his master, made frantic and imploring gestures, showing by his eagerness that all would surely betide those who swallowed the mixtures, and, though neither of the prisoners affected to notice him, fearing to draw down the priest's wrath upon his head, they stubbornly refused the proffered beverage.

"No thank you, old gentleman!" said Maurice, waving him away. "You don't suppose we are such simpletons as to poison ourselves in cold blood, do you?"

A hoarse chuckle broke from the dwarf, and, furiously turning upon him, the priest forgot his mission for the moment.

Maurice, however, did not. A sudden kick made the old man stagger, and drop both cups, which rolled harmlessly away. What the contents could have been neither of the young men could imagine. A white smoke rose steadily from the rocky floor for some time afterwards, and the dwarf's now unconcealed pleasure hinted strongly at the gruesome character of the draughts.

After his first paroxysm of fury, the priest relapsed into sullen silence, presently leaving the cavern.

"This gets serious," said Maurice. "Do they mean to starve us?"

Moore sighed. "It looks like it. Here comes the dwarf. Speak to him, he seems to understand English."

To their amazement the hideous little fellow skipped up to them directly the priest had disappeared.

"Do not fear, I will help you to escape!" he whispered, in good English.

"When?" asked Maurice. "We are starving!"

"In three hours," returned the dwarf. "I go for food." He brought them some dried roots, which made a poor substitute for bread; but for which they were sufficiently grateful.

"Can you not let us go now?" asked Maurice feverishly. "Wait, my master," said the dwarf, "Bondaru, the priest, stands at the doorway. The sun is setting. When he comes back I will give him his evening meal. In it I will put some-

thing to make him sleep. I know much of herbs. Then we will go!"

This seemed reasonable enough; but still the young men were uneasy. They might be unable to make good their escape after all. Suddenly, while they listened for the returning footsteps of the priest, a low, rumbling sound broke the stillness, the earth heaved, and all the golden vessels on the wall clattered and rattled. Twice the sounds were repeated.

"The earth trembles," said the dwarf; "a third time will come——" He broke off in haste, for the priest re-entered, and the dwarf hurried to attend his master.

The prisoners were unable to see much that went forward, for the cave was now lighted only by the dull glow of the fire; but after what seemed an interminable waiting, the dwarf rushed up to them, knife in hand. Their bonds were cut in a moment, and both the young men were wild with delight at being free once more. The dwarf led them to the other end of the cave, where they could just discern the form of the priest lying quietly upon the rock.

"Come!" said the dwarf. And noiselessly they followed.

Through one cave after another he went, till at length the pale-green fire of the water shone through the pitch darkness. Just as they reached the side of the river, doubly awful in the intense gloom, another low thunder rose in the air. Louder and louder it grew, the walls rocked, and the river burned with a fiercer glow. Awed and trembling, they all stood waiting. A minute more, and a terrific crash nearly threw them off their feet. The air was filled with dark and flapping wings, as thousands of bats whirled wildly over their heads.

"What can it be?" asked Moore, when the tumult subsided a little.

"Another earthquake!" said Maurice. "Ah! here comes the dwarf again."

For their helper had slipped away directly after the crash. His eyes were starting with horror, and his muscular form trembled and shook as if palsied.

"Masters! masters!" he gasped; "the cliff has fallen! We are buried alive!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE FATE OF BONDARU—TARROO'S STORY—A TERRIBLE PREDICAMENT—A DESPERATE VOYAGE.

Some time elapsed before they could grasp the meaning of the dwarf's disjointed utterances. At length they made out that he had feared an accident, and started to find the doorway of the principal cave, but could not even discern its whereabouts. The whole had collapsed, and he could only perceive that all outlets to fresh air were hopelessly closed.

"Let us go back to where Bondaru lies," suggested Maurice. "There, at least, we can breathe freely, and know when it is daylight."

But the dwarf vehemently protested. That he was in mortal terror of the priest was clear.

"He kill! he kill!" he moaned.

"Nonsense!" said Maurice. "I will fasten his hands so that you need have no fear."

This reassured their guide, and he assumed his usual place before them, intending to lead on; but he had not taken many steps before he stopped with a positive yell of anguish, and turned to flee. Maurice seized him in a firm clasp, while he looked to see the cause of this fresh distraction. Just in front, standing in the pale gleam of the river of fire, stood the awe-inspiring figure of the priest, his fearful countenance absolutely contorted with fury, as he surveyed his terrified servant in friendly converse with the prisoners, and his long wand raised as if to strike.

While the miserable dwarf writhed and struggled, the wand fell to the floor as if from a nerveless hand. The priest made one step forward, staggered, and tripped, for a breathless instant he swayed to and fro, striving to recover his balance; then, with a piercing shriek, fell backward into the river of fire, and was swept like a flash out of sight. Horror-stricken the three stood gazing at the ghastly tinted flood; but no sign was given of the terrible Bondaru.

"You need fear him no more," said Maurice to the dwarf; "he is dead!"

"He dead!"—incredulously. "He has lived more than a hundred years. He will live for ever! Nevertheless, I believe him to be dead now!"

"Let us go to the cavern whence we came!"

The dwarf, thus urged, plucked up courage, and led them back to their prison. Stars shone through the opening in the roof, and the air was cool and refreshing. Their position was desperate in the extreme, yet both Englishmen felt they could here at least support life, even without food for a day or two, so long as they could breathe the pure air of heaven.

In the meantime, they threw themselves down to rest, and

Maurice, remembering his own and his chum's amazement at hearing good English spoken in that strange place, fell to questioning the dwarf as to his previous life. His story was as follows:

"Many years ago, when I was a boy of ten years old, I came to Africa with my parents. We were travelling in a waggon drawn by horses. One day my mother died, and she was buried. Another day, I fell and hurt myself badly. I was made to lie on a mattress. Then, while I was still ill, and we were journeying onward, my father came in and told me our Kaffirs had deserted us, and he had lost his way. Then next morning there was a terrible noise. I never saw my father again. Bondaru took me into the caves, and I became his slave. He turned the horses loose, drove them away, and burnt the waggon."

"But who was Bondaru?" asked Maurice, deeply interested. "Nay, I know not. He lived in the home of his dead ancestors, and cared for them. He was fierce and cruel. Twice he has caught white men, and killed them—once by poison, as he wished to kill you, once he starved them."

"Starved them?" said Moore, horrified.

"Yes; he bound them to the stakes as you were bound, and they lingered till they died. I was young, and he kept me in another cave lest I should help them. But I heard their cries; they were sacrifices to the river of fire."

"It is a good thing the old fellow is dead!" said Maurice meaningly. "Now, what is your name, and where did you live in England?"

"My name was John. I forget the other. Master called me Tarroo. I know nothing of my English home, though I have not forgotten the English speech. When Bondaru sent me to search for food, I sang and talked to myself, for I thought someday, perhaps, I should escape."

"And how long have you lived here?" again asked Maurice.

"I cannot tell; many, very many moons have come and gone, and I feared Bondaru. He said he could see all I did when I was away from him. I was his slave!"

"Well, you are his slave no longer. I begin to think the old rascal deserved his fate."

"See, there is the first light of dawn. We must get out of this place, or we are doomed men."

Maurice had good reason to think sadly of his last words before the long day was over. Tarroo, as he preferred being called, manufactured a torch, and by its light they sought again and again for some outlet to the caves. As the dwarf had said, the whole of the entrance had collapsed, and nothing was visible but masses of rock, and heaps of sandy dust. The mummied bushmen lay about in confusion. All was in vain. They had no tools to attempt to dig a passage, and it was a very silent and depressed little group which assembled in the priest's cave for the frugal meal of roots, which was all they had as food. Tarroo brought water from the river; but they could not drink it, the bitterness was worse than thirst. He said the stream from which the priest had always taken his supplies was outside the entrance, and, of course, destroyed.

Thirst, unfortunately, was now becoming unpleasantly apparent, and Moore proposed that before they became unable to act, they should make an endeavour once again to reach the opening in the roof. This, however, proved quite impossible. They had no ropes, and it was at least thirty feet above their heads.

When the terrible truth could no longer be disguised that they were indeed doomed, Maurice felt almost inclined to despair. Throwing himself down beside his chum, he lay for an hour or more in moody silence, blaming himself for the foolhardy recklessness which had led to such a chapter of accidents. The sun was now directly overhead, and bright beams made their way through the opening, lighting up the whole of the cave.

Suddenly Moore jumped up.

"Couldn't we get away in that?" he said excitedly, pointing to a large object leaning against the wall in one corner.

"What?" asked Maurice, roused in turn.

But Moore, with the help of Tarroo, was already moving the object. It proved to be a section of the trunk of a tree hollowed, till the sides were not much more than an inch in thickness. It was, in point of fact, a boat.

"How did it come here?" Maurice asked.

But Tarroo shook his head. There it was when first Bondaru had pressed him into his service, and there it had remained.

"Now we have it. I don't quite understand what you mean to do with it?" said Maurice.

"Do with it? Why, sail away down the river, to be sure!" returned Moore jubilantly.

"My dear fellow, you are mad! The river is underground. Suppose we are stranded in some narrow place, where we can neither advance nor go back, think what our fate would be?"

"Think rather what it will be if we remain here. The river must have some outlet, else what becomes of it? If we trust

ourselves upon it, we may have a chance of life. If we do not, we shall be literally buried alive!"

This was clear enough, and though he feared the worst, Maurice raised no more objections. He explained to Tarroo what they were going to do, and the dwarf also agreed that, if a desperate experiment, they were also in a desperate position, and where they went he would also go, too.

This settled, the next thing was to convey the boat to the water's edge—a very easy task; but by alternately dragging and pushing it was done. Before embarking, Moore collected some of the golden vessels which hung on the walls of the cave.

"If we survive," he remarked, "we shall need money; if we do not, never mind. Perhaps some day we may return for the rest."

Tarroo saw to the storing away of the scanty stock of food, and then, after a last look around, one after another they embarked on their perilous and exciting journey. The boat was quite water-tight, and slid away into the natural arch through which the stream found a way, as easily and quickly as if propelled by oars. Tarroo had provided himself with a torch, but this soon went out, and, though the water still glowed with the same unearthly, green hue, it served only to light up their immediate neighbourhood. Once or twice they were nearly swamped, when their primitive vessel grated against unseen rocks, and another time they were compelled to lie down flat, when the roof was just above the gullwale. In agonies of suspense, hours passed on, till suddenly, Moore exclaimed:

"I see daylight!"

And there certainly, in the far distance, was a speck of light, which momentarily became brighter. Breathlessly they watched its nearer approach, as the boat slid on, till there was no longer any doubt that they would soon reach the open air. Joyfully they watched the darkness give way to twilight, and felt the pure air rushing in, and then saw the green glare of the water fade to the clear limpidity of a mountain stream. As they stood up in the boat, wild with expectation and excitement, the better to leap ashore when they emerged from the cave, they felt it glide forward with tremendous velocity. There was a sudden sensation of falling, a thud, and then they knew no more. Moore was the first to recover himself. He awoke to find that he had been shot headlong on to a stretch of sandy ground; but, save for a general feeling of stiffness, was not hurt. His companions were both evidently in a worse case. Maurice lay quite senseless, and Tarroo leaped to his feet just as Moore discovered his whereabouts.

Before doing anything else, they devoted themselves to Maurice, who had an ugly cut on one side of his head. When this was bound up, and the young man restored to consciousness, they were able to examine their surroundings.

The mysterious river poured out of a deep cleft in the rock, which formed a low range of hillocks stretching away into the distance, and, falling upon the sandy earth, most of it disappeared just as mysteriously, while the rest trickled away in a little streamlet. The country upon which they had emerged was wild and broken, and, so far as they could see, seemed to partake of the same character. Tarroo gazed about in bewilderment, and when Maurice asked him if he knew anything of the place, declared emphatically that he did not.

How far they had come they knew not; but as the sun was setting the young men decided that they had better make a camp for the night just where they were, rather than wander about an unknown land in utter darkness. The boat lay in fragments on the sand at the foot of the waterfall; but the guns were safe, and so was the box of ammunition, and the food, though it was scattered in confusion. They therefore dried their wet garments in the sunravs, and Tarroo, in his own fashion, managed a fire, where the remains of the boat hissed and sputtered merrily. Maurice went off for food, and soon came back, carrying some fine birds with glossy-black plumage, which he said he had found squatting among the mud formed by the streamlet farther down. They were very tame, and he had killed them with a stick; but they were none the less welcome, and were soon cooking over the fire. Supper over, the swift darkness was upon them, and the distant cries of various wild creatures warned them to heap up the fire, and look to their arms. Wearied as they were, they kept a strict watch; but even these precautions did not prevent their getting a terrible fright.

CHAPTER V.

A NARROW ESCAPE—HUMAN TARGETS—LIONS TO THE RESCUE—TARROO'S EXPLOITS.

It was Moore's turn to be on guard first, and he set himself to keep awake; but fatigue overcame his good resolutions, and in a few minutes he was fast asleep. He awoke in terror, and, springing to his feet, became suddenly aware that a huge beast was rolling furiously on the sand, biting savagely at a

wound in its flank, from which blood was streaming, and that his companions were hurriedly reloading their weapons. Snatching up his own rifle, he stepped forward, and fired at the foe—an enormous lion. The bullet crashed into the skull, and, with a deep groan, it fell dead.

It appeared that Tarroo was the first to become aware of the lion's presence. He awoke just as the beast was preparing to spring upon the slumbering camp. His terrified yell roused Maurice, who fired as the expected plunge took place, wounding but not killing the animal, which fortunately had no time to spring again before Moore put an end to it.

It being time for breakfast, Tarroo busied himself in finding roots, and also cooked the last of the birds for their meal. They had just partaken of it, when a hideous cry was heard from the brushwood near, and in an instant they were surrounded by a crowd of bushmen—dwarfed, misshapen, and savage. A dozen or more of the new-comers threw themselves upon each of the men, who fought till they were overcome by sheer force of numbers, and thrown, with hands and feet tightly secured, on the sand near the dead lion.

Then the bushmen, who were fully armed, gathered in a chattering, half-circle before their captives, as if uncertain what to do next. After a pause, each prisoner was roughly dragged along the veldt, till a small clump of low trees was reached. Here they were fastened each against a separate trunk, and Maurice faintly breathed the word "Targets" in his chum's ear. Tarroo was singled out as the first victim, and, as he was near enough to catch the words, Maurice shouted:

"I will help you directly! I am nearly free!"

An effort which made the raw-hide bonds cut into his wrists till they bled, enabled Maurice to loosen them till he could slip one hand out, and, though trembling with eagerness, he managed to free himself altogether without attracting the notice of the bushmen. Maurice's intention was to defend himself with his knife and revolver, while Moore was cutting the thongs around his ankles. He was just on the point of rushing across to his comrade, when an unexpected ally turned up. The scent of blood had attracted all the wild animals in the neighbourhood to the spot, and, just as the first flight of poisoned darts flew around Tarroo's head, a fierce roar awoke the bushmen to the fact that they were literally hemmed in on all sides by savage and hungry beasts.

In an instant all was confusion. Seeing their opportunity, the young men hesitated not an instant, but quickly rushed to the help of Tarroo, who fortunately was quite safe and unhurt. Maurice hurriedly bid his companions scramble up the largest of the trees, while he climbed into a smaller one near.

The bushmen were stricken with a sudden panic, and, uttering shrill cries of terror, fled up the rocks. In a few minutes not one of the natives was visible. Balked of their prey, the beasts gradually dispersed, and, without further delay, the three wanderers struck directly across the veldt, anxious to put a considerable distance between themselves and the haunts of the bushmen. Before many hours passed, they suddenly awoke to the unpleasant fact that they had neglected to bring a supply of water with them from the stream, which they found was drinkable, not far from their camping-place. The heat was intense, and everything green drooped and quivered in the blaze. Words became fewer and fewer, even Tarroo was silent, and at last Moore fell, unable to walk a step farther. Maurice hastily lifted him into the shadow of some stunted bushes, and looked around in agony for signs of water.

"Tarroo," he said, when he could force his parched and burning lips to form the words—he was past any but a hoarse whisper—"Tarroo, he will die!"

The dwarf gazed at the pinched features in dire perplexity; then, without speaking, darted away among the rocks.

In a short time he reappeared, his arms full of the leaves of a cactus. Carefully avoiding the spines, with which they were thickly ornamented, he bent over Moore, and squeezed the juice from the thickest and most fleshy portions of his prize, handing a leaf at the same time to Maurice, who was now suffering all the agonies of extreme thirst. He found the liquid was pleasantly acid and refreshing, and very soon Moore sat up, quite himself again.

Rested and refreshed, they waited till the furious midday heat was over before resuming their journey, and made good progress before nightfall. No game of any kind was obtainable, so their only supper was the wild berries they gathered on the way; but they managed to pass the night quietly under the shelter of some bushes. Next day they were delighted to find that they had slept within a few hundred yards of a track which led right through the veldt. This they decided to follow, and set out with fresh hopes of reaching a settlement where they could obtain food and guidance. At night they could see smoke in the distance, which, when they reached it, proved to come from a long, irregular house, half inn, half farm, standing close to the roadside. A settler's waggon was near, with a long string of tired oxen nibbling what scanty

herbage they could reach, and three or four Kaffir drivers were unloading some of their master's goods.

Maurice made them understand that they needed food and shelter, and, after a somewhat prolonged discussion with the inmates of the house, a Kaffir servant came out and told them to enter.

Their host was a stolid Dutchman, who watched them with an aggrieved air, as if they had done him an injury. This was so marked when Maurice approached to pay him, that he asked if anything was wrong.

"You have driven away two of my best customers!" said the man sulkily. "I can't let you stay here if that's your little game."

"My good friend," said Maurice in amazement, "I assure you we know no one, and have no idea of driving away anyone! You are imagining all this."

The Dutchman muttered fiercely; then, his fury getting the better of his discretion, he pointed to the door.

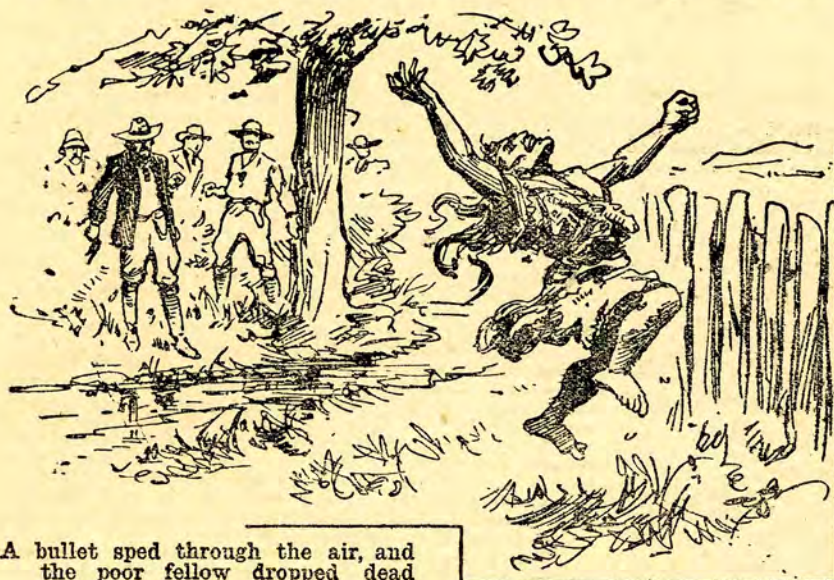
"You are after no good, I know, or the two gentlemen would not have rushed away at sight of you. You've had your supper, now out you go!"

Still wondering, Maurice left the half-drunken fellow, and hurried to meet Moore, who appeared to be in considerable excitement.

"Would you believe it!" he cried, "we are actually only fifty miles from Wettersfontein. Think of that; we have come by a short cut down the river. It was not a misfortune after all!"

Maurice communicated their dilemma as regarded their night's lodging.

The host still sullenly refusing to allow them to remain the



A bullet sped through the air, and the poor fellow dropped dead without a moan.

night, they left, merely asking if they were on the direct road for Wettersfontein.

On the evening of the third day after this, the little mining town came in sight, and, fully alive to the fact that the so-called Smith would prove a troublesome customer, if by any chance he were in the place, the friends laid their plans accordingly. Tarroo was to go in alone, and, if questioned, to disclaim all knowledge of Maurice and his chum, who, posing as fortune hunters, were to wait a few hours before following. This was carefully carried out, and, just at nightfall, Maurice and Moore came limping up to the hotel, a primitive shanty of wood and clay.

A number of men were grouped round Tarroo. One of them was speaking, and in him the young men instantly recognised one of the crew of ruffians who had seized them, before they made acquaintance with the caves of Bondaru. He stared hard, his jaw dropped, and, hastily rising, he rushed into the street, where he was soon out of sight. Maurice feared he was off to join his confederates; but he knew it was impossible to interfere. He accordingly came to terms with the landlord for a room for himself and his friend; and, wearied at last of the noise and uproar of the common bar of the house, they left it early, and retired to rest.

CHAPTER VI.

AN EVENTFUL NIGHT—PRIMROSE COTTAGE—THE WONDERFUL BOX—UNWELCOME VISITORS—TARROO'S FATE.

They had not slept more than an hour or two before Tarroo gently undid the door, and crept quietly in to the friends. When he awoke Maurice, he held up his hand for silence.

"Master!" he whispered, "this house is to be burnt to-night! Rise and dress quickly. There are many men outside!"

Moore joined the two at this moment, and they looked at each other in dismay. Here was a fresh check, for which they were totally unprepared.

"Save yourself, Tarroo! We will follow."

While he spoke, faint spirals of blue smoke crept through the roughly-hewn boards, and a dull murmur told of the unruly crew of ruffians bent on mischief who waited outside. Tarroo vanished, and, noiselessly opening the door, the chums stumbled through the ever-increasing smoke, and essayed to find the door of the building. But this they could not do.

Meanwhile, the uproar outside increased, and when the young men would have turned to try to find a window, a rush and whistling of flames warned them it was too late. Down a slippery flight of steps they fled, till, finding they had left the turmoil of the fire behind, Maurice spoke.

"Are we in a cellar, do you think?"

"It must be; we are away from the inn, at all events."

Moore was coughing and choking, half suffocated. Maurice led him further along the subterranean pathway, and at length to his extreme delight saw a star shining through the roof, and felt the fresh night-air pouring through the same opening.

"We're safe for the present, at any rate," said Maurice.

"Hush! what's that? Don't you hear something?"

A feeble moan broke the stillness.

"What is it? Where are you?" cried Maurice again.

"Here," said a weak voice—"here, near the wall."

They rushed in the direction of the sound, but found their progress barred by a wall.

"I believe it was Tarroo," said Maurice. "Let us go back again."

They returned to their original standpoint, and again the moaning was audible.

"Tarroo, is it you?" cried Maurice frantically.

"Yes," was the reply. Then, after a pause: "I am hurt. A man threw a bit of rock. Where are you, master?"

"We are underground, and cannot get out. Where is the fire?"

"Away!" was the rejoinder. "I can see the flames."

"Maurice, you are tall, stand under the hole. I will climb to your shoulders, and get through; then I will draw you up."

In another minute or two, Moore cried out from the open air:

"It was a stiff business, but I've managed it. Tarroo is here, more frightened than hurt, I believe. Now

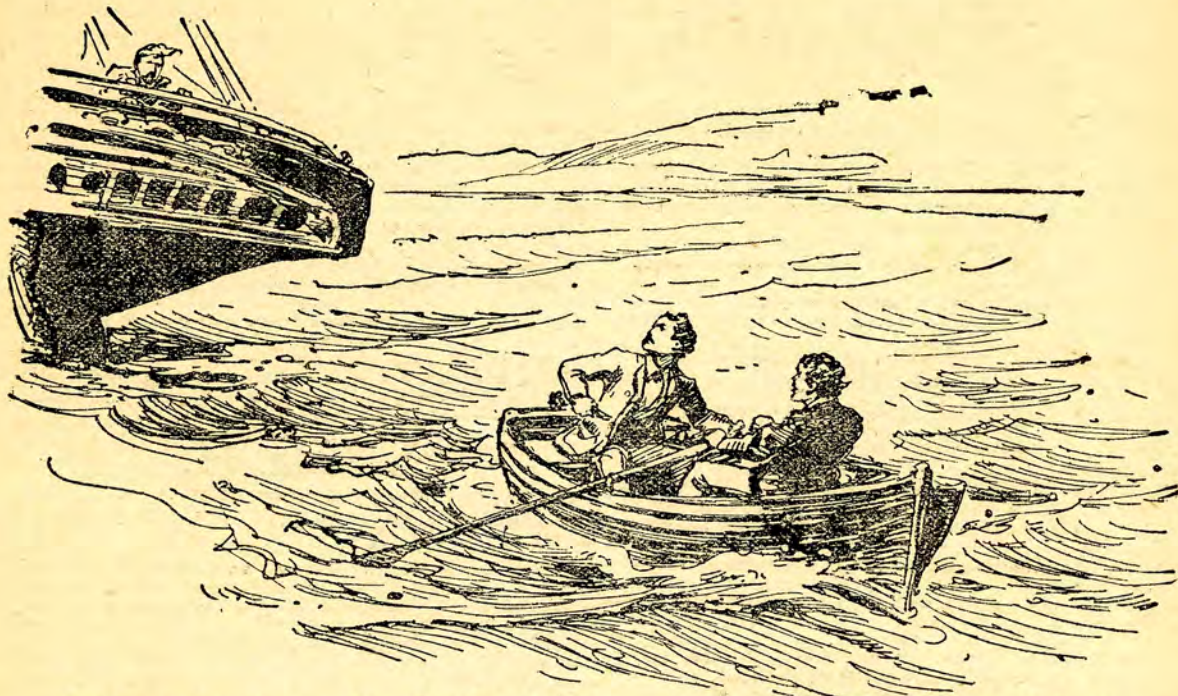
I'm going to hunt for something for you."

He did not go far, for he was even then stumbling about among the debris of mining operations, where he soon possessed himself of a coil of rope. This he lowered through the hole, and, just as the sun's first beams were thrown over the parched and thirsty country, Maurice stood beside his companions, surveying from a safe distance the ruins of the inn where they were supposed to have perished, for neither of them doubted for a moment that Smith and his myrmidons were at the bottom of the plot. Indeed, as they found later on, he was actually the owner of the inn itself, and had arranged the whole affair. Tarroo, though he had a formidable bruise on his head, plucked up wonderfully when he saw his friends beside him again, and, after binding up the injury, they took counsel as to their next move.

"We had better declare ourselves, and take possession of the cottage; it cannot be far away," said Maurice. "While they imagine we are buried in the ruins, let us find our destination before the sun rises."

Carefully hiding in the shadow of the heaps of debris lying on all sides, they cautiously made their way through the town till they emerged upon the open veldt. By this time, others were moving, and, meeting a Kaffir boy, they asked if he knew

NEXT WEEK. "FATHOMS



A red-capped ruffian caught sight of the fugitives. A shot whistled shrilly over their heads.

the cottage formerly inhabited by old Egerton, the farmer. To their surprise, he pointed before them, and there they saw lying off at a side an erection of fairly large size, with clay walls, and a roof of wooden shingles, hardly the home they had imagined for the old man.

However, as they drew nearer, they perceived that it was in truth the house they looked for, for Uncle Egerton's grimly ironical name was still there on the rough, deal boards, "Primrose Cottage."

It was untenanted, and showed plainly that it had been so for long. So, pushing open the door, the three entered, and Maurice closed it again directly.

"Now, what I propose is this," he said. "We must remain here till we have done our best to find the diamonds; but we must keep it a dead secret. Therefore, what are we to do? We shall need food, water, and we ought to have horses, so that we can take flight if we are likely to be overpowered and robbed."

"Then, while we are hidden here, Tarroo, who is not supposed to be one of us, had better get food and tools for us, and bring them at night," suggested Moore.

"Just what I was thinking. We must trust him to keep silence."

Tarroo, who was busy examining the resources of the cottage, was called, and the position explained, Maurice impressing on him the absolute necessity of caution. He agreed to their proposals, and accordingly left the cottage at once in case he was seen by inquisitive eyes. Once alone, the two young Englishmen set to work to look over their temporary abode. It consisted of two rooms only of fair size, and, save for an old box or two, was destitute of furniture. The walls were smoothed and painted, the floor was of stout planks, and there was an excellent fireplace.

"Below this floor, I suppose, we shall find some of the treasure," said Moore, when they had made an exhaustive survey. "Hallo! there comes Tarroo! What can he want?"

The faithful fellow entered a most immediately.

"Masters, I brought a hammer which I found, and some mealies which I bought with the money you gave me. I will come again to-night."

He slid away almost as noiselessly as he had come, and the friends attacked the mealies.

They set to work immediately after their frugal breakfast, and with some difficulty succeeded in raising several of the planks of the flooring. Still nothing rewarded them but clouds of dust and innumerable spiders, and both began to fear they had had their trouble for nothing. Another plank came up, and Maurice uttered a sudden exclamation, at the same time picking up a small wooden box placed on a cross-beam.

In a moment both were at the window investigating the contents, speechless with excitement and wonder. It was half

filled with fine diamonds, such as they had never hoped to see.

"Well," said Maurice, with a sigh of satisfaction, "I don't wonder Uncle Egerton wished these put in safety. I, for one, am very grateful to him for his consideration. You have a pocket in your belt, and so have I. Let us divide them, and then replace the planks."

Hardly had they finished the division, and put back all the floor, save one short, broad piece, when they heard footsteps outside the cottage. Maurice looked wildly around. There was no loophole of escape save the gaping hole in the floor.

"Get in!" he whispered. And Moore hurriedly obeyed, while his friend adjusted the board, so that he could allow it to fall when he had himself taken advantage of the refuge. The space was small, and the dust choking; but by judiciously lying flat, he contrived to get the wood in place before the door opened and two men came in.

"I tell you the old fellow meant this cottage garden. Here are the two trees, and, depend upon it, this red cross means the place where he found his money. No man could have followed him up closer than I did. I guessed he was ill, for I saw a doctor's carriage at the house-door. Then I got that unlucky blow on my head, was taken to the hospital, and kept there till I refused to remain any longer. I knew the old man would never go back himself, he would send someone else; and when I went down to Southampton, just on spec to see, I found his nephew was booked to sail by the 'Tuscan.' I knew then it was now or never. So I came, too, to follow it up," one said.

The pair then went into the so-called garden. Meanwhile, the two under the floor were suffering all the agonies of incipient suffocation, and, directly they dared venture, the smaller plank was thrown up, and they scrambled to their feet. Dusty and panting, they crept to the window. The men were away across the veldt, hurrying back to the town.

"Had we not better try our luck now?" suggested Moore.

"We may not have another opportunity."

"So I think," was the reply. "We have no tools, that is the worst of it."

"We must do what we can with these old bits of tin. At least we shall be able to raise the earth."

But when they reached the spot, which they imagined was represented by the red cross, they were considerably taken aback to see that a small streamlet ran directly over it, equidistant between the two trees. However, determined to try, they searched diligently; but no sign of diamonds, or diamond-bearing earth met their eyes. Headless of the blazing sun, they laboured on till they had made quite a large excavation on each side of the water.

"Has this been worked before, do you think?" asked Moore, pausing a moment.

"No, the bank is quite firm; but I fear Uncle Egerton got from it all there was of any value. What's this, though?"

He broke through into a small hole in the side. There, neatly arranged, almost as if it had been done by hand, was a pile of stones, much the same as those they had already secured, and as many, if not more, in number.

Moore with difficulty restrained a cry of delight; but his companion packed them into his belt with all speed.

"We have no time to lose," he remarked.

But they found no others, though they worked at railway speed, and when at last the setting sun warned them that night was approaching, they were almost too weary to crawl into the desolate and lonely cottage.

"If we find no more, we are rich men," said Maurice, "and the sooner we are away the better!" A sentiment in which Moore heartily concurred.

An hour or two later, Tarroo found them lying on the bare boards, the only couch they possessed. He looked hurried and excited.

Masters!" he said, "you must fly. A lot of men and horses are coming here. You were seen working to-day!"

Maurice leaped to his feet.

"Go, masters, go!" urged Tarroo. "They will be here directly!"

"Save yourself!" cried Moore. And, staying not a moment, they rushed out of the cottage, and away across the veldt, hiding as best they could among the brushwood and rocks. One backward glance showed them Tarroo leisurely strolling along the track in the opposite direction. It was the last time they ever saw him.

Running, scrambling, and slipping, the two exerted all their powers to put a good stretch of ground between themselves and their enemies. Coming to a deep cutting through which ran a stream, Moore proposed they should wade in the water for a time.

"They will see we have been working to-day, and they may hunt us with dogs. It will throw them off the scent."

Maurice immediately splashed into the water. Moore followed suit, and, as fast as they could in the semi-darkness, for the moon was now hidden behind a bank of cloud, they hurried along the uneven bed of the stream. Early dawn revealed the chimneys of a settler's hut, or farmhouse, half a mile away.

"Could we get horses there?" said Maurice, who was now utterly exhausted.

"I'll go and see," returned his chum. "You rest under this bush."

"Here's the cash, then," said Maurice; "absolutely all I have left. Happily, horses are cheap enough."

Moore limped away over the veldt till he reached the house, which he found was occupied only by a Kaffir family. He made known his wants as best he could; but for some time could get no satisfactory reply. Then he understood that they would sell if a certain price was paid. In his impatience Moore agreed, though it was far more than the two sorry nags were worth, as he found to his cost. Directly the bargain was made, he regretted his haste; but knowing Maurice would be waiting, he mounted one of the animals, and, leading the other, set off to rejoin him.

When they had been riding for an hour, Maurice suddenly declared he must rest, or he should fall from his horse. Moore was in nearly as bad a plight, and, accordingly they drew rein at the foot of a range of low hills, beyond which rose the mountains. A stretch of green turf promised forage for the horses, and some roots and wild berries food for the travellers; and, throwing themselves down, they eagerly began their meal.

Meanwhile, Tarroo, when he left the cottage, strolled leisurely along, hoping that he would escape the attention of the unruly mob he knew was approaching. Nearer and nearer they came, till he recognised Smith—or, as he should more correctly be termed, Van Dork—who seemed utterly mad with rage.

"Keep it to yourself, did you?" asked a lanky desperado at his elbow. "Well, it's share and share alike now, I can tell you!"

"What's the good of talking like that. Those fellows have cleared the ground!" cried Van Dork furiously; then, catching sight of Tarroo, he shouted: "Seen anyone working at the hut there?"

"No," said Tarroo. "Which hut?"

The man next Van Dork said something to his companion in a low voice, and both leaped to the ground.

"I believe you're one of the lot!" said the first menacingly. "Speak up, now! Where are the two Englishmen?"

Tarroo truthfully replied that he did not know, whereupon Van Dork cried: "Come with us, we'll soon find out whether you are a traitor or not!"

Tarroo was dragged forward, whether he would or not, the men yelling with delight when he frantically struggled to escape, till at length the savage crew poured into the cottage,

and thence to the enclosure where stood the two trees. A fierce cry of anger was raised when it became clear to the maddened and half-drunken miners that the bed of the streamlet showed distinct signs of recent operations.

Tarroo had been placed against one of the tree trunks till the inspection was over, and, taking advantage of the mêlée he endeavoured to creep away unobserved. He had reached the corner, and was about to leap the wooden fence, when a bullet whizzed through the air, and the poor fellow dropped dead without so much as a moan. A sudden silence fell on the band of desperadoes; but Van Dork did not lose his customary air of authority.

"Fire the cottage, and bury him in it. He's only a Kaffir fellow!"

In less time than it takes to tell, the body of Tarroo was placed in the larger room, and the cottage set fire to in several places.

"Now, boys," said Van Dork, when the place was enveloped in flames, "who is for a chase? Those Englishmen did not dig for nothing. Who will follow them?"

To his intense and angry amazement, no one volunteered, and, after hurling a volley of furious epithets at their heads, the Dutchman mounted and rode away alone.

CHAPTER VII.

ON BOARD THE "KATHERINE" — "WILLIAM BROWN"—A DASTARDLY VILLAIN—ADRIFT—ON THE ISLAND.

All unconscious of poor Tarroo's awful fate, Maurice and Moore remounted and rode on. The horses, miserable specimens as they were, managed to get over the ground fairly fast, and, by keeping to the beaten track across the veldt, they came within sight of Port Natal in a few days. The journey was uneventful. Both were truly thankful when they were once more safely in Port Natal. Here Maurice exchanged a small diamond or two for money, and they began to inquire for means of starting for England. The same day that they arrived so also did a man in the dress of a miner, who left a weary horse at an outlying settlement, and shambled into the place, limping as if footsore, and with his broad-brimmed hat well pulled down over his ears. He was a curious person, however, for he soon ascertained that one of the young Englishmen, whose coming he had actually watched, had converted some diamonds into cash, and he gnashed his teeth with baffled fury when he found that instead of waiting for a liner they were going by a trading vessel, the "Katherine," to the Cape.

The day before the vessel started a man presented himself to the captain, and begged for work. He would come for his passage only. The end of a long argument was that the man was permitted to take up his position among the other sailors, and for the first few days proved rather an acquisition than otherwise. At the end of this time, however, the mate informed the captain that the new hand—who had signed as William Brown—had been seen hovering about the hold in a suspicious manner; also that thefts of provisions were reported from the cook's department.

The captain immediately went off to inspect the hold, for they were without cargo, and it seemed a mysterious thing that anyone should trouble himself about it, particularly as it was almost empty.

It was about ten o'clock on a dark and starless night that this took place, and all day the wind had been gradually rising, till now it screamed through the rigging of the "Katherine," with such force that the vessel leaped and plunged tremendously. Captain Jessel's face was considerably paler than usual when his visit of inspection was over.

"All hands to the pumps!" was the next startling cry. And the young Englishmen rushing on deck at the warning call, were met by the news that the ship had sprung a leak. It was a time neither of them ever forgot. The ship appeared to be gradually sinking lower in the water. Towards morning, Captain Jessel ordered the boats—two in number—to be got ready, with provisions and water, so that if the wind did not moderate, a refuge was provided; and while some of the men hurried to execute his orders, the two friends went on deck to offer their help, and see the position of the ship. Maurice gazed hopelessly around. A driving fog added to the desperate situation, and the end could hardly be far off, for they were now very low down, indeed. Moore moved away to fetch a coat, and Maurice remained hidden in his sheltered corner gloomily surveying the narrow stretch of turbid water visible. Suddenly a heavy blow stretched him senseless on the deck, a desperate man hurriedly tore off his jersey and undid the belt in which lay hidden the precious store of gems.

Possessed of this, the robber deftly rebuttoed the jersey, and slid noiselessly away, just as Moore returned. Aghast at finding his chum lying bleeding, and as if dead, he hastened

to bind up the wound with his handkerchief, and when Maurice slowly opened his eyes asked what had happened.

Before he could answer, the "Katherine" began to lurch in a dangerously-suggestive manner, and Captain Jessel's voice was heard above the whistling wind:

"Save yourselves! To the boats, all! Come!" he added, rushing up to the young men, though scarcely had he spoken when a seaman followed him.

"The small boat's gone, sir, and Brown in her!"

"What?" roared the captain, in a sudden fury. "Shoot the rascal down!"

But this was impossible. The crafty scoundrel was well away and hidden by the fog. The crew, silent now, for there would be double danger for the ten remaining, packed in that one small craft, insisted, with true generosity, on the still half-stunned Maurice being placed in safety first, Captain Jessel and Moore helping to lift him comfortably into the bow. While they were doing this, and the others awaited the word of command before taking their places, a huge billow divided them from the lurching "Katherine" for the space of a couple of yards, when to the horror of the three, the sinking ship suddenly heeled over and sank as if weighted with lead, completely disappearing in a few seconds. Captain Jessel sprang to the oars, and, aided by Moore, succeeded in drawing away to prevent their boat being swamped, anxiously scanning the waters the while, to see if any of their comrades rose to the surface. But no sign of any human being showed among the restless, foam-tipped billows, and at last they were reluctantly compelled to accept the fact that all were lost. The brave fellows had been carried down by the ship. Only when all hope was abandoned did they turn the boat's head, as they hoped, to the westward, where they believed they should fall in with some passing vessel.

The fog grew denser and more chilly as the long hours wore on, and, too cold and anxious to sleep, they huddled together trying to bring back some warmth to their shivering bodies.

Suddenly Captain Jessel started up, a hollow, booming sound broke through the swishing of the waves.

"Breakers!" he cried; "we must be near some land!"

He and Moore seized the oars, for each moment the booming became more distinct. But they proved perfectly useless, for even while they waited, the boat was swept into a veritable sea of foam. Then one huge wave after another urged it through the flying masses, till, with a crash it dashed upon a rock, a sharp point breaking a hole in the side, and the impact throwing all three occupants upon their faces.

"We have grounded," said Captain Jessel, when he recovered himself; "but where, I know not. Help me to push my coat into this hole, or we shall sink."

The boat was bumping terribly. Each moment they expected her to go to pieces; but just as they succeeded in stopping the inrush of water, the fog lifted, and the bright beams of early sunrise showed them their predicament. The boat was lying on a ridge of rocks encircling a small island, which, so far as they could see, was only an enormous pile of jagged and broken crags, barren, and forbidding in the extreme. Captain Jessel lost no time. Aided by the two friends, he dragged off the boat, wading through the surf, and securing the painter to a jutting point. Exerting all their strength, they tugged manfully, and at length succeeded in beaching their broken and leaking vessel upon the rough and stony shore. Then, all drenched and dripping as they were, they carried the stores she contained to a dry nook in the cliff, and there deposited them, and afterwards threw themselves down for a rest, and a frugal meal of ship's biscuit.

"Have you any idea of our whereabouts?" asked Maurice, regarding the bleak and inhospitable coast with something like a shudder.

"No. We have naturally been driven far out of our course. We may be here for weeks before we are taken off, so we must waste no time in providing ourselves with some sort of shelter."

The older of the three took the lead, and all set diligently to work. The boat was dragged up to a safe place, and the shore, such as it was, carefully examined. The cliffs just there were almost inaccessible, so when Moore discovered a hollow altogether sheltered by overhanging crags, it was unanimously decided to make that their home for the present. Here they spent the night, deferring farther research till the next day. Morning broke bright and beautiful, and the castaways hastened to turn the fine weather to some advantage. They found that unless they could use the boat, which was impossible at present, they could only explore by climbing the cliff for they had landed in a little bay, and all other means of leaving it were closed by the water. At last, after close inspection, they came upon a place where it would be possible to ascend. It was a troublesome business, because Captain Jessel endeavoured to clear away some of the obstructions as they proceeded.

After a prolonged struggle the summit of the cliff was reached, and they saw for the first time that they were upon an island of perhaps a mile in length, and half a mile wide in

the widest part. From where they stood it sloped sharply away to the east, the whole surface barren and bleak, strewn with masses of rock of every shape and size, and alive in parts with myriads of seaweeds. Maurice followed Captain Jessel as he picked his way across the rough ground, till an exclamation from Moore roused him. Turning he saw his chum on his knees trying to lift something from the stony debris. Both Maurice and Captain Jessel exclaimed, when they saw him raise an image, perhaps, three feet high into a perpendicular position, the figure being the most grotesquely carved head and shoulders of a man. What excited them all, however, was not the remarkable nature of the find on such a forlorn and desolate spot, but the fact that the eyes of the image were formed of two splendid diamonds, roughly cut in facets, which glittered and flashed in the sunlight like liquid fire.

"They are diamonds!" said Maurice breathlessly, "and worth a fortune."

"Diamonds have been our undoing," said Moore. "I feel half afraid to meddle with these!"

"Let me try," suggested Captain Jessel. "Unfortunately I have had but small acquaintance with such gems, and we cannot be much worse off than we are now. Let me see if my hammer is of any use. It is a pity to destroy the carving; but we could not carry the thing, so here goes."

He had armed himself with a hammer, which someone had placed among the tools in the boat, and a few heavy blows from this soon broke in the head of the image, which proved to be made of some soft kind of sandstone. When the two jewels were extracted, however, another was found deeply imbedded behind one of the eyes. The artist who had produced the masterpiece had possibly driven in one eye too far, so had placed another over it. Maurice gave a whoop of delight.

Captain Jessel placed the three treasures in his pocket.

"This is all very well!" he remarked drily; "but while we have been spending precious time here, look what we have missed."

He pointed to the far-distant horizon, and there, like a tiny speck, floated a line of smoke from some passing vessel. In blank dismay the three stood watching as the faint trail grew fainter, and at last disappeared.

"We must have a signal," said the captain. "Let us carry up enough dry weed for a fire—a good pile, remember, to be visible for miles. Don't despair," he added, seeing the downcast faces of the young men; "where one vessel passes, another may follow."

They resumed their weary tramp in silence, it was hard to be hopeful in such a terrible plight, and went on without speaking, till they were within a hundred yards of the shore, on which long rollers driven by the rising breeze broke with a sullen crash. Here they stood, sadly enough, examining the desolate prospect, till Moore started off in sudden excitement.

"Is that a boat?" he said, pointing to some object lying among the rocks.

"To be sure it is!" cried Maurice jubilantly. "We may escape after all!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STRANGE BOAT—A FEARFUL SPECTACLE—THE SAVAGE WATCHER—A MYSTERIOUS ROBBERY—A FRIGHTFUL FALL.

In this hope he was doomed to disappointment. When they reached the strange craft, they found to their profound amazement that it was actually the boat stolen by William Brown from the "Katherine," but in an absolutely ruinous condition from the ill-effects of the journey to that rocky coast.

"Brown may be here also," suggested Captain Jessel.

They carefully searched the beach, but could find no sign of the cunning scoundrel, so they were obliged to come at last to the conclusion that he had met the fate he so richly deserved, and had fallen a victim to his own haste and imprudence, carrying the diamonds with him. A search satisfied them that nothing else was in the boat, save an oar or two; but Moore suggested that these should be saved, and some of the staves taken to help to mend up their own craft. Having loaded themselves, they turned to retrace their steps, carefully picking their way among the sharp rocks and piles of weed.

A man, so fierce, so tattered and starved, as to look more like some savage wolf than a human being, glared ferociously at the three from the shelter of a pile of seaweed into which he had burrowed, leaving only his head and shoulders visible. He heard all that was said. Scarcely restraining his malevolent fury, he waited till they were almost out of sight before he slowly withdrew from his shelter, and, crawling on all fours, painfully followed in their tracks. When they reached the summit of the cliffs, he saw them one after another disappear with a contemptuous smile.

"I know better than that!" he hissed; "and you will soon find out that I do!"

So saying, he struck off to the left till he came to a narrow gap in the rock, as if some giant hand had torn them asunder, and left them yawning there. Through this he passed, a very few steps bringing him face to face with the sea, the gap ending in a ledge not more than two feet wide, which sloped gradually down the side of the cliff, till it stopped at a mass of rock, over which it was necessary to climb before reaching the water. He picked his way cautiously down the perilous descent, for jagged and dangerous points of stone cropped up in profusion below, and presently emerged upon a wider portion, where he could stand or sit easily. From this place he could just see the heads of the three men as they moved to and fro, and he watched with a hungry and wolfish scowl the rising smoke of their fire.

Hunger drove him away at last. He crept back to the gap through which he had come, and there made a meal of a nest of eggs, which he found in one of the crevices. It was well he had concealed himself, for full of their plan of a fire as a signal, the two Englishmen, with Captain Jessel's help, were carrying piles of seaweed up the cliff, where they built a little orator with loose rocks, and, packing it tightly with the weed, set fire to it. A dense volume of smoke rose in the air, at which Moore could not conceal his delight.

Towards evening, Maurice proposed that they should try to skirt the shore as far as they could, in the hope of finding either shell-fish or drift timber. Accordingly they started, making their way up the cliff in the first instance, and scrambling down a little further east.

Van Dork, alias Brown, alias Smith, had been on the alert all this time. He waited, however, till the sound of voices died away, and then darted down with wonderful agility till he reached the mass of rock which barred the road. This he easily surmounted; then, dashing into the cave, he seized as much food as he could lay hands upon and rushed back by the way he had come. He found he had brought off food for at least three days, among the rest of his booty being a bottle of brandy, one of several which had formed part of the boat's provisioning.

In an hour or two he was roused by the sound of voices, and, creeping to his watch-tower, he listened eagerly. What he expected was not long in coming.

"Boys!" said Captain Jessel, in an excited tone—"boys, some thief has been helping himself during our absence. See here!"

During the hurried consultation which followed, Brown thought it advisable to convey his plunder to a corner among the rocks on his own side of the island, which he had lined with dry seaweed as a shelter from the chilliness of the nights. Here he threw himself down to rest, for stars were showing in the sky, and he rightly guessed no search would be made for the mysterious robber till next day. When that day broke, however, he judged it best to remain in his hiding-place, for in the distance he saw the three closely examining the cliffs and crevices of the rock-bound coast. Three days passed in this fashion, his provisions were exhausted, and half the brandy was gone.

He passed a miserable night, vowing that come what might he would find means of reaching the store of provisions hidden in the cave before another day was over.

Meanwhile, secure in the thought that their fire was burning, and, what was more important, smoking merrily, Moore and Captain Jessel lent a ready ear when Maurice proposed an excursion in search of shell-fish as an addition to their, alas! fast decreasing stores. They were successful beyond their hopes, for among the shallow rock pools they found some enormous crabs, of which they caught several, tying their formidable claws together with bands of seaweed. Moore took charge of them, saying he would cook them in the largest water jar; but he had scarcely begun his task when Captain Jessel discovered the robbery. None of them doubted that the thief was Brown. Their one idea was to find him, and force him to restore the diamonds.

With this idea they set themselves the task of hunting down the treacherous thief, and, to the unhappy wretch's dismay, began to carry out their plans in a very systematic manner, leaving no crevice or cranny unexplored.

On the evening of the fourth day the heat was intense, and, utterly tired out with their fruitless search, the three friends lay about the mouth of the cave watching the sea, which leaden hued, rolled over the shore in heavy masses of foam, breaking sullenly on the sharp rocks. Captain Jessel watched the lowering sky with some apprehension.

"We are in for a tempest," he observed at last; "and all things considered it will be wiser on our part to take refuge higher up the cliff."

He had scarcely ceased speaking before the storm was upon them. The sea was instantly a boiling cauldron of foaming waves, and the wind, blowing with the force of a tornado, threw sheets of water against the cliffs. Captain Jessel sprang to his feet, and, hurriedly snatching up whatever he could

reach, started up the narrow path which constant use had made to the signal-fire. The others followed, half blinded and staggering, and, after a severe struggle, succeeded in sheltering behind a rough wall of broken rock, which Moore had built to protect his fire from the rough breeze.

Morning broke; the worst of the tempest was over. Maurice suggested that they should get some food and dry their clothing, and as there seemed nothing further to be done they proceeded to the cave. Maurice was the first to enter.

The others who were following saw him stagger backward as if from a blow, while a man, wild, unkempt, and ragged dashed past, and darted along the shore towards a big boulder lying at the foot of the cliff.

In a moment all three were in full chase, reaching the boulder just as the fugitive disappeared behind it. Scrambling over it, they saw what they had never before noticed, a narrow, shelf-like track up the side of the cliff, here, at its greatest height. Up this the man was hurrying, and they did their best to follow, Captain Jessel leading. Suddenly he paused with an exclamation of horror. Brown, for he it was, slipped, and fell frantically grasping at the slippery surface, as he rolled nearer and nearer the edge.

With a scream of terror the wretched creature clung for a second or two to the sharp brink, the broken rock gave way beneath his weight, and he crashed down into the sea below.

CHAPTER IX.

CONCLUSION.

With all speed the three made their way down again, and round the point where only heaps of foam and weed told of the storm. Maurice saw the man lying, half in, half out of a pool, and, wading across, he dragged the bleeding and insensible fugitive into a position whence he could easily be carried back to the cave. Though frightfully injured, he still lived, and when brandy had been poured between his teeth, and his wounds bathed, for they had but little to bind them up, he opened his eyes.

"What is the meaning of this, Brown?" asked Captain Jessel sternly. "How came you here?"

"Oh, you know me, I see!" said Brown, with a ferocious snarl. "Well, this time you've got the upperhand, so I had better cave in—"

He stopped with a groan of agony. "Water, water!" he gasped.

Moore and Maurice, who were eagerly listening, hastened to fetch the precious fluid.

"Now," said the latter, when Brown appeared satisfied, "tell me how it is you are here?"

In a voice broken by groans, and gradually getting weaker till it was but a faint whisper, Brown told his story.

"My name is Van Dork. I dogged the old man, I knew he had suddenly grown rich. I followed him to England. Then I went on board the 'Tuscan' as Smith, and there I listened while you talked in your cabin. I stole the belt. I had you seized, for I was the man who rowed away from the wreck and left you to perish. I was picked up next day by a passing steamer. I shot Tarroo."

"Shot Tarroo!" exclaimed Maurice horrified.

"I shot him, and burnt his body in the cottage. We burnt that, too. I tracked you. I followed you on board the 'Katherine.' I was William Brown. I scuttled the ship, and made my escape in the fog with the treasure I had stolen. But the wind drove the boat on this awful island, and here I have lived since—"

He stopped. He was dead.

"Hey, there!" cried a loud voice; "have you taken up your abode on this precious place? Don't want and help I guess?"

The speaker laughed aloud as he uttered this last sarcasm, for the three turned with one accord, and bounded over the shallows till they reached the speaker, a man who was evidently in command of a small boat rowed by three others, which was drawn up in shore.

For a few minutes all was confusion. Captain Jessel told a little of their story.

"Saw your fire," said the man briefly. "Fetch along your things, and make haste. That's my ship," pointing to a small steamer lying half a mile away. "I'm captain, I'll see you safe on land again. Leave your dead friend, you can't bury anyone here."

Half delirious with delight, Moore and Maurice rushed to the cave for the remains of their stores, while Captain Jessel possessed himself of the dead miscreant's watch, and the belt of diamonds which he had clung to through all his straits.

Another hour, and the terrible island of stone was but a speck on the horizon, watched by three most happy and thankful men, who were now bound, as fast as steam could take them, to home and friends once more, where to this day they often meet, and tell over and over again the story of their adventures in finding Uncle Egerton's hidden treasure.

THE END.

The Silver Watches offered as Prizes by the "FUNNY WONDER" are "made in England."

THE BLACK SEAL

OR THE QUEST OF "ZUB" THE DOG DETECTIVE

READ THIS INTRODUCTION.

Viola Norris is found dead, murdered in the rooms which she occupies, in an aristocratic London mansion, with her only sister Jessie, and her guardian, General Cardwell.

Jessie Norris, being suspected of the murder, summons to her aid Jack Fairfax, a young detective, with his trained bloodhound Zub; and, Fairfax, despite many suspicious circumstances, believing in Jessie's innocence, agrees to take up the case, and track down the real criminal.

The principal clues are a great splash of blood on the wall of an adjoining room, and a black seal, on which is clearly traceable the impression of a man's thumb.

Extraordinary experiences are encountered in the opening chapters. Zub, the dog, traces a mysterious figure to the Underground Railway Station at Charing Cross. Jack enters the carriage with this individual, but is chloroformed, and the party leaps from the train. Zub and his master follow, and trace the weird figure to an underground passage, where they discover a wax-image of the murdered girl.

The trail subsequently leads to a London barracks, to the quarters of Captain Mortimer, the friend of Lieutenant Glyn, who had been engaged to the murdered Viola.

Fairfax, with difficulty gains admittance, and Mortimer receives him with apparent frankness, inviting the detective to lunch. Mortimer, however, drugs Fairfax, and also stupefies Zub; then steals from the detective a scarf, which the latter had just found, cuts it up, and burns all except one fragment, bearing a name, which he hides in his pocket.

A knock is heard. Mortimer escapes by the window, and Jessie Norris enters the room, making straight for the cabinet where the scarf had lain. Missing it, she rushes from the apartment; but is seized at the door by Captain Mortimer, who threatens her.

Jack Fairfax, recovering from his stupor, intervenes, and Mortimer flies.

Following on the track, Fairfax, with Zub, comes again across the weird figure previously met with, and, after several adventures, tracks it down to a mausoleum in West Brompton Cemetery. He throws open the door, and dashes in pursuit into the tomb.

Jack Fairfax crashed headlong into the mausoleum, overturning some trestles supporting the coffin of Viola Norris standing in the centre of the vault, and one end of the leaden chest fell to the ground, pinning him under it. The mausoleum was faintly lighted by a steely-blue glow, and, as the detective fell, a weird, wild figure started up from the corner, Fairfax recognising in her Jessie Norris herself, the girl who had employed him to hunt down her sister's murderer. Then, swiftly opening a secret door, the girl rushed from the vault, leaving all in darkness.

Lighting his lantern, the pinioned detective sees an oak hand-spike standing against the wall out of his reach; but Zub fetches it, and, prizing up the coffin, he releases himself.

The dog picked up the track of the girl outside, and followed the trail, which, however, was lost in the Fulham marshes.

Next morning another £100 banknote is mysteriously conveyed to the detective at breakfast time; but Fairfax determines to return it and give up the case, as it appeared that the woman who employed him was only fooling him, and was herself the murderer.

He goes round to the Norris' mansion.

CHAPTER VII.

A VISIT TO JESSIE NORRIS.

And yet—and yet—he somehow could not believe it. His faculties, his common-sense, led irresistibly to this conclusion; but his inner nature revolted, his instinct declared it wrong.

"Still, seeing is believing!" he muttered decisively, putting the note, with its fellow, in his pocket-book. "I must accept the clear evidence of my eyes. I will go to Miss Norris, and tell her what I have discovered, will show her I have found

her out. But I won't denounce her; no, I could not find heart for that. Let her punishment come from other hands than mine. I will simply return the notes to her, and retire from the case. Come along, Zub, and make your final bow to this strange and inscrutable creature!"

Despite his cogitation, Jack had been so expeditious over his meal, that as he passed through the still slumbering streets of the fashionable quarter, few folks were stirring but the milkmen; and, on turning into the square where the Norris mansion was situated, the whole space seemed utterly waste and deserted, most of the windows having the blinds down as if the houses were still asleep; the few that had them partially raised, blinking in the sunshine as though but half awake.

Stay! The square was not quite deserted after all. Standing just within the gate of the Norris mansion were two figures, a tall form and a short one, and, with a strange thrill, Fairfax recognised in these persons, Captain Mortimer and the black-mute page-boy.

The man had hold of the boy, and was twisting his arm cruelly, at the same time stooping and whispering fiercely in the ear of the lad.

"So, Captain Mortimer has been making an early-morning call!" murmured the detective wrathfully. "Returning Miss Jessie's visit. Looks as if they were both in it. Shouldn't wonder. And yet——"

At the sound of the approaching footsteps, Mortimer looked up, started on recognising the detective; then, releasing his victim, strode hastily away in the opposite direction, the poor, maimed boy shaking his fist savagely at the departing figure. Evidently there was no love lost between the pair.

"Hi! boy!" was Fairfax's hail, causing the page to start and turn quickly round, disclosing a face still distorted by pain, while the tears coursed down his sable cheeks.

"Why was that rascal maltreating you? But, I forgot, your tongue has been wrenched out by the root; you can't answer, my poor fellow. You can hear and understand, though?"

The mute nodded.

"Can you write?"

The boy shook his head.

"Humph! Were I continuing this quest I should feel inclined to have you educated. I believe you could clear it up if able to express yourself intelligibly. However, that doesn't matter now to me!" Jack continued sotto voce. Then, louder, he inquired:

"Is your mistress up? Can I see Miss Jessie Norris?"

The page nodded, threw open the gate, led the way up the forecourt, and entered the house, followed by Fairfax and Zub.

The place presented the same desolate appearance as formerly: the stairs were still littered and dirty, and they yet bore the prints of those delicate, French-made boots. At the sight, Jack's lips curled in a grim smile. When last he saw these footprints, it was in the charnel-house in West Brompton Cemetery.

Ay, and Zub recognised them, too, and sniffed them familiarly.

Up and up they mounted. Jack was left for a minute on the landing, while the page carried in his card; then the door was thrown open, and the detective entered the room where he had had his former interview.

Jessie was there, the only other occupant of the apartment being an elderly, white-haired, kindly-visaged, motherly-looking person, whom Fairfax rightly concluded to be the nurse, Margaret Maggs.

Starting up with a joyful little cry, her pale, anxious features brightening with pleasure, her clear eyes dwelling trustfully on the visitor, Jessie ran forward, with both hands outstretched in eager welcome, exclaiming:

"Oh, how glad I am that you have come. How thankful I am for the presence of one I can trust; and never had an innocent girl greater need for a champion! You know I am

suspected of murder, Mr. Fairfax—of the murder of my dear sister, for whom I would have given my own life! Learn now that I am accused of robbery as well!

"But why do you look at me so strangely? Will you not shake hands? Are you, too, against me? Then, I am lost indeed!" she added, in a changed voice, checked by a wailing sob. As she stopped, her pleading hands still outstretched, her clear, ingenious eyes riveted upon the detective, he had halted, put his hands behind his back, and fixed his eyes sternly upon the girl.

Thus they stood, as if turned to stone; while one might have slowly counted a score.

At length, breaking the strained silence, Fairfax said:

"It is painful for me to speak the words, yet they must be said. I promised to find the real criminal. Well, I have done so. I will say nothing on that point to anyone, however. My lips shall be sealed to all besides. To you, Miss Jessie Norris, it will be sufficient to remind you that I saw you under most suspicious circumstances in the quarters of Captain Mortimer at the barracks; but, further, let me tell you I recognised you—you, Jessie Norris, at eight o'clock last evening in the family mausoleum in Brompton Cemetery. Now I know the weird woman who led me such a desperate chase, who even attempted my life. Now I know the murderess of Viola Norris. But, fear not, I will never denounce her!

"It only remains for me to return your retaining fees, and retire from the case."

So saying, Fairfax took the notes from his pocket-book, and offered them to the girl.

The action was unheeded.

With a gasping, quivering cry, Jessie wailed:

"What new mystery is this? Of what am I now accused? Of being in the chambers of Captain Mortimer? I never was there! I have not left this house since my sister's death. Of being in the mausoleum? I never was there in my life, my guardian would not allow me to attend my sister's funeral. At eight o'clock last night, you say? Why, I can prove that I was in this very room at that time! What madness is this?"

"Sit down, Mr. Fairfax. I beg, may, demand an explanation! I have at least the right to know of what you accuse me!" cried Jessie, waving the detective to a chair, she seating herself on a couch by her old nurse, who took the girl in her motherly arms, as if to shield her from danger.

"Yes, that is only fair; although, remember, I make no accusations, but simply relate to you what I myself witnessed," replied Fairfax, accepting the chair indicated.

He was much surprised, however, at the conduct of Zub. Instead of stretching himself as usual at his master's feet, the dog walked gravely over to the couch on which Jessie sat, looked the girl straight in the face, then, after a long, unwinking stare, fell on his haunches by her side, and laid his great head confidently in her lap. The action was far more eloquent than words, expressing clearly the hound's trust and confidence in the truth and innocence of the girl; nor was Jessie slow to respond, but fondled fearlessly the great head and jaws, mutely thanking the beast for its sympathy, seeming to recognise that in Zub she had found a staunch friend.

The silent but significant incident created a great impression in the mind of the detective. When a well-bred, sagacious dog takes readily of its own accord to a stranger, be sure there is but little evil in that person. The natural instinct of the animal gives it a perfect insight into human character. A good dog is a far better judge of human nature than is either man or woman, boy or girl, a fact which readers may be able to demonstrate for themselves.

Somewhat discomposed, Fairfax proceeded as briefly as possible with his unpleasant task, relating how he had seen Jessie at the quarters of Captain Mortimer, and had even spoken to her there; then detailing his hunts after the mysterious woman in black, whom he had recognised in the mausoleum as Jessie herself. And after a long, thoughtful pause, the girl replied.

"Let me deal first with the last matter, because I can disprove that at once.

"At eight o'clock last night I was in this very room. Margaret Maggs here can testify to that, as she was present."

"That I can swear to, my dear," interrupted the nurse.

"But," resumed Jessie, "if you require other evidence, my guardian, General Cardwell, can give it. He called here at that very hour, and accused me of robbery. You can apply to him for confirmation."

"Nay," said the detective, somewhat staggered; "but I do not rely upon my eyesight alone. You must allow me to produce my proofs. Oblige me, Miss Norris, by showing me a pair of your ordinary outdoor boots."

At a sign from her mistress, Margaret Maggs brought a pair of dainty botines, and, placing them on his knee, Fairfax, drawing his notebook from his pocket, said:

"In a corner of the mausoleum there are the imprints of the boots of the woman whom I met there. They are still plainly to be seen; but I took careful measurements of them.

Let us see how these figures compare with the marks made by these boots of yours." Then, dipping the soles of the boots in water, he stamped their impressions on a sheet of brown paper, then measured the marks.

The figures tallied exactly, save that the impressions in the mausoleum seemed a shade broader than those on the brown paper. It was only a trifle, however, and might easily be accounted for by the yielding nature of the soil.

"I cannot explain it," said Jessie in reply to the inquiring, searching look bent upon her by the detective. "It is all a horrible mystery; but certainly the marks in the mausoleum were never made by boots worn by me. I never was in the place in my life. Could not have been at the hour you name."

"Very well, let us pass to my next proof," resumed the detective.

"Here is a silver coin, dropped by the woman in the mausoleum; it is marked with the initial letter of your name, Miss Jessie."

"But it's not mine, Mr. Fairfax," replied the girl, fingering the coin, and examining it closely. "I don't remember ever seeing the piece before, though it is not uncommon. It is a rupee. General Cardwell has several; but none marked with this letter. My father had, I understand, a complete collection of Indian coinage, gathered during his service in that country."

"Then your father has served in India, Miss Jessie?"

"Oh, yes, he was an officer in the Army, and spent many years in India. Viola and I were born there; but we were sent home very early to avoid the fate of our predecessor. Father was twice married, you know; but his first wife and her infant child were both killed during a native rising when he was absent. He afterwards married my own mother, but when she died he sent Viola and myself home to England. We were only children at the time.

"Shortly afterwards, father himself died; but he had consigned us to the wardship of his brother-officer, General Cardwell, who brought up Viola and myself. That is our family history, Mr. Fairfax.

"Now," continued Jessie, "let me deal with your charge that I was in the quarters of Captain Mortimer. Nurse Maggs knows I have never been over this threshold since poor Viola's death. But, is it likely I should go to the barrack quarters of any officer? To those of Captain Mortimer's especially. Why, sir, I loath, detest, and distrust the man. He professed to love me, wanted to marry me; but I could have no faith in him. His eyes are untrue, his voice rings false. I would sooner be lying beside my dead sister than become the wife of that man!"

"Ah, my pretty, he is no fit mate for you," interrupted the nurse; "but it was your fortune, not yourself, he loved. He is a bad man. I know more about him than you do!"

"Then you saw a good deal of him," suggested the detective, fishing for all possible information, since the girl was in such a communicative mood.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Fairfax, far too much!" replied Jessie, shuddering. "Mortimer served in India with Lieutenant Glyn, our guardian's nephew. Their regiment returned home early last year. Mortimer has great influence over Edward Glyn, who was engaged to Viola, and is always with him. Indeed, the captain exercises a powerful influence over all with whom he comes in contact. His eyes are most peculiar, their stare most disquieting. When he looks at me he reminds me of a serpent fascinating a pigeon; and, alas! I seem to be that unfortunate bird. Now, is there anything further I can tell you, Mr. Fairfax? I wish to be frank and open with you, so far as I may. I look upon you as the one man I can trust, the only one who can unloose the cords that are strangling me. Will you help me, Jack?"

Here the girl rose, and crossed swiftly to where Fairfax sat, her right hand extended, her clear, steadfast eyes fixed beseechingly upon him; and, with a bound, Zub ranged himself by her side, shoving his muzzle whinnying into her disengaged hand, eloquently espousing her cause.

"That I will, Jessie!" cried Jack, springing to his feet, his face all aglow as he caught the proffered hand in his own. "Away with suspicions, which are desecrating to such as you. I know you are honest and true-hearted. Zub vouches for that, too. Forgive my doubts (even my dog knew better), and let me continue to work for you. Trust to us, Jessie. Zub and I will solve this mystery, and prove your innocence in the light of day." A sentiment which the intelligent dog confirmed by a short, deep bay.

"Do that, Jack, and name your own reward!" cried the girl joyously.

"I will," replied Fairfax, firmly pressing the hand he still held; "then, perhaps, I may ask as my guerdon the greatest thing you can bestow. But I must work ere I speak of reward. Now we come to the wax figure," he said.

(To be continued in next week's number.)

Life in Hand

By Viscount Y

THE CISTERN OF DEATH.

I dare not reveal names in this black instance of treachery, for they are famous in the world's history to-day.

For some long time a secret understanding existed between the ruler of a distant state and the crowned head of one of the Great Powers in Europe to annihilate this country's splendid resources at one fell blow.

It was a well-conceived, adroit plan. A house with an extensive cellars was taken in the vicinity of one of the most important public buildings. The house was used for the purposes of trade, and a small army of foreigners were employed by the mock firm.

These men were well-drilled, well-armed, expert soldiers, whose very lives depended on their secrecy and despatch. It was their sworn duty to undermine and, on a certain date, destroy the great public buildings and Government offices in London. The destruction of one building was to be the signal for the wholesale destruction of the rest.

In the midst of this reign of terror they were to lead the foreign element in London, previously armed to a man, against the citizens, and occupy all the great arteries of traffic. At the same time war would be openly declared by the Great Power whose agents had wrought this deadly havoc.

I got to hear of it. So, with a foreign lisp on my tongue, foreign manners and foreign dress, I managed to obtain the situation of a common workman amongst the conspirators.

Weeks passed, and the plots ripened.

At last I knew that the time had come; and luck seemed to favour me, for, on the eve of the impending catastrophe, I received orders to assist the man delegated to the work.

A long, irregular passage, extending far beneath the road, then dropping by a dozen rudely fashioned steps still lower, terminated in a freshly excavated cellar. It was bricked round, and the roof was supported by iron girders. Quantities of chemicals and retorts were ranged along shelves. In the centre stood a wooden frame supporting a glass tank containing acids. This liquid was slowly trickling away through a number of pipes which dropped into the floor.

I fancied I had met my companion before, under vastly different circumstances. He was a high foreign officer, disguised as a workman. All at once he bade me step aside, and while I did so, he raised up the glazed flag.

A blinding light shot upwards through the aperture.

In a moment he had disappeared.

I heard his guttural voice calling me from below, and then, as I set my feet firmly on the rungs of the ladder, I felt that the mystery of that deep cellar was now to be unfolded.

He came forward and caught me, easing my descent as I approached the bottom. When my eyes grew accustomed to the glare from the electric lamp, I found myself standing on a narrow platform stretching across a wide cistern, the interior of which was round and sloping like the bowl of a basin. It contained a thick, sickly, yellow fluid, slowly revolving, while the acids dripped steadily from the pipes in the ceiling.

I knew what it meant! Before he spoke, I understood that beneath that slender platform was a mass weighing several tons; that, in short, I beheld a cistern of nitro-glycerine in the actual process of manufacture.

I had suspected this. He watched me narrowly, and smiled when I caught my breath.

"Step down here," said he. And I followed him, treading the soft, oozy clay floor.

The atmosphere was horribly foul. No wonder, for a break in the clay exposed a gloomy brick aperture, and beyond the noisome depths of London's underground sanitary channels.

We were standing abreast the cistern, when, feeling that the time to defeat the conspirators had arrived, I turned suddenly, and as I thought, unexpectedly, and with a loose cloth attempted to blindfold him.

But he slipped back and, unable to save myself, I crashed to the floor.

He stood over me with a loaded weapon.

"Ah! Viscount, you were just a trifle premature!" he sneered.

I could not forbear a start. My disguise, then, had been penetrated. I was known.

I addressed him by a familiar name. It was his turn to start. For a while we glared at each other, he above and I below.

The drip, drip, drip of the nitric acid and oil of vitriol into

the deadly explosive in the cistern alone disturbed the silence.

All at once he shifted his eyes to the thermometer showing the heat of the mass. His face turned deadly pale.

I was up and on my feet in an instant.

Only a few degrees of temperature separated us from utter annihilation, unless the centrifugal action of the explosive was stopped.

This could only be done by means of a mechanical arrangement above.

The wretch was already at the foot of the ladder.

I glided swiftly beneath him; but he was away up far beyond my reach.

He had almost gained the top, and, with an exulting cry, was preparing to remove the narrow stone groove which kept the slab from quite closing down, when I sent a revolver-shot crashing against the projection. The slab dropped into its frame with a dull thud.

A snarl burst from my companion. He came gliding down the ladder, and flew at me like a tiger.

The madness of terror blazed in his eyes. He was reckless, for the veriest jostle might produce a disaster.

Death swift and certain stared us in the face. But more awful still was the thought of the impending destruction and its consequences.

Something to prevent it must be done. A plan occurred to me. Either this wretch must assist or die. I put it to him.

"The temperature of that mass is rising fast. You know what it means. Death sure and swift!"

He pressed, shuddering and gasping, against the wall.

"Come, you coward, catch up that pail and help!" I cried.

"What do you mean? What are you going to do? Don't touch it. Great Heaven! don't touch that cistern!" he screamed, darting forward, and trying to drag me back.

"Hark!"

The deadly mass seemed to sigh and open out to lick up the terrible acids which fell with a steady drip, drip, drip!

He looked at his watch.

"My life, we timed her to explode in half an hour!" he groaned; and then his eye suddenly alighted on the gloomy aperture in the wall. He sprang towards it.

"Move another step and I will shoot you like a dog!"

He stood stock-still, trembling in every limb.

"Bring that pail here, now!" And I skimmed the mass of explosives.

He drew back, white to the very lips, while I passed, and gently emptied the explosive through the gap.

"Fill that other pail, and bring it me!" I called, and he obeyed.

Pail after pail I emptied, pail after pail he carried to and fro. We worked at fever-heat. He was ready to drop from fatigue; but the knowledge of his danger spurred him to fresh effort. At last the cistern was empty.

The acids in the tank above had run dry. He had scooped the last painful out to the very dregs, and I was emptying it, when, with the treachery of his kind, he deliberately raised his weapon and fired.

The shot struck me full in the back, and though it glanced off my coat-of-mail, the force knocked me over, and he dashed by, plunging into the subterranean channel.

It was too dark, and too risky to fire after him; but I dared not let him escape.

I dropped gently through, and struck softly out across the water. I had not gone far when a stinging blow was levelled at my head. I grappled with the assassin, and a terrible struggle for supremacy began. He was the stronger man; but I was desperate. With a knife I managed to wrest from him I gave him a cut down the right cheek. It seemed to madden him, for he shook me as a cat shakes a mouse. I was forced back, and down—down into the murky depths.

By and by I floated out into the river, hardly conscious. Night had set in. I gained a landing, and was driven to the Home Office, where, just in time, I managed to unfold the plot for the destruction of the metropolis.

The conspirators were not caught; but the terrible work of destruction they had contemplated was undone.

Important papers were discovered: and— Well this is one reason why a certain crowned head prefers not to visit England.

A little while after the occurrence people wondered why this monarch's chief adviser went about with an ugly wound on the side of his face.

(An equally thrilling story next week.)

From the Quarter-Deck.

BY THE SKIPPER OF THE "UNION JACK."



J. V. CANNOT,
Bond Street, W.

A. MCKENZIE,
Grantown-on-Spey.

There are still many laggard readers who have not sent me their portraits yet. I hope they will be quick.

Electricity played an important part in the Arctic voyage of the "Fram," Dr. Nansen's staunch vessel. The electric lights were daily used on board, according to the "Elektroteknisk Tidsskrift," of Christiania, until May, 1895, when the wearing out of the gearing, and the fact that portions of the apparatus were needed for making snow-shoes, made it necessary to dispense with the use of the dynamo, which was worked by a windmill. Though at times the accumulators froze solidly, yet the acid-blended ice proved a fine electrolyte. Electricity, too, fired the mine shots which freed the "Fram" from the ice-floes.

Is the loftiest mountain on the globe equal in height to the depth of the profoundest hole in the ocean bottom? asks a reader.

Until recently it would have been necessary to reply that the sea contained no measured chasm equalling in depth the elevation of Mount Gaurisankar, otherwise known as Mount Everest, in the Himalayas.

But according to the most recent soundings there are three holes in the bed of the ocean between the Fiji Islands and

New Zealand, each of which is considerably deeper than the great Asiatic mountain is tall.

The height of Mount Gaurisankar is supposed to be about 29,000 feet, or a trifle less than five miles and a half. The most profound of the ocean pits just referred to sinks to a depth of about 31,000 feet, thus exceeding by 2,000 feet the elevation of the loftiest mountain known.

But there is a bare chance that the mountains may come out ahead yet, because the Himalayas have not been thoroughly explored, and rumour asserts that, in the heart of that immense range, and shut round by an almost inaccessible wilderness of icy peaks and tremendous walls of rock, there are snowy summits which soar higher even than Gaurisankar.

The heart is not always the delicate organ it is generally believed to be, "A. D. E." Dr. William Turner records in the "British Medical Journal" a few cases which point to the fact that wounds of the heart are seldom, if ever, immediately fatal. A child two years old was brought to him with a sewing-needle driven into its heart, and the needle was extracted without evident harm resulting to the heart of the child. Another case described is that of a soldier, in whose heart a bullet was found imbedded six years after he had been wounded, he having died from quite another cause. Several instances are also given of persons living for months and years after their hearts had been terribly lacerated. Indeed, neither gunshot injuries nor penetrating wounds bring the heart at once to a standstill; so that this part of the animal organism is apparently not its most vital structure.

The cost of the establishment of a prominent animal collector in Germany includes some astonishing figures, "R."

The food bill is the main item, of course, costing probably £100 a month. An elephant consumes 200 pounds of rice, biscuits, clover, &c., every day. Add to the food bill the wages of the enormous staff of feeders and workmen, whose services are in constant demand, and you will have some vague idea of the bills that are presented for payment.

The annual food bill at the London Zoo comes to £5,000, and the items last year included 40,000 pounds of whiting, 650 quarts of shrimps, 160 bushels of apples, 15,000 oranges, and twenty baskets of cherries. Even wild beasts have their luxuries.

*Yours sincere friend,
The Skipper*

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