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[Illustration: Cover 1]

[Illustration: Cover 2]

[Illustration: "MAX LEANED FORWARD TO EXAMINE THE FACE OF THE ROCK; AND
AS HE DID SO, HE WAS SEIZED SUDDENLY FROM BEHIND."]

THE FIRE-GODS

A Tale of the Congo

By

CAPTAIN CHARLES GILSON

Author of "Submarine U93," "The Mystery of Ah Jim," and other Stories.

ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGE SOPER

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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The Sword of Deliverance. A Tale of the Balkan War.

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ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOUR

BY GEORGE SOPER

THE FIRE-GODS

CHAPTER I—THE EXPLORERS' CLUB

The Explorers' Club no longer exists. To-day, as a matter of fact, it is a tea-shop in Old Bond Street—a small building, wedged between two greater ones, a fashionable milliner's and a famous Art Establishment. Towards the end of the last century, in what is known as the mid-Victorian era, the Explorers' Club was in the heyday of its glory.

The number of its members was limited to two hundred and fifty-one. In the inner smoking-room, through the green baize doors, where guests were not admitted, both the conversation and the company were at once remarkable and unique. The walls were adorned with the trophies of the chase: heads of elk, markhor, ibex, haartebeest and waterbuck; great lions and snarling tigers; mouflon from Cyprus, and the white leopard of the Himalayas. If you looked into the room through the glass peep-hole in one of the green baize doors, you might have thought at first that you beheld a menagerie, where the fiercest and the rarest beasts in the world were imprisoned in a single cage. But, presently, your attention would have been attracted by the great, sun-burnt men, sprawling in the leather chairs, dressed in tweeds for the most part, and nearly every one with a blackened briar pipe between his lips.

In those days, Africa was the "Dark Continent"; the source of the Nile and the Great Lakes were undiscovered, of the Congo nothing was known. Nor was this geographical ignorance confined to a single continent: in every part of the world, vast tracts of country, great rivers and mountains were as yet unexplored. And

the little that was known of these uttermost parts of the earth never passed the green baize doors of the inner smoking-room of the Explorers' Club.

There, in an atmosphere blue with smoke, where a great fire roared in winter to keep the chill of the London fog from the bones of those who, time and again, had been stricken with the fevers of the equatorial parts, a small group of men would sit and talk by the hour. There great projects were suggested, criticised and discussed. A man would rise from his seat, take down a map of some half-discovered country, and placing his finger upon a blank space, announce in tones of decision that that was the exact spot to which he intended to go. And if he went, perhaps, he would not come back.

At the time our story opens, Edward Harden was probably the most popular member of the Explorers' Club. He was still a comparatively young man; and though his reputation rested chiefly upon his fame as a big game shot, he had rendered no mean service to the cause of science, as the honours heaped upon him by the Royal Geographical Society and kindred institutions fully testified.

It was early in June, and the height of the London season, when this six foot six of explorer walked up St. James's Street on the right-hand side. Somehow he felt that he was out of it. He was not one of the fashionable crowd in the midst of which he found himself. For ten years he had been growing more and more unaccustomed to the life of cities. It was a strange thing, he could break his way through the tangled thicknesses of an equatorial forest, or wade knee-deep in a mangrove swamp, but he could never negotiate the passage of Piccadilly.

As he stood on the "island" in the middle of the street, opposite Burlington House, he attracted a considerable amount of attention. He was probably the tallest man at that moment between St. Paul's and the Albert Memorial. His brown moustache was several shades lighter than his skin, which had been burnt to the colour of tan. His long limbs, his sloping shoulders, and the slouch with which he walked, gave him an appearance of looseness and prodigious strength. Also he had a habit of walking with his fists closed, and his arms swinging like pendulums. He was quite unconscious of the fact that people turned and stared after him, or that he was an object of exceeding admiration to small boys, who speculated upon the result of a blow from his fist.

He had not gone far along Bond Street when he cannoned into a young man, who received a ponderous blow in the chest from Harden's swinging fist. The

explorer could hardly have been expected to look where he was going, since at that moment he was passing a gunsmith’s where the latest improvement of elephant gun was on view in the window.

"I beg your pardon!" he exclaimed in eager apology.

"It’s nothing," said the other, and then added, with a note of surprise, "Uncle Ted, by all that’s wonderful! I might have known it was you."

Edward Harden seldom expressed surprise. He just took the young gentleman by the arm and walked him along at the rate of about five miles an hour. "Come and have lunch," said he.

Now Max Harden, in addition to being the explorer’s only nephew, was a medical student at one of the London hospitals. As a small boy, he had regarded his uncle as one of the greatest men in the universe—which, in a physical sense, he was.

A week before Max had come of age, which meant that he had acquired the modest inheritance of a thousand pounds a year. He had also secured a commission from the Royal Academy of Physicians to make sundry inquiries into the origin of certain obscure tropical diseases in the district of the Lower Congo. This was precisely the part of the world to which Edward Harden was about to depart. Max knew that quite well, and his idea was to travel with his uncle. He had been to the Explorers’ Club, and had been told by the hall porter that Mr. Edward Harden was out, but that he would probably return for lunch. It was about two minutes later that he collided with his uncle outside the gunsmith’s shop.

To lunch at the Explorers’ Club was in itself an achievement. That day several well-known men were there: Du Cane, the lion hunter; Frankfort Williams, back from the Arctic, and George Cartwright, who had not yet accomplished his famous journey into Thibet. Upon the walls of the dining-room were full-length pictures of the great pioneers of exploration: Columbus, Franklin and Cook. It was not until after luncheon, when Max and his uncle were seated in the outer smoking-room—through the green baize doors, it will be remembered, it was forbidden for guests to enter—that Max broached the topic that was nearest to his heart.

"Uncle Ted," said he, "tell me about this expedition? As yet I know nothing."

"We’re going up the Congo," answered Harden simply; "and it’s natural enough that you should know nothing about it, since practically nothing is known. Our object is big game, but we hope to bring back some valuable geographical information. The mouth of the Congo was discovered by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century. Since then several trading-stations have sprung up on the river, but no one has penetrated inland. It is known that about five hundred miles from the mouth of the river, a tributary, called the Kasai, flows from the south. Of the upper valley of that river absolutely nothing is known, except that it consists of the most impenetrable forests and is inhabited by cannibal tribes. It is there we propose to go."

"Who goes with you?" asked Max.

"Crouch," said Harden; "Captain Crouch. The most remarkable man on the Coast. Nobody in England has ever heard of him; but on the West Coast, from Lagos to Loango, he is either hated like sin or worshipped like a heathen god. There’s no man alive who understands natives as well as Crouch. He can get more work out of a pack of Kru-boys in a day than a shipping-agent or a trader can in a week."

"How do you account for it?" asked Max.

"Pluck," said Harden, "and perseverance. Also, from the day he was born, a special providence seems to have guarded him. For many years he was captain of a coasting-packet that worked from St. Louis to Spanish Guinea. He fell overboard once in the Bight of Biafra, and lost a foot."

"How did he do that?" asked Max, already vastly interested in the personality of Captain Crouch.

"Sharks," said Harden, as if it were an everyday occurrence. "They swim round Fernando Po like goldfish in a bowl. Would you believe it? Crouch knifed that fish in the water, though he’ll wear a cork foot to his dying day. He was one of the first men to force his way up the Niger, and I happened to be at Old Calabar when he was brought in with a poisoned arrow-head in his eye. At that time the natives of the interior used to dip their weapons in snake’s poison, and no one but Crouch could have lived. But he pulled through all right. He’s one of those small, wiry men that can’t be killed. He has got a case full of glass eyes now, of all the colours in the rainbow, and he plays Old Harry with the natives. If they

don’t do what he wants, I’ve seen him pull out a blue eye and put in a red one, which frightens the life out of them. Crouch isn’t like any one else I’ve ever met. He has the most astonishing confidence in himself; he’s practically fever-proof; he can talk about twenty West African dialects, and he’s a better shot than I am. I believe the only person he cares for in the world is myself. I would never dream of undertaking this expedition without him."

"I suppose," said Max, a trifle nervously, "you wouldn’t think of including a third member in your party?"

Edward Harden looked at his nephew sharply. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean," said Max, "that I have undertaken to investigate certain tropical diseases, such as sleeping sickness and malarial typhoid, in the very districts to which you are going. I thought you might not object if I came with you. I didn’t know I had Captain Crouch to deal with."

Edward Harden rose to his feet and knocked out his pipe in the grate.

"For myself," said he, "I should be pleased to have you with me. Are you ready to start at once? We hope to sail next week."

Max nodded.

"H’m," said the explorer, "I must ask Crouch. I think he’s in the club."

He went to one of the green baize doors at the other end of the room, opened it, and looked in.

"Crouch," said he, "do you mind coming here a moment. There’s something I want to ask you."

He then came back to his seat and filled another pipe. As he was engaged in lighting this, a green baize door swung back and there entered one of the most extraordinary men that it was ever the lot of the young medical student to behold.

As we have said, the Explorers’ Club was in Bond Street, and Captain Crouch was dressed after the fashion of a pilot; that is to say, he wore a navy-blue suit with brass buttons and a red tie. He was a very small man, and exceedingly thin.

There seemed nothing of him. His head was almost entirely bald. He wore a small, bristling moustache, cut short like a tooth-brush, and a tuft of hair beneath his nether lip. His eyebrows were exceedingly dark, and met on the bridge of his nose. His skin was the colour of parchment, and wrinkled and creased in all directions. He had a large hook nose, and a chin of excessive prominence. Though he appeared entirely bloodless, there was something about him that suggested extreme vital energy—the kind of vitality which may be observed in a rat. He was an aggressive-looking man. Though he walked with a pronounced limp, he was quick in all his movements. His mouth was closed fast upon a pipe in which he smoked a kind of black tobacco which is called Bull’s Eye Shag, one whiff of which would fumigate a greenhouse, killing every insect therein from an aphis to a spider. He reeked of this as a soap-factory smells of fat. In no other club in London would its consumption have been allowed; but the Explorers were accustomed to greater hardships than even the smell of Bull’s Eye Shag.

"Well, Ted," said Crouch, "what’s this?"

One eye, big and staring, was directed out of the window; the other, small, black and piercing, turned inwards upon Max in the most appalling squint.

"This is my nephew," said Harden; "Max Harden—Captain Crouch, my greatest friend."

Max held out a hand, but Crouch appeared not to notice it. He turned to Edward.

"What’s the matter with him?" he asked.

"He’s suffering from a complaint which, I fancy, both you and I contracted in our younger days—a desire to investigate the Unknown. In a word, Crouch, he wants to come with us."

Crouch whipped round upon Max.

"You’re too young for the Coast," said he. "You’ll go out the moment you get there like a night-light."

"I’m ready to take my chance," said Max.

Crouch looked pleased at that, for his only eye twinkled and seemed to grow

smaller.

Max was anxious to take advantage of the little ground he might have gained. "Also," he added, "I am a medical man—at least, I’m a medical student. I am making a special study of tropical diseases."

And no sooner were the words from his lips than he saw he had made a fatal mistake, for Captain Crouch brought down his fist so violently upon one of the little smokers’ tables with which the room was scattered, that the three legs broke off, and the whole concern collapsed upon the floor.

"Do you think we want a medical adviser!" he roared. "Study till you’re black in the face, till you’re eighty years old, and you won’t know a tenth of what I know. What’s the use of all your science? I’ve lived on the Coast for thirty years, and I tell you this: there are only two things that matter where fever is concerned—pills and funk. Waiter, take that table away, and burn it."

It is probable that at this juncture Max’s hopes had been dashed to earth had it not been for his uncle, who now put in a word.

"Tell you what, Crouch," said he, in the quiet voice which, for some reason or other, all big men possess; "the boy might be useful, after all. He’s a good shot. He’s made of the right stuff—I’ve known him since he was a baby. He’s going out there anyhow, so he may as well come with us."

"Why, of course he may," said Crouch. "I’m sure we’ll be delighted to have him."

Such a sudden change of front was one of the most remarkable characteristics of this extraordinary man. Often, in the breath of a single sentence, he would appear to change his mind. But this was not the case. He had a habit of thinking aloud, and of expressing his thoughts in the most vehement manner imaginable. Indeed, if his character can be summed up in any one word, it would be this one word "vehemence." He talked loudly, he gesticulated violently, he smashed the furniture, and invariably knocked his pipe out in such a frantic manner that he broke the stem. And yet Edward Harden—-who knew him better than any one else in the world—always protested that he had never known Crouch to lose his temper. This was just the ordinary manner in which he lived, breathed and had his being.

"I’m sure," said Captain Crouch, "we will be delighted to take you with us. Ted, what are you going to do this afternoon?"

"I am going to get some exercise—a turn in the Park."

"I’ll come with you," said Crouch.

So saying, he stumped off to fetch his cap which he had left in the inner room. No sooner was he gone than Max turned to his uncle.

"Uncle Ted," said he, "I can’t thank you sufficiently."

The big man laid a hand upon the young one’s shoulder.

"That’s nothing," said he. "But I must tell you this: if you are coming with us to the Kasai, you must drop the ’uncle.’ Your father was considerably older than I was—fifteen years. You had better call me by my Christian name—Edward. ’Ted’s’ a trifle too familiar."

By then they were joined by Crouch, who carried a large knotted stick in one hand, and in the other—a paper bag.

"What have you got there?" asked Harden, pointing to the bag.

"Sweets," said Crouch. "For the children in the Park."

And so it came about that they three left the Explorers’ Club together, Max in the middle, with his gigantic uncle on one hand, and the little wizened sea-captain on the other.

They created no small amount of interest and amazement in Bond Street, but they were blissfully ignorant of the fact. The world of these men was not the world of the little parish of St. James’s. One was little more than a boy, whose mind was filled with dreams; but the others were men who had seen the stars from places where no human being had ever beheld them before, who had been the first to set foot in unknown lands, who had broken into the heart of savagery and darkness. Theirs was a world of danger, hardship and adventure. They had less respect for the opinion of those who passed them by than for the wild beasts that prowl by night around an African encampment. After all, the world is made up of two kinds of men: those who think and those who act; and who can say

which is the greater of the two?

CHAPTER II—ON THE KASAI

A mist lay upon the river like a cloud of steam. The sun was invisible, except for a bright concave dome, immediately overhead, which showed like the reflection of a furnace in the midst of the all-pervading greyness of the heavens. The heat was intense—the heat of the vapour-room of a Turkish bath. Myriads of insects droned upon the surface of the water.

The river had still a thousand miles to cover before it reached the ocean—the blazing, surf-beaten coast-line to the north of St. Paul de Loanda. Its turgid, coffee-coloured waters rushed northward through a land of mystery and darkness, lapping the banks amid black mangrove swamps and at the feet of gigantic trees whose branches were tangled in confusion.

In pools where the river widened, schools of hippopotami lay like great logs upon the surface, and here and there a crocodile basked upon a mud-bank, motionless by the hour, like some weird, bronze image that had not the power to move. In one place a two-horned rhinoceros burst through the jungle, and with a snort thrust its head above the current of the stream.

This was the Unknown. This was the World as it Had Been, before man was on the earth. These animals are the relics that bind us to the Past, to the cave-men and the old primordial days. There was a silence on the river that seemed somehow overpowering, rising superior to the ceaseless droning of the insects and the soft gurgling of the water, which formed little shifting eddies in the lee of fallen trees.

A long canoe shot through the water like some great, questing beast. Therein were twelve natives from Loango, all but naked as they came into the world. Their paddles flashed in the reflected light of the furnace overhead; for all that, the canoe came forward without noise except for the gentle rippling sound of the water under the bows. In the stern were seated two men side by side, and one of

these was Edward Harden, and the other his nephew Max. In the body of the canoe was a great number of "loads": camp equipment, provisions, ammunition and cheap Manchester goods, such as are used by the traders to barter for ivory and rubber with the native chiefs. Each "load" was the maximum weight that could be carried by a porter, should the party find it necessary to leave the course of the river.

In the bows, perched like an eagle above his eyrie, was Captain Crouch. His solitary eye darted from bank to bank. In his thin nervous hands he held a rifle, ready on the instant to bring the butt into the hollow of his shoulder.

As the canoe rounded each bend of the river, the crocodiles glided from the mud-banks and the hippopotami sank silently under the stream. Here and there two nostrils remained upon the surface—small, round, black objects, only discernible by the ripples which they caused.

Suddenly a shot rang out, sharp as the crack of a whip. The report echoed, again and again, in the dark, inhospitable forest that extended on either bank. There was a rush of birds that rose upon the wing; the natives shipped their paddles, and, on the left bank of the river, the two-horned rhinoceros sat bolt upright on its hind-legs like a sow, with its fore-legs wide apart. Then, slowly, it rolled over and sank deep into the mud. By then Crouch had reloaded.

"What was it?" asked Harden.

"A rhino," said Crouch. "We were too far off for him to see us, and the wind was the right way."

A moment later the canoe drew into the bank a little distance from where the great beast lay. Harden and Crouch waded into the mire, knives in hand; and that rhino was skinned with an ease and rapidity which can only be accomplished by the practised hunter. The meat was cut into large slices, which were distributed as rations to the natives. Of the rest, only the head was retained, and this was put into a second canoe, which soon after came into sight.

After that they continued their journey up the wide, mysterious river. All day long the paddles were never still, the rippling sound continued at the bows. Crouch remained motionless as a statue, rifle in hand, ready to fire at a moment’s notice. With his dark, overhanging brow, his hook nose, and his thin, straight lips, he bore a striking resemblance to some gaunt bird of prey.

A second shot sounded as suddenly and unexpectedly as the first, and a moment after Crouch was on his feet.

"A leopard!" he cried. "I hit him. He’s wounded. Run her into the bank."

The canoe shot under a large tree, one branch of which overhung the water so low that they were able to seize it. Edward Harden was ashore in a moment, followed by his nephew. Crouch swung himself ashore by means of the overhanging bough. Harden’s eyes were fixed upon the ground. It was a place where animals came to drink, for the soft mud had been trampled and churned by the feet of many beasts.

"There!" cried Harden. "Blood!"

Sure enough, upon the green leaf of some strange water plant there was a single drop of blood. Though the big game hunter had spoken in an excited manner, he had never raised his voice.

It was Crouch who took up the spoor, and followed it from leaf to leaf. Whenever he failed to pick it up, Harden put him right. Max was as a baby in such matters, and it was often that he failed to recognize the spoor, even when it was pointed out to him.

They had to break their way through undergrowth so thick that it was like a woodstack. The skin upon their hands and faces was scratched repeatedly by thorns. They were followed by a cloud of insects. They were unable to see the sky above them by reason of the branches of the trees, which, high above the undergrowth through which they passed, formed a vast barrier to the sunlight. And yet it was not dark. There was a kind of half-light which it is difficult to describe, and which seemed to emanate from nowhere. Nothing in particular, yet everything in general, appeared to be in the shade.

On a sudden Crouch stopped dead.

"He’s not far from here," he said. "Look there!"

Max’s eyes followed Crouch’s finger. He saw a place where the long grass was all crushed and broken as if some animal had been lying down, and in two places there were pools of blood.

Crouch raised both arms. "Open out," said he. "Be ready to fire if he springs. He'll probably warn you with a growl."

This information was for the benefit of Max. To tell Edward Harden such things would be like giving minute instructions to a fish concerning the rudiments of swimming.

Max, obeying Crouch's orders, broke into the jungle on the left, whereas Edward moved to the right. Keeping abreast of one another, they moved forward for a distance of about two hundred yards. This time it was Harden who ordered the party to halt. They heard his quiet voice in the midst of the thickets: "Crouch, come here; I want you."

A moment later Max joined his two friends. He found them standing side by side: Edward, with eyes turned upward like one who listens, and Crouch with an ear to the ground. Harden, by placing a finger upon his lips, signed to his nephew to be silent. Max also strained his ears to catch the slight sound in the jungle which had aroused the suspicion of these experienced hunters.

After a while he heard a faint snap, followed by another, and then a third. Then there was a twanging sound, very soft, like the noise of a fiddle-string when thrummed by a finger. It was followed almost immediately by a shriek, as terrible and unearthly as anything that Max had ever heard. It was the dying scream of a wounded beast—one of the great tribe of cats.

Crouch got to his feet.

"Fans," said he. "What's more, they've got my leopard."

He made the remark in the same manner as a Londoner might point out a Putney 'bus; yet, at that time, the Fans were one of the most warlike of the cannibal tribes of Central Africa. They were reputed to be extremely hostile to Europeans, and that was about all that was known concerning them.

Edward Harden was fully as calm as his friend.

"We can't get back," said he. "It's either a palaver, or a fight."

"Come, then," said Crouch. "Let's see which it is."

At that he led the way, making better progress than before, since he no longer regarded the spoor of the wounded leopard.

Presently they came to a place where the jungle ceased abruptly. This was the edge of a swamp—a circular patch, about two hundred yards across, where nothing grew but a species of slender reed. Though Max had not known it, this was the very place for which the other two were looking. Backwoodsmen though they were, they had no desire to face a hostile tribe in jungle so dense that it would scarcely be possible to lift a rifle to the present.

The reeds grew in tufts capable of bearing the weight of a heavy man; but, in between, was a black, glutinous mud.

"If you fall into that," said Crouch, who still led the way, "you'll stick like glue, and you'll be eaten alive by leeches."

In the centre of the swamp the ground rose into a hillock, and here it was possible for them to stand side by side. They waited for several moments in absolute silence. And then a dark figure burst through the jungle, and a second later fell flat upon the ground.

"I was right," said Crouch. "That man was a Fan. We'll find out in a moment whether they mean to fight. I hope to goodness they don't find the canoes."

In the course of the next few minutes it became evident, even to Max, that they were surrounded. On all sides the branches and leaves of the undergrowth on the edge of the swamp were seen to move, and here and there the naked figure of a savage showed between the trees.

The Fans are still one of the dominant races of Central Africa. About the middle of the last century the tribe swept south-west from the equatorial regions, destroying the villages and massacring the people of the more peaceful tribes towards the coast. The Fans have been proved to possess higher intelligence than the majority of the Central African races. Despite their pugnacious character, and the practice of cannibalism which is almost universal among them, they have been described as being bright, active and energetic Africans, including magnificent specimens of the human race. At this time, however, little was known concerning them, and that little, for the most part, was confined to Captain Crouch, who, on a previous occasion, had penetrated into the Hinterland of the Gabun.

Edward Harden and his friends were not left long in doubt as to whether or not the Fans intended to be hostile, for presently a large party of men advanced upon them from all sides at once. For the most part these warriors were armed with great shields and long spears, though a few carried bows and arrows. The Fan spear is a thing by itself. The head is attached but lightly to the shaft, so that when the warrior plunges his weapon into his victims, the spear-head remains in the wound.

Captain Crouch handed his rifle to Edward, and then stepped forward across the marsh to meet these would-be enemies. He was fully alive to their danger. He knew that with their firearms they could keep the savages at bay for some time, but in the end their ammunition would run out. He thought there was still a chance that the matter might be settled in an amicable manner.

"Palaver," said he, speaking in the language of the Fans. "Friends.
Trade-palaver Good."

The only answer he got was an arrow that shot past his ear, and disappeared in the mud He threw back his head and laughed.

"No good," he cried. "Trade-palaver friends."

A tall, thin savage, about six feet in height, approached by leaps and bounds, springing like an antelope from one tuft of grass to another. His black face, with white, gleaming teeth, looked over the top of a large, oval shield. With a final spring, he landed on dry ground a few feet from where Crouch was standing. Then he raised his spear on high; but, before he had time to strike, Crouch’s fist rang out upon his chin like a pistol-shot, and he went over backwards into the mud.

[Illustration: "CROUCH’S FIST RANG OUT UPON HIS CHIN LIKE A PISTOL-SHOT,
AND HE WENT OVER BACKWARDS INTO THE MUD."]

There was a strange, sucking noise as the marsh swallowed him to the chin. For some moments he floundered hopelessly, his two hands grasping in the air. He laid hold of tufts of grass, and pulled them up by the roots. Then Crouch bent down, gripped both his hands, and with a great effort dragged him on to terra firma.

His black skin was plastered with a blacker mud, and on almost every inch of his body, from his neck to his feet, a large water-leech was glued like an enormous slug. The man was already weak from loss of blood. Had he remained in the marsh a minute longer, there is no doubt he would have fainted. Crouch took a knife from his pocket, and, talking all the time, as a nursemaid talks to a naughty child, one by one he tore the leeches from the man’s body, and threw them back into the marsh.

The others, who had drawn closer, remained at a safe distance. It seems they were undecided how to act, since this man was their leader, and they were accustomed to receive their orders from him. It is impossible to say what would have happened, had not Crouch taken charge of the situation. He asked the man where his village was, and the fellow pointed to the east.

"Yonder," said he; "in the hills."

"Lead on," said Crouch. "We’re coming home with you, for a cup of tea and a talk."

For a moment the man was too stupefied to answer. He had never expected this kind of reception from an individual who could have walked under his outstretched arm. What surprised him most of all was Crouch’s absolute self-confidence. The Negro and Bantu races are all alike in this: they are extraordinarily simple-minded and impressionable. The Fan chieftain looked at Crouch, and then dropped his eyes. When he lifted them, a broad grin had extended across his face.

"Good," said he. "My village. Palaver. You come."

Crouch turned and winked at Max, and then followed the chief towards the jungle.

CHAPTER III—THE WHITE WIZARD

When both parties were gathered together on the edge of the marsh, Max felt strangely uncomfortable. Both Crouch and Edward seemed thoroughly at home, and the former was talking to the chief as if he had found an old friend whom he had not seen for several years. Putting aside the strangeness of his surroundings, Max was not able to rid his mind of the thought that these men were cannibals. He looked at them in disgust. There was nothing in particular to distinguish them from the other races he had seen upon the coast, except, perhaps, they were of finer physique and had better foreheads. It was the idea which was revolting. In the country of the Fans there are no slaves, no prisoners, and no cemeteries; a fact which speaks for itself.

Crouch and the chief, whose name was M’Wané, led the way through the jungle. They came presently to the body of the wounded leopard, which lay with an arrow in its heart. It was the "twang" of the bowstring that Max had heard in the jungle. And now took place an incident that argued well for the future.

M’Wané protested that the leopard belonged to Crouch, since the Englishman had drawn first blood. This was the law of his tribe. Crouch, on the other hand, maintained that the law of his tribe was that the game was the property of the killer. The chief wanted the leopard-skin, and it required little persuasion to make him accept it, which he was clearly delighted to do.

Crouch skinned the leopard himself, and presented the skin to M’Wané. And then the whole party set forth again, and soon came to a track along which progress was easy.

It was approaching nightfall when they reached the extremity of the forest, and came upon a great range of hills which, standing clear of the mist that hung in the river valley, caught the full glory of the setting sun. Upon the upper slopes of the hills was a village of two rows of huts, and at each end of the streets thus

formed was a guard-house, where a sentry stood on duty. M’Wané’s hut was larger than the others, and it was into this that the Europeans were conducted. In the centre of the floor was a fire, and hanging from several places in the roof were long sticks with hooks on them, the hooks having been made by cutting off branching twigs. From these hooks depended the scant articles of the chief’s wardrobe and several fetish charms.

For two hours Crouch and the chief talked, and it was during that conversation that there came to light the most extraordinary episode of which we have to tell. From that moment, and for many weeks afterwards, it was a mystery that they were wholly unable to solve. Both Crouch and Harden knew the savage nature too well to believe that M’Wané lied. Though his story was vague, and overshadowed by the superstitions that darken the minds of the fetish worshippers, there was no doubt that it was based upon fact. As the chief talked, Crouch translated to his friends.

The chief first asked what they were doing on the Kasai, and Crouch answered that they were there for big game—for rhinoceros, buffalo and leopard. The chief answered that there was certainly much game on the Kasai, but there was more on the "Hidden River." That was the first time they ever heard the name.

Crouch asked why it was called the "Hidden River"; and M’Wané answered that it would be impossible for any one to find the mouth. On the southern bank of the Kasai, about two days up-stream, there was a large mangrove swamp, and it was beyond this that the "Hidden River" lay.

"Can you pass through the swamp in a canoe?" asked Crouch.

The chief shook his head, and said that a canoe could pass the mangrove swamp, but it could not penetrate far up the river, because of a great waterfall, where the water fell hundreds of feet between huge pillars of rock.

"One can carry a canoe," said Crouch.

"Perhaps," said M’Wané, as if in doubt. "But, of those that pass the cataract, none come back alive."

"Why?" asked Crouch.

"Because of the Fire-gods that haunt the river. The Fire-gods are feared from the

seacoast to the Lakes."

Crouch pricked up his ears like a terrier that scents a rat. The little man sat cross-legged, with his hands upon his ankles; and as he plied the Fan chief with questions, he positively wriggled where he sat.

He found out that the "Fire-gods" were white men—a fact that astonished him exceedingly. He was told that they were not white men like himself and his friends, but wicked spirits who controlled the thunder and who could make the earth tremble for miles around. Even the Fans feared them, and for several months none of the tribes had ventured into the valley of the "Hidden River."

"They're men with rifles," said Harden. "These people have never seen a firearm in their lives."

At that he led M'Wané from the hut, and, followed by Max and Crouch, he walked a little distance from the village. There, in the moonlight, he picked up a stone from the ground, and set this upon a branch. From a distance of about twenty paces, with M'Wané at his side, he lifted his rifle to his shoulder, and struck the stone with a bullet, so that it fell upon the ground.

"There," said he, "that is what your Fire-gods do; they are armed with rifles—like this."

But M'Wané shook his head. He had heard of rifles. Tribes they had raided upon the coast had spoken of the white men that could slay at a distance. But the Fire-gods were greater still. Every evening, in the valley of the Hidden River, loud thunder rent the air. The birds had left the valley—even the snakes had gone. The Fire-gods were kings over Nature. Moreover, they were merciless. Hundreds of natives—men of the Pende tribe, the Pambala and the Bakutu—had gone into the valley; but no one had returned.

At that Crouch set off towards the hut without a word. The others, following, found him seated cross-legged at the fire, tugging at the tuft of hair which grew beneath his lip. For some minutes the little wizened sea-captain spoke aloud to himself.

"I'll find out who these people are," said he. "White men may have gone up the river to trade; but it's bad for business if you get a reputation for murder. I don't understand it at all. I've heard of a white race in the centre of the continent;

maybe it’s they. I hope it is. At any rate, we’ll go and see."

For a few brief moments he lapsed into silence. Then he tapped M’Wané on the arm.

"Will you take us to the Hidden River?" he asked.

M’Wané sprang to his feet, violently shaking his head. He protested that he dared do nothing of the sort. They could not disbelieve him, for the man was actually trembling in his limbs.

Crouch turned to Harden.

"I’ve a mind to look into this," said he.

"I, too," said the other.

"He won’t take us," said Max.

"I’ll make him," said Crouch. "For the present, I’m going to sleep. The boys will stick to the canoes. We must get back to the river to-morrow afternoon. Good-night."

So saying, he curled himself up like a hedgehog, and, resting his head upon his folded arms, immediately fell asleep.

It was already three months since they had left Banana Point at the mouth of the Congo. They had journeyed to the foot of the rapids by steamboat, and thence had carried their canoes across several miles of country. They had enjoyed a good deal of mixed shooting in the lower valley, and then they had said good-bye to the few trading stations, or factories, which lay scattered at wide intervals upon the banks of the great river, and which were the last links that bound them to such civilization as the wilds of Africa could show. Max had already gained much experience of life in the wilds of tropical Africa. This was not the first time that he had found himself obliged to sleep upon the ground, without pillow or blankets, or that which was still more necessary—a mosquito-net.

When he opened his eyes it was daylight, and the first thing that he beheld was Captain Crouch, seated cross-legged at the fireside, with his pipe between his teeth. His one eye was fixed in the glowing embers. He appeared to be deep in

thought, for his face was all screwed up, and he never moved. Thin wreaths of smoke came from the bowl of his pipe, and the hut reeked of his foul tobacco. Suddenly he snatched the pipe from his lips, and banged the bowl so viciously upon the heel of his boot that he broke it in twain. "I have it!" he cried. "I've got it!"

Max asked what was the matter.

"I've got an idea," said Crouch. "I'll make this fellow take us to the Hidden River, whether he wants to or not. They are frightened of these Fire-gods, are they! By Christopher, I'll make them more frightened of me, or my name was never Crouch!"

He got to his feet, and crossed the hut to M'Wané, who still lay asleep. He seized the chief by the shoulders and shook him violently, until the man sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Your people," said he. "Big palaver. Now. Be quick."

M'Wané seemed to understand, for he got up and left the hut. Edward Harden was now awake.

The life that is lived by these Central African tribes finds a parallel in the ancient history of nearly all races that we know of. Government, for the most part, is in the hands of the headman of every village. The maintenance of law and order, the giving of wives, the exchange of possessions, is settled by "palaver," which amounts to a kind of meeting of the entire population, presided over by the chief. Near every village is a regular palaver-ground, usually in the shade of the largest tree in the neighbourhood.

It was here, on this early morning, that M'Wané summoned all the inhabitants of the village—men, women and children. They seated themselves upon the ground in a wide circle, in the midst of which was the trunk of a fallen tree. Upon this trunk the three Europeans seated themselves, Crouch in the middle, with his companions on either side.

When all was ready, M'Wané rose to his feet, and announced in stentorian tones that the little white man desired to speak to them, and that they must listen attentively to what he had to say. Whereupon Crouch got to his feet, and from that moment onward—in the parlance of the theatre—held the stage: the whole

scene was his. He talked for nearly an hour, and during that time never an eye was shifted from his face, except when he called attention to the parrot.

He was wonderful to watch. He shouted, he gesticulated, he even danced. In face of his limited vocabulary, it is a wonder how he made himself understood; but he did. He was perfectly honest from the start. Perhaps his experience had taught him that it is best to be honest with savages, as it is with horses and dogs. He said that he had made his way up the Kasai in order to penetrate to the upper reaches of the Hidden River. He said that he had heard of the Fire-gods, and he was determined to find out who they were. For himself, he believed that the Fire-gods were masters of some kind of witchcraft. It would be madness to fight them with spears and bows and arrows. He believed, from what he had heard, that even his own rifle would be impotent. High on a tree-top was perched a parrot, that preened its feathers in the sunlight, and chattered to itself. Crouch pointed this parrot out to the bewildered natives, and then, lifting his rifle to his shoulder, fired, and the bird fell dead to the ground. That was the power he possessed, he told them: he could strike at a distance, and he seldom failed to kill. And yet he dared not approach the Fire-gods, because they were masters of witchcraft. But he also knew the secrets of magic, and his magic was greater and more potent than the magic of the Fire-gods. He could not be killed; he was immortal. He was prepared to prove it. Whereat, he re-loaded his rifle, and deliberately fired a bullet through his foot.

The crowd rushed in upon him from all sides, stricken in amazement. But Crouch waved them back, and stepping up to Edward, told the Englishman to shoot again. Harden lifted his rifle to his shoulder, and sent a bullet into the ankle of Crouch’s cork foot. Thereupon, Crouch danced round the ring of natives, shouting wildly, springing into the air, proving to all who might behold that he was a thousand times alive.

They fell down upon their faces and worshipped him as a god. Without doubt he had spoken true: he was invulnerable, immortal, a witch-doctor of unheard-of powers.

But Crouch had not yet done. Before they had time to recover from their amazement, he had snatched out his glass eye, and thrust it into the hands of M’Wané himself, who dropped it like a living coal. They rushed to it, and looked at it, but dared not touch it. And when they looked up, Crouch had another eye in the socket—an eye that was flaming red.

A loud moan arose from every hand—a moan which gave expression to their mingled feelings of bewilderment, reverence and fear. From that moment Crouch was "the White Wizard," greater even than the Fire-gods, as the glory of the sun outstrips the moon.

"And now," cried Crouch, lifting his hands in the air, "will you, or will you not, guide me to the Hidden River where the Fire-gods live?"

M’Wané came forward and prostrated himself upon the ground.

"The White Wizard," said he, "has only to command."

CHAPTER IV—THE HIDDEN RIVER

It is not necessary to describe in detail the passage up the Kasai, from the place where the leopard had been wounded to Date Palm Island, which was where M’Wané decided to disembark. During that voyage, which occupied two and a half days, they passed a mangrove swamp upon the southern bank, which the Fan chief pointed out as the place where the Hidden River joined the Kasai.

No one would have guessed it. The short, stunted trees were packed so close together that their branches formed a kind of solid roof which appeared to extend for miles. Underneath, there was darkness as of night. There was nothing to suggest that another river here joined the larger stream. The Kasai did not narrow above the swamp, nor was there any change in the colour of the water or the strength of the current.

Date Palm Island lay a day’s journey by canoe above the mangrove swamp. The name of Date Palm Island was given by Edward Harden the moment he set eyes upon the little rocky islet in mid-stream, upon which stood a solitary tree. It was the custom of this explorer to name the natural features he discovered; and it was he who was also responsible for the names of other places of which, in course of time, we shall have occasion to tell, such as Solitude Peak and Hippo Pool.

In addition to the Loango boys who composed the crews, the party now included M’Wané, the Fan chief, and four of his most trusted warriors. It was on the occasion of this journey on the Upper Kasai that Edward Harden made one of the mistakes of his life. M’Wané travelled in the first canoe with themselves, and his four warriors in the other canoe which followed. Both Harden and Crouch had a natural wish to keep the object of their journey a secret. Neither knew that one of the boys in the second canoe could both speak and understand the Fan dialect, and it was he who told his companions that the Hidden River was their destination. Still, no one suspected that the secret was out, until they had unloaded all their supplies and ammunition at Date Palm Island, where they

decided to form their base.

In this district, the general course of the Kasai lies due south-west. From the mangrove swamp on the southern bank, the valley of the Hidden River lies, more or less, in a direct line from north to south. M’Wané had known the Hidden River in the old days, before the Fire-gods came into the country. He said that there was a good portage across country from Date Palm Island to Hippo Pool, which was the nearest accessible point on the Hidden River above the rapids that flowed through the Long Ravine.

They decided to leave one canoe on the island, in charge of four of the Loango boys. The remaining natives could be employed in carrying the lighter of the two canoes, and a sufficiency of stores and ammunition across country to the Hidden River. The indignation of Crouch may be imagined when the boys struck in a body and refused to undertake the portage.

Edward used his greatest powers of persuasion; Crouch threatened and abused. They answered that word of the Fire-gods had been carried even as far as the Coast, that they had never bargained to sell their lives to the Englishmen. None the less, they expressed their willingness to remain upon the island until the party returned.

Crouch turned to M’Wané.

"And do you, too, go back?" he asked.

The chief shook his head, and smiled.

"My men and I will stand by the White Wizard," he answered. "A Fan holds to his word."

Crouch slapped the chief upon the back, and then went on to explain to the boys that if they helped with the portage, they would not be asked to embark on the Hidden River, but could return to Date Palm Island. After some discussion, they agreed to this; and as much time had already been wasted, Harden and Crouch decided not to start until daybreak the following day.

According to Edward Harden’s diary, the portage lasted two weeks and three days. They were obliged to force their way through virgin forest. It was frequently necessary to cut down with axes and billhooks the tangled

undergrowth and creepers that wove themselves amid the trunks of the trees, in order to make room for the canoe to pass. Some days they did not cover more than a mile, though they were working from dawn to sunset. But towards the end of the journey the passage became easier, by reason of the fact that they found a watercourse, which they followed, until they finally came forth into the sunlight at Hippo Pool.

When they first looked upon it, it was as if, indeed, there were an air of mystery in the valley of the Hidden River. The silence that reigned upon its surface was intense. The atmosphere seemed several degrees hotter even than the forest. The name Hippo Pool was given because, immediately on their arrival, Edward Harden, who was leading, shot a hippopotamus which he found asleep upon the bank. They were glad enough of the meat for the natives, who would require provisions on their journey back to the Kasai.

The next morning the Loango boys left in a body. They were glad enough to be off. And soon afterwards the canoe shot out from the bank.

Their progress was painfully slow. M'Wané and his four followers worked continually with the paddles, assisted in turn by Harden and his nephew. As for Crouch, he was always the look-out man. His only eye was quick and keen as that of a falcon.

Hour by hour they toiled into the Unknown, until the sweat poured from their faces and their hands were blistered in the sun; and the blisters would not heal, because of the insects that followed in a crowd. The jungle grew more magnificent and wild as the river narrowed. The character of the trees changed, and of the undergrowth—all became more luxuriant, more profuse, until they found themselves in a land where Nature was something fantastic and superb.

It was on the third day after they had set out from Hippo Pool that they turned an angle of the river, and came on a sudden into a cup-shaped valley where there was but little vegetation. A circle of granite hills stood all around them, and in the centre on either side of the river was a plain of sand. Crouch turned in the bows and pointed to something ahead, and at that moment the sharp crack of a rifle echoed in the stillness, and a bullet sped into the water a few inches from the bows of the canoe.

CHAPTER V—THE STOCKADE

As the bullet cut into the water Crouch sprang upright in the canoe. His thin form trembled with eagerness. The man was like a cat, inasmuch as he was charged with electricity. Under his great pith helmet the few hairs which he possessed stood upright on his head. Edward Harden leaned forward and picked up his rifle, which he now held at the ready.

By reason of the fact that the river had suddenly widened into a kind of miniature lake, the current was not so swift. Hence, though M'Wané and his Fans ceased to paddle, the canoe shot onward by dint of the velocity at which they had been travelling. Every moment brought them nearer and nearer to the danger that lay ahead.

In order to relate what followed, it is necessary to describe the scene. We have said that the wild, impenetrable jungle had ceased abruptly, and they found themselves surrounded by granite hills, in the centre of which lay a plain of glaring sand. To their left, about a hundred paces from the edge of the river, was a circular stockade. A fence had been constructed of sharp-pointed stakes, each about eight feet in height. There was but a single entrance into this stockade—a narrow gate, not more than three feet across, which faced the river. Up-stream, to the south, the granite hills closed in from either bank, so that the river flowed through a gorge which at this distance seemed particularly precipitous and narrow. Midway between the stockade and the gorge was a kraal, or large native village, surrounded by a palisade. Within the palisade could be seen the roofs of several native huts, and at the entrance, seated cross-legged on the ground, was the white figure of an Arab who wore the turban and flowing robes by which his race is distinguished, from the deserts of Bokhara to the Gold Coast. Before the stockade, standing at the water's edge, was the figure of a European dressed in a white duck suit. He was a tall, thin man with a black, pointed beard, and a large sombrero hat. Between his lips was a cigarette, and in his hands he held a rifle, from the muzzle of which was issuing a thin trail of smoke.

As the canoe approached, this man grew vastly excited, and stepped into the river, until the water had risen to his knees. There, he again lifted his rifle to his shoulder.

"Put that down!" cried Crouch. "You’re a dead man if you fire."

The man obeyed reluctantly, and at that moment a second European came running from the entrance of the stockade. He was a little man, of about the same build as Crouch, but very round in the back, and with a complexion so yellow that he might have been a Chinese.

The man with the beard seemed very agitated. He gesticulated wildly, and, holding his rifle in his left hand, pointed down-stream with his right. He was by no means easy to understand, since his pronunciation of English was faulty, and he never troubled to take his cigarette from between his lips.

"Get back!" he cried. "Go back again! You have no business here."

"Why not?" asked Crouch.

"Because this river is mine."

"By what right?"

"By right of conquest. I refuse to allow you to land."

The canoe was now only a few yards from the bank. The second man—the small man with the yellow face—turned and ran back into the stockade, evidently to fetch his rifle.

"I’m afraid," said Crouch, "with your permission or without, we intend to come ashore."

Again the butt of the man’s rifle flew to his shoulder.

"Another yard," said he, "and I shoot you dead."

He closed an eye, and took careful aim. His sights were directed straight at Crouch’s heart. At that range—even had he been the worst shot in the world—he could scarcely have missed.

Crouch was never seen to move. With his face screwed, and his great chin thrust forward, his only eye fixed in the midst of the black beard of the man who dared him to approach, he looked a very figure of defiance.

The crack of a rifle—a loud shout—and then a peal of laughter. Crouch had thrown back his head and was laughing as a school-boy does, with one hand thrust in a trousers pocket. Edward Harden, seated in the stern seat, with elbows upon his knees, held his rifle to his shoulder, and from the muzzle a little puff of smoke was rising in the air. It was the man with the black beard who had let out the shout, in anger and surprise. The cigarette had been cut away from between his lips, and Harden’s bullet had struck the butt of his rifle, to send it flying from his hands into the water. He stood there, knee-deep in the river, passionate, foiled and disarmed. It was Edward Harden’s quiet voice that now came to his ears.

"Hands up!" said he.

Slowly, with his black eyes ablaze, the man lifted his arms above his head. A moment later, Crouch had sprung ashore.

The little sea-captain hastened to the entrance of the stockade, and, as he reached it, the second man came running out, with a rifle in his hands. He was running so quickly that he was unable to check himself, and, almost before he knew it, his rifle had been taken from him. He pulled up with a jerk, and, turning, looked into the face of Captain Crouch.

"I must introduce myself," said the captain. "My name’s Crouch. Maybe you’ve heard of me?"

The man nodded his head. It appears he had not yet sufficiently recovered from his surprise to be able to speak.

"By Christopher!" cried Crouch, on a sudden. "I know you! We’ve met before—five years ago in St. Paul de Loanda. You’re a half-caste Portuguese, of the name of de Costa, who had a trade-station at the mouth of the Ogowe. So you remember me?"

The little yellow man puckered up his face and bowed.

"I think," said he, with an almost perfect English accent—"I think one’s knowledge of the Coast would be very limited, if one had never heard of Captain

Crouch."

Crouch placed his hand upon his heart and made a mimic bow.

"May I return the compliment?" said he. "I've heard men speak of de Costa from Sierra Leone to Walfish Bay, and never once have I heard anything said that was good."

At that the half-caste caught his under-lip in his teeth, and shot Crouch a glance in which was fear, mistrust and anger. The sea-captain did not appear to notice it, for he went on in the easiest manner in the world.

"And who's your friend?" he asked, indicating the tall man with the black beard, who was now approaching with Edward Harden and Max.

"My friend," said he, "is a countryman of mine, a Portuguese, who has assumed the name of Cæsar." The half-caste had evidently not forgotten the insult which Crouch had hurled in his teeth; for now his demeanour changed, and he laughed. "If Captain Crouch finds it necessary to meddle in our affairs," said he, "I think he will find his equal in Mister Cæsar."

Crouch paid no more attention to him than he would have done to a mosquito; and before the man had finished speaking, he had turned his back upon him, and held out a hand to the Portuguese.

"I trust," said he, "you've expressed your gratitude to Ted Harden, who, instead of taking your life, preferred to extinguish your cigarette."

"I have already done so," said Cæsar, with a smile. "I hope to explain matters later. The mistake was natural enough."

Crouch, with his one eye, looked this man through and through. He had been able to sum up the half-caste at a glance. Cæsar was a personality that could not be fathomed in an instant.

The man was not unhandsome. His figure, in spite of its extreme height and thinness, was exceedingly graceful. The hair of his moustache and beard, and as much as was visible beneath the broad-brimmed sombrero hat, was coal-black, and untouched with grey. His features were aquiline and large. He bore some slight resemblance to the well-known figure of Don Quixote, except that he was

more robust. The most remarkable thing about him was his jet-black, piercing eyes. If there was ever such a thing as cruelty, it was there. When he smiled, as he did now, his face was even pleasant: there was a wealth of wrinkles round his eyes.

"It was a natural and unavoidable mistake," said he. "I have been established here for two years. You and your friends are, perhaps, sufficiently acquainted with the rivers to know that one must be always on one’s guard."

Unlike de Costa, he spoke English with a strong accent, which it would be extremely difficult to reproduce. For all that, he had a good command of words.

"And now," he went on, "I must offer you such hospitality as I can. I notice the men in your canoes are Fans. I must confess I have never found the Fan a good worker. He is too independent. They are all prodigal sons."

"I like the Fan," said Edward.

"Each man to his taste," said Cæsar. "In the kraal yonder," he continued, pointing to the village, "I have about two hundred boys. For the most part, they belong to the Pambala tribe. As you may know, the Pambala are the sworn enemies of the Fans. You are welcome to stay with me as long as you like, but I must request that your Fans be ordered to remain within the stockade. Will you be so good as to tell them to disembark?"

"As you wish," said Edward.

At Crouch’s request, Max went back to the canoe, and returned with M’Wané and the four Fans. Not until they had been joined by the natives did Cæsar lead the way into the stockade.

They found themselves in what, to all intents and purposes, was a fort. Outside the walls of the stockade was a ditch, and within was a banquette, or raised platform, from which it was possible for men to fire standing. In the centre of the enclosure were three or four huts—well-constructed buildings for the heart of Africa, and considerably higher than the ordinary native dwelling-place. Before the largest hut was a flag-staff, upon which a large yellow flag was unfurled in the slight breeze that came from the north.

It was into this hut that they were conducted by the Portuguese. As the Englishman entered, a large dog, which had been lying upon the floor, got up and growled, but lay down again on a word from Cæsar. The interior of the hut consisted of a single room, furnished with a bed, a table and several chairs, all of which had been constructed of wood cut in the forest. As there were only four chairs, the half-caste, de Costa, seated himself on a large chest, with three heavy padlocks, which stood against the wall farthest from the door.

Cæsar crossed to a kind of sideboard, made of packing-cases, whence he produced glasses and a bottle of whisky. He then drew a jug of water from a large filter. These he placed upon the table. He requested his guests to smoke, and passed round his cigarette-case. His manner, and the ease with which he played the host, suggested a man of breeding. Both Edward Harden and his nephew accepted cigarettes, but Crouch filled his pipe, and presently the hut was reeking, like an ill-trimmed lamp, of his atrocious "Bull’s Eye Shag."

"I owe you an apology," said Cæsar; "an apology and an explanation. You shall have both. But, in the first place, I would like to hear how it was that you came to discover this river?"

It was Edward Harden who answered.

"We were shooting big game on the Kasai," said he, "when we heard mention of the ’Hidden River.’"

"Who spoke of it?" said Cæsar. His dark eyes were seen to flash in the half-light in the hut.

"A party of Fans," said Edward, "with whom we came in contact. We persuaded them to carry our canoe across country. We embarked upon the river three days ago, and paddled up-stream until this afternoon, when we sighted your camp, and nearly came to blows. That’s all."

Cæsar leaned forward, with his arms folded on the table, bringing his dark face to within a few inches of the cigarette which Edward held in his lips.

"Were you told anything," said he, in a slow, deliberate voice; "were you told anything—of us?"

Edward Harden, being a man of six foot several inches, was one who was guileless in his nature. He was about to say that the Fans had spoken of the "Fire-gods," when an extraordinary occurrence came to pass.

Crouch sprang to his feet with a yell, and placing one foot upon the seat of the chair upon which he had been sitting, pulled up his trousers to the knee. In his hand he held a knife. All sprang to their feet.

"What is it?" they demanded, in one and the same breath.

"A snake," said Crouch. "I’m bitten in the leg."

CHAPTER VI—CROUCH ON THE WAR-PATH

Both Cæsar and Edward hastened to the captain’s side. Sure enough, upon the calf of his leg, were two small drops of blood, about a quarter of an inch apart, where the fangs of the reptile had entered.

Crouch looked up at Cæsar. His voice was perfectly calm.

"Where’s the kitchen?" he demanded.

The tall Portuguese appeared suspicious.

"The kitchen is quite near at hand," said he. "Do you want to go there?"

"Yes," said Crouch. "Lead the way. There’s no time to lose."

They passed out and entered a smaller hut, from which a column of smoke was rising through a hole in the roof. In the centre of the floor was a large charcoal brazier, at which a man was squatting in the characteristic attitude of the East. Crouch lifted his eyebrows in surprise when he saw that this man was an Arab.

"Tongs," said he in Arabic. "Lend me a pair of tongs."

The man, expressionless, produced the article in question.

Crouch took a piece of charcoal from the brazier, that was white-hot, and, without a moment’s hesitation, he thrust this upon the place where the poison had entered his flesh. As he underwent that agony, his sallow face turned a trifle paler, his lips grew thinner, and his only eye more bright; but never a groan, or even a sigh, escaped him.

At last he threw the charcoal back into the fire.

"That’s all right," said he. "It isn’t a pleasant remedy, but it’s sure." Then he turned to Cæsar. "I should like a little whisky," said he. "I feel a trifle faint."

He asked for Edward’s arm to assist him on his way, and no sooner were they clear of the kitchen than he whispered in Harden’s ear—

"There’s nothing to worry about," said he. "I’m as right as rain. I was never bitten at all. But I had to stop you somehow, or you would have told that fellow what we heard of the Fire-gods. Mind, he must know nothing."

When they got back to the hut, Cæsar gave Crouch half a tumblerful of neat whisky, which the captain drained at a gulp. Needless to say, their efforts to find the snake proved fruitless. Then Crouch again complained of faintness, and asked permission to lie down upon the bed. No sooner was he there than he closed his eyes, and soon afterwards was sound asleep—if one was entitled to judge by his heavy breathing. Once or twice he snored.

But, already, we have seen enough of Captain Crouch to know that, in his case, it would not be wise to go by appearances. He was no more asleep than he had been throughout those long hours when he had kept watch in the bows of the canoe.

Cæsar motioned to Edward to be seated at the table, and Max took the chair which had been formerly occupied by Crouch. De Costa remained seated upon the chest.

"Let me see," said Cæsar; "of what were we speaking? Ah, yes, I remember. I was asking if the natives had made any mention of us."

"We asked many questions," said Harden, "but they knew little or nothing of the Hidden River. For some reason or other, they seemed to fear it."

Cæsar regarded Edward intently for a few seconds; and then, seeming satisfied, he shrugged his shoulders.

"Their minds are filled with superstitions," said he. "And now it remains for me to explain myself. I came to this valley two years ago. I had already journeyed some distance up the Congo, in search of ivory. I discovered that in the jungle in this valley elephants abound; moreover, these elephants are finer than any others I have ever seen in any part of Africa, even those of the East Coast, whose tusks

are stored at Zanzibar. I made this place my headquarters. I regard the whole country as my own happy hunting-ground. I naturally resent all new-comers, especially Europeans. I look upon them as trespassers. Of course, I have no right to do so; I know that quite well. But you must understand that here, in the heart of Africa, the laws of civilized nations hardly apply. To all intents and purposes this country is my own. In the kraal yonder I have two hundred of the finest elephant hunters between the Zambesi and the Congo. I pay them well. I have already a great store of ivory. In another two years I hope to retire to Portugal, a wealthy man. That is all my story."

"How do you kill your elephants?" asked Edward. The hunting of big game was the foremost interest of his life.

Cæsar smiled.

"You will not approve of my methods," said he. "You are a sportsman; I am only a trader. I send my natives into the jungle, in the direction in which a herd of elephants has been located. These fellows creep on all-fours amid the undergrowth. They are as invisible as snakes. They are armed with long knives, with which they cut the tendons of the elephants' hind-legs, just below the knee. If an elephant tries to walk after that tendon has been severed, it falls to the ground and breaks its leg. The great beasts seem to know this, for they remain motionless as statues. When all the finest tuskers have been thus disposed of, I come with my rifle and shoot them, one after the other. Thus it is that I have collected a great store of tusks."

Edward Harden made a wry face.

"I have heard of that manner of hunting," said he. "It is much practised on the East Coast. I consider it barbarous and cruel."

Cæsar smiled again.

"I told you," said he, "you would not approve."

Harden swung round in his chair, with a gesture of disgust.

"I would like to see the ivory trade stopped," he cried, in a sudden flood of anger, very rare in a man naturally prone to be unexcitable and mild. "I regard the elephant as a noble animal—the noblest animal that lives. I myself have shot

many, but the beast has always had a chance, though I will not deny the odds were always heavily on me. Still, when I find myself face to face with a rogue elephant, I know that my life is in danger. Now, there is no danger in your method, which is the method of the slaughter-house. At this rate, very soon there will be no elephants left in Africa."

"I’m afraid," said Cæsar, with a shrug of the shoulders, "we would never agree, because you’re a sportsman and I’m a trader. In the meantime, I will do all I can to make you comfortable during your stay at Makanda."

"Is that the name of this place?" asked Max.

"Yes," said the Portuguese. "There was a native village when I came here—just a few scattered huts. The natives called the place Makanda, which, I believe, means a crater. The hills which surround us are evidently the walls of an extinct volcano. But, to come back to business, I can provide a hut for your Fan attendants, but they must be ordered not to leave the stockade. You have noticed, perhaps, that I employ a few Arabs. I am fond of Arabs myself; they are such excellent cooks. An Arab is usually on sentry at the gate of the stockade. That man will receive orders to shoot any one of the Fans who endeavours to pass the gate. These methods are rather arbitrary, I admit; but in the heart of Africa, what would you have? It is necessary to rule with an iron hand. Were I to be lax in discipline, my life would be in danger. Also, I must request you and your friends not to leave the stockade, unattended by either de Costa or myself. The truth is, there are several hostile tribes in the neighbourhood, and it is only with the greatest difficulty that I can succeed in maintaining peace."

"I’m sure," said Harden, "you will find us quite ready to do anything you wish. After all, the station is yours; and in this country a man makes his own laws."

"That is so," said Cæsar; and added, "I’m responsible to no one but myself."

This man had an easy way of talking and a plausible manner that would have deceived a more acute observer than Edward Harden. As he spoke he waved his hand, as if the whole matter were a trifle. He ran on in the same casual fashion, with an arm thrown carelessly over the back of his chair, sending the smoke of his cigarette in rings towards the ceiling.

"Most of us come to Africa to make money," said he; "and as the climate is unhealthy, the heat unbearable, and the inhabitants savages, we desire to make

that money as quickly as possible, and then return to Europe. That is my intention. For myself, I keep tolerably well; but de Costa here is a kind of living ague. He is half consumed with malaria; he can’t sleep by night, he lies awake with chattering teeth. Sometimes his temperature is so high that his pulse is racing. At other times he is so weak that he is unable to walk a hundred paces. He looks forward to the day when he shakes the dust of Africa from his shoes and returns to his native land, which—according to him—is Portugal, though, I believe, he was born in Jamaica."

Max looked at the half-caste, and thought that never before had he set eyes upon so despicable an object. He looked like some mongrel cur. He was quite unable to look the young Englishman in the face, but under Max’s glance dropped his eyes to the floor.

"And now," said Cæsar, "there is a hut where I keep my provisions, which I will place at your disposal."

At that he went outside, followed by the two Hardens. De Costa remained in the hut. Crouch was still asleep.

Cæsar called the Arab from the kitchen, and, assisted by this man and the five Fans, they set to work to remove a number of boxes from the hut in which it was proposed that the three Englishmen should sleep. Blankets were spread upon the ground. The tall Portuguese was most solicitous that his guests should want for nothing. He brought candles, a large mosquito-net, and even soap.

Supper that evening was the best meal which Max had eaten since he left the sea-going ship at Banana Point on the Congo. The Portuguese was well provided with stores. He produced several kinds of vegetables, which, he said, he grew at a little distance from the stockade. He had also a great store of spirits, being under the entirely false impression that in tropical regions stimulants maintain both health and physical strength.

After supper, Cæsar and Captain Crouch, who had entirely recovered from his faintness, played écarté with an exceedingly dirty pack of cards. And a strange picture they made, these two men, the one so small and wizened, the other so tall and black, each coatless, with their shirt-sleeves rolled to the elbow, fingering their cards in the flickering light of a tallow candle stuck in the neck of a bottle. Crouch knew it then—and perhaps Cæsar knew it, too—that they were rivals to

the death, in a greater game than was ever played with cards.

They went early to bed, thanking Cæsar for his kindness. Before he left the hut, Edward Harden apologized for his rudeness in finding fault with the trader’s method of obtaining ivory.

"It was no business of mine," said he. "I apologize for what I said."

No sooner were the three Englishmen in their hut, than Crouch seized each of his friends by an arm, and drew them close together.

"Here’s the greatest devilry you ever heard of!" he exclaimed.

"How?" said Edward. "What do you mean?"

"As yet," said Crouch, "I know nothing. I merely suspect. Mark my words, it’ll not be safe to go to sleep. One of us must keep watch."

"What makes you suspicious?" asked Max. Throughout this conversation they talked in whispers. Crouch had intimated that they must not be overheard.

"A thousand things," said Crouch. "In the first place, I don’t like the look of Arabs. There’s an old saying on the Niger, ’Where there’s an Arab, there’s mischief.’ Also, he’s got something he doesn’t wish us to see. That’s why he won’t let us outside the stockade. Besides, remember what the natives told us. The tribes the whole country round stand in mortal fear of this fellow, and they don’t do that for nothing. The Fans are a brave race, and so are the Pambala. And do you remember, they told us that every evening there’s thunder in the valley which shakes the earth? No, he’s up to no good, and I shall make it my business to find out what his game is."

"Then you don’t believe that he’s an ivory trader?" asked Max.

"Not a word of it!" said Crouch. "Where’s the ivory? He talks of this store of tusks, but where does he keep it? He says he’s been here for two years. In two years, by the wholesale manner in which he has been killing elephants, according to his own account, he should have a pile of ivory ten feet high at least. And where is it? Not in a hut; not one of them is big enough. I suppose he’ll ask us to believe that he keeps it somewhere outside the stockade."

"I never thought of that," said Harden, tugging the ends of his moustache. "I wonder what he’s here for."

"So do I," said Crouch.

Soon after that, at Crouch’s request, Harden and Max lay down upon their blankets, and were soon fast asleep. As for the captain, he also lay down, and for more than an hour breathed heavily, as if in sleep. Then, without a sound, he began to move forward on hands and knees across the floor of the hut.

When he reached the door he came into the moonlight, and had there been any one there to see, they would have noticed that he carried a revolver, and there was a knife between his teeth.

As quick as a lizard he glided into the shade beneath the walls of the hut. There he lay for some minutes, listening, with all his senses alert.

This man had much in common with the wild beasts of the forests. He was quick to hear, quick to see; it seemed as if he even had the power to scent danger, as the reed-buck or the buffalo.

His ears caught nothing but the varied sounds of wild, nocturnal life in the jungle. The stockade was not more than a hundred paces distant from the skirting of the forest. Somewhere near at hand a leopard growled, and a troop of monkeys, frightened out of their wits, could be heard scrambling through the branches of the trees. Farther away, a pair of lions were hunting; there is no sound more terrible and haunting than the quick, panting noise that is given by this great beast of prey as it follows upon the track of an antelope or deer. Then, far in the distance, there was a noise, so faint as to be hardly audible, like the beating of a drum. Crouch knew what it was. Indeed, in these matters there was little of which he was ignorant. It was a great gorilla, beating its stomach in passion in the darkness. And that is a sound before which every animal that lives in the jungle quails and creeps away into hiding; even the great pythons slide back into the depths of silent, woodland pools.

But it was not to the forest that Crouch’s ear was turned. He was listening for a movement in the hut in which slept the Portuguese trader, who went by the name of Cæsar. After a while, seeming satisfied, he crawled on, in absolute silence, in the half-darkness, looking for all the world like some cruel four-footed beast that had come slinking from out of the jungle.

He reached the door of the hut, and crept stealthily in. Inside, he was not able to see. It was some little time before his eye grew accustomed to the darkness.

Then he was just able to discern the long figure of the Portuguese stretched upon his couch. Half-raising himself, he listened, with his ear not two inches from the man’s mouth. Cæsar was breathing heavily. He was evidently fast asleep.

Still on hands and knees, as silently as ever, Crouch glided out of the hut.

Instead of returning by the way he had come, he turned in the opposite direction, and approached another hut. It was that which belonged to the half-caste, de Costa, whom he had met five years before in St. Paul de Loanda.

Once again he passed in at the door, silently, swiftly, with his knife still in his teeth.

This hut was even darker than the other, by reason of the fact that the door was smaller. Crouch sat up, and rubbed his eyes, and inwardly abused the universe in general because he was not able to see.

Suddenly there was a creaking noise, as if some one moved on the bed. Crouch was utterly silent. Then some one coughed. The cough was followed by a groan. De Costa sat up in bed. Crouch was just able to see him.

The little half-caste, resting his elbows on his knees, took his head between his hands, and rocked from side to side. He talked aloud in Portuguese. Crouch knew enough of that language to understand.

"Oh, my head!" he groaned. "My head! My head!" He was silent for no longer than a minute; then he went on: "Will I never be quit of this accursed country! The fever is in my bones, my blood, my brain!"

He turned over on his side, and, stretching out an arm, laid hold upon a match-box. They were wooden matches, and they rattled in the box.

Then he struck a light and lit a candle, which was glued by its own grease to a saucer. When he had done that he looked up, and down the barrel of Captain Crouch’s revolver.

CHAPTER VII—THE WHITE MAN’S BURDEN

Before de Costa had time to cry out—which he had certainly intended to do—Crouch’s hand had closed upon his mouth, and he was held in a grip of iron.

"Keep still!" said Crouch, in a quick whisper. "Struggle, and you die."

The man was terrified. He was racked by fever, nerve-shattered and weak. At the best he was a coward. But now he was in no state of health to offer resistance to any man; and in the candle-light Crouch, with his single eye and his great chin, looked too ferocious to describe.

For all that the little sea-captain’s voice was quiet, and even soothing.

"You have nothing to fear," said he. "I don’t intend to harm you. I have only one thing to say: if you cry out, or call for assistance, I’ll not hesitate to shoot. On the other hand, if you lie quiet and silent, I promise, on my word of honour, that you have nothing whatsoever to fear. I merely wish to ask you a few questions. You need not answer them unless you wish to. Now, may I take my hand from your mouth?"

De Costa nodded his head, and Crouch drew away his hand. The half-caste lay quite still. It was obvious that he had been frightened out of his life, which had served to some extent to heighten the fever which so raged within him.

"Come," said Crouch; "I’ll doctor you. Your nerves are all shaken. Have you any bromide?"

"Yes," said de Costa; "over there."

He pointed in the direction of a shelf upon the wall, which had been constructed of a piece of a packing-case. On this shelf was a multitude of bottles. Crouch

examined these, and at last laid hands upon one containing a colourless fluid, like water, and handed it to the patient to drink. De Costa drained it at a gulp, and then sank back with a sigh of relief.

Crouch felt his pulse.

"You're weak," said he, "terribly weak. If you don't get out of this country soon you'll die. Do you know that?"

"I do," said de Costa; "I think of it every day."

"You don't wish to die?" said Crouch.

"I wish to live."

There was something pitiful in the way he said that. He almost whined. Here was a man who was paying the debt that the white man owes to Africa. In this great continent, which even to-day is half unknown, King Death rules from the Sahara to the veld. A thousand pestilences rage in the heart of the great steaming forests, that strike down their victims with promptitude, and which are merciless as they are swift. It seems as if a curse is on this country. It is as if before the advance of civilization a Power, greater by far than the combined resources of men, arises from out of the darkness of the jungle and the miasma of the mangrove swamp, and strikes down the white man, as a pole-axe fells an ox.

De Costa, though he was but half a European, was loaded with the white man's burden, with the heart of only a half-caste to see him through. Crouch, despite the roughness of his manner, attended at his bedside with the precision of a practised nurse. There was something even tender in the way he smoothed the man's pillow; and when he spoke, there was a wealth of sympathy in his voice.

"You are better now?" he asked.

"Yes," said de Costa; "I am better."

"Lie still and rest," said Crouch. "Perhaps you are glad enough to have some one to talk to you. I want you to listen to what I have to say."

Crouch seated himself at the end of the bed, and folded his thin, muscular hands upon his knee.

"I am not a doctor by profession," he began, "but, in the course of my life, I've had a good deal of experience of the various diseases which are met with in these parts of the world. I know enough to see that your whole constitution is so undermined that it is absolutely necessary for you to get out of the country. Now I want to ask you a question."

"What is it?" said de Costa. His voice was very weak.

"Which do you value most, life or wealth?"

The little half-caste smiled.

"I can see no good in wealth," said he, "when you're dead."

"That is true," said Crouch. "No one would dispute it—except yourself."

"But I admit it!" said de Costa.

"You admit it in words," said the other, "but you deny it in your life."

"I am too ill to understand. Please explain."

Crouch leaned forward and tapped the palm of his left hand with the forefinger of his right.

"You say," said he, "that you know that you'll die if you remain here. Yet you remain here in order to pile up a great fortune to take back with you to Jamaica or Portugal, wherever you intend to go. But you will take nothing back, because you will die. You are therefore courting death. I repeat your own words: what will be the use of all this wealth to you after you are dead?"

De Costa sat up in his bed.

"It's true!" he cried in a kind of groan.

"H'sh!" said Crouch. "Be quiet! Don't raise your voice."

De Costa rocked his head between his knees.

"It's true—true—true!" he whined. "I know it. I shall die. I don't want this money. I want to live. I—I fear to die." His voice trembled. He was pitiful to see.

"You shall not die," said Crouch; "I'll make it my business to see that you live. I can't cure you, but I can keep you alive till we reach the coast. There, one week on the sea will restore your health."

"That's what I want," said de Costa, "the sea air. Oh, for a breath of the sea!"

"I'll take you down with us," Crouch ran on. "I'll doctor you on the way. Max Harden is a young man of science. He has studied these things, and with his knowledge and my experience we'll pull you through. In three months from now, I promise you, you shall set eyes upon the ocean."

"How glorious!" the poor man cried. He looked into Crouch's face, and there were large tears in his eyes.

"Stay," said Crouch; "I've not come here for philanthropic purposes. If I do this for you, you must do something for me. Otherwise you can stay here—and die."

"What is it you want?"

Crouch bent forward and whispered in the man's ear, speaking distinctly and with great deliberation.

"I want to know what's inside the padlocked chest that Cæsar keeps in his hut. Come, out with the truth!"

On the instant the man sprang out of bed and seized Crouch by the wrists. He was so little master of himself that hot tears were streaming down his cheeks. He was shaking in every limb. It was as if his neck was not strong enough to support his head, which swung round and round.

"Not that!" he screamed. "For pity's sake, not that!"

"Come," said Crouch; "the truth."

De Costa drew back. "I daren't," said he.

"Why?"

"Because he—would kill me."

"Look here, you have to choose between two men," said Crouch: "Cæsar and myself. Trust me, and I'll see you through. You told me you had heard of me before. You may have heard it said that I'm a man who sticks to his word through thick and thin, once it has been given."

As Crouch said this he noticed a remarkable change that came on a sudden upon de Costa's face. The man's complexion turned livid; his jaw dropped; his eyes were staring hard over Crouch's shoulder, in the direction of the door.

Crouch whipped round upon his heel, his revolver in his hand, and found that he stood face to face with Cæsar.

"By Christopher," said he, "you're mighty silent!"

"And may I ask," said Cæsar, "what you are doing here?"

Crouch made a motion of his hand towards de Costa, who had sunk down upon the bed.

"This man's ill," said he; "in fact, he's dying."

"He is always dying," said Cæsar, "and he never dies. He has the vitality of a monkey."

"It doesn't seem to distress you much," said Crouch. "Since you have lived together for two years, in a forsaken spot like this, I should have thought that you were friends."

Cæsar threw out his hand.

"Ah," he cried, "we are the best friends in the world—de Costa and myself."

He stood looking down upon Crouch, with his white teeth gleaming between his black moustache and his beard. In that light it was difficult to see whether he smiled or sneered. There was something mysterious about the man, and something that was fiendish.

"And so," he ran on, "Captain Crouch has taken upon himself the duties of medical officer of Makanda? I'm sure we are much obliged."

"I have some experience of medicine," said the captain.

"Indeed," said Cæsar. "And do you always operate with a revolver?"

For once in his life, Crouch had been caught off his guard.

"In this country," he said, "I am seldom without one."

"You are wise," said Cæsar. "I myself am always prepared."

With a man like Crouch, this kind of verbal sword-play could never last for long. He was too much a creature of impulse. He liked to speak his mind, and he hated and mistrusted this thin Portuguese as a mongoose hates a snake.

"There are no laws in this country," said he, "and there are certain times when it’s not a bad principle to shoot at sight. In the civilized world, a man goes about with his reputation on the sleeve of his coat, and all men may know him for what he is. But here, in the midst of these benighted forests, one must often act on instinct. To kill at sight, that’s the law of the jungle; and when men come here, they’d do well to leave behind them what they know of other laws respecting life and property and rights. If I’m wise to carry a revolver, perhaps I’m a fool because I hesitate to use it."

Here was a plain speaking, an outright honesty that quite disarmed the Portuguese. If, hitherto, Cæsar had held the upper hand, Captain Crouch had now turned the tables. Whether warfare be carried on by words or amid the clash of arms, the victory lies with him who best knows his mind. And Captain Crouch did that. It was as if he had thrown a gauntlet at the tall man’s feet, and defied him to pick it up.

But Cæsar was never willing to fight. His was a quick, calculating brain, and he knew that the odds would be against him. Listening outside the hut, he had overheard the greater part of the conversation which had taken place between Crouch and the fever-stricken half-caste. His secret, which he kept under lock and key in the strong chest at the foot of his bed, he was prepared to guard at every cost. He saw now that Crouch was an adversary not to be despised. It was necessary for him to take steps to seal de Costa’s lips.

Though the man no longer showed it in his face, Cæsar was by no means pleased at the appearance of the Englishmen. Though he was affable and polite, all the

time he was scheming in his mind how to get rid of them as quickly as he could. For the present, he decided to bide his time, hoping that, sooner or later, Fate might play into his hands. Whatever happened, he was determined that they should not suspect him of any sinister intention, and on that account it behoved him to keep up an appearance of friendship. He answered Crouch with all the pleasantry of manner he had at his command.

"Captain Crouch," said he, "you are a man after my own heart. I also respect the laws of the jungle. I have shaken the dust of civilization from my feet. It is only the strong man who can do so. In you I recognize an equal."

In his heart, Crouch stigmatized such talk as this as high-falutin’ nonsense. Still, he thought it unwise to hatch a quarrel with the man, and answered with a kind of grunt.

"I suppose you’re right," said he.

"And what of our poor invalid?" said Cæsar, turning to de Costa.

Side by side, these two men, who were already sworn enemies in secret, bent over the prostrate figure of the half-caste. De Costa lay with one arm hanging listlessly over the side of the bed. His eyelids were half-closed, and underneath the whites of his eyes could be seen. When a man sleeps like that, he is in a bad way. The sands of life are running down.

"He’s asleep," said Crouch. "That’s all he wants. The fever has subsided. He’ll be much better to-morrow. Let us leave him."

Together they went out. The little sea-captain walked back to his hut, and threw himself down upon his blankets. As for Cæsar, he remained standing in the moonlight, with his long fingers playing in his beard.

For some minutes he remained quite motionless. The silence of the night was still disturbed by the strange sounds that came from out of the forest. The man seemed plunged in thought. Presently a soft, moist nose was thrust into the palm of his hand, and looking down, he beheld his great dog, which, unable to sleep by reason of the heat, had followed her master into the moonlight.

"Gyp," said he, in a soft voice—"Gyp, old friend, how are we to get rid of these accursed Englishmen?"

The dog looked up, and licked her master’s hand.

"Come, Gyp," said Cæsar; "come and think it out."

He entered his hut, and sat down upon the great, padlocked chest. There, he took the dog’s head between his knees. She was a Great Dane, and even larger and more powerful than the majority of her kind.

"Do you know this, Gyp," said he: "de Costa can’t be trusted?
Fortunately, you and I, Gyp, know a way to make him hold his tongue."

At that, the man laughed softly to himself.

Meanwhile, in the other hut, the quick brain of Captain Crouch was not idle. He had learnt much that night; but the secret was still unsolved. He had not been slow in discovering the weak point in Cæsar’s line of defence: the little half-caste could be induced to speak the truth. That the man was not an ivory trader, Crouch was fully convinced. Indeed, he could be no sort of trader at all, because there was no direct line of communication from Makanda to the Coast. Try as he might, Crouch could find no answer to the riddle; and in the end, like Cæsar, he resolved to bide his time.

Before he went to sleep, he awakened Max.

"Max," said he, "I want you to keep watch till daybreak. Keep your eyes open, and if any one enters the hut, give him ’hands up’ on the spot."

"Have you discovered anything?" asked Max.

"Nothing," said Crouch, "except that de Costa’s our friend’s weak point. Given half a chance, I will find out the truth from him. But Cæsar suspects us, as much as we suspect him; and, from what I have seen of the man, I’m inclined to think that he’ll stick at nothing. We must never cease to be on our guard. Keep on the alert, and wake me up if you see or hear anything suspicious."

At that Crouch turned over on his side, and this time actually fell asleep.

Max Harden sat with his back to the wall of the hut, his loaded revolver in his hand. Through the doorway, above the rampart of the stockade, he could see the march of the tropical stars, as the Southern Cross dropped lower and lower in the

heavens. As it drew nearer to daybreak, the sounds of the jungle ceased. Even in these latitudes there is a time, about an hour before the dawn, when all Nature seems hushed and still; the great beasts of prey retire to rest, foodless or with their appetites appeased—more often the first, and it is not before the first streaks of daybreak are visible in the eastern sky that the large minor world, of beast and bird and reptile, awakens to the day.

Max obeyed his orders to the letter. Hour by hour, he remained perfectly motionless, with every sense on the alert. He was beginning to think that the fears and suspicions of Crouch were entirely baseless, when, on a sudden, the eternal stillness was broken by a shriek, piercing and unearthly, that was lifted from somewhere near at hand.

Springing to his feet, he rushed forth from the hut. And as he did so, the shriek was repeated, louder than before.

CHAPTER VIII—LEAVE TO QUIT

Max had no difficulty in recognizing whence came these appalling sounds; for, as he hastened forward, they were repeated, again and again. It was as if the night were filled with terror, as if some wild, tormented spirit had been let loose upon the stillness of the jungle.

From the opened doorway of de Costa’s hut a bright light shone forth, making a wide, diverging pathway to the foot of the stockade. And in this pathway two shadows danced like fiends. They were here, there and everywhere, whilst time and again that piercing shriek went forth.

Max dashed into the hut, and there was brought to a standstill by the sight that he beheld.

On one knee upon the floor, with an arm upraised as if in self-protection, was the half-caste, de Costa, with abject fear stamped upon every feature of his face. Still yelping like a cur, flinching repeatedly for no ostensible reason, he looked up furtively, and into the face of the man who stood above him.

This was Cæsar, with the Great Dane snarling at his side. His right arm was bare to the elbow, and in his hand he held a whip. It was a cruel whip, if ever there were such a thing. The handle was short, but the lash was long and tied in many a knot.

"Drop that!" cried Max; and, without a moment’s thought, he lifted his revolver and directed the muzzle full at the head of the Portuguese.

At that the dog crouched low, as if about to spring, and filled the hut with a growl.

What happened in the next brief moments cannot be told in a word. The Great

Dane sprang straight at the throat of the young Englishman, who was borne headlong through the doorway, to fall at full length upon the ground. Simultaneously, Max's revolver went off, and the bullet flew high into the roof. The next thing that he knew of was that both his hands were pressed tight into the throat of the huge beast that had pinned him to the ground. Strive as he might, he was not able to rise. By sheer weight and strength Gyp held him down.

[Illustration: "THE GREAT DANE SPRANG STRAIGHT AT THE THROAT OF THE
YOUNG ENGLISHMAN."]

Then the hound was lifted bodily into the air. Max struggled to his feet, and beheld his uncle, whose great hands grasped the dog by the scruff of the neck. Harden was holding the animal so that it stood upright on its hind-legs, and in that position Gyp was little shorter than he. The dog was almost mad; it snarled like a wild animal, and its white fangs gleamed in the light.

The voice of Cæsar sounded sharp, but calm and collected, in the midst of this turmoil and confusion.

"Gyp," he cried, "come here!"

Edward let go his hold, and immediately the dog lay down, growling at the feet of her master.

"I should like to know," said Edward, "the cause of this disturbance."

"A private matter," said Cæsar, "which concerns no one but de Costa and myself."

But Max, though he had been overthrown by the dog, who had come upon him so unexpectedly, was in no mind to let the matter drop. He was so hot in anger, and his indignation so great, that his lips trembled when he spoke.

"Why did you strike that man?" he demanded, pointing to the half-caste.

"That, I repeat," said the other, "is my affair—and his."

"Understand," said Max, "that I make it mine. When I entered this room, this poor wretch was on the floor, and you stood over him, whip in hand."

For the first time since they had entered the stockade, they saw the real man under the calm, black mask that the Portuguese habitually wore. Setting his brows in a frown, he whipped round upon Max, and spoke in much the same manner as a cat spits at a dog.

"You have yet to learn," he cried, "that in this place I am master. I take orders from no one. In Makanda my word is law. This half-bred cur is my servant. He knows it, as well as I. He knows, also, that if he serves me faithfully he will be rewarded. But if he dares to disobey my orders, he incurs the penalty I choose to inflict. There is my answer; and I ask you, who are you to come here and presume to dictate to me?"

"I have no more special mission," answered Max, "than any other who knows the difference between what is right and wrong. You may be master here—for all I care you may be master of the whole of Africa—but I am not going to stand by and see one man flog another for any cause. Raise that whip again on peril of your life."

Max dared the man on purpose. The fact was, he would have been glad enough to shoot. As for Edward, though all this time he had stood by in silence, his finger had never left the trigger of his revolver. But, Cæsar was not such a fool as to give either of them the chance they waited for. He cast his whip upon the ground.

"After this," said he, "I presume you will avail yourselves of my hospitality no longer. I shall be glad to see your backs."

"We shall be only too glad to go," said Max.

"I put no obstacle in your way," said Cæsar. "It is almost daylight now."

Max turned and left the hut, followed by his uncle. Each asked himself the same question the moment he got out into the open air: where was Captain Crouch?

Crouch must have heard the disturbance. The shrieks of the half-caste, the growling of the dog and the firing of Max’s revolver had been enough to have awakened the dead. Yet he had never put in an appearance. When they entered their hut they found him seated cross-legged on the floor, with his pipe between his teeth. The atmosphere was tainted with the smell of Bull’s Eye Shag.

"Where have you been?" asked Edward.

Crouch never deigned to reply, but, taking his pipe from his lips, asked a question himself.

"Did you come to blows?" he said.

"Practically," said Max, with a shrug of the shoulders. "I found him thrashing that half-caste within an inch of his life. I threatened him, and his dog flew at me, and, had it not been for Edward, would have torn me to bits. We had a kind of an argument, and in the end he told us to clear out, which we said we were perfectly ready to do."

Crouch returned his pipe to his mouth.

"I was afraid of that," said he.

"Why?"

"I would like to have stayed here just a little longer. I haven’t probed the mystery yet. When I saw you two run into de Costa’s hut, I knew there was going to be trouble. I knew you wouldn’t come out for some minutes, and I had the chance of a lifetime."

"Where did you go?" asked Harden.

"Into Cæsar’s hut," said Crouch, winking with his only eye. "I searched everywhere, but could find nothing. As I told you before, this man has a secret, and that secret is locked up in his chest. In Central Africa a man doesn’t have a chest like that to keep his clothes in. It’s iron-bound, and locked with three padlocks, and I suppose he keeps the key in his pocket. It would have been sheer waste of time to have tried to open it. I couldn’t lift it. It’s as heavy as if it were filled with lead. That’s why I’m sorry we’ve got to clear out. I mean to discover what that chest contains."

"We’ve got to go," said Max. "I wouldn’t stay here another hour for all the secrets in the universe."

"You’re quite right," said Crouch. "As the natives say on the Ogowe, ’a bad man’s bread is poison.’ We’ll sheer off at once."

Edward went out, and returned in a few minutes with M’Wané and the four Fans.

"M’Wané," said Crouch, still seated on the ground, "we’re going back to Hippo Pool."

M’Wané smiled as though he were glad to hear it.

"That is good news," said he. "I do not like this place."

"Why?" asked Crouch, looking up.

"We have been told," said M’Wané, "that if we try to leave the camp, we shall be shot by the Arab men."

"Have you found out anything?" asked Crouch.

M’Wané shook his head.

"I have seen no one," said he. "I know nothing. To speak the truth, I am afraid."

In the half-light of morning, the party left the stockade. Their canoe was moored to the bank of the river, in the place where they had left it on the afternoon of the day before. They clambered into their places: Max and his uncle to the stern seat, and Crouch to his old place in the bows. Then the canoe shot out into mid-stream, and it was not until a month later that any one of them looked again upon the mysterious settlement of Makanda.

CHAPTER IX—A THIEF BY NIGHT

It will be remembered that it had taken two and a half days to make the journey to Makanda from Hippo Pool. They returned in seven and a half hours, and even then the natives did little work with their paddles.

The fact was that, from the granite hills that almost surrounded the station of the Portuguese, a number of small tributaries joined the Hidden River. In consequence, a great volume of water flowed down to Hippo Pool. The current became stronger every mile, since the banks grew nearer together, and several jungle streams joined forces with the river. The largest of these was the tributary which flowed into Hippo Pool, along which had lain the latter part of the portage they had made from Date Palm Island on the Kasai. Harden named this stream Observation Creek, for a reason which we are just about to explain.

They camped on the east bank of Hippo Pool, at a place selected by Crouch. Two courses lay open to them: they had either to remain here indefinitely, or, leaving their canoe on the Hidden River, to return to Date Palm Island by the route of their former portage. Never for a moment had they had any intention of returning to the Kasai until they had discovered something more definite concerning the mystery of Makanda. That night, seated around their camp-fire, by the waters of Hippo Pool, they held a council of war.

With this place as their base, they were resolved to operate against Cæsar’s position farther up the river. That afternoon, M’Wané had climbed to the top of a gigantic cocoanut-tree, some little distance from the right bank of Observation Creek. Thence he had surveyed the surrounding country, and it was largely on the information supplied by M’Wané that Edward Harden drew up the sketch-map which proved so useful to them throughout the eventful days that followed.

[Illustration: EDWARD HARDEN’S MAP OF THE COUNTRY OF THE FIRE-GODS.]

From that tree-top the broad course of the Kasai had been visible, its gleaming waters showing here and there, white in the sunlight, to the north and to the east. To the north-west, the course of the Hidden River lay comparatively straight to the mangrove swamp where it joined the larger stream. The rapids began three miles or so below Hippo Pool, and there, according to M'Wané, the river was foaming white. Lower still, it entered the Long Ravine, where great bare cliffs rose upright on either side, and at the end of which was the waterfall of which the Fans had spoken. On some days, when the wind was from the north, they could hear the dull roar of the cataract, like thunder in the distance.

To the south-west, above the tree-tops of the forest, M'Wané had been able to observe the crest-line of the red granite hills which enclosed the station of Makanda. Almost due south, from out of the midst of the forest, like a giant in a stubble-field, a great mountain towered into the sky. On the northern slopes of this mountain the Fan chief had been able to discern a little village, lying like a bird's nest in a declivity, thousands of feet above the dark, inhospitable forest. One night, by firelight, on the banks of Hippo Pool, Edward Harden drew the map on a piece of cartridge paper, though many of the features thus shown were not filled in until further facts had come to light.

Their plan of campaign was evolved in the fertile mind of Crouch, though Max, and even Edward, made several suggestions which the little sea-captain was only too glad to accept. They named the mountain Solitude Peak, and it seemed probable that it was in this direction that the creek found its source.

They desired, if possible, to reach Makanda without the knowledge of Cæsar and his Arabs. They did not doubt that they would be able to overlook the stockade from some eminence in the eastern granite hill. Now, since it was two and a half days' journey up the river, it would take them months to force their way through the jungle to the south. They decided, therefore, to follow Observation Creek to its source, which, they hoped, would be somewhere in the vicinity of the mountain. There they might be able to glean some knowledge at the native village which M'Wané had seen in the distance. At any rate, they would be able to survey the surrounding country, and take the most accessible route in the direction of Makanda.

However, neither Crouch nor Harden was the man to undertake anything rashly. Each knew that in Cæsar they had an adversary who was not to be despised. Before they set forth upon their expedition, they decided to secure more

ammunition and supplies from Date Palm Island, and for this purpose it was decided that Edward Harden should return to the Kasai with M’Wané and the Fans.

Accordingly, the next day the explorer set out, following the route of their old portage along Observation Creek, and thence through the jungle to the left bank of the great river opposite Date Palm Island. Edward thought that he would be able to persuade the Loango boys to carry the "loads" back to the base-camp at Hippo Pool. Then, if they still feared to remain in the valley of the Hidden River, they could return to the Kasai. That night, Crouch and Max were the only two who remained at the little camp at Hippo Pool.

The next three days were by no means idle. Game had to be shot in the forest; there was cooking to be done; they even carried the canoe ashore and repaired a small leak which had been sprung in her bows. Moreover, Crouch insisted that one or other of them should always be on watch. With a good fire burning throughout the night, they had little to fear from wild beasts. Even the leopard, which is a far more courageous animal than the lion, must be well-nigh starving before it dares to approach a camp-fire. What Crouch feared most was a raid on the part of Cæsar. He knew enough of the tall Portuguese to suspect that the man would not stay idle whilst the three Englishmen remained in the valley of the Hidden River. In one of the many canoes they had seen tied up to the river bank at Makanda, Cæsar could shoot down-stream in the space of a few hours. There was therefore not an hour of the day or night that one or the other of them was not seated on the river-bank, rifle in hand, with his eyes turned towards the southern extremity of Hippo Pool.

Three days passed, and nothing of importance occurred. It was on the third night that something happened which was so much in the nature of a mystery as to be fully in keeping with the character of the whole valley and the rumours they had heard. Though Captain Crouch had only one eye, that eye was as the eye of a lynx; and the matter in question is all the more worthy to relate, since the event first occurred by night, when Crouch himself was on guard.

That day Max had shot his first buffalo, about half a mile from camp, on the southern side of Observation Creek. The meat had been cut into steaks, and one of these was cooked that night for breakfast in the morning. Crouch relieved Max on sentry at twelve o’clock, with the intention of keeping watch till daybreak. As Max turned over to go to sleep, he distinctly remembered having

seen the buffalo-steak on a tin plate, a few inches from the fire. In the morning this steak was gone.

Crouch had seen nothing. He was prepared to swear that he had never been to sleep. Throughout the morning the matter seemed to worry him a good deal.

"I can’t make it out," he said, talking to himself, as was his wont. "I don’t believe any leopard would do it. The beasts are terrified of fire. A starving leopard might; but no leopard could very well starve in a valley like this, which positively abounds in game." At various intervals throughout the day he gave expression to the same opinion.

That night Max took the first watch, from seven o’clock to twelve. During that period never once did he relax his vigilance. He sat, hour by hour, with the fire at his elbow, and his face turned towards the river. He was thinking that it was nearly time to awaken Crouch, and had pulled out his watch, when he heard the sound of a breaking twig a few feet behind him.

He turned sharply, and was just in time to discern the shadow of some great beast disappearing into the jungle. His eyes shot back to the fire, and there he beheld to his amazement that once again their breakfast had disappeared. He immediately awoke the little sea-captain, and told him what had happened.

"Did it look like a leopard?" asked Crouch.

"No," said Max, "I think it was a lion."

Crouch got to his feet.

"I don’t believe it," said he. "The king of beasts is the greatest coward I know. The most courageous animal in the world is the African buffalo, and after him come the peccary and the wild boar. All the cats are cowards, and the lion the biggest of all. Once I was shooting buzzard on the Zambesi, when I came face to face with a lion, not fifteen paces from me. I had no one with me, and was armed only with a shot-gun. What do you think I did?"

Max laughed. "Ran for it?" he suggested.

"Not a bit!" said Crouch. "That would have been sheer folly; it would have showed the brute I feared him. I just dropped down on all-fours, and walked

slowly towards him."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Max, unable to restrain his admiration.

"That lion," said Crouch, "looked straight at me for about three seconds, and then quietly turned round and walked away, swishing the flies from his body with his tail. As soon as he thought he was out of sight, he broke into a gallop. It was beneath his dignity, I suppose, to let me see he was frightened. He had got to live up to his reputation."

"Is that actually true?" asked Max.

"As true as I'm standing here. All lions are naturally frightened of anything they can't understand. That particular animal couldn't make me out, didn't like the look of me; so he just walked away. The lions in this valley can have had little or no experience of white men. I therefore refuse to believe that our breakfast has been stolen by a lion. Shall I tell you who I believe is the culprit?"

"Who?" asked Max.

"Gyp," said Crouch; "Cæsar's dog. Cæsar himself could hardly have got here by now. Yesterday afternoon I reconnoitred some way up the river, and saw no signs of a canoe. But the dog could have found its way through the jungle. It seems improbable, no doubt; but I can think of no better explanation."

Indeed, this was the only solution of the matter, and they resolved to be upon their guard.

The following day they determined to explore the rapids. They were already acquainted with the river-valley between Hippo Pool and Makanda, but as yet they knew nothing of the country which lay between their camp and the mangrove swamp on the Kasai. M'Wané, from the cocoanut-tree, had caught sight of the Long Ravine, which ended in the waterfall of which the natives had told them, the dull roar of which was frequently audible at Hippo Pool when the wind was in the right direction. They did not expect Edward back for some days, and each was of the disposition that chafes under the restraint of inaction.

Accordingly, soon after daybreak they launched the canoe, and taking with them three days' supplies and a quantity of ammunition, they shot down-stream to the north. The descent of the river was easy enough. Throughout the journey Crouch

kept his eye on the current. Since this grew stronger and stronger as they progressed, he did not desire to go too far, knowing full well that the return journey would be by no means easy to accomplish.

At a place where the river was exceedingly narrow, and the jungle on either bank even more dense and tangled than usual, they heard, on a sudden, the crashing of undergrowth in the forest, as if some great beast were flying for its life. A moment later a leopard sprang clear from the river bank. For a second the beast was poised in mid-air, its legs extended at full length, its ears lying back, its superb coat dazzling in the sunlight. Then it came down into the water with a splash.

For a few strokes it swam straight for the canoe. Max carried his rifle to the shoulder and fired. The beast was hit, for it shivered from head to tail, and then turned round and swam back to the bank whence it had come. As it crawled forth, dripping, with its head hanging low between its fore-legs, the great snout of a crocodile uprose from out of the water, and the huge jaws snapped together.

Crouch, who was steering, ran the canoe into the bank, and a moment later both he and Max, their rifles in their hands, had set out into the semi-darkness of the jungle.

They had no difficulty in following the leopard’s spoor. The beast was badly wounded and very sick. Every hundred yards or so it lay down to rest, and when it heard them approaching, rose and went on with a growl.

Presently it led them into a marsh—which Edward Harden afterwards called Leopard Marsh—where they sank knee-deep in the mud. There were no trees here. In the middle of the marsh, lying in a few inches of water, was the wounded leopard, wholly unable to rise.

"He’s yours," said Crouch. "I’ll stand by in case you miss."

Max lifted his rifle, took careful aim, and fired. On the instant, with a savage screech, the leopard rose with a jerk. For a moment it stood upon its hind-legs, rampant, its fore-feet fighting in the air. Then it came down, as a stone drops, and lay quite still.

Max felt the flush of triumph that every hunter knows. His blood tingled in his veins. He was about to rush forward, to gloat upon his prize, when from

somewhere near in the forest a shot rang out, and a bullet splashed into the moist ground at Max’s feet.

CHAPTER X—THE BACK-WATER

Crouch’s voice was lifted in a shout. "Run for your life!" he cried.

Together they went floundering through the mire. They had to run the gauntlet for a distance of little more than a hundred paces; but, by reason of the nature of the ground, their progress was necessarily slow, and before they had gained the cover afforded by the jungle, several bullets had whistled past them, and Crouch was limping badly.

"Are you hurt?" asked Max.

"Hit in the leg," said the little captain, as if it were a trifle.
"There ’re no bones broken, but I’m bleeding like a pig."

"Let me look at it," said Max. "The artery may be cut."

They were now well screened by trees. It was impossible that any one could come upon them unawares. Max took his knife from his pocket, ripped open the seam of the captain’s trousers, and examined the wound. The artery was untouched, but there was an ugly wound in the thigh, which had evidently been made by an enormously heavy bullet.

"Cæsar’s elephant-gun," said Crouch. "By Christopher, I’ll make him pay for this!"

"Are you sure of that?" said Max.

"Yes," said Crouch. "I caught sight of something white moving among the trees. I knew at once that Cæsar was there with his Arabs."

Meanwhile, with quick fingers, Max was folding his handkerchief lengthwise for

a bandage.

"Wait a bit," said Crouch. "I'll soon stop that flow of blood. I've a special remedy of my own." Whereupon he produced his tobacco-pouch; and before Max could stop it, he had taken a large plug of his vile, black tobacco, dipped it into a puddle of water, and thumbed the lot into the open wound, as a man charges a pipe.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Max, with memories of his hospital days. "You'll get septic poisoning! You can't do that!"

Crouch looked up. There was a twinkle in his only eye.

"So much for science," said he. "When you get back to London, you can tell the doctors they're wrong. If it amuses 'em to play with antiseptics—and they're fond of the smell of carbolic—they're welcome to do what they like. As for me, I've used this remedy for twenty years, and I'm not inclined to try another."

Max looked worried. He was convinced that Crouch would die of blood-poisoning, and was beginning to wonder how, in that benighted, tropical forest, he was going to amputate the captain's leg.

"Don't you fret," said Crouch, tying the bandage himself. "Maybe, one brand of tobacco's not so good as another. It's my belief that if they cut off your head, you could stick it on again with Bull's Eye Shag." By then he had got to his feet. "Come on," said he; "this man won't let us get away if he can help it. Follow me."

So saying, he plunged into the jungle, and though he was now limping like a lame dog, it was all Max could do to keep up with him.

Time and again he dived through what had looked like impenetrable thickets. He seemed to know by instinct where to go. He avoided quagmires. He sprang over fallen trees. He wormed his way through creepers, the branches of which were thick as ropes.

Frequently he stopped to listen, and sometimes placed his ear to the ground.

"They're after us!" he cried once. He pulled out his compass and looked at it. "We must get back to the canoe," he said. "The river's to the east."

Soon after they struck what to all intents and purposes was a path. It was, in fact, the "run" of some wild animals, and doubtless led to the place where they were in the habit of drinking. It was no more than two feet across; and about four feet from the ground the undergrowth from either side met in a kind of roof; so that they found themselves in a tunnel, along which, if they stooped sufficiently, they were able to make good headway.

Suddenly Crouch, who was still leading, stopped dead, and held his rifle at the ready. Max stopped, too, and listened.

Something was moving in the jungle. They heard distinctly a quick, panting sound, coming nearer and nearer.

"There!" cried Crouch. "Shoot!"

He pointed down the tunnel, in the direction they had come. Max turned, and beheld the head of a great beast thrust through the leaves of some creeping plant that bound the trunks of two trees together in a kind of lattice-work.

It is unfortunate that the mind cannot retain a complete recollection of scenes that have momentarily impressed us. Most of us, when asked to describe in every detail even the most familiar objects, fall very short of the mark. How much more so must this be the case when we look upon something for no longer than a second, and then it is no more.

Max will never forget that moment. He remembers the main features of the scene, but there were a thousand and one details, which impressed him at the time, that he is no longer able to remember.

The semi-darkness of the jungle; the moist ground whereon he stood, where multi-coloured orchids showed like little evil faces in the twilight; the tangled undergrowth; and in places, like peep-holes through which the daylight streamed, the shadows of the tall trees towering high above. The scene, in its luxury and darkness, stood for all that is savage, for all that is Africa—the country where the white man ventures at his peril. And if anything were needed to complete this strong suggestion of the wild, it was the great head and white, gleaming fangs of the unknown beast which, half invisible, seemed as if it were the unholy spirit of the place. On the spur of the moment, Max lifted his rifle and fired.

"Well done!" cried Crouch, who brushed past his elbow.

A moment later they found themselves kneeling on either side of the prostrate and lifeless figure of Gyp.

"There lies our thief," said Crouch; "and the thief’s master ’s not so far away."

Max felt profoundly sorry in his heart that he had killed so magnificent a creature. If the dog had hunted them, she had been told to do so by her master. The only crime which could be laid to the account of the Great Dane was obedience to Cæsar.

They remained by the body of the dog no longer than a few seconds, and after that they pushed on upon their way, still following the course of the tunnel, or "run." At length, when least they expected it, they found themselves at the water’s edge, at the place where the rapids were inordinately swift.

The water foamed and swirled upon its way, lashing the banks, forming little whirlpools in mid-stream, and bounding in waves over the trunks of trees which had fallen into the river.

"Sit down," said Crouch. "There’s no hurry. We may as well talk matters out."

Max looked at his companion. Now that they were in the sunlight, he was able to see Crouch’s face. He was alarmed to notice that the little captain looked haggard and drawn. His lips were pressed together, as though he were in pain, and his only serviceable eye was puckered and screwed up. Seeing Max’s anxiety, he did his best to smile.

"The Bull’s Eye ’s beginning to work," said he.

"How do you mean?" asked Max.

"After a bit it begins to smart. It smarts for about three days, and then the blamed thing’s healed. Sit down, my boy. This man Cæsar annoys me. I want to think it out."

They seated themselves at the river bank, and Crouch kept an ear towards the jungle, in order to be warned if any one should approach.

"What about the canoe?" asked Max.

"It’s up-stream," said the other, with a nod of the head. "If we work our way along the bank, we can’t miss it. To tell you the truth, I want a rest; I feel queer. And, besides, I want to think."

Max asked him what was on his mind.

"Cæsar," said he. "I should like to know how the man managed to get here." Then he went on, thinking aloud, as was his custom. "There may be a path through the jungle; but I doubt if even then he would have been able to come this distance on foot. And yet his canoe never passed Hippo Pool, or we should have seen it—that’s sure enough." Then, on a sudden, he slapped his knee. "By Christopher," he cried, "I have it! I remember!"

"You remember what?" asked Max.

"About half-way between the Pool and Makanda I remember seeing the entrance of a little back-water, on the left bank of the river. That back-water probably rejoins the river somewhere about here. It’s all as plain as a pikestaff. He has come north by the back-water, which accounts for us not having seen him pass through Hippo Pool. The end of that back-water is either between here and the place where we left the canoe, or else farther down-stream. Come," said Crouch, "we’ll get the better of this rascal. Perhaps, for once, Fortune will play into our hands."

He struggled to his feet, but immediately turned pale, and was obliged to support himself against the trunk of a tree.

"I feel mighty dizzy," he said. "I’ve lost a deal of blood."

"You had better stay here," said Max; "I’ll work along the bank until I find the canoe, and then come back to you. I don’t like leaving you, but there’s nothing else to be done. Perhaps the canoe is not far away."

"It’s farther than you think," said Crouch; "that tunnel took us almost due north. Besides, I can tell by the water. The rapids are pretty strong; we can’t be far from the ravine."

"Will we be able to paddle against it, do you think?" asked Max.

Crouch looked at the river.

"Yes," said he. "My arms are all right, though I've gone wrong in the leg. You get off, and come back here as quickly as you can. If you see Cæsar, shoot."

At that Max set off alone. He soon found it impossible to make any progress on the actual bank of the river, since here, by reason of the moisture that was in the ground, the vegetation was so dense and tangled that a weasel would have found some difficulty in making any headway. He soon found, however, that by moving about thirty yards from the river bank, he could make his way southward with tolerable ease. From time to time he forced his way to the river's edge, and looked both up-stream and down, to note if he could see any sign of the canoe.

The sun was in the mid-heavens, and the heat intense. The jungle was alive with sounds. The evening before there had been a heavy shower of rain, and now the vapour rose like steam, and the moisture dropped from the trees. To his left he could hear the roar of the rapids as the river plunged upon its way, and this served to guide him, making it possible for him to hold his course parallel to the river bank. He was followed by a swarm of insects that droned and buzzed in his ears. The perspiration fell from his forehead in great drops, and frequently he found himself caught and held fast by strong, hook-like thorns.

Presently the forest opened. It was like coming out of a darkened room into the light. For a moment he was unable to see. During that moment he fancied he heard a sound quite near to him—a sound of something that moved. Looking about him, he discovered that he was standing in long reeds which reached almost to his chest. To his right, the trees of the forest were extended in a kind of avenue, and at their feet was a narrow, swiftly-flowing stream.

He had discovered Cæsar's back-water. Moreover, he had discovered Cæsar's canoe, for there it was, its bows just visible, peeping through the reeds.

CHAPTER XI—IN THE LONG RAVINE

Max took in the situation at a glance. If Cæsar had come north from Makanda by way of the back-water, he had not passed their canoe on the Hidden River. Two courses lay open to Max: he might cross the back-water in Cæsar's canoe, and pursue his journey on foot; or he might take this canoe and go down to Crouch, about whom he was anxious. The latter was undoubtedly the wiser course to pursue. In the heart of Africa, one canoe is as good as another; and, besides, by taking Cæsar's canoe he would be paying off old scores.

Having come to this conclusion, he looked about him for a suitable way by which to approach the canoe. He had not taken one step in the right direction, when he discovered to his dismay that the reeds were growing in a bog, into which one leg sank deep before he was able to recover his footing on dry land.

Still, he had every reason to be hopeful. If the Portuguese and his party had disembarked at this place, there was clearly a way of getting into the canoe. For all that, search as he might among the reeds, he could not find it, and at last he retired to the top of the bank.

No sooner had he got there than he discovered that for which he had been looking. A tall tree had fallen in the forest, and the roots were half in the water. The canoe had been moored under the lee of this. On each side of the fallen tree the reeds grew so high that the trunk was half hidden from view.

This tree formed a sort of natural pier, or landing-stage, along which it was possible to walk. Max stepped upon the trunk, and walked towards the canoe. Fearing that if he jumped into it he would knock a hole in the bottom, he lowered himself to a sitting position, and then remembered that he had not untied the painter at the bows. He always looks upon his next action as the most foolish thing he ever did in his life. He left his rifle in the canoe, and returned along the tree-trunk to untie the bows.

It was then that he was seized from behind. Some one sprang upon him from out of the reeds. Two strong arms closed about his chest, and he was lifted bodily from off his feet.

Putting forth his strength, he managed to twist himself round, seizing his adversary by the throat.

He had been set upon by one of Cæsar's Arabs. The Portuguese himself was doubtless still searching in the jungle for Crouch and Max, and no doubt he had left this fellow in charge of his canoe. Fortunately, the man was not armed; otherwise, Max would have been murdered. As it was, he realized from the start that his life was in imminent danger.

The man was possessed of the strength of all his race. His arms, though thin, were sinewy, and his muscles stood out like bands of whip-cord as he strove to gain the upper hand. Max was at a disadvantage, since he wore boots; whereas the Arab with his bare feet had the better foot-hold on the trunk of the fallen tree. Still, even he could not retain his balance for long, with the young Englishman flying at his throat like a tiger. The man had a beard, and Max, laying hold of this, forced his head backwards, so that they both fell together into the mud.

During that fall Max's head struck the bows of the canoe. For a moment he was dazed, half stunned. He relaxed his hold of his opponent, and thereafter he lay at the mercy of the Arab.

If we make an exception of the Chinese, the Arab is in all probability the cruellest man we know of. He is possessed of an almost fiendish cunning. His courage no one will dispute. To his children he is a kind father; to those who know and understand him he is a good friend; he is one of the most hospitable men in the world. But to his enemies he is relentless. He has none of the barbarity of the savage races, like the Zulus or the Masai. He is refined, even in his cruelty. Above all, he is a man of brains.

Because of their craftiness, their cunning and their courage, the Arab races have existed from the very beginnings of time. We read in the most ancient history that exists—in the history of the Pharaohs—of how the Egyptian towns in the valley of the Nile were walled against the incursions of the Arabs. Long before the Persians came to Egypt, no man dared venture far into the desert because of the Bedouin bands. And that was when the world was in its cradle, when just the

valleys of two rivers—the one in Asia and the other in Egypt—were able to produce the rudiments of the civilization of the future. That was, perhaps, eight thousand years ago.

Since then—and before then—the Arab has been feared. The Negro races have bowed down before him, as dumb animals obey a superior intelligence. In this, above all things, had the Portuguese been wise; he had formed his bodyguard of those men who for centuries have been the stern, implacable rulers of the great, mysterious continent.

Max never lost possession of his senses; he was only dazed. And, whilst in that condition, he was lifted in the strong arms of the Arab, and thrown bodily into the canoe. When he was sufficiently recovered to endeavour to rise to his feet, he found that he was in mid-stream, drifting rapidly towards the river. He looked about him for a paddle, and seeing none, turned his eyes to the bank. And there stood the Arab, in his mud-stained garments, his white teeth showing in his swarthy face in a broad, unholy grin. Moreover, in both hands, he held the paddles which he had taken from the canoe.

Max recognized, as in a flash, that his fate was in the hands of a greater Power than himself. He snatched up his rifle, and endeavoured to steer with the butt. That had the effect of turning the canoe a little, but the current was too strong, and he was borne onwards.

Twenty yards farther, and the canoe would turn the corner and shoot out into the river, where the rapids foamed and lashed. At one time the bows brushed the tall reeds which were growing from the water. Max, dropping his rifle, seized the only one of these that was within his grasp. He held it for no longer than a second—an agonizing moment that seemed eternity—and then the reed was drawn out by its roots from the soft mud beneath the water.

The canoe was launched into the rapids at a bound. The current struck it sideways, and sent it round like a top. For a moment it was like some blind, excited animal that knows not whither it means to go, and then it shot down-stream like an arrow from the bow.

Max became aware of a kind of singing in his head. This may have been caused by the blow which he had received, or else by the manner in which the canoe was now whirled round and round upon the tide. The whole scene about him

became blurred and indistinct. The great, white-hot sky above him was like a sheet of fire. He saw the trees on either bank fly past like armies of dark, gigantic spectres. At such times as this, it is as if the brain becomes unhinged; we think of strange, and often foolish things, of no consequence soever. Max saw a large dragonfly, of all the colours in the rainbow. Even then he admired its beauty and coveted its wings. The latter thought was natural, but the first was strange. And the next thing he knew of was Crouch shouting and waving his arms upon the bank. In a few moments Max had shot down the river to the place where he had left the little captain, though it had taken him more than two hours to force his way to the back-water through the density of the jungle.

"Paddle!" Crouch was crying. "Paddle for your life! Bring her in to the bank."

Just then the canoe was steady, shooting downward like a dart. Max raised his hands to his lips and shouted back.

"I’ve no paddles!" he cried.

He saw Crouch break into the jungle. The little sea-captain threw himself into the thickets like a madman. Once again, only for an instant, Max caught sight of him. He was fighting his way down-stream along the river bank like some ferocious beast. The long arm of a creeper barred his way, and Crouch wrenched it from the tree to which it clung with a strength that was almost superhuman. And then he was lost to view.

Max looked down into the water, and saw at once that it would be impossible to reach the bank by swimming. He had never been a strong swimmer, and in such a current as this no one could hope to prevail. On hands and knees, he crawled to the other end of the canoe, and immediately the thing swung round again, like a gate upon its hinges.

He was now calm enough to think the matter out. If he tried to swim to the shore the odds would be a hundred to one against him. There was still a chance that the canoe might be driven into the bank. He was determined to keep his head, to be ready to spring ashore, should the opportunity occur, and lay hold upon the first thing that fell to his reach.

As he sat and waited, whilst the seconds flew, his heart sank within him. The river narrowed. Black, ugly-looking rocks sprang up, like living things in mid-stream, and before him opened the ravine.

He saw its great walls rising, smooth and sheer, on either side of the river, and fading away in the distance, in the thick haze of the steaming, tropic day. He was fascinated by the rocks. He marvelled every instant that the canoe was not dashed to atoms. The surface of the water was now white with foam, in the midst of which the black rocks glistened in the sunlight. The canoe would rush towards one of these, as some swift beast of prey hurls itself upon its victim; and at the eleventh hour it would be whipped aside to go dancing, leaping on.

The ravine was like one of the pits we read of in Dante's *Inferno*. Its walls were precipitous and white, glaring in the sunshine. This was the gate that guarded the Hidden Valley.

Max had a sensation of passing through a railway-cutting in an express train. Little objects upon the steep banks—perhaps straggling plants, sprung from seeds which had fallen from above—were blurred and indistinct, flashing past like may-flies in the sunlight. There was the same rattling noise in his ears, quite distinguishable from the roar of the water beneath his feet.

For a moment he buried his face in his hands. A hundred thoughts went galloping through his brain, not one of which was complete. One gave place to another; there was no gap between them; they were like the films on a cinematograph.

And then came a murmuring in his ears which was something apart from the rattling sound we have mentioned, and the loud roar of the rapids. He looked up, with a white face, and listened. It seemed his heart had ceased to beat, and breathing consisted of inspiration only. The murmuring grew into a roar, and the roar into a peal of thunder—the cataract was ahead!

CHAPTER XII—WHEN HOPE DIES OUT

As the canoe rushed forward, Max Harden recognized himself for lost; he realized there was no hope. Resolved to meet his fate with all the fortitude he could command, he was yet sufficiently unnerved to stand upright in the canoe, which so rocked and swayed that he balanced himself with difficulty.

It was then that he looked down upon what seemed certain death. The river ended abruptly, as a cliff falls sheer to the sea. The walls of the ravine were folded back to the east and to the west, and between, the water went over the cataract in one long, unbroken wave.

Far below, extending to the north, was a broad plain, dotted here and there with trees which, in the haze of the tropic heat, appeared indistinct and restless, like weeds and pebbles at the bottom of deep, discoloured water. Beyond that were the broad, gleaming waters of the Kasai, rolling north-westward to the Congo.

Max looked up to the wide, burning sky. In that mad, headlong moment he offered up a prayer. The roar of the waters thundered in his ears. The canoe overshot the crest of the cataract, as a swallow dips upon the wing. Max was conscious of a bursting in his head. There was a noise in his ears as if all chaos were rushing in upon him; it was as if he were an atom in the midst of an upheaval of the worlds. And then he remembered no more.

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Now that the Hidden Valley has been explored, and is even shown upon some of the large scale maps that have recently been issued by the Royal Geographical Society, those whose pleasure it is to study such matters are well acquainted with the formation of the country.

The river finds its source in the unknown mountains to the south of Makanda;

thence it flows due north towards the Kasai. South of the waterfall the basin consists of a hard, impervious rock. In the region of the jungle, this rock is covered by about ten feet of fertile subsoil: in some places a black, glutinous mud; in others, a red, loamy clay, containing a super-abundance of plant food. At the Long Ravine the rock rises to the surface, in what geologists call an "out-crop." North of the cataract lies a great plain of mud.

This phenomenon is merely what is found in every waterfall in the world. The river at the top of the falls flows over hard, impermeable rock; at the foot is found a softer stratum—such as chalk or clay—which is easily washed away. Originally, far back in the centuries, there was no waterfall at all. The river flowed on an even course from Makanda to the Kasai. Very soon, however, the current swept away vast tracts of mud to the north of the waterfall. This mud was carried by the Kasai to the Congo, and thence to the sea. In consequence, a tract of country, many square miles in area, gradually descended lower and lower. On the other hand, in the hard rock of the ravine, the river worked more slowly, so that, at last, the cataract was formed.

At the foot of the falls is a great pool in which the water is exceedingly deep, and round which the current spends its fury in many whirlpools, such as may be seen in a mill-pond when the flood-gates are opened to their full extent.

Having thus briefly explained the conformation of the country in the lower valley of the Hidden River, it is now necessary to return to Captain Crouch. The effort made by the little wizened sea-captain upon that eventful morning is worthy to rank with anything that was ever told by the poets of classic days. Had it not been for his indomitable will, he could never have accomplished a feat that was almost superhuman. Edward Harden had said that he believed that he was the only person whom Crouch cared for in the world. That might have been true at the time, but certain it is that the captain thought well of Max, else he had never accomplished what he did.

He was already wounded; even he himself had owned he was in pain. And yet, mile upon mile, he broke his way through the jungle, fighting onward amid the profusion of the forest, like one who was raving mad. Often he sank to his waist in marsh. His clothes were torn to shreds by thorns. His face and hands were red with blood which had mingled with the perspiration that streamed from every pore. When he came forth from the forest, at the head of the ravine, he looked hardly human—the most desperate being it were possible to picture.

For all that he dashed on, across the bare rocks, in the blazing heat of the sun. There was nothing now to impede him, and he raced upon his way, never pausing for breath. He was half-naked; he had left the greater part of his clothes upon the thorn-trees in the jungle. His pith helmet was askew, and battered and out of shape. He had used his Remington rifle as a club to beat his way through the thickets, had broken it off at the small of the butt, and now held the barrel in his hand. His legs were bare to the knee, like those of an urchin, and so clotted with blood that he looked like a savage who had dyed his skin. Sometimes he stumbled, and seemed in danger of falling; but each time he braced himself up, struck himself upon the chest, and went on even faster than before.

When he came to the end of the ravine he turned to the west, and there found a place where he could climb down to the low-lying flats. It was then approaching sunset. The heat of the day was past.

At about half-way down the incline he paused, and lifted the palm of his hand to screen his only eye. For some minutes he scanned the plain, and then on a sudden he gave vent to a loud cry of exultation, and bounded down the hill. Far in the distance, high and dry upon a mud-bank, he had caught sight of a small speck, which he knew for a human being.

It took him more than half an hour to reach this place. By then it was nearly dusk. Bending down over the drenched, motionless form, he thought at first that Max was dead. He could feel no beating of the heart.

Still, Crouch was not the man to despair. Moreover, in the days when he had sailed the seas, he had had experience in the resuscitation of the drowned.

Without delay he set to work. He lifted the body so that the water poured from the mouth of the unconscious man. He then seated himself upon the ground at Max’s head, and worked both arms like the handles of a pump.

The sun set and a full moon arose, which traced a silvery pathway across the great wasteland that extended both to the east and to the west, as far as the eye could reach. Here and there lonely, stunted trees showed like sentinels upon the plain. The only sound that disturbed the stillness of the night was the dull, continuous roar of the cataract to the south. Here was no sign of animal life. In the daytime the marshland was thronged with birds, but these now were silent. It would be impossible to imagine a place more desolate and weird. It seemed not

of the world, or, if it were, of some forgotten country, buried for ever beyond the reach of progress and the influence of man.

Hour after hour Crouch held to his task. The sweat poured from his forehead, the blood still issued from his wounds, but never for a moment did he cease.

At last he stopped, and placed an ear to Max's chest. Thereupon, he went on again, more feverishly than ever.

Soon after that, a quick cry escaped his lips. He had looked into Max's face, and seen the eyelids flicker; and presently, two eyes were staring in his face. And at that the little man just toppled forward in a faint, and lay upon his face across the body which his efforts had brought back to life.

Without doubt, the mind is master of the body, and the will is king of the mind. One had but to glance into the face of Captain Crouch to see that he was possessed of a will of iron. The strong brows, the firm mouth, the great hatchet chin—these had not been given him for naught. He may have had the strength of Hercules; yet he had never accomplished his journey down the river, had it not been for the indomitable strength of his mind. And now that he realized that the victory was his, that his efforts had been crowned with success, the will, on a sudden, relinquished its task, as a helmsman gives way to his successor at the wheel—and Crouch fell forward in a faint.

At dawn, the sun found them lying together on the mud, and by the warmth of its rays set the blood coursing more freely in their veins.

Max was the first to revive. He tried to lift himself, but found that he was not able to do so, because of the weight of Crouch's body on his chest. He fell back again, and lay for some time with opened eyes, staring upward at the sky.

He saw the colours change in the heavens. He heard the cries of the birds upon the marsh. Then, once again, he struggled to an elbow.

With difficulty he lifted Crouch; and then, looking into the captain's face, he wondered where he was, and how it had come about that they two were stranded, side by side, in the midst of surroundings with which he was wholly unfamiliar.

Then he remembered, by degrees. The struggle with the Arab in the back-water —his headlong rush throughout the length of the rapids—the vision he had had

of Crouch, frantic on the bank. And then—the ravine, and at the end, the cataract—the thunder of the water—the rushing in his ears.

The truth was not difficult to guess; indeed, there was no other explanation. He tried to rise to his feet, but could not do so. At that, he lay back again, to rest, and gave silent thanks in his heart to Divine Providence by means of which he had been saved as by a miracle. He had undergone the sensations of death, and yet he lived.

He had lain quite still and motionless, it may have been for an hour, when Crouch sat up and looked about him. And when he had taken in the scene, he let fall the following irrelevant remark—

"I've lost my pipe," said he.

He then got to his feet, and walking to the water's edge—which was but a few feet distant—he knelt down, scooped the water in his hands, and drank.

Then he returned to Max, and seated himself by his side.

"Feeling queer?" he asked.

Max answered that he was very weak.

"Your strength 'll return," said Crouch; "but you must have some cover for your head."

He took off his coat, which was nothing but a bundle of tatters, and rolling this into a kind of turban, he placed it upon Max's forehead to protect him from the heat of the sun. Then he went back to the water's edge, washed the blood from his face and hands, and bathed the back of his neck. As he returned, he found the barrel of his broken rifle, and stooped and picked it up.

"Look at that!" said he. "That was once the best rifle in this forsaken continent. Not worth its weight as scrap-iron!"

"I suppose," said Max, "you'll be offended if I try to thank you?"

"You suppose right," said Crouch. "Do you feel able to walk?"

"I think so."

"You don’t," said the captain. "There’s no hurry." Then he began to think aloud. "If we work up-stream," said he, "we’ll be on the wrong side of the river. By now Cæsar will have found our canoe. We’re not armed; we have no food. There are precisely three ways in which we might die: first, starvation; second, Cæsar; third, a buffalo. The first’s a certainty. Both of us are too weak to swim the river at Hippo Pool—to say nothing of crocodiles. On the other hand, if we go down-stream, walking will be easy till we get to the mangrove swamp. Have you got a knife?"

Max felt in his pockets, and produced the article in question. Crouch looked at it.

"That’ll do," said he. "With this we should be able to dig out a canoe, and make a couple of paddles. If we don’t die at the job, we ought to work our way up to Date Palm Island. As soon as you’re ready, we’ll start."

"I’m ready now," said Max.

"Then come along," said Crouch.

The mud lay in ridges, which had been baked hard by the sun. Between these the water lay in long pools which, as they progressed farther to the north, became more and more still, less disturbed by the current that issued from the falls. Crouch patted his clothes as he limped along.

"I’ve lost every blamed thing," said he; "pipe, pouch and baccy, compass, knife and ammunition."

Max answered nothing. He thought it would not be wise to sympathize. Crouch was a peculiar man in many ways.

Soon after midday they came to the mangrove swamp; and the crossing of a mangrove swamp is a thing that most African explorers have accomplished. The roots of the short, stunted trees stand out upon the surface of the water. It is necessary to pass by way of these, stepping from one root to another; and some knowledge of the art of balancing is utterly essential. If you lose your foothold, you fall into the swamp, and there you are set upon by leeches. Some of these are large—sometimes as large as snails—but the kind generally met with is an animal so small that it can work its way through the eye-holes of your boots.

Once this creature has laid hold upon your skin, and begun to suck your blood, it begins to swell until it has attained the size of a cherry.

At the edge of the mangrove swamp Crouch and Max took off their boots, and hung these across their shoulders. With bare feet they could get a better footing upon the twisted roots of the trees.

For three hours they journeyed through the swamp, which was buried in semi-darkness. It was far darker than the jungle. It is in these swamps that the mosquitoes swarm in myriads, and all the deadly diseases of the country are engendered. To pitch a standing camp in the vicinity of a mangrove swamp, is to court a certain death from malaria or typhoid.

They were weary, faint, and aching in their bones when they came upon the banks of the Kasai. No wonder this had been named the "Hidden River." It joined the great tributary of the Congo in a thousand little streams, all flowing silently through darkness beneath the close-packed trees.

Crouch turned to the right. He had been bearing to the east throughout, and in a little while they were clear of the swamp, on terra firma. Seating themselves, they put on their boots.

"By Christopher," said Crouch, "I’m weak! I don’t fancy making that canoe with a jackknife."

"Nor I," said Max. "But we’ll do it."

Crouch laughed.

"We will," said he, but his face was white as a ghost. Then he sat bolt upright and listened. "What’s that?" he cried.

Faint in the distance was a gentle, scraping sound, which grew louder and louder as the minutes passed. Max at first could not believe the evidence of his ears. He waited expectantly, and at last heard a rippling sound, that was like the laughter of a child. He sprang to his feet, and rushing to the water’s edge, looked up-stream, shading his eyes with his hand. It was, indeed, the truth—a long canoe was swinging down upon the tide.

CHAPTER XIII—BACK TO THE UNKNOWN

A minute later they saw that the canoe was manned by six of their own Loango boys, who made the blades of the paddles flash in the sunlight; and, moreover, they recognized the canoe as the one they had left at Date Palm Island.

Max lifted his voice and shouted from the bank. Whereat the boys ceased to paddle, and regarded them amazed. Then, recognizing their masters, they raised a shout in chorus, and drew in towards the bank.

Had these natives desired proof of the omnipotence of the Fire-gods, they could have wished for nothing more. Had they searched Central Africa from the Equator to the Zambesi, they could have found no two people more wretched-looking and forlorn. Max was utterly exhausted, and so faint that he could scarcely stand. As for Crouch, he might have been mauled by a lion.

One of the boys flung himself upon the ground, then rose to a kneeling position, and lifted his arms as in prayer.

"Master," he cried, "what did we tell you? We warned you of the Fire-gods! We told you the valley was bewitched! We implored you not to go!"

As the boy ran on in the same strain, Crouch gathered himself together, growing purple in the face. With his tattered garments, which resembled ruffled feathers, he looked like an infuriated turkey-cock. And then, without warning, he landed the boy such a kick as lifted him bodily into the air.

"Fire-gods be hanged!" he shouted. "These are jungle marks. If the valley ’s bewitched, it’s bewitched by thorns. Look here! See for yourselves!" So saying, he lifted his bare leg, in which the thorns were sticking like so many pins in a pin-cushion. "I’ve seen the Fire-gods," he ran on. "You blithering fools, I’ve

taken tea with ’em. I’ve doctored one with a dose of medicine, and I’ve played cards with the other. And I’ve not done with them, yet—mind that! I’m going back, by Christopher! and there’ll be the biggest war-palaver you ever heard of in your lives. Come, get up, and get a move on! But, first, what are you doing here?"

The boys answered that they had come down-stream to shoot hippopotami for food. They said that about a mile farther down the river there was a great grassy bank where many of these animals were to be found. Crouch ordered them to get back into the canoe, saying that as soon as they arrived at the island he would open a case of supplies—bully beef and sardines, of which the Loango boys cherished the empty tins. Also, he promised that in a day or so he would shoot a buffalo, and they would not want for provisions. There was a certain amount of hippo meat in the canoe, and that night Crouch and Max partook of the same food as the boys. It was not until the afternoon of the following day that they arrived at Date Palm Island.

They did not expect Edward Harden for some days. He was still forcing his way towards the Kasai by way of the portage. In the meantime, not only were they glad enough of a rest, but this was altogether essential. It took Crouch some days to rid himself of the thorns which had attached themselves to his skin. He refused all medical assistance from Max; and the wonder of it was, that the wound in his thigh was healing rapidly under his "Bull’s Eye treatment." This was wholly incomprehensible to the young medical student, who beheld the theories he had studied at hospital, and on which he had placed such store, dissipated to the winds. In all probability, the fact was that Crouch had such firm belief in his own remedy that his cure was an example of "faith healing"; it is generally admitted in these days that "attitude of mind" affects the health and can even bring about organic changes, for better or for worse. At any rate, in three days he was sufficiently recovered to set forth into the forest of rubber trees on the right bank of the river in search of the buffalo he had promised the boys. Max—although on this occasion he remained in camp—had by now completely recovered his strength.

There were few things they carried with them to the Hidden River of which they had not duplicates at Date Palm Island. Crouch had been able to secure a new suit of clothes, tobacco and another pipe. As for rifles, both Edward and Crouch were experienced explorers, and knew that if a fire-arm was lost or broken, they could not buy a new one in the heart of Africa. They had therefore equipped

themselves with a battery of several rifles, including Remingtons, Expresses and Winchester repeaters, besides several shot-guns and revolvers.

On the evening of that day, when he was expecting Crouch’s return at any moment, Max walked to the northern extremity of the island. When there, his ears caught the sound of a shot in the forest, on the left bank of the river.

Now, since Crouch had landed on the other side, there could be no question as to whence came this shot; and in a few minutes Max had run to the canoe, jumped in and paddled to the bank. There, he picked up his rifle and fired twice into the air.

Almost immediately his two shots were answered, and there came a second answer—from Crouch on the northern bank. A quarter of an hour later, Max, who had hastened forward on the line of the portage, had grasped the hand of his uncle, who was amazed to see him.

Crouch returned at nightfall. He had killed his buffalo, far in the interior of the forest, and the following morning the boys set out to cut it up. That night the three friends were seated around the camp-fire on Date Palm Island. Edward’s journey had been uneventful, except that one of his Fan attendants had been mauled badly by a wounded leopard.

It was Max who related the story of all that had happened since his uncle left Hippo Pool. The big man listened in silence; and when the story was ended he said nothing, and never once did he look at Crouch. He knew the captain far too well to thank him. With old friends who have been through thick and thin together, who have stood side by side throughout many a danger, words are at a discount—a kind of mutual understanding exists between them that makes conversation a sheer waste of time. Still, though Edward said nothing, Max knew well enough that he thanked the little, wizened captain in his heart, and was conscious of the debt he owed him.

They remained on the island for another week, and it took them all that time to persuade a dozen of the boys to accompany them upon the portage in the capacity of carriers. It was only on the understanding that they would not be asked to embark upon the dreaded river of the "Fire-gods" that, at last, they consented to go.

Indeed, this time, they had no intention of advancing as far as the river. They

proposed to follow the portage to Observation Creek, and thence to strike up-stream, due south, until they found a suitable camping-ground. Here they would establish their base, sending the boys back to the island with orders to wait for their return.

The Loango boys could be trusted; most of them had faithfully served either Crouch or Edward in the past. Besides, they were a thousand miles from their home, and dared not make the passage of the Congo by themselves, because of the hostile tribes that, in those days, abounded to the east of Stanley Falls. When Crouch and Edward Harden were on the river their reputation went before them; their friends came forth to meet them—grinning cannibals with necklaces of monkeys' teeth suspended round their necks, and little else besides by way of clothing—and their enemies, those who had broken their faith with Harden or fallen foul of Crouch, deserted their villages and took to the jungle, to let the two great white men pass, whose fame had reached to the very heart of the continent, and who, it was said, were spoken of even by the pigmies who lived in the dark, unknown country west of the Lakes.

When they set out with their carriers for Observation Creek, the three Europeans were sanguine of success, and even the four Fans (the one who had been injured by the leopard had been left behind on the island) shared their expectations. The riddle of the valley was yet unsolved. The Portuguese still guarded well his secret. In his fortress by the river, encompassed upon every hand by the dark, inhospitable jungle, he had every reason to think himself secure. Moreover, he had cause to believe that both Max and Crouch were dead—the former drowned at the cataract, the latter lost in the jungle. Half the victory is gained when one can take one's adversary by surprise. Cæsar had lost Gyp, his most accomplished scout. He might patrol the river, but he would find no trace of the Englishmen from Makanda to the rapids. He might search their old camp at Hippo Pool, where he would find, perhaps, a box of ammunition, cooking utensils and a few days' provisions—to say nothing of Crouch's case of glass eyes—but he would gain no clue to the fact that his enemies had returned to the valley.

From their base camp on Observation Creek they had decided to move up-stream towards the mountain. They hoped to make friends with the natives of the Pambala village that M'Wané had seen in the distance. Thence they could approach Makanda from the east.

Each time they traversed the portage progress was more easy. It was no longer

necessary to cut a way through the thickets with bill-hooks and axes, and to "blaze" the trees. Besides, they were now familiar with the road, knew where to look for water and the bitter roots of wild manioc, or cassava—from which tapioca is manufactured—and upon which, to a large degree, they were obliged to subsist in the jungle. Also they no longer carried a canoe.

In consequence, they reached the Creek in four and a half days. After halting for an hour, they continued their journey to the south, turning to the left from the route which led direct to Hippo Pool. They followed the course of the stream till sunset, and then camped for the night. Another day's march brought them to an open place by the side of the Creek, where the ground was too rocky for vegetation to flourish. They had been conscious throughout the day's journey of going up-hill, and this was doubtless the foot of one of the spurs of the mountain they wished to gain. It was here they decided to camp.

They pitched their tent, and gathered a supply of firewood in the forest. The water of the stream was clear and good to drink. They were much pestered by insects of all descriptions, but this is inevitable in the heart of an equatorial forest, and not even the smoke of Crouch's tobacco served to keep away the millions of flies, mosquitoes and ants, to say nothing of less disagreeable companions, such as the most gorgeous butterflies and gigantic dragon-flies and moths.

The following day the Loango boys departed upon their return journey to the Kasai. As had been the case before, they showed great eagerness to return. It seems that they could not rid their minds of the tales they had heard of the Fire-gods, and neither Crouch nor Edward could persuade them that the valley was not haunted by evil spirits.

During the days that followed the party suffered from want of meat. They had deemed it advisable not to shoot. Though they were still some distance from Makanda, there was always a chance that Cæsar and his Arabs were somewhere abroad in the forest, and they did not wish the man to suspect that they had returned. In the forest they found nothing to eat but manioc, and a continual diet of the tubers of this peculiar plant is somewhat monotonous and is apt to set up a kind of blood poisoning, to which some people are more liable than others. Edward, whose large carcass required a considerable amount of nourishment, began to suffer from some kind of bilious fever.

After a day's rest they set out upon their southward journey. Day by day as they progressed, the nature of the vegetation changed. The forest trees became thinner and not so large. The atmosphere became cooler and more rarefied. The slope grew steeper and steeper, until at last they were confronted by a sharp, rocky bluff which enclosed the jungle like a wall. They followed this to the left, and came presently to a gully, a dried-up watercourse, up which it was possible to climb. At the top they found themselves upon a hillock—one of those bare, flat-topped eminences which are scattered throughout the whole continent of Africa. Hence it was possible to obtain a bird's-eye view of the country.

To the north, as far as the eye could reach, extended the forest through which they had passed. About twenty miles to the eastward they could see the Kasai above Date Palm Island. To the west there was no sign of the Hidden River, which, being narrower and flowing in a direction almost due south to north, was hidden among the trees. To the south a magnificent panorama was extended to their view. The foreground fell away in a valley which, to some extent, had been given over to cultivation; and beyond, in rugged majesty, arose Solitude Peak. The great mountain towered into the sky, its crest wrapped in clouds; and over the valley hung a thin blue mist, above which some great bird of prey hung like a gnat, with outstretched wings, in the very midst of space.

It was Max who was the first to see the village, half-way up the mountain slope, lying—as M'Wané had described it—like a bird's nest in the forked branches of a tree. He pointed it out to his companions, and then the party began to descend into the valley, one behind the other in single file, following a track which had been made by elephants. An elephant trail can never be mistaken; however hard the ground, the imprints of their great feet remain, and they have a habit of tearing branches from the trees as they pass, not so much for food, as from pure love of destruction.

It took them several hours to cross the valley, and then they began the steep ascent of the mountain. Suddenly M'Wané, who was leading, came to an abrupt standstill, and stood upon a sharp pinnacle of rock, pointing to the east. There was something noble in his dark, savage figure, standing upright, straight as a larch, in the midst of these wild surroundings. A moment later he was joined by the two Hardens and Crouch.

There, in the distance, they could discern the broad waters of the lake before Makanda. They could see the granite hills, which were red in the glow of the

setting sun. They could see, also, the narrow gorge in the south, and far in the distance was a great range of undiscovered mountains. As they looked, a sound issued from the valley, which, like a long peal of distant thunder, rolled away to the north upon the wind, echoing through the forest.

CHAPTER XIV—"BLACK IVORY"

"The Fire-gods’ thunder!" said M’Wané, in a kind of hushed whisper, with his lips parted and his eyes staring in the direction of the Hidden River.

It was obvious that the man was afraid. He belonged to a wild race that for centuries has roamed the jungle, catching fish in baskets at the waterfalls and setting traps in the forest. Until a few days before he had never seen a firearm in his life. He had heard tales of white men who were traders on the Coast, but he had never associated these with the Fire-gods who inhabited the Hidden Valley, whom he regarded as superhuman.

Crouch looked at Edward. "What do you make of it?" he asked.

Harden was frowning in the direction of the valley. His fingers tugged at the end of his moustache. He was a man of few words, as we know.

"Dynamite," said he.

"I think so, too," said Crouch. "I wonder what his game is!"

In their immediate neighbourhood was a narrow stretch of grass—the coarse, thin grass that is usually to be met with on the lower slopes of mountains. It was at this moment that Crouch’s eye became fixed in the centre of this. He remained motionless for some seconds, and then on a sudden grasped Edward by the arm.

"There’s a man there!" said he. "Look out!"

Simultaneously a black form sprang out of the grass and ran up the hill in the direction of the village. Crouch whipped round upon M’Wané and his Fans.

"After him!" he cried. "A reward if you catch him alive."

The four Fans set off as fast as they could go. The race lasted no longer than five minutes at the most. The fugitive seemed possessed of the agility of an antelope when startled from its midday slumber; he sprang over boulders, he dodged right and left like a snipe. But the Fans were fleeter of foot than he; at every stride they gained upon him, and in the end he was overtaken.

They brought him back to Crouch—a woeful, terrified object who had not the courage to lift his head. Crouch tried him with five languages, but he seemed not to understand, and only gave utterance to a few incoherent grunts. Then Crouch tried the "blood-bond," and this is not pleasant to describe. He took a knife from his pocket, opened a vein in his hand, and the native licked the wound. At that Crouch gave his knife to the man, who in turn inflicted a wound upon himself, and Crouch went through his part of the business with a heroism that Max was bound to admire. They were now "blood-brothers," and that is a bond which is inviolable in the region of the Congo. Crouch made the man understand him by means of signs, in the art of which he was a master.

"I have one heart," said he, by which he conveyed the fact that he was no traitor, that his word could be relied on. "I wish to speak with the people of your village."

The man, pointing in the direction of Makanda, wanted to know whether Crouch and his companions were allies of the Fire-gods.

"No," said Crouch. "We are come to make war upon the Fire-gods."

The man but half believed that. None the less, he agreed to take them to the village. They urged him to set forward without delay, since it had already grown dark.

It was past nightfall when they arrived at a narrow street of small, rounded huts, constructed of bamboo stems and palm leaves. Despite the fact that they came with one of the villagers, the majority of the inhabitants fled at their approach. This wild people were timid, shy as animals; also, as we shall see, they stood in a mortal fear of Cæsar and his Arabs.

As they approached the village, Crouch managed to gain the confidence of their captive. Where natives were concerned the little sea-captain had a way with him. The man promised that if they would wait till the morning he would persuade his friends to attend a palaver.

That night they had the village to themselves. The inhabitants—men, women and children—had disappeared into the valley, where they spent the night in fear and trembling. This is the common behaviour of many uncivilized peoples when, for the first time in their lives, they behold the indomitable white man. And these villagers had the greater reason to be fearful, since they associated the explorers with the Fire-gods.

Fortunately, they had fled in such haste that they had left most of their provisions in their huts. Crouch and his companions enjoyed a change of diet. That night they dined upon the flesh of a goat, which they resolved to pay for on the morrow, besides plantains and Indian corn.

They took turn and turn about to keep watch throughout the night, but there was no alarm. At daybreak they stationed themselves upon an eminence above the village, hoping that the inhabitants would summon up courage to return. Below them was the cultivated ground through which they had passed the previous evening. The greater part had been given over to the culture of ground-nuts; but there were also small patches of Indian corn and banana groves. The explorer who wishes to succeed with the untutored savage must possess his soul in patience by the hour. Crouch sat down and lit his pipe.

Shortly before midday, several dusky figures appeared from out of the jungle, and made their way to the plantation. There they remained in a body, frightened to come nearer; and by the aid of his field-glass, Max was able to make out the figure of Crouch’s "blood-brother" who, gesticulating wildly, endeavoured to persuade his friends and relations to return.

Seeing that this was going to be a long business, Crouch suggested that they should walk down to the village and partake of food. Since their hosts were unwilling to entertain them, it only remained for them to help themselves. This they did with liberality, for they had the appetites of lions.

They were in the middle of their repast when they heard the sound of running feet and a great commotion. Looking up they beheld one of the women of the village running towards them well-nigh panic-stricken, and filling the air with screams. This woman rushed into a hut, and came out again with all her portable belongings.

By then the little street was crowded with old men, women and children,

wringing their hands in desperation, and uttering such moans and supplications as were heartrending to listen to. It was remarkable that among the crowd there were not more than five young men at the most; the majority were women, and of the children there were few who were not three years of age.

Crouch looked about him, and caught sight of his "blood-brother," who was no less distracted than the rest. He laid hold of this fellow by the arm, and with great difficulty managed to discover what had happened.

The "blood-brother" had just persuaded his relatives to return to the village; he had explained, at last, to their satisfaction that the new white men were not the servants of the Fire-gods, when suddenly the Fire-gods themselves had been seen approaching up the valley. At that, the whole population had taken to their heels. They knew not where they were going, for it was the custom of the Fire-gods to come upon them from both sides at once, and if they tried to escape they were shot without mercy. The great Fire-god was there himself—the tall, white man with the black beard—and it was he whom they feared even more than the Arabs.

Crouch looked at Edward. There was a twinkle in his eye.

"There’s going to be fun," said he.

"It will come to a fight," said Edward; "and I’m not sorry for that."

"I hope it won’t," said Crouch. "There are many things we ought to find out before we come to blows. As far as I can understand from my worthy ’blood-brother,’ Cæsar is coming here for palaver. They’ll hold palaver in the street; and if we hide in a hut we ought to overhear what the advertisements in the newspapers call ’something to our advantage.’"

"I see," said Edward; "and if we’re discovered, we fight."

"Exactly," said Crouch. "That’s the idea."

It so happened that they had placed their "loads" in one of the huts where they would not be seen by Cæsar as he entered the village. It was all Crouch could do to explain to his "blood-brother" that they desired to hide, that the Fire-gods must not be told of their presence in the village. After a while, the man seemed to understand; but, indeed, he stood in such dread of the Portuguese that it was

extremely doubtful whether he was wholly responsible for what he was saying.

Crowded together in one of the small huts the three Englishmen and the four Fans awaited the arrival of the Fire-gods. They were astonished at what they beheld—the abject consternation and alarm of the villagers, who now appeared a cowered and servile race. Never for one moment did it seem to occur to the few men among them to take up arms, in spite of the fact that the Pambala—to whom they were obviously related—are a warlike and courageous people.

The reason for their cowardice was obvious. They did not fear the Portuguese without a cause. They had learnt to their cost that Cæsar was a man to be dreaded.

Crouch made a little eye-hole in the wall of the hut, whence he obtained a good view of the street. It was through this that he caught sight of Cæsar and de Costa, the moment they entered the village.

It was Cæsar himself who led the way. He strolled forward, with his rifle under his arm, and his black eyes shooting in all directions, as if he were doing no more than taking an afternoon walk in a neighbourhood where there was much to be observed. He was followed by four Arabs, in robes of flowing white; and the last of these conducted a negro, of the same tribe as the villagers, who wore an iron collar round his neck which was made fast to a chain. The rear of the party was brought up by de Costa, slinking forward like some mongrel cur, fever-stricken and afraid.

The party halted in the village street, some little distance from the hut where the three Englishmen were hiding, but not so far away as to make it impossible for Crouch to overhear the conversation that ensued. The chained negro was brought forward by the Arab who had charge of him; and it was this man who acted as interpreter. Cæsar spoke to him in Portuguese, and he translated. Crouch made a mental note of every word, for he had a far better knowledge of the Portuguese language than the interpreter himself.

"As you know," said Cæsar, "it is my custom to state my business in a few words. I come here to give orders. I expect those orders to be obeyed."

He lifted his sombrero hat and mopped the perspiration from his forehead, for the afternoon was hot, and he walked up hill. The four Arabs stood around him —proud, arrogant, handsome men, upon whose features were stamped an

unmitigated contempt for the simple savages who stood in awe before them. It was the headman of the village who answered, an old man, with a short, grey beard, who wore a helmet made of a monkey’s skin, and surmounted by the green covert feathers of a parrot.

"The great Fire-god," said he, "has but to speak."

"Good," said Cæsar. "You know who I am. You know my power. You know that to disobey me is death."

The old man bowed his head.

"I trade in ivory," said Cæsar, "black ivory. You understand what I mean. Now, listen to my command. I desire twenty more slaves, of your youngest and most able-bodied men. They must be ready to return with me to Makanda before the setting of the sun."

At that the headman threw himself upon the ground.

"It is impossible!" he cried. "Only last moon the great Fire-god took away all the men of the village. No one remains but those who are old, and women and children. The Fire-god can see for himself."

"I do not choose to look," said Cæsar. "As I have said, it is my business to give orders. There is sickness in my camp, and many of my people have died, and more are dying every day. I require others to take their places. If you have no more men, I will take women and children. But I will require two women, or three boys over twelve and under sixteen years of age, for every man. You can please yourself as to which you give me. It is all the same to me."

"It is impossible!" repeated the native.

"Impossible or not," said the Portuguese, "I give you till sunset. If these people are not ready then, the consequence is on your own head. You know how I treated the villages on the other side of the mountain? Your fate will be the same. I will attack by night; I will set fire to every hut; and I will take every one of you to be my slaves."

"Mercy!" cried the native. But Cæsar turned upon his heel, and led the way from the village, followed by his Arabs, who smiled in heartless satisfaction.

Crouch gave time for Cæsar to be well away from the village. Then he crawled out of the hut, and seizing his "blood-brother" by the hand, swore that he would save them all.

At first, he quite failed to gain their confidence. They were convinced in their minds that the Fire-gods were greater than all men, as the strength of the elephant exceeds that of other beasts of the forest.

But Crouch would not take that for answer. He commanded them to light a fire, and they obeyed. When the flames were burning brightly he executed a war-dance round and round the fire. His antics were extraordinary to see.

They may have thought him mad; but at all events he gained his object: he drew them round him in a ring. They stood open-mouthed and open-eyed, amazed at his contortions. They were children of the minute. To all intents and purposes they had already forgotten the Portuguese and his threats.

Crouch sang, and never was there such singing. His voice was cracked and out of tune. It was all Max could do to prevent himself exploding into laughter. The words of Crouch’s song had nothing to do with the matter; in point of fact they were concerned with "Nuts and May." For all that, he impressed the natives hugely. And when they had gathered closer he took the boot from his foot, and thrust his toes into the fire. And all the time he continued to sing of "Nuts and May," whilst the atmosphere was tainted with the pungent smell of burning cork.

The silence was so great that Edward Harden could hear the ticking of his watch. The villagers stood around, breathless and amazed. Then Crouch spoke to them; and the following was the argument he used.

He admitted that the slave-dealer was master over fire; hence he was called the "Fire-god." But he (Crouch) had proved to them that fire could not affect him. Near-by a pitcher of water was standing outside a hut, and into this he thrust his foot. There was a sizzling sound, and steam was given off. He made the natives place their hands into the water, to see for themselves that it was warm. He finished up by saying that, if they would put themselves under his command, he would show them how to face the Fire-god’s anger.

With reluctance they agreed. In the space of a few minutes it was impossible for Crouch to efface the result of two long years of persecution. The headman of the village, Crouch’s "blood-brother," and one or two others, came forward on behalf of their relations, their children and their wives. Crouch turned to Harden.

"Can we defend this place?" said he.

Edward had already thought of that.

"Yes," said he. "They can only advance by two paths. Elsewhere the slope is too steep. There is an hour before sunset. If you make these people build a wall of the small boulders which lie everywhere about, we should be able to keep the rascals at bay."

"I’ll do my best," said Crouch. And thereupon he set to work.

It took the natives some time to understand his meaning; but when he had shown them what he wanted done they worked with a will, the women carrying enormous stones, and even the little children lending aid.

The parapet of stone grew like the walls of Rome, until, at last, it formed a semi-circle around the village, joining the mountain-side at either end. Then the women and children were placed under cover, and ordered not to move. Edward posted himself at the head of the path which led from the west, and Max on the other side of the village. At the feet of each was a box of ammunition. As for Crouch, he hobbled here and there on the charred stump of his foot, giving instructions up to the last minute, when, in the dying light of day, Cæsar and his Arabs were observed advancing up the valley.

CHAPTER XV—CHOLERA

As before, it was Cæsar who led the way; and the stone wall warned him that danger was ahead. He guessed the truth in a flash. He knew well enough that the natives themselves would never have dared to offer him resistance.

He stopped dead upon the path, and pointed out the wall to the Arab who accompanied him. The man shaded his eyes with the palm of his hand, for the mists of evening were rising from the valley, and the light was bad. After a while the Arab disappeared from view, and then returned with his comrades. They came up the path as men stalk game, creeping from boulder to boulder. It was impossible to see them from the village. Flat upon the ground, they glided from place to place like snakes. And every minute the light was getting worse.

One man, more daring than his comrades, had gained the cover of a large rock about two hundred yards from the village.

His eyes were sharp as those of a vulture. He was descended from the sons of the desert. Peering round the angle of the rock behind which he was hiding, he caught sight of Edward Harden’s helmet, moving behind the wall.

In a second, the butt of his rifle was at his shoulder, and his left eye was closed. He took in a deep breath, and aimed. At that moment, there was a sharp crack from the wall, whence nothing of the Arab was visible but the upper part of his head. And Edward Harden’s bullet drilled a hole in the centre of the man’s forehead; so that his head just dropped like a broken toy, and he lay still and lifeless, with his loaded rifle in his hand. Son of a warlike race, that for centuries had oppressed the ignorant and the weak, he had gone to make his peace with God, the Giver of Life and Death.

Cæsar, from some distance behind, with a pair of field-glasses to his eyes, had watched this tragedy of seconds; and he knew at once with whom he had to

reckon. He drew a whistle from his pocket, and blew a long, shrill note, which was the signal to retreat. His three remaining Arabs came back to him, retiring even more cautiously than they had advanced.

Night fell, as a curtain is rung down upon a stage. The natives of the village, the old men and women and children, who had sat huddled and shivering under cover of the wall, came forth and marvelled that a Fire-god had been turned back by a single shot. Crouch's authority increased by leaps and bounds. The villagers, like children, desired to celebrate the occasion with inconsequent rejoicing. They set about beating large, wooden drums, but Grouch cast these away. They lit fires, but Crouch stamped them out.

Only the babies were allowed to rest that night; the little sea-captain kept the others working until long after midnight, when a new moon arose. He improved the defences. He had all the provisions and the water-jars carried to the hut which he had made his own headquarters, whilst the two Hardens stood as sentries on either side of the village.

At about two o'clock in the morning, Max, on the eastern side of the village, heard the noise of a loosened stone rolling down the mountain-side. That put him on his guard. And a moment after, another stone bounded into the valley.

At that, he sent back M'Wané to tell Crouch that some one was approaching, and remained at his post alone.

There is nothing more majestic in the whole range of Nature than moonlight in the mountains. The white mists drift in the valleys; and, here and there, the great, ragged peaks blot out the stars. Midnight is ever silent in the higher altitudes. The slightest sound—the hoot of an owl or the bubbling of a spring—is magnified by echo, and carried far upon the breeze.

Max, with his rifle at the ready, waited with his heart thumping against his ribs. He heard a noise, quite near to him, but so faint that he could never have heard it had not every sense been on the alert. He saw something white, moving like a ghost in the moonlight. Then, a loud shout was uplifted in the stillness. "Allah Akbar! Strike for God and the Prophet!"

Three white figures rushed in upon him from the darkness. He fired, and one went down. And then, reversing his rifle, he used it as a club, swinging the butt around him in a kind of mad delight.

The two men who remained pressed him close. He saw knives flash in their hands. And then a third figure appeared, and a revolver spat like a cat. Cæsar himself was there.

The Portuguese called back the two Arabs, spoke a few words which Max was not able to hear; and then all three abreast endeavoured to rush the wall. Max fired, but missed. He was attacked from three sides at once, and must have been overpowered had not Crouch hastened to his rescue.

It was no more than a scuffle at the best. Crouch emptied his revolver; but it was too dark to shoot straight. Max used his fist, and sent one of the men rolling backwards; whilst Crouch flew like a leopard at Cæsar's throat. It was all over in an instant. Cæsar and his men drew off as suddenly and quickly as they came, taking with them the Arab whom Max had wounded or killed.

Crouch took out his pipe and filled it.

"I wish I had had the luck to hit that rascal," said Max, "instead of one of the Arabs."

Crouch grunted as he lit his pipe.

"When I shoot that man," said he, "I don't want it to be due to luck. Nothing's too bad for a slave-dealer, if that's what he is—which I doubt."

It was then that they were joined by the Fan whom they had left with Edward. He presented a note to Crouch, written in pencil on a leaf torn from a note-book.

"*How goes it?*" was all it said.

Crouch scribbled a reply: "*He's gone to bed. But remain at your post till daybreak.*"

Sunrise brought their vigil to an end. No sign of the Portuguese was to be seen; and presently news was brought to the village by a man who had been setting traps in the forest, and who had known nothing of the alarm. This man stated that he had seen Cæsar returning to Makanda, followed by two Arabs, who carried the body of a third.

The delight of the natives exceeded anything that Max Harden had ever seen in

his life. They beat their wooden drums, and sang and danced in jubilation. They realized that, at last, after two years of oppression, the yoke of the Fire-gods had been lifted from their shoulders. They regarded Crouch and his companions as angels who had dropped from the skies to deliver them from bondage.

That evening the three Englishmen held a council of war. They regretted that Cæsar had learnt of their return to the valley. But that was inevitable; they had been in duty bound to help the natives. Though the mystery of Makanda was by no means solved, they had, at least, an inkling of the truth. The explosion they had heard in the valley was undoubtedly the blasting of rock; and there was no question that it was for this purpose that Cæsar required the services of slaves. That explained why he had been unwilling for either the Europeans or the Fans to leave the stockade. The kraal, fenced around by high palisades, and guarded by Arab slave-drivers, contained the slave gangs; and who can say what cruelty was perpetrated therein? The slave trade had been abolished; but at that time, in the heart of Africa, it still flourished in all its blackest colours, with utter disregard for the equality of all men, who—whatever the colour of their skin may be—are equal in the sight of God. Edward Harden was a man in whose big heart a sense of justice burned like a living flame. When he considered the innate cruelty of the Portuguese, who was willing to enslave even women and little children, his wrath rose within him and the blood flew to his face. He felt that he could not rest until the fortress of Makanda had been taken, the slaves set free, and Cæsar brought to his account.

Still, Edward was no fool. He knew well enough that it would be madness for three of them to endeavour to attack a defensive position held by a determined man and, at least, half a dozen Arabs. It was then that they decided to arm M’Wané and his Fans. They had with them six rifles and a shot-gun; a great quantity of reserve ammunition had been left at the camp on Observation Creek. Crouch and Max undertook to teach the Fans to shoot; whilst Edward, with a party of villagers, made his way back to the camp in the jungle, to bring up all their supplies.

The following morning Edward Harden set out upon his journey, and it was a strange crowd that followed him into the forest. The majority of them were women; but the African woman is accustomed to manual labour. At Zanzibar, sea-going ships are coaled by great buxom wenches, who can lift a hundredweight as though it were a trifle. With many inland tribes, between Mombasa and the West Coast, the work in the fields is conducted almost

exclusively by women. The men pride themselves upon being warriors, hunters of big game and setters of traps. They consider it beneath their dignity to dig and delve and hoe the ground, since such employment entails no personal danger. Edward, therefore, was well contented to have women as his servants; and before he started he bargained to pay them in beads, cloth and cowrie shells.

Whilst he was absent, Crouch and Max became drill-sergeants for the nonce. The Fans were first taught the mechanism of the rifle, and how to clean it. They were then instructed in aiming drill. Though Crouch had now a fair working knowledge of their language, for the most part he taught them by demonstration; and they proved most promising recruits. At last a target was set up in the valley; and rifle practice took place daily both in the morning and the evening.

By the time Edward returned, though the Fans were not yet marksmen, it seemed probable that they would be ready to take the field in another day or so. Still, both Crouch and Edward desired to run no risks. They did not intend to operate against Makanda, until they could do so with every chance of success. It was Edward's suggestion that they should reconnoitre the settlement before they advanced. They desired to discover the quickest route to the granite hills, and some position thereon—within striking distance of Makanda—where they could establish their headquarters. It was also necessary to find out the strength of Cæsar's garrison. At the time of their visit, they had not been able to ascertain how many Arabs were secreted in the kraal. De Costa, they knew, need not be taken into account; the man was an arrant coward. But the Arab is a foe who can never be despised; he is a good rifle-shot, an intelligent soldier, and his religion teaches him to be brave.

The next question was to decide who should be sent forward as a scout; and it was Max who was selected for the task. Edward had just returned from the jungle; and besides, the big man was by no means so quick and agile as his nephew. Crouch was out of the question; he had burnt so much of his cork foot that he could only hobble and would take too long over the journey. It was finally decided that Max should start a day in advance of the others, taking with him provisions for three days, as well as his rifle and revolver.

That evening, Edward and Max climbed to the top of Solitude Peak. During the day the crest of the mountain was invariably wrapped in clouds, but towards evening these usually disappeared. On this occasion, a most magnificent panorama of the surrounding country was presented to their view. They looked

down upon the whole valley of the Hidden River, from Makanda to the mangrove swamp; and it was then that Edward filled in the final details of his map.

They saw that it was possible to reach Cæsar's stockade without entering the jungle. If one followed the valley above which lay the Pambala village, one would come, in course of time, to the granite hills to the east of Makanda. They calculated that, if Max started at daybreak, he would reach his destination towards the evening.

Accordingly, soon after sunrise, Max set out, bearing with him the good wishes of his friends. A native footpath led some distance down the valley, but there turned into the jungle. Max struck across country, holding his course south-west by the compass.

He halted at midday to enjoy a meal of biscuits and sardines, washed down by the clear water from a neighbouring brook. As he sat in solitude, in the midst of that illimitable wilderness, he could not but reflect upon the strangeness of his situation. Here was he, who all his life had been accustomed to the roll of London 'buses and the cries of newsboys in the streets, seated on a boulder, in the blazing heat of the tropics, thousands of miles beyond the pale of civilization.

It was whilst he was there that he beheld, for the first time in his life—if we make exception of the animals he had seen in the Zoo—a great rock-python which lay, coiled in the grass, not twenty paces from him. The sight of the thing caused him to shudder. He sprang instantly to his feet. As he did so the snake heard him, and glided away among the rocks. In the thickest part of its body the great reptile was about the size of a man's thigh; and it must have been over twenty feet in length.

Max, having no desire for such a companion, moved on in haste, keeping the mountain to his left. For the most part, he passed through a kind of neutral territory, where the dominion of the jungle gave way to the barren, rock-bound slopes of Solitude Peak. The afternoon was well advanced by the time he arrived at the granite hills.

Here, he exercised the greatest caution. It was possible that a sentinel had been posted on the crest-line. He accordingly advanced by way of a donga, which led

to the hill-top, and in which he could not be seen. When he cleared the donga, a few yards from the crest, he went down on hands and knees, and crawled from boulder to boulder.

A few minutes later, he found himself looking down upon the settlement of Makanda. He was immediately above the kraal, and from that altitude he was able to see inside the enclosure. The kraal consisted of four rows of huts. In one of these was a white figure which, even without the aid of his glasses, he had no difficulty in recognizing as one of the Arabs. This man, rifle in hand, entered a hut, and presently came out with a party of six slaves, all of whom wore iron collars around their necks, which were fastened together by a single chain. Followed by the Arab, this party left the kraal, and turned to the left, towards the southern extremity of the lake.

Max directed his field-glasses upon the stockade. He could see no one therein but Cæsar's Arab cook, who was walking leisurely from the direction of the river with a bucket of water in either hand.

By now the slave-driver and his party were out of sight to the south. Max, anxious to observe whatsoever was in progress, descended from the sky-line and ran in all haste along the ridge. He soon came to a place whence he was able to see the course of the river, which had taken a sudden bend to the west above the lake, where it was spanned by a rope suspension bridge, such as is often met with in the heart of Africa. Beyond the bridge, the sight that he witnessed held him rooted to the spot.

He beheld a large quarry, where about fifty natives were at work. In charge of these were four Arabs, and Max had no difficulty in distinguishing Cæsar and the half-caste de Costa.

The work which was in progress was singular, by reason of the fact that this was Equatorial Africa where, at that time, commerce, industry and enterprise were quite unknown. A group of slaves in charge of the Portuguese himself, was gathered together beneath the walls of the quarry. A little distance from them was a great heap of rubbish. Suddenly, the whole party was seen to set off running in the direction of the river. Cæsar was the last to retire.

There followed a tremendous explosion. A great column of dust and smoke was thrown up into the air. And even before this had descended, or had been carried

away upon the wind, both Cæsar and the natives had hastened back to the place, where there was now a great rent in the living rock. There they set to work carrying baskets of débris to de Costa, who supervised a party engaged in sifting. Now and then, something was taken from the siftings and handed to de Costa, who examined it, and cast it into a wheelbarrow. At intervals, this wheelbarrow was taken to a third party at the water's edge that was engaged in washing something in pans.

Max was, at first, too interested and surprised at all this to take notice of an occurrence in the nature of a tragedy which was taking place farther up the stream. There, about a dozen natives lay stretched at full length upon the sand at the water's edge. Some of these lay still and motionless, as if in death; others were writhing in agony; from time to time one would endeavour to raise himself, but invariably fell back, drawing up his knees as if in fearful pain.

Even at that distance, Max could not fail to recognize the symptoms of cholera—the most severe and fatal of all diseases. At various intervals in the history of the world, cholera has raged in Asia and throughout the eastern parts of Europe. In the early part of the nineteenth century a violent outbreak occurred in Bengal, which in a short time spread throughout the length and breadth of India. Thence, it raged eastward into China, and westward through Persia and Turkey to Russia and Central Europe. North Africa was also afflicted, and the valley of the Nile, whence the pestilence had evidently now crossed to the basin of the Congo.

No disease in the world is more deadly and virulent. It strikes down its victims swiftly and without warning. Even as the men worked at the quarry, Max observed one who took himself a little distance from his fellows, and sat down upon a rock as though he were in pain.

Cæsar followed him, and ordered the man to return. The poor fellow was too weak to obey; and thereupon the slave-master raised his whip and three times brought down his lash upon the naked back of the sufferer. The man's cries for mercy carried even to the hills, and it was all Max could do to restrain the burning indignation which kindled in his soul.

Presently the order was given for the slaves to return to the kraal; and the whole party set out across the bridge, driven forward by the whip. If any man, in all God's Kingdom, had merited death by dint of his misdeeds, it was surely this relentless Portuguese.

CHAPTER XVI—THE OPEN CHEST

At sundown Max looked about him for somewhere to sleep. He soon found a sandy patch between two great boulders, and here he took off the haversack in which he had carried his provisions. He had filled his water-bottle at the brook.

After he had eaten he lay down, converting his helmet into a pillow. He felt quite secure; he could not possibly be discovered, unless some one actually walked over him—an event that was very unlikely to occur. He was thoroughly tired out after the day's march; for all that, he found himself quite unable to sleep. He could not rid his mind of the sight he had seen that evening: the miserable slaves, dropping like poisoned flies, struck down by the cholera which raged amongst them, and yet goaded by the whip. And if Max's sense of pity had been aroused, he was scarcely less curious to discover the nature of the work that was going forward at the quarry. When, at last, he fell asleep this thought was dominant in his mind.

He awoke suddenly, and found the same question on his lips: why were they blasting at the quarry? He could not have been asleep for more than a few hours, for the moon was but newly arisen. On consulting his watch, he found that it was only half-past twelve.

He failed in his endeavours to go to sleep again; so he sat up, and tried to think the matter out. He had already accomplished part of his mission: he had discovered that Cæsar had not more than six Arabs with whom to defend the stockade. It remained for him, on the following morning, to see if he could find a point upon the ridge whence rifle-fire could be opened upon Makanda. For the time being, however, he resolved to go down into the valley under cover of darkness, to cross the suspension bridge and examine the quarry.

Leaving his haversack, water-bottle and rifle behind him, he armed himself with his revolver, and set forward down the hill, making a wide detour around the

kraal. He was then devoutly thankful that Gyp had departed from the land of the living. He found that he was obliged to pass nearer to the settlement than he liked; and had the Great Dane been on watch, no doubt she would have given the alarm.

As it was, he passed in safety, and reached the river bank. He had no difficulty in finding the suspension bridge, which he crossed on tiptoe, as rapidly as possible. On the other side his attention was immediately attracted by the loud groans of the sufferers who had been left to their fate.

It was quite beyond his power to do anything to help these men. He had no medicines; he could not speak their language; and in the majority of cases, the disease was so far gone as to be incurable.

Before he left the hills, the moon had disappeared behind a bank of clouds. During the last ten minutes, a tempest had been driving up from the west, which now burst with all its force upon the valley of the Hidden River.

Africa is the land of mighty storms. The sky grew so dark that it was impossible for Max to see one yard before him. Then, there approached in one wild, savage gust, a roaring, raging wind that bent the great trees of the forest like saplings and picked up the water in the lake before Makanda in little driving waves, whilst the rain came down in sheets. The suspension bridge swung to and fro like a kite. There came flash upon flash of lightning which illumined the quarry, so that the bare walls of rock were blazing like a furnace.

The lightning lasted for seconds at a time, and at such times the scene stood for all that was barbarous and fantastic. The dark, mysterious river flowed upon its course through the narrow gorge where the lightning beat upon the rocks. The electricity in the air flashed, died out, and flashed again, like thousands of sparks in the wind. And there, upon the white sand, writhing in torture, were the dark forms of those who had been stricken by the pestilence.

Max had never felt so powerless. He was in the heart of the Unknown. Close at hand, lay those who had been stricken by a force which all the resource of modern science had entirely failed to conquer. Overhead, echoed and mirrored by the rocks, the typhoon rent the sky with sheets of fire, whilst peal upon peal of thunder caused the earth to tremble.

Yet Max was by no means disposed to forget the object of his quest. He was

determined to find out the nature of the work which was carried on at the quarry. He hastened forward, and presently blundered into one of the great heaps of sifted débris.

He picked up a handful of this and examined it in the light of the lightning. As far as he could make out, it was composed of a kind of fine gravel, in which appeared great quantities of a green stone, known as serpentine.

Being unable to find out anything definite from the heaps of debris, he resolved to examine the quarry. The wind was too great to permit him to strike a match, even had that been prudent. He was obliged to rely upon the lightning to guide him in his search. He availed himself of the opportunity of a series of flashes to run to the quarry, and there he found himself in impenetrable darkness.

He stood waiting for the lightning to return. It seemed that the storm was already passing. These tropical hurricanes, that often uproot the trees of the forest, are seldom of long duration. They are too violent to last for many minutes.

Max was beginning to think that the storm was passed, when the sky immediately overhead burst into a lurid glow, and almost simultaneously a deafening peal of thunder rolled across the valley. Max leaned forward to examine the face of the rock; and as he did so, he was seized suddenly from behind.

As quick as thought, he whipped his revolver from its holster; and immediately the weapon was struck from his hand.

The lightning still continued, jumping like fire-light; and Max was able to make out the dark eyes and the pointed beard of Cæsar.

The Portuguese was aided by an Arab. The struggle that ensued was no more than an affair of seconds. Max, though he fought with the strength that comes of desperation, was overpowered from the first, and presently he was thrown violently to the ground. There his hands were tied fast behind his back. Cæsar was heard to laugh.

"Get up," said he, and then ran on in his broken English: "You must think me a fool, if I do not keep a sentry by night over the richest of my possessions. Come, follow me."

He led the way across the bridge, and Max had no alternative but to obey him. The Arab, rifle in hand, brought up the rear.

They passed around the eastern shore of the lake, walking on the crisp sand in which their boots sank to the ankles. Max saw the kraal wherein the man’s slaves were asleep; and a few minutes afterwards they came to the stockade. Cæsar led the way into his hut—the hut in which Crouch and he had played cards some weeks before. He told Max to sit down upon a chair, and placed himself on the other side of the room, with his loaded revolver ready to his hand.

"If you endeavour to escape," said he, "I shoot. I advise you to remain still, and listen to what I have to say."

Max looked about him. As far as he could see there was no method of escape. His wrists had been bound securely.

"In the first place," said Cæsar, "I would like to know for what reason you have meddled in my affairs."

"You are a slave-dealer," said Max.

"That may, or may not, be true."

"It is true," cried the young Englishman, his anger rising in a flood. "I know it. The employment of slaves is a sin in the eyes of both God and man. Justice is the duty of every one; and that is why we have meddled—as you call it—in your affairs."

"I have already pointed out," said Cæsar, "that the laws of civilization do not apply to Makanda. But that is beside the mark. I understand you are a doctor, that you have had some sort of medical training."

Max answered that that was so.

"Do you understand the treatment of cholera?"

"I know the various methods that have been tried," said Max; "but, as you probably know, they are seldom successful."

It was at that moment that Max heard a loud groan which issued from a hut not

far away.

"Do you hear that?" asked Cæsar.

Max nodded his head.

"That is my friend, de Costa. When he returned to the stockade this evening he was taken ill with cholera. I went to look at him an hour ago, just before my sentry informed me that you were in the quarry. He is dying."

"How does that concern me?" asked Max.

"It concerns you," answered Cæsar, "inasmuch as it concerns myself. Your life is in my hands. I can either kill you, or place an iron collar around your neck and yoke you to a gang of slaves. If you do not do as I wish, I will have you shot. If you obey me, you may continue to live—as a slave."

"What is it you want?" asked Max.

"I want you to do what you can to save de Costa. He is of some use to me. Indeed, I could not do very well without him."

"I will do what I can," said Max.

Outside, the Arab was on guard. Cæsar lead the way to de Costa's hut; and there, Max found the half-caste stretched upon his bed, with features drawn and haggard, and his complexion of a ghastly purple hue. His body was all twisted in his agony. He was too far gone to speak.

"Now," said Cæsar, "I do not feel disposed to untie your hands; but you will kindly look at the bottles of medicine on that shelf, and see if you can find anything that might be of use."

Max searched the shelf where the half-caste kept his stock of drugs, and had no difficulty in finding the very thing he wanted, namely, opium. He found also bismuth and nitrate of silver. He instructed Cæsar how to mix these drugs in the ordained proportions; and the Portuguese placed a glass containing the medicine at the sick man's bedside. It is noteworthy that he took care not to touch the patient, for the disease is one of the most contagious in the world.

"Will he live, do you think?" asked Cæsar.

"It is impossible to say," said Max.

"You can do nothing else?"

"Absolutely nothing. He has reached the turning point. If he does not die in an hour or so, he will live."

"Come," said Cæsar, "we must not risk contagion."

Outside the hut he paused, and spoke to the Arab, who immediately left the stockade. He then ordered Max to enter his hut, and followed with his loaded revolver in his hand.

"You have come to spy out my secrets," said he. "You are at liberty to learn as much as you wish. It can make no difference to me; for I intend that you shall never see Europe again."

So saying, he drew a bunch of keys from his pocket, and stepped to the great, padlocked chest on the other side of the room. One by one, he unlocked the padlocks, and then threw back the lid, and stood by, holding the candle over the contents.

"Here," said he, "see for yourself. Few have ever witnessed such a sight."

Max drew nearer, and looked down into the box. For some seconds he stood as if spellbound, unable to move his gaze. The chest was about three-quarters full of the most enormous Oriental rubies.

Cæsar took one at random, and held it before the light. Garnets had been found in Africa, and even spinels; but these were genuine rubies of the highest quality, such as had hitherto only been discovered in the famous mines of Ava.

CHAPTER XVII—THE TABLES TURNED

When Max looked up into the face of the Portuguese the man was smiling, so that his white teeth showed in the blackness of his beard.

"You see," said he, "I did not come here on a wild-goose chase after all. I first came to this river five years ago, and discovered the rubies of Makanda. I promptly engaged the services of de Costa, who had worked in the mines of Santa Fé in Mexico. This treasure-chest contains the result of the labour of two years."

"And why have you employed slaves?" asked Max. "Why did you not set to work like an honest man?"

"For a simple reason," answered Cæsar; "I desired the maximum of profit. No one knows of my discovery. I intend no one to know. Paid labour is not only expensive, but workmen would come and go at their pleasure, and word of this would reach the Coast. That is precisely what I desire to prevent. There would be talk of rights and royalties, and probably international complications. At present it is not known that rubies can be found in Africa. I cannot speak too highly of these gems. One of these stones, weighing five carats, is worth at least twelve times as much as a diamond of equal weight. I am prepared to receive your congratulations."

It was some time before Max Harden spoke.

"Why is it," he asked, "that you tell me the secret you have kept for years?"

Cæsar smiled again.

"Because," said he, "I number you among my slaves."

It was then that Max heard the jangling of a chain without the hut. The Arab had returned.

Max was led forth into the moonlight. The storm was past, the water lay inches deep upon the ground. There, shivering from fear, were five slaves—men who had been born and bred in the Pambala village on the mountain slope—fastened one to the other like so many dogs upon a leash. At the end of the chain was an empty collar, which one of the Arabs opened with a key. It closed with a snap around Max Harden's neck, and from that moment, according to the law of the slave trade, his soul was not his own. The Arab cracked the whip he held in his hand, and like a team of dumb, patient animals, the gang filed from the stockade.

It wanted but an hour to daylight, but the misery of that hour stands alone in the life of the young Englishman as the most terrible experience that ever came his way. He found himself and his five bond-companions confined in a narrow hut in which there was scarcely air to breathe. They had to sleep upon straw mats spread upon the floor. The long chain bound them one to another, so that if one man moved in his sleep he disturbed the others.

There was no sleep for Max. Even had he desired to sleep he would not have been able to do so. The place swarmed with mosquitoes, and, after the rain, great pools of water lay upon the floor. For all that, the majority of the natives lay down and slept like dogs, tired out by the day's work, and weary at heart at the implacable injustice of the world.

At daybreak the slaves were summoned to their toil. Gang after gang—and there were six in all—filed out of the kraal, in charge of the Arab drivers, and crossed the river by way of the suspension bridge.

At the quarry Max gained a more intimate knowledge of the workings of a ruby mine than he had ever hoped to attain. He himself was set to work, washing the dirt from the sifted rubies by the river bank.

The slaves remained at the workings from sunrise to sunset, during which time they received two meals. Their food consisted of manioc and plantains. They were given no meat. The gang which was employed in washing, to which Max was attached, worked in chains.

These poor driven creatures took no interest in their task. They set about their business mechanically, with never a smile upon their faces, and though they

were allowed to talk to one another, scarcely a word was uttered. Whenever they found a ruby they expressed no satisfaction, though it were worth a thousand times the price of their freedom. They just handed it to Cæsar, who examined the quality of each stone under a magnifying-glass.

That day there were two more cases of cholera; two more of these unfortunate creatures were freed of their bonds to throw themselves down upon the river bank to die.

Cæsar was utterly without pity. If a man fell ill he cursed him, and as often as not, resorted to the whip. Max Harden felt that these things sickened him. He had never dreamed that such barbarity could exist in an age of enlightenment and toleration.

That night he slept—the sleep of those who are utterly exhausted. He was over-burdened by the sights which he had seen. The unhappy lot of these poor sufferers was like a mountain weight upon his heart. It was a three-day nightmare, in which Cæsar stood for all that was terrible and pitiless. None the less Max did not despair. His courage was maintained by hope. He knew that as long as Crouch and Edward were in the land of the living they would not rest until the slaves had been avenged.

Cæsar knew now that Crouch had escaped from the jungle, and Max had been saved as by a miracle from the rapids. But he had asked no questions. He had gone back to his work at the quarry as if nothing unusual had occurred. Perhaps he desired to fill his treasure-chest without delay, and take his rubies to Europe. Perhaps he recognized already that the game was up.

At daybreak Max was awakened by the Arab who had charge of his gang, and once more he was marched out to the workings. That afternoon a strange thing occurred: de Costa appeared at the quarry.

The Portuguese seemed genuinely glad to see the young Englishman. He even grasped him by the hand.

It was now that Max saw how invaluable the half-caste was to Cæsar. The man was a ruby expert. His business was to examine the gems, one by one, and select those of the greatest value. His place was at the river where the washing was in progress, whereas Cæsar himself superintended the blasting of the rock.

De Costa drew near to Max.

"You saved my life," said he; "I have to thank you."

The Arab slave-driver was out of earshot, and even had he been able to overhear them he could not have understood since they talked in English.

"If you wish to show your gratitude," said Max, "you can help me when the time comes."

De Costa remained silent for a while, his weak, almost colourless eyes staring at the water of the river.

"Yes," said he, "you saved my life. None the less I will die if I am not taken to the sea. The fresh air, the sea breezes—these are better than rubies, are they not?"

He was silent for some minutes, whilst Max continued with his work.

"There’s a ruby," said Max, selecting a small blood-red stone from the handful of gravel he was washing.

De Costa looked at it and then threw it into a bag which lay at his side.

"Yes," said he, "it is worth about five hundred pounds. But I was about to ask you if you remember the night when you saved me from the whip?"

"I remember quite well," said Max.

"Do you know why he thrashed me? I was about to tell Crouch of the rubies and the slaves, and Cæsar guessed it, and used the whip. Then you came in, and Gyp flew at you. I am grateful for what you did."

De Costa sat cross-legged on the ground, with his eyes fixed upon the river. The slaves saw nothing as they worked; long since their senses had been numbed. Cæsar was engrossed in his business at the quarry; the Arabs, with their loaded rifles in their hands, never moved their eyes from the slaves. Max was the only one who looked about him.

His eyes were fixed upon the granite hills across the river, to the east of the

gorge. The sky-line was rugged, by reason of the great boulders that lay upon the crest. Two of these were close together, and from that position they bore a striking resemblance to two faces in profile—that of an old man and a woman. As Max looked, the resemblance became more lifelike. And then something dark passed from behind one boulder to the next. It had been visible for no longer than an instant, but in that instant Max recognized M'Wané.

He thought the matter out. If M'Wané was there, Crouch and Edward were not far behind. He knew that they would see him through their glasses. He continued with his work. It was above all necessary that Cæsar's suspicions should not be aroused.

In life things sometimes so happen that it is evident our fate is not always in the hands of ourselves. There is a Divine Providence that watches over us and is Master of the human will. Max had no sooner decided to remain as servile and obedient as the most broken-hearted negro in Makanda, when he was called upon to act.

The man next him, who early in the morning had complained of feeling ill, now lay down upon the ground and uttered a groan. The Arab approached and told him to get up. The poor fellow was not able to do so, and though he tried his best he fell back again, saying that he suffered the most violent pains.

At that, Cæsar drew near, whip in hand, and demanded to know what was the matter. When he saw that here was another case of cholera, he flew into a passion. He had no pity for the man. He merely regretted the incident as a disaster, inasmuch as he had lost another workman. He ordered the Arab to unlock the iron collar around the slave's neck, and then he raised his whip.

The long lash swung high into the air, and then came down upon the bare back of the dying man. Two strokes fell, and the whip had been raised for a third, when Max Harden flew like a wild beast at Cæsar's throat.

So sudden was the onslaught that the Portuguese was taken by surprise. Though Max was encumbered by the heavy chain which hung from his neck, he had room enough in which to move. His fellow-bondsmen, unable to believe the evidence of their eyes, ceased their work and stood together in a crowd, their eyes dilated and their limbs trembling in fear.

Max paid no heed to them. He was like a mad dog on a leash that rushes forth

from its kennel and lays hold upon its victim. He took no heed of the consequences. He neither thought what he was doing, nor asked himself whether it were wise. He was just driven mad by the sight of such inhuman cruelty.

He flung Cæsar to the ground, and before the man could rise, the whip had been wrested from his hand. Max placed a foot upon his chest, and the lash of the whip rose and fell, cracked, made circles in the air and fell again, until Cæsar shrieked for mercy.

[Illustration: "THE LASH OF THE WHIP ROSE AND FELL, UNTIL CÆSAR SHRIEKED
FOR MERCY."]

Never, since the Dark Continent had been traversed by Tippu Tib, and the villages of the Upper Congo had been given over to plunder, had the slave-driver's whip been wielded with such remorseless energy. Cæsar groaned and writhed upon the ground, and struggled blindly to rise. The thong cut his cheek and hands, and the cruel knots which he himself had tied tore the coat from his back, till his cries became fainter, and at last he lay quite still. And at that, Max cast the whip in his teeth.

Throughout all this every one had remained motionless, rooted to the spot. The whole thing had been so unexpected and so sudden. Nothing like it had ever happened before.

De Costa stood by with chattering teeth. The very sight of Cæsar's punishment had set the ague shaking in his bones. The slaves were petrified by fear. They looked on in breathless silence, with their mouths opened wide and their heavy under-lips hanging so low as to show their white teeth and gums. As for the Arabs, even they were too surprised to act. They had known the Portuguese for two years, and they knew that his word was law; not one of them would have dared for a moment to defy him. On that account they could not believe what they saw.

Cæsar rolled over on his face, and then struggled to his feet. He stood for a moment swaying. Then he passed a hand across his eyes.

After that, he shot Max such a glance as it were impossible to describe. Therein were passion, hatred and vengeance.

He felt in his pockets, as if he searched for something. It was his revolver, which had fallen to the ground. Not seeing it, he staggered to the Arab who was nearest, and held out his hand.

"Give me that," said he in Arabic.

The man, with the stoic indifference of all his race, handed over his rifle, and Cæsar took it, though his hand was shaking like a leaf in the wind. Step by step, he returned to Max. He walked like a drunken man. There were great weals upon his face and hands, and there was blood upon his coat.

"You shall pay for that!" said he.

The slaves cowered at the water’s edge. They were like sheep in a storm. As for de Costa, he stood there, impotent to help, yet willing to do so, his hands clasped before him, and shivering from head to foot. The Arab who had handed over his rifle was smoking a cigarette.

"You shall pay for that!" said Cæsar.

So saying, he raised his rifle to his shoulder and took long and careful aim. He was not ten paces from Max. It seemed impossible he could miss. Still, we must remember that he was unsteady on his feet, that it was all he could do to stand.

There was a flash—a loud report—a quick jet of fire; and Max was struck in the chest with the cotton wad, and his face was blackened by the powder. For all that, the bullet had sped past, to bury itself in the bed of the Hidden River.

Cæsar let fall an oath and then re-loaded, ejecting the cartridge case.
That done, he stepped even nearer, and lifted his rifle again.

At that moment a double report sounded from the hills, and the Portuguese gave a kind of gulp and then fell forward on his face, his rifle still in his hand.

CHAPTER XVIII—FREEDOM

There are some men who are born to command, who imbue their followers with confidence, who are masters of the art of managing men.

Cæsar was one of these. He had entered the heart of Africa at the time when the first great explorers were opening up the unknown continent, and some small knowledge connected with the source of the Nile and the presence of the Great Lakes was reaching the ears of Europe.

For the most part these daring pioneers penetrated Africa either to shoot big game or propagate the Christian Gospel, or in the cause of science. Grant, Speke, Mason and Stanley were geographers, explorers before all else. Livingstone was a missionary; and Cotton Oswell, Gordon-Cumming and Sir Samuel Baker were hunters of big game. Unlike these famous men, the Portuguese, who afterwards adopted the name of "Cæsar," was prompted by purely selfish motives—the acquisition of wealth.

Like every one else, he found the interior overrun by the Arabs, who, since time immemorial, had exploited the equatorial regions for slaves for the Greek satraps and the Roman consuls. The abolition of the slave trade did not affect the regions of the Upper Nile, the Great Lakes and the Congo. Laws which men chose to make in Europe could in no way modify or hinder what went on in the equatorial forests. Not only in Zanzibar, but even in Cairo, there was an open slave market where the trade continued to flourish.

Nothing can speak so eloquently for the virility, the craft and cunning, of the Arab as the fact that for centuries millions of savage warriors were held in fear and trembling by a few hundreds of these ruthless sons of the desert. In quite recent years, when Stanley made his passage of the Congo and the Aruwimi in search of Emin Pasha, he found Arab slave stations scattered at intervals throughout the unknown forest, and his whole expedition must have perished

had it not been for the assistance he received from the Arab ivory hunters in the valleys of the Upper Congo.

In his early days the tall Portuguese had also taken care to be on friendly terms with the Arabs. He was one who was quick to learn, and experience taught him two things: firstly, that the Arab will do anything for profit; and secondly, that once his word has been given he is one of the most faithful friends in the world.

The Arabs employed at Makanda were men whom Cæsar knew that he could trust. Each was to have his share of the plunder when the slave camp was broken up and the Portuguese returned to Europe. Until then he knew they would stand by him, faithful to their promise that he could rely upon their courage in case of emergency.

In the panic that now took place Cæsar must have been captured had it not been for the heroism of the Arabs. He had been taken by surprise in open country. There was no escape by way of the quarry, and upon the hills on the other side of the river was Edward Harden, who, in spite of the fact that he had said that Crouch was a better shot than himself—had the clearest eye and the steadiest hand of any man throughout the length and breadth of Africa.

The slaves were distracted. Those who were joined together by chains ran to the quarry and huddled in a crowd. Those who were free to go whither they listed ran to and fro, filling the air with their cries. As for de Costa, he could do nothing but wring his hands and look about him for some place of safety.

Max, by the sheer weight of the slaves with whom he was yoked, was dragged onward to the quarry. He tried to assure them that there was nothing whatsoever to fear, but they were incapable of understanding a word of what he said.

In those brief moments it was only the prompt action of the Arabs that saved Cæsar’s life. The Portuguese had been shot in the chest. He was unconscious for no longer than a few seconds, and then he struggled to an elbow.

When they saw that their master was alive two Arabs hastened towards him and lifted him in their arms. Under a perfect hail of fire from the six rifles on the hills they bore him to a place of safety at the southern extremity of the lake where a long canoe was moored. They could not cross at the bridge, since it was immediately under fire from the granite hills.

Then followed a race—a race for the stockade. Harden, Crouch, and the four Fans appeared upon the crest-line, and thence came down into the valley with a cheer.

In the meantime, the Arabs so plied their paddles that the canoe shot across the lake like a dart, dividing the water at the prow into two long feathery waves. When they sprang ashore, a little above the place where the Englishmen had landed on the day they first came to Makanda, M’Wané, who was leading the attack, was not fifty paces distant.

The Fan chieftain dropped upon his knees to fire, and missed. And a moment later the door of the stockade was closed.

M’Wané retreated no less hastily than he had come, with the bullets flying at his heels, splashing in the sand. Halfway up the slope he met Edward Harden striding forward, rifle in hand.

"Too late!" he cried. "Master, why did not the white wizard teach me to shoot like you?"

Edward smiled, and placed a hand on M’Wané’s shoulder.

"You’ll have another chance all right," said he. "They’ve shut themselves up in a trap."

By this time Crouch, who had already given up the chase, had descended to the suspension bridge and crossed to the quarry. There the first person he set eyes upon was de Costa.

"Hands up!" he cried. And at the word de Costa threw up his arms pleading for mercy.

Crouch looked about him, and heard Max’s voice calling for assistance. And at that, of his own accord, de Costa took a bunch of keys from his pocket and offered them to Crouch. They were the keys of the iron collars of the slaves.

A few seconds later every slave was free. They could not at first realize what had happened; and then, one man, more intelligent than his fellows, grasped the truth, and picking up the chain which had been fastened to his neck for many months hurled it into the river.

Max told his story in a few words. He explained how he had been captured, and showed Crouch the rubies.

Crouch turned to the half-caste. "Will you throw in your lot with us?" he asked.

"I am ready to do so," said de Costa. "I would have told you all that night when Cæsar found you in the hut."

"I have some reason to believe that to be true," said Crouch. "I hold to my original promise. Stand by us to-day, and I'll take you down to the Coast. You must see that the game's up for Cæsar."

De Costa intimated that he was only waiting to receive orders.

"Very well," sad the captain; "you probably have some authority over these poor brutes of slaves. I suppose you can speak their language? Tell them they are free. Explain to them that they owe their liberty to us, and ask them to lend us a helping hand. Select a party of the strongest, and take them yourself to the village on the mountain. There you will find our ammunition and stores. Bring them here as quickly as you can, and don't forget the medicine chest. We must lend what help we can."

"Where am I to find you?" asked de Costa.

"Here," said Crouch. "There are only seven of us, and we can't spare a man. We shall need every rifle we've got to capture the stockade."

"I will do my best," said de Costa.

"I trust you will," said Crouch. Then, his face lit up, and his only eye looked the half-caste through and through. "By Christopher," said he, "if you fail me, I'll hunt you down! All Africa won't be big enough to hold you. I'll search the country from the Zambesi to the desert, and I'll find you in the end."

He said these words with his teeth clenched, and his great chin thrust forward. The little half-caste quailed before his glance.

It was then that there came a burst of firing from the north. Crouch stiffened in every limb.

"There!" he cried, "the band’s begun to play."

Max followed him for a little distance, then remembered that he had left his rifle on the hill-top. De Costa looked about him, bewildered. Events had happened in such swift succession that he felt that the whole thing might prove a dream from which he would presently awaken. Then he called the slaves together. They obeyed his word from force of habit; and though there was nothing now to prevent them taking to the hills, they followed him meekly into the kraal.

CHAPTER XIX—THE PHANTOM CANOE

That firing was the beginning of the siege of the stockade of Makanda, which lasted for seven days. Edward Harden had approached too near, and had drawn fire from the Arabs who manned the walls. The firing was answered by the Fans, who were somewhat over-eager to try their new-found strength. Shots were exchanged until nightfall, when the three Englishmen gathered together to discuss their plan of campaign.

They had every reason to believe that Cæsar himself had been put out of action —at least for a day or so. As far as they knew, the garrison consisted of six or seven Arabs. The two sides were therefore equal in strength, but the advantage lay with the defenders, who were strongly entrenched, whereas the attackers had no cover nearer than the hills.

They knew that the stockade was well provisioned, and it would take months for the garrison to be starved into submission. Their only chance was to take the stockade by assault, and this would be by no means easy to do.

They could not hope to succeed by day: a surprise would be out of the question. They would have to advance across the sandy plain that enclosed the shores of the lake, and they would be shot down, one after the other, from the loop-holes in the stockade. Their only chance was to assault the place by night.

That evening they could do nothing. Crouch and the four Fans remained to keep a watchful eye on the garrison, while Max and his uncle betook themselves to the kraal, to render what aid they could to the cholera patients.

A few hours before daybreak de Costa set out for the mountain, with strict injunctions to return as quickly as possible. It had taken a whole night for the slaves to realize that they had gained their freedom, and then, out of the gratitude in their hearts, they readily volunteered to act as carriers to the white men

whenever their services should be required.

For three days no assault was delivered. The Englishmen and the Fans confined their energies by day to desultory shooting from the crest-line of the hills. By night they closed in upon the stockade, to see that Cæsar made no attempt to escape. Throughout these days most of Max's time was taken up in fighting a far more formidable foe than a handful of Arabs and a wounded Portuguese. With the aid of the few disinfectants and medicines which Edward had brought from the Pambala village, he did his best to stamp the cholera out. Those who had died were buried, and their clothing burnt. The remaining slaves, who had not followed de Costa, were removed from the kraal and taken to a place in the hills, where they were told to wait the issue of the siege. A few deserted to their homes, for they were ignorant people, and had learnt by bitter experience not to trust the white man. However, the majority stayed at Makanda, conscious of the debt they owed to the two Hardens and to Crouch.

It was on the third night that Max decided to burn the kraal to the ground. Great flames rose high into the air and illumined the crater through which the Hidden River flowed swiftly on its course.

As the kraal burned the slaves upon the hill-top danced and sang. They beheld in the spreading fire the burning of their bondage. To them the red glow that filled the valley and made the barren slopes of the granite hills stand forth in the night like peaks in fairyland, was the dawn of happier days. And Max, too, was light of heart. He believed that that fire would stamp out the pestilence once and for all.

Early in the afternoon on the following day de Costa arrived from the mountain. He had remained faithful to his promise. Only three slaves had deserted on the march, and the others were told to join the refugee camp which had sprung up upon the hill. De Costa was to remain in charge of the liberated slaves. The majority were Pambalas from the district, but several had been brought from so far away that they knew not how to find their way back to their homes.

That night Crouch and Edward decided to attack. They had now a large supply of ammunition, and Max, who had finished his duties as doctor, was free to take his place in the ranks.

Max and M'Wané approached the stockade along the river bank from the south,

Crouch and another Fan from the north, whereas Edward and the two others descended from the hills.

There was no moon when they crept upon the garrison from three sides at once, moving cautiously forward on hands and knees through the sand. When about fifty paces distant, each party lay still and listened for the signal to assault. This was to come from Crouch, who could imitate to the life the jackal's howl.

Max and M'Wané, lying close as hares, waited for the signal to come. They could hear the wild beasts in the jungle, and now and again a faint, piercing cry, as some animal was seized in the strong jaws of a leopard or a lion. The great cats were hunting like the white men who surrounded the stockade.

Then the long-drawn howl of a jackal was lifted in the night, and at that those seven men sprang to their feet and rushed upon the defence.

The Arabs had been warned. On the instant fire flashed from the loop-holes. The night was alive with the whistling of bullets, which dived into the water of the river or flew into the forest to send little leaves fluttering to the ground, or buried themselves in the trunks of gigantic trees.

On the east Edward was driven back. Before he reached the ditch one of his men had been wounded, and there he found it would be certain death to endeavour to scale the stockade.

Max and Crouch on the other side were more successful. It was the former who was the first to reach the gate, and endeavour to force it open. The man who was there on guard put his shoulder to the business, and for a few seconds a struggle took place the issue of which was doubtful.

At one time Max had the door ajar, but the man or men on the other side forced it back inch by inch until it was nearly closed. It was then that M'Wané came to Max's assistance; and immediately after, the opening in the door grew wider by degrees.

Had this affair been fought to a finish, it is beyond question that Max and M'Wané would have gained the fort, but it was at this moment that the unexpected occurred. A rapid burst of firing came from the river, from the northern extremity of the lake. A stream of bullets flew past, and many splintered the woodwork of the gate which had been the bone of contention from

the first.

To be attacked by night unexpectedly from the rear is an ordeal which the finest trained soldiers in the world find it difficult to stand. It was too much for the Fans. Even M'Wané, who was as brave a savage as any who ever roamed the grassland west of the Lakes, turned on his heels and bolted.

Max turned round, and on the instant the gate of the stockade was closed. He had no alternative but to retire, and even that much had to be accomplished between two withering fires. Five minutes later there was silence in the valley. The assault had been repulsed.

It seemed, indeed, as if this river would hold its mysteries to the end. They had heard weird legends of the Fire-gods from savage lips, dressed up in all the blandishments of fancy. They had thought the problem solved in the slave gangs and ruby mine, but here was another mystery unsolved.

While Max was engaged in his struggle at the gate, the sharp eye of Captain Crouch had seen a long canoe glide out from the darkness where the river penetrated the jungle. Before he had had time to give warning of its approach, the occupants of the canoe had opened fire. When he was asked to explain it, Crouch could not do so. They knew the course of the river from the Makanda to the rapids. The canoe could be nothing but a phantom. At daybreak no sign of it was to be seen.

At first their suspicions rested upon the unfortunate de Costa. But they discovered from the natives that that night the half-caste had not left the refugee camp; indeed, he had actually been seen asleep whilst the assault was in progress. The natives had nothing to gain by defending a man who so recently had been one of their tyrants; and besides, it was not in the nature of de Costa's disposition to conduct a daring attack at dead of night.

Throughout that day they kept a watchful eye upon the stockade. Everything appeared as usual. They could see the white-robed Arabs moving about between the huts, and they subjected these to long-range rifle-fire from the hills. Cæsar's yellow flag still floated on the wind from the flagstaff before his hut.

The three Englishmen went about their business—cleaning their rifles, cooking, or attending to the wounded Fan—sullenly, as if ill-pleased with the world in general, speaking only when spoken to, and then in monosyllables.

The truth was not one of them liked to own that they had been worsted. Their attack had proved unsuccessful. That in itself was sufficiently annoying; but, what made matters worse, was the fact that they could not explain how the catastrophe had come about.

An hour before sundown they sat in silence at their evening meal. They were obliged to feed thus early, because it was necessary that at nightfall they should take their places around the stockade to prevent the Arabs breaking out in the night. The little sleep they got in those days they were obliged to take by day, when it sufficed for one of their number to watch the enemy's movements in the stockade.

Suddenly Crouch drove the knife with which he had been eating into the earth.

"I can't make it out!" he cried. "I'll give credit where it's due; the man 's clever as a monkey. What do you say?" he broke out in a different tone of voice. "Shall we attack again to-night?"

"Yes," said Edward; "certainly."

That was the way in which the mind of the big man worked. He thought in monosyllables. He was not like Crouch, who had a thousand reasons for everything, who was always eager to explain. With Edward Harden it was either Yes or No, and generally the former.

"Look here," said Max, "I propose we go about it in another manner. Last time I undertook to reconnoitre the enemy's position I made a fool of myself, and was captured."

"You did very well," said Edward.

"I don't think so," said his nephew. "At any rate, with your permission, I should like to try again. I suggest that we surround the stockade as we did last night, but that I am allowed to go forward alone. After all, I'm the youngest and most active of the party, if we exclude M'Wané and his friends. I believe I can creep up to the wall without being heard. I am sure I can vault the stockade. As soon as I am inside I will fire at the first man I see, and when you hear that shot you must endeavour to rush the gate."

Crouch knocked out his pipe on the heel of his boot.

"Bravo," said he. "There’s no question you should meet with success. If you get into the fort—as you think you can—you’ll take their attention from the gate, and we ought to join you in a few seconds even if the canoe appears on the river. Still, it’s a big risk you’re taking; I suppose you’re aware of that?"

"Quite," answered Max.

Thus was the matter settled; and soon afterwards darkness descended, and day turned to night in the course of a few minutes, for there is no twilight on the Line.

They took their places in silence under cover of the darkness, and then waited in patience and suspense. They had agreed upon midnight as the hour.

Max, lying upon his face in the sand which still retained much of the warmth of the day, followed the hands of his watch, which he was just able to see in the starlight. Never had he known time pass more slowly. Even the second-hand seemed to crawl, and he was certain that the minute-hand never moved the thousandth part of an inch. And yet, at last the hour arrived. He knew that on the other side of the stockade both Crouch and his uncle were ready to advance. Rising softly to his feet he put his watch in his pocket.

On hands and knees he crawled forward to the ditch. He had decided not to encumber himself with a rifle. His revolver was loaded in his holster. He reached the ditch in safety, and there paused to listen. There was no sound within the fort. The night was still as the grave.

Summoning his courage he rose once more to his feet, and laid hold with both hands upon the sharpened points of the stakes which formed the enclosure. Then, taking in a deep breath, he sprang, swinging himself on high, and landed on his feet on the other side.

A second later he stood with his revolver in his hand, glancing in all directions, ready to fire at sight. It was then that he stood in momentary expectation of a swift and sudden death. However, no shot was fired.

Seeing that he had entered the stockade and was yet undiscovered, he hastened into the shade of the nearest hut, and there knelt down and waited.

For five minutes he never moved, and during that time he heard no one either on the banquette or among the huts. Then he thought of Crouch and his uncle. He imagined the suspense which they endured. He realized that they must believe he had died in silence under the knife. Presently, whether he fired or not, he knew that they would attempt to rush the gate.

It was, therefore, no longer necessary to remain undiscovered. It would aid their purpose better if some one saw him and he fired. His object was to create an alarm, to draw the attention of the garrison to himself, whilst Crouch and Edward, followed by the Fans, bore down upon the gate.

He stepped out from his hiding-place, and walked down the line of huts until he came to that which was Cæsar’s. He looked in. It was deserted, though a candle burned low upon the table.

At that he placed a finger round the trigger of his revolver, and fired three shots in rapid succession into the ground. Then, standing in the doorway of the hut, he listened.

Absolute silence reigned. The truth burst upon him as in a flash: the stockade had been abandoned. And at that moment there was a great crashing sound as the gate swung back upon its hinges, and Crouch and Harden burst into the fort.

CHAPTER XX—THE RATS ESCAPE

Edward Harden, rifle in hand, led the way, followed by Crouch and the four Fans. As they entered the stockade, expecting to be attacked from all sides in the darkness, they opened out in accordance with a pre-arranged plan. Crouch turned to the left and Edward to the right; and then, taking post on the banquette, they stood ready to fire.

For a few seconds there was absolute silence. The situation was so unlooked for that they could not, at first, realize what had happened. Then Crouch’s voice was lifted in the night.

"By Christopher, the rats are gone!"

Max, guided by the sound of these words, found the sea-captain in the darkness, and confirmed his suspicions. He said that he had been several minutes within the stockade, and had neither seen nor heard a living soul.

It seemed as if the valley of the Hidden River would maintain its reputation to the last. There was no end to mystery. Time and again were they confronted with facts that they were wholly unable to explain.

It was M’Wané who found a lantern in the hut which had formerly been occupied by de Costa; and with the help of this they searched the huts, one after the other, in the hope of being able to discover Cæsar’s line of retreat.

It was not possible that the Portuguese and his Arab attendants had left the stockade by way of the gate. By day, the garrison had been under the constant observation of their sentinel on the hills. Every night, as soon as it was sufficiently dark to permit them to approach, the stockade had been surrounded. They found nothing suspicious in any one of the huts, until they came to Cæsar’s, before which the yellow flag still unfurled itself upon the wind. Here

they discovered that the ruby chest had gone.

Now, it would require four men, at least, to carry this heavy chest to the water's edge, and even then, the task could not have been accomplished without noise. It was impossible to believe that the garrison had passed through the little investing force by dead of night. And yet, as far as they could see, there was no other means of escape. Cæsar and his slave-drivers had vanished as suddenly and unaccountably as if they had been spirited away.

They separated and searched the stockade from end to end. It was M'Wané who gained the first clue, who came running breathlessly to Crouch.

"Master," he cried, "the wood-stack has been moved."

Within the stockade they had noticed on their arrival a great quantity of firewood, which had been cut in the adjacent forest. On approaching this, Crouch saw at once that the wood-stack had been pulled down as if in haste. Calling out to Edward to bring the lantern, he awaited further developments. No sooner had Harden arrived than the mystery was solved.

Leading downward into the ground was a broad flight of steps. A kind of tunnel had been formed under the sand, about four feet wide and six feet high, revetted by wooden beams. So all the time Cæsar had been at liberty to escape, whenever he felt that he was sufficiently recovered of his wound to undertake the journey.

When Cæsar had constructed his stockade in the heart of the wilderness, he had been prepared for all eventualities and had neglected nothing. He had unlimited labour at his disposal. Knowing the nature of his business, and the hatred with which he was likely to be regarded by the neighbouring tribes, he had thought it likely that, at some future date, he might be called upon to undergo a siege. That siege might last for several months, by which time his provisions would be exhausted and he obliged to retreat. As far as they were able to discover, the subterranean passage had been made during the absence of de Costa on a two-months' journey to the Coast, in order to procure fresh supplies of dynamite. From the fact that the half-caste knew nothing whatsoever of the passage, it seems likely that the Portuguese had all along intended to desert his companion at the eleventh hour.

Without a word, Edward Harden descended the steps, holding the lantern on high to guide his friends who followed. The passage lay in a bee-line throughout the

whole of its length. It was about three hundred yards long, and whilst it ran through the sandy sub-soil in the crater of Makanda, both its walls and roof consisted of solid logs. For the last hundred yards it pierced the living rock, and at last came forth in the impenetrable darkness of the forest.

By the aid of the lantern they were able to discover a path which led to the left, and after a few minutes' walking, this brought them to the river bank. Here, in the soft mud, was the indentation of the bows of a canoe. Moreover, the place was so screened by trees and tall reeds that no one, passing either up or down the river, would suspect for a moment that here was a mooring-place. It was here that the "phantom canoe" had lain, to be brought upstream by two or three of the Arabs from the stockade on the night of the attack.

No sooner did Crouch observe this evidence of the means Cæsar had taken to escape, than he shook his fist in the air.

"He's gone down-stream," he cried. "But, I'll follow him, if he leads me a ten-years' journey through the wilderness. I'll overtake that man, and I'll kill him. I swear it. I swear that I'll never set eyes upon the shores of England again, until I know that he is dead."

And that was the oath of Captain Crouch, which—when we have got to the end of the story—will prove to us that oaths are very futile after all. The strength of man is limited; in face of the wonders of the universe, his knowledge is indeed small. He may be strong and brave and unswerving of his purpose; but, after all, where men teem in cities, no less than in the heart of the illimitable and mighty forest, there is a greater Power than anything that is human—the all-pervading Spirit of the Universe, before whom the foolish vows of men are of infinitesimal account.

Crouch had flown too often in the face of Providence not to be aware of that; but, just then, he was well-nigh mad with wrath and restless with excitement. Snatching the lantern from Edward's hand he raced along the passage, until they found themselves again within the stockade.

Still, the captain never paused. He passed through the gate, and thence ascended the hills. They found the slave-camp absolutely silent. On every hand the unhappy negroes lay stretched upon the ground, and there in the middle of them was de Costa, nature striving to maintain the spark of life within that fever-

stricken body, by means of healthful slumber. On the eastern horizon, beyond the unknown hills which they had seen from Solitude Peak, the dawn was rising in a flood.

With scant ceremony Crouch awakened first de Costa, then every one of the slaves. Through the medium of the half-caste he spoke to the natives as follows —

"We found you slaves, we have made you freemen. Are you grateful for what we have done?"

A murmur arose from the crowd. They said that they were mindful of what they owed to the white wizard and his brave companions.

"Then," said Crouch, "you can help us. We are going down-river. We must start at once. We must take all our baggage, our stores and ammunition. There are six canoes at the kraal, and these will be sufficient. But we will need porters to make the journey through the jungle to the Kasai. If you come with us, to carry our loads and canoes, we will pay you in cowrie shells and beads, brass rods and cloth."

To a man they volunteered, and not five minutes later a caravan of fifty carriers, protected by seven rifles, descended to the lake before Makanda.

In less than an hour the canoes were loaded, and then the expedition shot down the stream, the canoes following one behind the other in single file. Crouch led the way, his quick eye sweeping either bank in search of the place where Cæsar had embarked. Max, in the last canoe brought up the rear.

As the canoes gained the point where the sandy plain around the settlement gave place to the density of the jungle, all turned and looked back upon Makanda. To the slaves, many of whom had worked for two years under the whip, without hope of ultimate salvation, it was as if they looked their last upon their prison doors. As for the Englishmen, they remembered that grey, steaming morning when they had first come within sight of the stockade, when Cæsar had fired at them from the water.

All that had happened in the weeks that followed was like some strange, swift-moving dream.

It was midday when they reached their old camp at Hippo Pool, and Harden and Crouch disembarked, to see if they could find traces of Cæsar's escape on the line of their former portage.

They met with instant success. Some one had passed within the course of the last few hours.

In consequence, the loads were disembarked. Three canoes were sunk, and the remaining three lifted high and dry upon the bank. It was whilst this work was in progress that Crouch, to his infinite delight, discovered his case of glass eyes, which he had left in camp on the morning of their adventure at Leopard Marsh.

They were obliged to halt for a few hours for food. They had brought with them a week's rations for their men: plantain flour, soaked manioc and ears of corn. It was two o'clock when the caravan began to move through the jungle towards the Kasai. They eventually reached one of their old camps by Observation Pool. Their progress was necessarily slow. The slaves were in no fit condition to do a forced march through the jungle; and that night it was decided that Edward and Max and the Fans should push on ahead, in an endeavour to overtake the fugitives, and failing that to bring back the Loango boys to help. Crouch was to follow with the caravan with what dispatch he could.

In two days, the advanced party reached the place where the creek turned to the south. Cæsar's tracks still followed the old route direct to Date Palm Island.

On the fifth day of their journey from Hippo Pool, they came upon a place where Cæsar had turned to the north. Edward was an experienced tracker, but it did not require the eye of an expert to see that human beings had turned from the portage and followed an elephant track to the Kasai. For a moment, Harden was undecided how to act. If he continued on his way to Date Palm Island, some days might be wasted before he again picked up the trail. In the end he decided to send Max and the three Fans to the north, and go himself with M'Wané to the Island. There he would load up the canoe, send half the boys down-stream on the look-out for Max, and bring the others back to the portage to assist the slaves.

The following morning he shook hands with his nephew, and continued on the old route with which he was now familiar. He had not gone far, however, before he noticed bloodstains on the leaves of the undergrowth; and presently, to his utmost surprise, he came across one of the Loango boys wounded by a bullet in

the leg, and crawling painfully on hands and knees towards the river.

This boy said that he had been hunting in the jungle—for they were short of food on the Island—when he had come across a caravan consisting of six Arabs and a white man. They were carrying a canoe half-filled with supplies, and a great box which appeared to be excessively heavy. The white man who led the way, seemed to be very weak, for he staggered as he walked. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine the hardships that the tall Portuguese underwent upon that last and fateful journey. So anxious was he to save his rubies, to gain the sea-coast in safety, that he had not brought with him sufficient supplies. In consequence, he and his men were starving and, as we shall see, they had an even more deadly foe to reckon with.

M'Wané, picking up the wounded boy in his arms, carried him like a baby throughout the rest of the journey to Date Palm Island. There the man's wound was attended to, and he was placed in a canoe which was ready loaded two hours after Edward had reached the river.

Once more Harden set forth upon his old track, leaving instructions that the canoe was to drop down-stream on the afternoon of the following day. The Loango boys from the Island, though they had complained of being short of food, were in fine condition; and the party came up with Crouch at the end of the second day. Thence they made better headway and, following Cæsar's trail, arrived eventually at the river, where they found not only Max and the Fans, but the party from the Island.

And now followed a race down the river after the slave-drivers and their chest of rubies. The three canoes which had been carried from the Hidden River, were embarked on the Kasai. The slaves who had acted as porters on the journey were given the option of finding their own way back to their villages or going down to the Congo in the canoes. There was never the slightest doubt that the majority would choose the former course. Half their number had come from the Pambala village on the slopes of Solitude Peak, and a score from other villages farther to the south-west. In all there were only five who desired to journey to the Congo, and these were men whom Cæsar had captured in the land of the Bakutu.

The current of the river was so swift that the four canoes shot down-stream at a great velocity with little help from the paddles. On the upper reaches of the great river, rapids and waterfalls were frequent, and at such times it was necessary to

carry the canoe to unbroken water. At each portage they found traces of Cæsar and his Arabs. Once the camp-fire of the Portuguese was still alight, and soon after that, on rounding a point, they came in sight of a canoe.

They thought at first that they had overtaken Cæsar, but they were doomed to be disappointed. With the aid of their fieldglasses they ascertained that the canoe was coming towards them, working slowly up-stream against the force of the current.

They were still more surprised when they recognised, seated in the stern of this canoe, the white solar topee and the black coat of a European. A few minutes later Crouch was within hail.

"Who are you?" he asked, with both hands to his mouth.

And the answer came back in the accent of Aberdeen: "James Mayhew, of the Scottish Missionary Society."

That, indeed, was so. This man alone, attended only by a few native servants, was forcing his way in the absolute Unknown, in order to bring the enlightenment of Christian knowledge into the depths of an endless forest, inhabited by cannibals and dwarfs. They had time only to congratulate the missionary upon his courage, and to wish him every success. Crouch gave Mr. Mayhew directions as to how to reach the Hidden Valley, and told him that, if he found his way to Solitude Peak and said that he had come from the "White Wizard," he would find many converts among the liberated slaves and the people of the village.

On being asked whether he had seen the Portuguese and his Arabs on the river, the Missionary answered that he had passed them not an hour ago. The Arabs had been paddling furiously, as if their lives depended upon their reaching the Congo with as little delay as possible. As for the Portuguese, he had been lying as if sick, in the body of the canoe, with his head propped against a great ironbound chest.

Crouch waited to hear no more. Waving his hand to the Missionary, he gave orders for the journey to continue.

That evening, they expected to arrive at Cæsar’s camp, but by midnight they had come to the conclusion that the man was resolved to push on without halting for

food.

It was now that M’Wané and his four companions—the three that had gone to Solitude Peak and the one who had been left at the Island—asked to be put ashore. They said they were not far from their own people, and were desirous of returning home. For all that, they were extremely sorry to leave their masters, the great white men who had overcome the Fire-gods.

When they left, there was much hand-shaking. Each man was presented with a rifle and several rounds of ammunition, in addition to that they received enough beads, brass rods, and cloth, to gladden the hearts of any savage who ever roamed the equatorial forests.

Throughout the night the canoes paddled to the north-west. All this time de Costa lay in the body of a canoe, groaning with ague and shivering from fever. It is a strange thing that in the close and humid atmosphere of the forest there is little malaria or malarial typhoid, which cause such havoc among the white men on the great rivers of the Congo Basin. For it is above the surface of the water that the mosquitoes swarm, which breed these fell diseases.

At daybreak they sighted Cæsar. They saw his canoe for no longer than an instant as it rounded a bend in the river. The natives plied their paddles with a will, and Crouch, in the vanguard of the pursuit held his rifle ready to fire.

All day long, beneath the blazing tropic sun, with the insects droning in their ears and the yellow seething water rushing onward to the sea, this strange race continued.

Three times did they catch sight of the fugitives; once in the morning, once at mid-day, and the last time when the afternoon was drawing to a close.

By then they were not five hundred yards in the rear. It seemed probable that the Portuguese would be overtaken before night. Throughout that day native settlements on either bank of the river had been frequent. They were but two hundred miles above the point where the Kasai joins the Congo, to the north of Stanley Pool.

At last they entered a broad reach, where the river was straight as a Roman road. On either side the jungle rose to the height of about two hundred feet—a tangled mass of vegetation, of creepers, vines, convolvuli, so densely interwoven as to

give the effect of endless walls. Far in the distance, at the end of this long reach, they could see an island standing in mid-stream, as if it floated on the surface of the river.

Resolved to overtake the man before darkness set in and assisted his escape, they urged the canoes forward, until Cæsar recognised himself for lost. Two shots from Crouch, and Cæsar's canoe drew in to the bank of the island.

As they approached they saw the Portuguese lifted out of his canoe in the arms of his faithful Arabs, and deposited on the bank. Then the Arabs, taking their rifles in their hands, opened fire on their pursuers.

They realized at once that resistance would be hopeless. The Loango boys, after many weeks of inactivity on Date Palm Island, were spoiling for a fight. Not all of them were armed with rifles, but the odds were two to one against the Arabs, who knew that they could always trust the white men to show mercy. No sooner had the Englishmen set foot upon the island than they delivered up their arms.

Had Crouch shot them on the spot these men, who for two years had been scourging slaves with their whips, had got no more than they deserved. As it was, their weapons were not given back to them, and they were turned adrift upon the great river, with a week's provisions, to find their way back as best they might to some settlement of their own kith and kin.

And then the Englishmen were able to give their attention to Cæsar. The tall man lay upon the ground, rigid as in death. The whole party gathered around him, with the exception of de Costa, who was himself too ill to land upon the island.

Cæsar's complexion was a dull, slaty-blue. His face was drawn and haggard, his eyes had sunk deep into their sockets. As Max pushed his way through the inquisitive Loango boys, who stood gaping at the dying man, Cæsar struggled to a sitting position, and supporting his back against a tree, looked savagely about him.

"Stand back!" cried Max. "It's cholera!"

It was then he realized the truth. Cæsar had thrashed one of his slaves for no greater crime than having contracted the pestilence that was ravaging his camp. Max had snatched the whip from the man's hand and brought down upon his face and hands and back the cruel thong, whose very touch was contagion. And

thus was the vengeance of God, upon one who had done evil all his days, taken from the hands of Captain Crouch.

Max was actually on his way back to his canoe to procure his medicine chest when the man looked about him, rolled his eyes to the heavens, as if he who had shown so little of mercy to others thought to find it there. Then he fell back with a groan, and lay cramped and twisted in the agony of his death.

That night, they buried him upon the island. They filled ammunition boxes with the rubies, and burnt the chest against which Cæsar had rested his head. And then, they left him in the starlight, in the midst of the great stillness of the lonely river, to make his peace with God.

CHAPTER XXI—BACK AT THE "EXPLORERS'"

The green baize doors are just the same as ever; and in the inner smoking room is Edward Harden, as large and clumsy-looking as on the morning when we met him first at the top of St. James's Street, except that, perhaps, he is more sun-burnt and somewhat haggard.

It is winter; the London fog is without, and a great fire is roaring in the grate. And before that fire is seated a young gentleman who now, for the first time, is enjoying the privileges of a member.

Edward rose to his feet, and looked at the clock.

"It's six," said he. "Crouch ought to be here."

Max Harden consulted his watch, as if to verify the evidence of the tall grandfather's clock which proclaimed the hour between the masks of a snow-leopard and a panther.

"He said he would be back at five," said he to his uncle. "I suppose we'd better wait."

At that moment, one of the green baize doors swung open, and Captain Crouch limped into the room. He was now dressed in what he deemed the garb of civilization: that is to say, a navy blue pilot-coat, with brass buttons, and a red tie that might have served to guide him in the fog. They had the smoking-room to themselves.

"It's all right," said Crouch, "I've fixed it up. Lewis and Sharp paid over the money this afternoon, and I gave them a receipt."

"How much did they fetch?" asked Max.

"Three hundred and eighty thousand pounds."

Max whistled, but said nothing. For some minutes, the three explorers sat gazing into the fire. Not another word was spoken until Frankfort Williams burst into the room.

Williams had no sympathy with those who roamed the equatorial forests.
His own heart was set upon the ice-floes of the Arctic.

"Look here," he cried, "what's this I hear about you fellows presenting a million pounds to some Missionary Society?"

"Who told you that?" said Crouch.

"Why, I heard it just now from Du Cane."

"News travels quickly," said Crouch. "But, a million is rather an exaggeration Three hundred and eighty thousand is the sum."

"And it all goes to a Missionary Society!"

"Yes," said Max, "you didn't expect us to keep it, did you? It was slave-trade money. We wouldn't touch a penny of it. Why, it would burn holes in our pockets."

"You see," said Edward, taking his pipe from his mouth, "a chap called Mayhew —nice sort of fellow from what we saw of him—has gone up into the very part of the country that we came from. He wants to civilize the people; and after all, it's only fair that they should have the benefit of the money, for it was they who earned it."

Crouch got to his feet, and turned his back to the fire.

"See?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, I see all right," said Williams, somewhat reluctantly, however. "Of course, you couldn't very well do anything else, in the circumstances. But, it seems rather a shame, somehow—when I can't raise subscriptions for an expedition to the west coast of Baffin Land."

"Look here," said Crouch, "if you think we’re going to take money from half-starved negroes, who have slept in chains and sweated under the lash, and give it to you to climb some flaming iceberg, you’re in the wrong, my friend; and it’s just as well for you to know it."

Frankfort Williams laughed. It was the custom in the "Explorers’" for those who favoured the tropics to scorn the men who were endeavouring to reach the poles; just as it was for the Arctic adventurers to wax ironical on the subject of cannibals and mangrove swamps, poisoned arrow-heads and manioc. Williams talked for some few minutes upon the current topics of the day, and then left the club.

When he was gone, the three friends remained in their old positions before the fire. Though not a word was said, the thoughts of each drifted in the same direction. They saw the steaming mist upon a wide, tropic river; they heard the hum of thousands of insects in their ears, and the cries of the parrots overhead. They passed over, once again, the route of their portage from Date Palm Island to Hippo Pool, and set forth in fancy into the valley of the Hidden River.

At last, Crouch got from his chair and, walking to the window, looked out into the street. The fog had lifted in a fine, drizzling rain. Shadowy figures hurried past, each with umbrella in hand, whilst the reflection from the lights of the club windows glistened on the pavement. The shops had closed. The workers were hurrying home; and the London that had no need to work was dressing up for dinner. Crouch swung round upon his heel.

"I’m sick of this!" he cried.

"So am I," said Edward. "Where shall we go?"

Max got to his feet, and fetched down the map.

THE END

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