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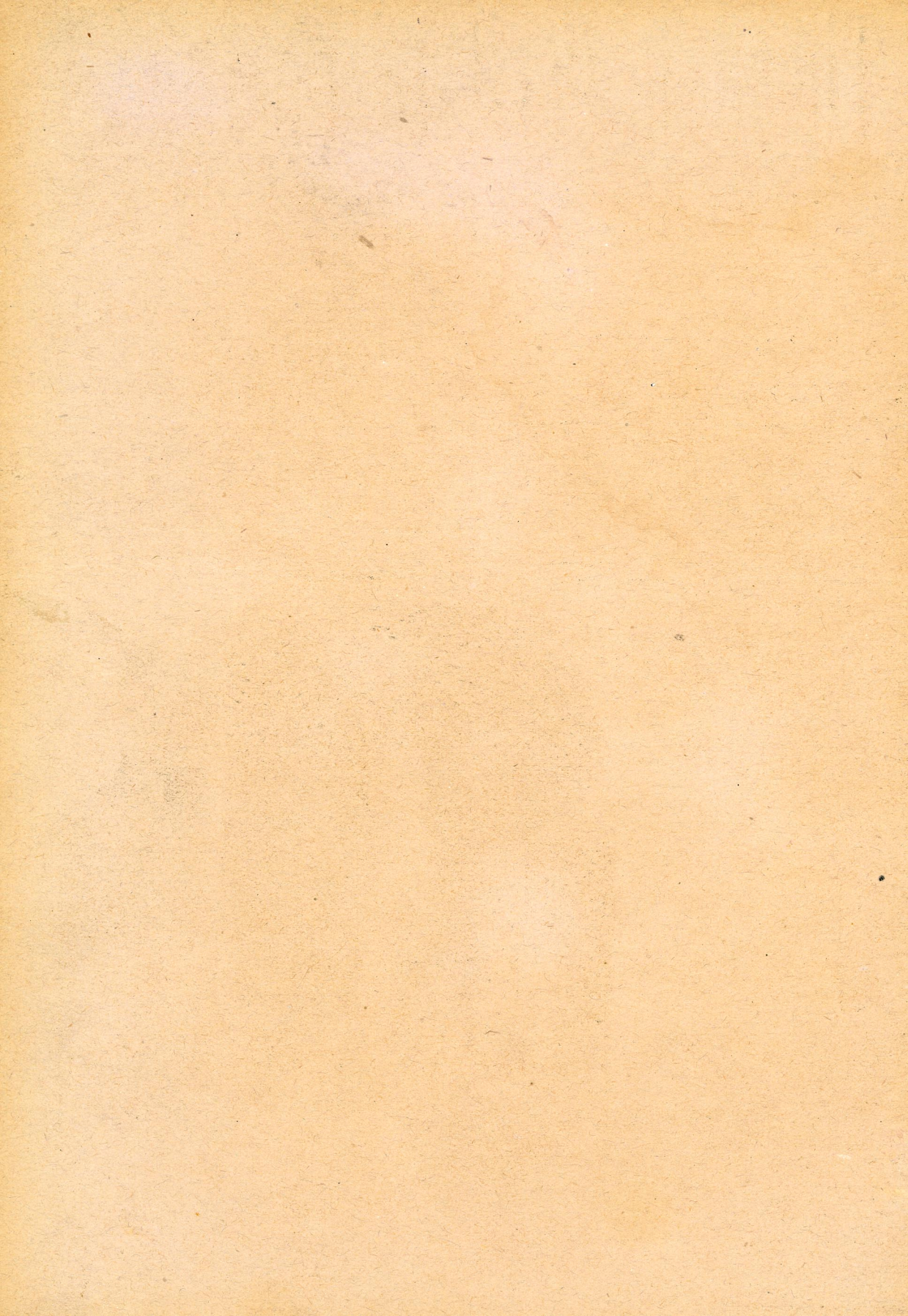
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Through Peril to Fortune



The giant brute stopped its sniffing, then ceased to play with its victim, and, with head erect, gazed fixedly in the direction of the sounds—entranced.

No. 234.



Through Peril to Fortune.

The Strange Adventures of Two Young Britons in the Heart of Africa.

By W. SHAW RAE.

CHAPTER 1.

CAMPED ON THE NIGER—FIGHT WITH A WHISTLE-SNAKE—"THE CHILD OF THE MOON"—AN ALARM.

By a camp-fire in the woods, on the banks of the Upper Niger, lay two young Englishmen—Sidney Palmer and Clement Chiffney.

The taller and stouter of the two was Chiffney—a fine, athletic youth, of two-and-twenty, whose clear, fresh features indicated that he was not long from home.

He looked now a picture of sturdy health; yet only three months before he had been stricken down by wasting fever.

Sent out to a commercial situation at Brass, Chiffney had been attacked by the almost inevitable malarial disease, and had been warned to leave the coast at once, if he would not lay his body in the "white man's grave!"

Clement's first intention had been to return home, although such would mean the ruin of his business prospects; but he had gladly changed his plans, on the invitation of his old friend Sidney Palmer, now a trader on the Benin River, who was about to make a journey into the interior, and cordially invited his former chum to accompany him.

The proposal to seek renewed health in the interior of Africa seemed startling at first; but the idea was sound. The unhealthy zones of that Continent lie usually round its coast, and on the low-lying deltas and lagoons fringing the shore-line. Beyond these fetid belts, inland, on the higher, drier, breezy levels, a perfect sanatorium is generally found.

So it was, at least, in Chiffney's case.

The erstwhile fever-stricken invalid was now as strong and robust, as hale and hearty, as ever he had been. Now he lay on his side, sound asleep, his curly head pillowed on his stalwart arm, breathing with the freedom and regularity of a child.

Sidney Palmer, as already indicated, was of slighter build than his friend; but perhaps more lithe and active. His well-tanned skin bore the signs of long residence under a burning sun.

Possessed of a small capital, Sidney had been, for the past few years, a merchant-trader on the Benin River; one of those sturdy pioneers of British commerce—one of the shrewd, yet daring, adventurers who have carried Britain's trading-flag all over the world, opening fresh markets for the benefit of all concerned.

Ever with a keen eye to the main chance, Palmer was on a business journey now, his object being partly to extend his sphere of operation, partly of a more private nature, as will soon transpire.

Night was passing. Palmer, like his chum, was reposing; but, instinctively alert and vigilant, his watchfulness quickened by his recent training, Sidney permitted himself but a "dog's doze." Every now and again one of the quivering eyelids would partially open, and a scintillating glance be shot around. Occasionally he would stir himself to replenish the fire; for wild beasts abounded in the forest, and flame is the best bulwark against such night prowlers.

Suddenly he started, both eyes opened wide and bright, as a soft whistle fell upon his ear—the sound low and melodious, as though it issued from human lips.

Instantly he sprang to a sitting position. His hand was instinctively outstretched to the wood-pile; and, grasping a faggot, the youth gazed eagerly in the direction of the sound.

Into the circle of light a sinuous body was advancing—a snake, of about four feet in length, slender in body, with flat, venomous head. Dark-brown in colour, it was mottled with black marks. The reptile was crawling towards the slumbering man, creeping leisurely, and its procedure was most singular. With each revolution of its coils, it raised its head and neck, passing them forward with something like a peacock's gait; while at every strut it gave vent to its low, seductive whistle.

Scant time spent Palmer in watching. He knew the crawling figure too well. The faggot was firmer clutched, waved in the air, then hurled full at the interloper, striking the reptile fair on the swelling neck, instantly interrupting its chuckling whistle.

At once a wild commotion sprang up, the stricken snake wriggling and struggling, curling and whirling like a live fire-work; then, leaping to his feet, the young man further joined in the fray, delivering several more smashing blows with a



Suddenly he started, as a soft whistle fell upon his ear. He recognised the sound at once. It was the call of a whistle-snake.

fresh faggot, quickly beating the life out of the reptile. Then, with one foot placed firmly on the venomous head, with its protruding fangs, Palmer slashed through the neck with his hunting-knife, kicked aside the severed body, and, picking up the head and poison-bags on the point of his blade, dropped them into the fire, remarking:

"That makes sure. Now there is one demon less in this world!"

"Eh! Ah! What's the row? Had a visit from a fiend?" queried Chiffney, sitting up, and rubbing his bewildered eyes.

"Yes," replied Palmer, throwing himself on the ground again, beside his friend, "a veritable demon, in truth—a whistle-snake. These reptiles are as deadly as the American rattlesnakes, to which they bear some resemblance, as they cannot move upon their prey without a warning. That whistle has saved the life of many a man. If ever you hear it again, Clem, look out; act promptly. Their sting is always fatal; generally, death follows almost instantly. In other cases, a few hours of madness intervene; but the end is always the same. Nothing can save from the venom of the whistle-snake. You saw me cut off the head and throw it into the fire? Cases have been known of men treading barefoot upon, or even handling, the head of such a reptile, dead for hours, when the poison somehow infecting the victim, the unfortunate man dies shortly afterwards, just as though he had been stung by the live reptile. Oh, they are fiendish creatures!"

"Not very pleasant neighbours; hope there are no more about," commented Chiffney.

"Say, Sid," he added, "how much further have we to go ere you reach the spot for which we are making? This river seems interminable, and we have to work our own passages now. It seems months since I left Brass, feeling weak as water—luckily, at that time, having black fellows to row me. Then up we went, I improving daily, portering past falls, towing up rapids, past Rabba, Bussa, through Gompa, Say, and all sorts of unpronounceable places, till we reached Gao. Then we gave up our big boat, discharged our crew, purchased that small craft there (pointing to a canoe drawn up on the bank), and have been 'paddling our own canoe' ever since. How long is it to last, old man?"

"Tired of the life?" queried Palmer. "Never mind, Clem, the trip has done you a world of good. You are a very different man from the corpse-like creature that was borne away from Brass. You feel well, don't you?"

"Fit as a fiddle, and tight as ninepence!" cried Chiffney gaily. "I'll show you that by my appetite at breakfast, by and by. By George! I could do with a bit of deer-meat now!"

And the youth cast a hungry glance at a koodoo, which, shot the previous evening, had been hung up on the tree under which the voyagers had fixed their camp.

"Of course, I like this living," continued Clem. "By George! it's a real pleasure to work when one's thews and sinews are strung to concert-pitch; but one likes to see the end. Where is this wonderful valley of yours, with its marvellous diamond. You might run over the story again, Sid, as I was scarcely alive when you first told it me."

"It is not much of a story, Clem, and it may not have any definite end," laughed Palmer.

"Of course, the ostensible reason for my journey was to extend my up-river connection, which I have done, most satisfactorily; but, privately, I mean to look for 'The child of the moon.'"

Throughout the lower delta there is a legend of a wonderful point of fire, that glitters at full-moon, on a mountain-top. It can only be seen from a valley, and all attempts to locate the luminosity have proved fruitless. The natives hold it as sacred, calling the fire-point "child of the moon," and the vale "the valley of moonlight."

"I have heard the yarn repeatedly, and did not pay much attention to it at first; but latterly it has occurred to me that this 'child of the moon' may be a great diamond, or other precious stone, on which the moon, striking at a certain angle, reflects a stream of light into the centre of the valley. If so, the jewel must be an immense one—probably worth a fabulous sum. It's only a notion, of course—very likely I'm wrong; but I want to look into the thing."

"And whereabouts is this 'valley of moonlight'?" queried Chiffney.

"It cannot be far distant now," replied Palmer. "It is said to lie close by the river, on this side of the mysterious old city of Timbuctoo. Now, Timbuctoo is the next town of any importance above us. But I have a more authentic guide. I can locate the valley exactly. See here."

Then Palmer drew a small piece of paper from his pocket, on which were the characters:

18 deg. 8 N.

0 deg. 25 W.

"I'm no good at cryptograms," said Chiffney, shaking his head.

"Why, man, it's clear enough," laughed Palmer. "It reads: 18 deg. 8 min. north latitude, 0 deg. 25 min. west longitude. These are the bearings of the 'valley of moonlight.' It's merely a memorandum. With this, and with my sextantette, and chronometer, I can always work my reckonings."

"We are now nearing the spot. Soon we shall be able to test the merits of the legend. Should there be anything in it, we may become possessors of fabulous wealth (for, of course, we shall go share and share alike, Clem). If not, we shall be none the poorer; and when we return, you will have gained that which is better than wealth—health; while I shall have developed my business."

"Hi! Look out! Get you 'barker' ready!" cried Palmer, suddenly interrupting himself.

CHAPTER 2.

THE BRANDED PANTHER—SIDNEY'S CLEVER SHOT—AT DEATH'S DOOR—A WEIRD RESCUER.

For some minutes previously, a strange, weird, unnatural stillness—a freezing dread—had been falling over the scene.

In an African forest, even at midnight, there are continuous evidences of life and motion—the hum of insects, the flutter of birds, the tapping and scratching of bills and claws upon bark, the hurried scurry of some timid creature, low cooings and calls from mate to mate. Now, all sound, all motion, was gradually stilled; all Nature was gradually rendered mute, breathless, in suspense.

Then came a stealthy rustle, as of the soft breeze playing amongst the leaves, quickly followed by a sharper, shivering rush, as of a great wind; and when Palmer, a perfect woodman, ever on the alert, shouted, seizing his ready rifle as he uttered the warning, the silence was broken, the sinister cause of the deathly stillness revealed itself.

As though startled by the rustling rush, the fire itself leaped up, brightly illumining the scene.

From one of the upper boughs of a neighbouring tree came a flash, as of lambent flame, and a huge panther, white bellied, amber backed, shot like a great missile from a giant gun.

Yet the men by the camp-fire were not the subjects of attack—their larder was the object aimed at. The great cat, prowling around, had been attracted by the koodoo, hanging by the heels, and, crawling up till within springing distance, the panther, with a plunging pounce, had launched itself upon the tempting prey. Launched and landed fairly, alighting on the upper part of the quarry, then clinging to it with claws and teeth.

The sudden jerk, the added weight, proved too much for the suspending cords; the strands strained and snapped, and, locked together, panther and koodoo fell crash to the ground, mid a shower of falling leaves and broken twigs, to the accompaniment of a growling "nuzzling" monologue from the living beast.

Almost as sharply as the unexpected intruder, Palmer sprang erect, rifle in hand. A kick at the burning logs stirred them to more active glow; then the intrepid hunter turned upon the beast of prey.

No light task. The African panther is a dangerous antagonist even for a well-armed man. Of great bulk, to power immense and ferocity intense it has added the agile activity of its feline strain, with all its craft and cunning.

Big as was the koodoo, the panther was ready to carry it off, and, seizing the dead beast by the neck, was about to trot away like a cat with its kitten.

But Sidney Palmer was not a man to be robbed thus. Throwing his rifle into position, he advanced upon the savage brute, his eye as fierce and more steady than its own.

With a snarling protest at the intervention, the great cat dropped its prey, yet stretched itself across it, grinning defiance. Still Sidney advanced, boldly yet warily. Stealthily the great brute wriggled forward, its paws stealing out. It paused, crouched lower, made ready for another spring—a fresh pounce upon a second victim; its head swayed slowly, then steadied as it glared fiercely on the hunter; another second and that living, death-dealing missile would be hurtling through the air.

That was the moment for which Palmer watched. Quickly his rifle was raised. He sighted that furious head, marking the spot right above that grinning, bristling mouth fair between those yellow, flaming eyes, and, concurrent with the first upheaval of the spring, fired.

True was the aim. The heavy bullet entered the centre of the forehead, crashing into that evil brain; but not at once was that frenzied mass of vitality quelled. The brute screamed aloud—a wild, shrill, reverberating yell that throbbed and tingled through the forest glade; then it sank back on its former prey, tearing and rending the dead buck frantically,

till a second shot, scientifically delivered, ended its convulsions by passing a bullet through its heart.

"Whiew! what a night we're having. Rather too lively for my taste!" cried Chiffney, who now joined his friend, rifle in hand, only to find that his aid was unnecessary.

"Say, Sid," he continued, "you're a wonderful chap, always on the alert. I noticed nothing unusual, and was enjoying a sound snooze; but you, old watch-dog, seem to sleep with one eye open. No chance of your being taken by surprise, if seems."

"Well," returned his friend, laughing, "so far you are right, old fellow. I am accustomed to keep one eye open even when the other rests. It is absolutely necessary to do so in such a life as mine. But, it is only natural, Clem. All our senses are doubled, or, rather, run in pairs. Why are we gifted with two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, and two hands—to see, hear, smell and touch with, unless it is intended that one set of senses should watch while the other sleeps? It's just like the crew of a ship, divided into watches, port and starboard, the one on duty while the other rests."

"H'm! Maybe! You're getting rather deep for me now, Sid," replied Chiffney dubiously.

After standing their guns against the tree, the two youths drew the animals apart; then, while Chiffney was busy re-hanging the koodoo (which, although clawed about a bit, would taste none the less tender), Palmer occupied himself in an examination of the defunct panther.

It was a magnificent beast—more agreeable perhaps to look upon in death than in life—almost four feet long, its sweeping tail nearly three; its yellow fur (spotted with rows of black roses) thick and strong, yet smooth and sleek; its great cat-like head grinning even now with baffled malignity.

But what immediately attracted the attention of the young hunter was a curious marking on the breast of the brute. Deeply cut in the heavy fur were a couple of wavy, bulging lines, forming a heart. They were due to no accidental scratch or tear—the shape was perfect, the lines were regular, the hair had been carefully clipped and trimmed by a pair of shears, or some such instrument.

"Come here, Clem!" called Palmer. "Look at that mark—a perfect heart. I could have sworn, I should declare yet that that panther had never been tamed—that it was in its natural, wild state; but it has been under human hands, and that not long ago. See, the trimming is clean, the decoration has been made recently. And who could have done such a thing? who dared such a deed? The creature could not have been tied up during the operation; there are no marks of bonds or muzzle on the other parts of the fur. And with what object was the design cut? A civilised mark on a wild animal, in the depths of the forests of unexplored Africa? Here's a puzzle-picture, Clem!"

Eagerly the youth bent over the prostrate beast, seeking for the solution of the enigma. Their whole attention was riveted upon the device. Even that experienced woodman, Sidney Palmer, forgot his hard-won caution; his rifle, with that of his friend, leaned negligently against the tree-trunk, out of reach. Better had he borne in mind his previous maxims; safer would he have been had he divided his senses, keeping one set on the watch.

As the youths bent wonderingly over the body of the panther, tracing the clear-cut heart-marks with their finger-tips, smoothing the fur, and speculating over the cause and meaning of the design, a hideous, yelling chorus broke upon their startled ears; wild, strident cries, vengeful and snarling as the death yell of the panther; a circle of dark figures quickly closed like a stretched elastic band; a swarm of black savages hurtled in, a score of dark hands gripped the white men, who were instantly borne to the ground, overturned by the human flood.

The assailants were all armed, some with bows and arrows, others with spears or heavy clubs, and all were lusting for the blood of the whites. Yet the very press of the crowd saved the assailed ones for the moment; in that close-packed throng there was no room either to thrust or smite.

Palmer fell upon the slain panther; his head rested upon the dead beast's shoulder, close by its broad breast, which was fully exposed. A vice-like hand gripped him by the throat, other fingers pinned down his shoulders; he could not stir to save his life.

But now, with a harsh, guttural cry, and a commanding arm wave, the leader of the assailants ordered his men to draw back, and the superabundant crowd on top of the white man rolled off, and drew slightly back, only the fellow at the victim's throat maintaining his position and his stifling grip.

'Twas but a short reprieve. The leader wanted only room to use his arm in order to deliver the death-stroke. He planted himself firmly above the prostrate man, gripped his spear vengefully, the lust of slaughter gleaming from his eye.

Yet was the fatal thrust arrested in the very act of delivery. As the crowd thinned, the firelight flashed upon the

doomed man and his panther-pillow. The extended arm of the executioner was stayed; its tense muscles relaxed, the limb swayed, trembled, then dropped as though struck by paralysis; and instead of plunging the spear-point into the breast of his victim, he pointed with the weapon towards the heart-mark on the beast, at the same time uttering a strange word, a name as of awe.

Instantly the eager crowd peered in, intently gazing; then their dusky cheeks paled to a sickly grey, their jaws dropped, their eyes seemed bursting from their sockets.

"Bonci-ba! Bonci-ba!" they muttered tremblingly, gazing fearfully around, as though they had uttered the name of something of dread.

And, ah! the exclamation appeared indeed to have invoked another form, though not that of a fiend.

Close by the fire, between it and the crowd, clearly defined against the glow, stood a new figure—that of a white man, with a long, sparkling, white beard falling almost to his waist. He seemed very old, but was yet vigilant and alert; of medium height and spare frame; sinewy yet supple. He was dressed in curious garments, obviously the skins of animals, self-fashioned for their new purpose.

Meeting boldly the bewildered, timorous glances of the dusky troop, so soon as he had focussed all their gaze, he drew himself up haughtily, waved his arms commandingly, and uttered a couple of authoritative words in an uncouth language.

The effect was magical. The despotic tones fell upon the blacks like a blight; they shivered, as under a withering blast, recoiled in fear, then tremblingly stole away, entering the woods on the other side.

In little knots, and singly, they vanished, disappearing like shadows in the darkness; and when the last, strange apparition was swallowed up, Palmer turned his astonished gaze towards his strange deliverer—turned it, then started with a fresh sensation of bewilderment, not unmingled with awe.

Their wondrous rescuer was no longer there! The place of the white stranger was vacant; the camp was as utterly deserted as before the advent of the panther.

CHAPTER 3.

WONDERMENT—A FRESH CAMP—CHIFFNEY'S STALK—IN THE LION'S JAWS.

"Ugh! What is the meaning of it all? Is this a play, or have I been asleep and dreamed a horrid nightmare?" cried Chiffney, sitting up and gazing around bewilderedly.

"No nightmare about it. It's real enough, as the pressure on my windpipe evidences. I dare say my throat bears the marks of those choking fingers still," replied Palmer, struggling to his feet. "But up, Clem; get your gun, lad; if it's a play we must be prepared to take an active part in the next act. There, I feel more ready now," he added, gripping his trusty "Winchester" and handing his to his companion.

Yet all had passed as in a dream; save footmarks, there were no traces of the blacks; there was no sign whatever of the imperious white man, who might almost have been the spirit he seemed.

The camp was untouched. All their belongings were there. The canoe lay on the bank; the buck hung from the bough; the tail of the headless snake protruded from the bush.

"Can you explain this thing, Sid?"

"No, lad, I'm fairly puzzled."

"But you know the lingo. Did you understand nothing that was said?"

"Well," replied Palmer, "I speak the language of the natives of the coast delta, and have a smattering of the up-river dialects; but in this case very little was spoken at all. Deeds, not words, was the order of the day—of the night, rather. Still, I gleaned a little of what passed.

"'Boncia-ba' means literally Big-beard. That that cognomen applied to the old white man who so provisionally intervened is evident, not only from his long white beard, but from the greeting of the natives on his appearance. Further, I gathered there was some connection between this Big-beard and the heart-shaped mark on the breast of the panther; and more, the blacks hold him in great awe. They were in dread when they saw the mark—that, indeed, caused the first pause, and his mere command was sufficient to make them slink away like whipped curs!

"What he said was: 'Begone, water-rats! Off to your holes!' And they scurried away like rats at sight of a terrier. These fellows were of the Bosos tribe; predatory natives, who infest the rivers and lagoons; the term 'water-rats' fits them well. They live by thieving and robbery; they are pirates by profession, murderers by inclination. They formerly were a constant terror on the lower reaches of the river, till the Niger Company drove them back; now they plague the upper waters. If ever you meet another Bosos, Clem, shoot him on sight as you would a snarling wolf!"

"Wonder who the white man was—that Big-beard?" mused Chiffney. "By the way, he vanished as mysteriously as he appeared."

"That's so," agreed Palmer. "I saw him distinctly as he ordered off the rubble; but, turning my head to see the effect, after watching the last shadow flit away, when I looked again towards the fire, Big-beard was gone also. You did not see him go, I suppose, Clem?"

"Not I, Sid. I had a black fellow sitting on my chest, another on my stomach, and a swarm of the creatures pinning me down generally. I only caught a casual glimpse of your Big-beard, who, if providential, was not very polite. He might have waited for our thanks."

"Didn't want 'em, seemingly, Clem; but we may yet have an opportunity to tender them. He required no invitation for his first appearance; he may not wait permission to make a second."

"But we must not stand chattering here, my boy. These Bosos may return, and it might go hard with us in such case. This camp is not very defensible, even with our recovered weapons. Let's strike, Clem—embark in the canoe, and lie under the opposite bank till daylight."

The change was deftly effected. And when the two were fairly settled in their new position, snugly screened by an overhanging clump of bushes, Chiffney remarked:

"And how now, Sid—or, rather, how about the morning? What's to be our next move on the board? Don't you think, old man, we've gone far enough? This curious country, with its fatal whistling-snakes, its sanguinary panthers, branded like innocent sheep, its bloodthirsty, piratical Bosos, and its mysterious Big-beard, is rather too lively for my taste. As for your 'child of the moon,' to speak frankly, old chum, I don't believe that nigger yarn. Seems to me that these credulous, superstitious blacks, by gazing too intently at the moon, have had their wits turned under her well-known influence. The whole story is a fable, due to softening of the brain. What d'ye say to 'bout ship,' and make tracks down stream?"

"No, no; I will not readily agree to that," cried Palmer resolutely. "Call me wilful, stubborn, pig-headed, if you like; but when I make up my mind to a certain course, I like to see it through. I'm a perverse chap, whom obstacles render only the more determined. I have long desired to examine this thing, and now it would be hard to break off the quest, when the spot is so near. The site of this 'valley of moonlight,' according to my bearings, lies only two days' journey ahead. Very likely the whole thing is a myth—a fable, as you suggest—but, if so, I want to prove it. Bear with me a little longer, Clem."

"That's no hard task, old fellow," cried Chiffney, gripping his friend's hand heartily. "And it is all the easier, since you won't be much disappointed if the thing ends in moonshine. Then, too, I have gained the object of my journey—I am thoroughly fit and well again. Shame on me if I tried to turn you aside from your mark. We will go ahead at daylight, old man, daring all dangers—human and animal, actual and superstitious."

So things were settled. The remainder of the night passed quietly. There was no return of their late assailants to the camp on the further bank; and shortly after daybreak the two adventurous youths resumed their course up stream, "padding their own canoe."

Hard though they wrought, they did not make any great distance that day.

The river banks became higher and rockier, the bed contracted, the current grew difficult to stem, and towards evening, having covered some twenty miles, after clearing a swift, swirling gorge, they were glad to camp for the night in a quiet backwater, fairly worn out by their exertions.

Yet, tired out as they were, they were hungry also. They had no provisions with them, save tinned foods, Chiffney having insisted upon leaving behind the carcass of the koodoo, mauled and clawed by the panther. And, to renew the stock of fresh meat, he (being responsible for its depletion) sallied out, gun in hand, in search of wherewithal to fill the pot.

But Clement was not an experienced hunter, and for long he found no suitable game.

Monkeys there were in plenty, and wood-pigeons flew about in abundance; but Clem only carried a bullet-gun, not a fowling-piece. He was looking for bigger game, his idea being to replace the spoiled and mangled koodoo, by one of the same species. Yet he saw neither hoof nor horn, though on he plodded, while the monkeys chattered and jeered; the very paroquettes flouted and mocked.

Chiffney wandered some considerable distance from camp, and as he passed along, the woods gradually thinned, the ground becoming ever more broken and rocky; and at length he reached a spot perfectly bald—utterly bare of vegetation. It was like an old man's scalp, in that it was surrounded by a fringe of trees; but the ground was by no means smooth and

level, being rough and rocky—a wild conglomeration of great stones and boulders, having been forced through the earth, looking like a partly-healed scar, or giant wart.

And ah! What was that? The place seemed unlikely, but Clement felt certain he saw a great, fawn-coloured body slide stealthily behind one of the rocks. Big game here, sure enough—perhaps another koodoo; but, if so, a much larger beast than the last. Be what it might, he would stalk it.

So Clement carefully looked at his gun, satisfied himself as to the direction of the wind, then, circling round, cautiously approached from another point the spot where the animal had disappeared.

In stole the ardent youth, warily as any Highland gillie, taking advantage of each mound or depression by the way, dodging round rocks, slipping by boulders, dropping latterly on hands and knees, squirming forward finally upon his belly. He meant to bag that game, whatever it was.

Nearer and nearer he drew; no sound disturbed the thrilling silence, no sign was there of the quarry sneaking away. And at length the hunter reached the spot where it had disappeared.

Silently, cautiously, Chiffney raised himself, and gazed eagerly over the rock; then almost dropped his gun in dismay. His game was there, but more—much more than he bargained for.

Couchant, on the other side of the boulder, not a dozen feet distant, crouched an enormous, black-maned lion.

And the quarry was awaiting the hunter; that was evident. With head erect, it gazed expectant, its nostrils, slightly compressed, delicately sniffing. As Chiffney raised himself over the rock, he met the brute literally face to face, and glared straight into its lurid, flashing eyes.

A sharper gleam, accompanied by a low, rumbling growl that shook the whole body of the monster, greeted the advent of the man. Then Chiffney, completely losing nerve in his surprise, did the most foolish thing possible. Gripping his gun in his trembling hands, he fumbled with it, then fired—blazed anyhow. Unfortunately he hit the beast; unlucky, that is, as he only slightly wounded it. He aroused all the passion of the fiend, without crippling the brute.

Instantly, as though startled by a galvanic shock—as though heaved up by a hidden spring, the lion shot up from the ground, and launched itself upon the hidden intruder, sailing over the rock like a belch of cannon-smoke.

A futile, aimless shot from the second barrel, then the mighty, animated avalanche was upon the hapless youth. His useless gun was dashed aside; he was hurled to the ground under the lion, pinned to the earth more firmly than he lately had been by the human tigers—the pirate Bosos.

And now the unfortunate lad felt his last hour, his final minute, had come, and almost longed for a wound sharp and speedy, to prevent further suffering. Earthly hope was completely gone; what had he to hope for?

Yet the brute seemed disinclined for any summary ending. Its feline nature aroused, its prey secure, it began playing with the helpless man, like a cat with a mouse.

Chiffney had fallen on his back, the lion stood over him, gripping his shoulder with its fore-paw, slowly rocking its victim, like a child with a doll. It sniffed him over, peered in his face, its foetid, sickening breath fanned his lungs, clogging his senses. He would welcome unconsciousness, prelude to death though it might be, as thankfully as a patient on the operating-table.

CHAPTER 4.

A STRANGE RESCUE—THE MYSTERIOUS LION-TAMER—PALMER'S RESOLVE.

Still the lion continued its grim play; but the senses of the victim were rapidly gliding away—merciful unconsciousness was quickly stealing over him.

Then, as the prelude to a dream, Chiffney became conscious of a weird melody sounding in the air; a human voice, strangely resonant, dulcet, yet penetrating in its tones, the cadence rising and falling, ever softly, ever melodiously, like strains of an Æolian harp, under a zephyr breath. Yet the tones were human, words were moulded to the song, a strange rhythm that Chiffney failed to understand. The tones were pathetically sweet, inexpressibly alluring. Was this some spirit sent to greet and guide the departing human soul in its flight to another world?

The lion had heard the symphony also, and even the brute beast was moved and thrilled by the dulcet tones. It stopped its sniffing, then ceased its play with its victim, and, with head erect, gazed fixedly in the direction of the sounds. Gradually it became entranced, its eye lost its vengeful fire, its fiercely erected crest drooped and fell, and it began rocking its huge head from side to side, to the time and tune of the mystic strain.

Chiffney was quite unable to discover the source of the melody.

Lying on his back, he could discern nothing but the form of the hideous brute towering over him, silhouetted against the evening sky. He could only mutely marvel.

Still the chant continued; now soft and low, anon full and resonant, sometimes soothing and wailing, then imperiously commanding. And it seemed as though the performer was walking to and fro, the notes sounding alternately close by, then dwindling in the distance, yet ever remaining clear and distinct.

The lion meantime fell increasingly under the influence of the spell; its tail waved rapturously, its whole body swayed in ecstasy. Then, at length, the heavy paw pinning the man down was slowly withdrawn, and gradually the great beast withdrew its whole body from its prey, which it seemed quite to forget, in wondrous, absorbing ecstasy.

Continuing its fascinated motions, it glided majestically on in the direction of the strains, moving slowly, absorbedly, automatically, with the action of a somnambulist, or one under hypnotic influence, the weird strain receding as the creature advanced.

Thus left at liberty, freed as by a miracle, Chiffney for a time felt unable to avail himself of the boon; he, too, experienced the spell.

At length the great beast, in its entranced gait, disappeared, its further course hidden by the rocks; and regularly the hidden strains withdrew, becoming momentarily more faint, subdued by distance.

With a great effort, Chiffney broke the numbing spell, sat up, and stared bewilderedly, scrambled to his feet, shook himself together, then staggered to the boulder blocking his view.

On his way, the melody suddenly ceased; but the youth was yet in time to see the singer.

There stood the old man who had rescued his comrade and himself from the Bosos—Big-beard.

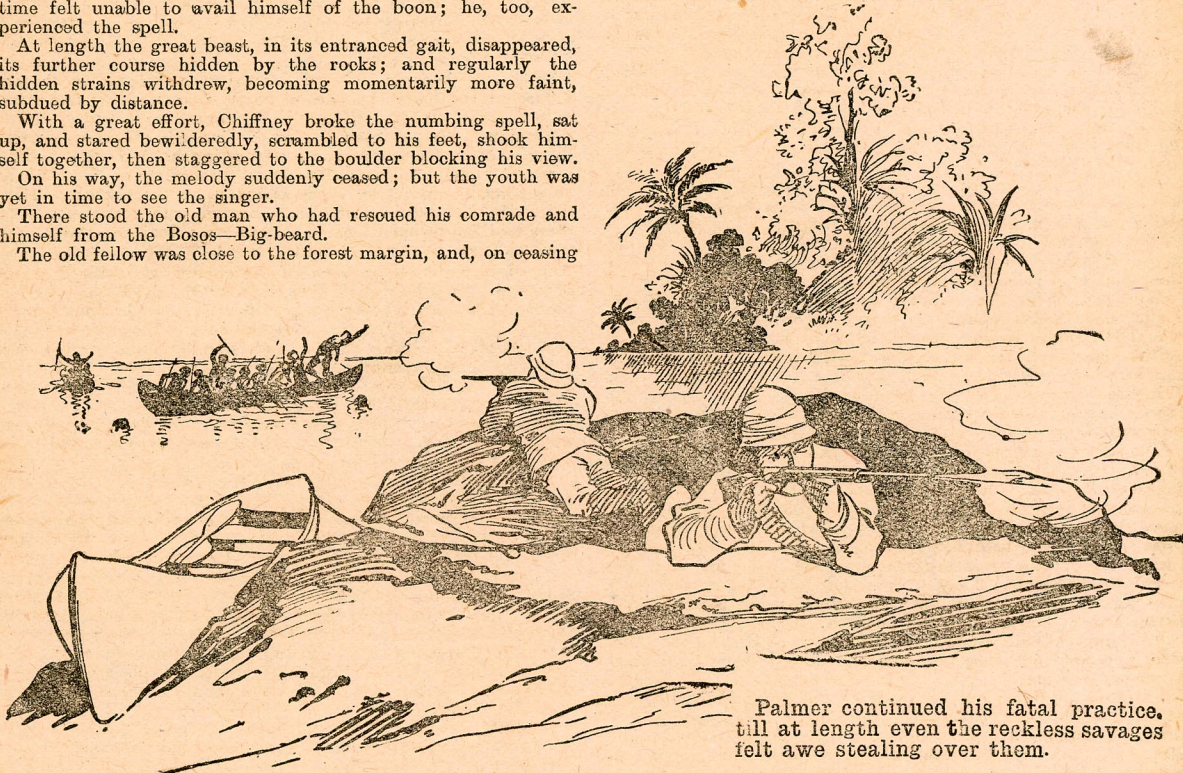
The old fellow was close to the forest margin, and, on ceasing

"Um, He must be a marvellous being, Clem, thus able to tame and subdue, to calm the passions, and command savage beasts, and, still more, ferocious men. I wish I knew his secret. But there, we are well out of it, so far. Let us descend to more earthly matters. Let's have supper. You have returned empty-handed, but I secured something for our repast, without stirring from this spot. I knocked down an ant-eater from the tree overhead. It is cooking now, and should be about ready."

"Faugh! one of those squirrel-like creatures!" objected Chiffney. "I'd as soon think of eating a hedgehog!"

"You might easily fare worse, Clem. Hedgehog, properly cooked, makes most dainty eating—as delicate as spring chicken. And just wait till you see and smell my 'squirrel.' If it doesn't make your mouth water, I'm a Bosos. Of course, if you like, you can fall back on our tinned stuffs; but I do not think our stores will be drawn upon for our present meal."

As he spoke, the hunter-cook produced the repast he had prepared. Palmer had cooked the ant-eater camp-fashion, the method being simplicity itself. After cleansing the beast, without skinning it, he had wrapped the carcass in a thick coating



Palmer continued his fatal practice, till at length even the reckless savages felt awe stealing over them.

his song, he plunged abruptly into the woods, affording but a fleeting glimpse of his person, yet ample for identification.

The lion, on the cessation of the music, stopped short; then seemingly awoke from its trance, and, without apparent thought for its late captive, bounded away.

Full of wonderment, not unmixed with awe, Chiffney, after securing and re-charging his gun, ran to the spot where his late conqueror and subsequent rescuer had disappeared; but not a sign of man or beast was to be seen. They might have been the airy visions of a dream, save that his tunic was rent and torn at the shoulder by the lion's claws. There "the king of beasts" had left his grim mark.

Evening was falling fast, and, having no desire for further adventures in the darksome woods, Chiffney retraced his way to camp, and was rejoiced to find all safe there, his comrade having passed the interval undisturbed.

"And so I can say, 'he went his way and I saw him no more,'" remarked Chiffney, concluding his marvellous recital to his wondering friend.

"Sounds like magic. Are you sure things really happened as you have described, Clem?"

"Certain, Sid. Seeing is believing, and I have the evidence of my ears as well. In further proof, look at my tunic. That mysterious man, whom you call Big-beard, wiled away the lion when I was helpless under its paw. When it was about to worry my life out, he charmed it off by the wonderful power of his voice alone."

of soft clay; then, scooping a hole under the embers of the fire, had laid his "bake" in the orifice, shovelled in the cinders again, piled on fresh fuel, and left the dish to cook itself.

On being withdrawn, it was found done to a turn. On being broken open, the skin and fur adhered to the clay, showing the delicate flesh clean and white; a dainty mess, truly, from which arose such an appetising steam that Chiffney's scruples were quickly banished, and he declared it was the most delicious "rabbit stew" he had ever tasted. There was no need to fall back upon the tinned meats that evening.

"And what is the programme for to-morrow? Still onward, I suppose?" inquired Chiffney, lazily, as the two lay, placidly enjoying an after-supper smoke.

"Still onward, Clem," replied his companion firmly. "I'm fixed to find that 'valley of moonlight' and the 'child of the moon' also, if such a thing exists. I won't give up the search till the direction fades from the paper on which it is written!"

CHAPTER 5.

THE CHASE—THE ISLET REFUGE—ATTACKED IN FRONT AND REAR—"BRITANNIA RULES THE WAVES."

Early morning found the intrepid voyagers again on the water, ploughing their course up-stream.

"HELD UP!" How a Daring Attempt was Made to Rob the Bank of England.
See next Friday's "UNION JACK."

And now the river began to widen, becoming broader and shallower, the current consequently less rapid; but broken rocks appeared in the channel, necessitating careful navigation.

Still wider grew the waters, till, looking ahead, the river appeared to issue into a small lake, or lagoon, a circular, rocky islet, flat topped, and some thirty yards in diameter, standing like a vehicular blocking post at the entrance of a footpath.

Suddenly, from the left bank, a couple of canoes shot out—large crafts, each containing about a dozen men (black fellows)—and it at once became evident that the white men were the objects of the foray.

The new-comers headed straight for the passing boat, the rowers wielding their paddles strenuously, waving them vigorously, while the others held aloft their weapons threateningly, and all joined in a harsh, vengeful chorus.

"Those river pirates—those bloodthirsty Bosos again!" muttered Palmer, setting his teeth, but paddling all the harder.

"The river expands here," cried Chiffney. "See, we are coming to a regular lake. On, Sid, we will lose the black rascals in the open water."

"I fear not," replied his friend. "They have the heels of us, Clem; they carry too many men—half a dozen paddles to our two. Besides, we cannot row and fight at the same time, while they, with their superior numbers, can."

"No, lad, we are in for another fray, and we can defend ourselves better with firm ground underfoot. But we need not make for the other bank; it's too far off. There is a better post ahead. See that bare islet in front? We can hold them off from thence, ourselves covered. Push on, Clem; make a dash for it."

Dash they did, churning the water alongside like paddle-wheels, and shooting forward their light craft like a racing skiff; but still speedier were their pursuers.

On came the hunting blacks, momentarily reducing the distance, affording no doubt of their sanguinary intentions by their vengeful yells and threatening gestures.

Well was it for the harassed white men that the islet was nigh. They never could have made the distant shore, and would have been simply overwhelmed on the water.

But make their retreat they did. On a shelving rock they ran up their canoe, and made her fast. Then, seizing their Winchesters, sought cover, as now missiles were flying, the blacks having already strung their bows, though the distance was yet too great for effective arrow flight.

The islet seemed the tip of an extinct volcano, a rugged ring of rock, some six feet high on the outer face, forming a capital breastwork from within; yet, even as the defenders threw themselves down in a position of sharpshooters prepared to meet the force in front, their ears caught the sound of distant cries coming from behind. Turning quickly, they saw another canoe, filled with shouting savages, advancing on the islet from the lake side. They were assailed front and rear—two men against two score; but the couple were Britons bold, better armed, and in a strong position.

"We must divide, Clem," cried Palmer. "Run to the other side, and hold off these new-comers, while I settle with these fellows in the rear."

Carefully sighting his Winchester, Palmer took steady aim at the leading boat, then fired, and one of the foremost men dropped, with a shrill yell, causing a momentary confusion and stoppage; but the halt was brief. The man hit—dead or wounded—was tossed overboard, and the boats came on more vengefully than before.

And now a fresh idea flashed across the brain of the rifleman. An expert, experienced marksman, Palmer determined to go in for some fancy shooting.

At the point where the pursuing boats debouched from the land, the stream ran strong and swirling, the canoes being held in their course, not by the side paddlers, but by a steersman standing in the stern, wielding a long, fixed sweep.

That fellow made a prominent mark; and scarce was the thought formed than Palmer's rifle rang out. The steersman dropped, and the canoe slewed round.

As an echo of the first shot, the repeater spoke sharp again, and the rudder-man of the second boat shared the same fate.

But other steersmen were there—other hands were equally ready. Scarce did one coxswain reel and sway, ere the oar-handle was snatched from his failing grasp, and another dusky form took his place; while, judged by their vengeful shouts, the remainder of the crews were in no way daunted.

Yet calmly, methodically, as though shooting at the "running deer" or "vanishing man," Palmer continued his fatal practice, till at length even the reckless savages felt awe stealing over them, quelling their reckless courage. The grip of that oar-handle seemed but the prelude to the death stroke. It was as fatal as the lever of an electric machine.

As one steersman after another dropped, the canvas swayed and jibbed, time was lost, and but little way was made against the hurrying stream.

In numbers, too, the crews were rapidly diminishing. Every shot rang a death-knell.

At length, as another steersman fell in one of the boats, there was a momentary hesitation among the survivors to assume the fatal post. The canoe swerved, broached-to, drifted upon a rapid, and was instantly overturned, an upset boat, a number of splashing, black forms and bobbling heads alone marking the scene.

This was enough for the other craft. Its crew had been equally thinned, had suffered from the same awe-inspiring consternation; and, not sorry for an excuse to abandon their disastrous attack, the surviving canoe swept off to the assistance of its consort. They were completely repulsed, fairly cowed, and, slipping away, the immersed ones hanging on by the gunwale, the rowers only wielding their paddles to avoid the rocks and shoals of the channel, the black band drifted away down stream like a derelict log.

During the onset, Palmer more than once heard the ring of Chiffney's rifle, and knew that they were beset on the other side; but he could do nothing to aid his friend, nor even ascertain how he fared. "Chiffney must keep up his own end of the stick," was his mental comment. And as the up-stream assailants were less in numbers by one-half, surely Clem could be trusted to hold the door.

But, just because of the stream, the attack there was different; the blacks had not to battle against the current, but only to drift down with it. No chance here to pick off the steersman, sharpshooter fashion; indeed, Chiffney never thought of such an expedient, contenting himself with blazing away at the boat, more than once succeeding in hitting the occupants, confounding them as much by the rapidity of his fire as by his actual execution. Armed with repeating rifles, these two Englishmen seemed to number a dozen at least.

Indeed, the crew of the rear boat believed themselves confronted with the entire force of the enemy, whatever it might be; and, supposing the other side of the islet to be undefended, adopted dilatory tactics, to afford their down-stream friends time to land, and sweep the rock. They backed with their paddles, holding off the islet, wheeling and circling like a hawk about to pounce, screaming more loudly, yet striving to hold their distance.

Yet presently they began to weary of their dilatory manoeuvres; the current was strong, rushing them on, sucking them in; the fate of their fallen comrades exasperated the survivors, and they prepared for a dash.

"Just in time, Sid!" gasped Chiffney, as Palmer threw himself down by his side. "I can't hold these beggars off much longer; they mean to charge. How about your own handful?"

"Oh, my fellows have fled down stream. One boat overturned; both crews cowed!" replied Palmer briefly.

"Here they come! Look how they cluster and threaten! Hark how they yell!" cried Chiffney. "That's the cheer before they charge. We must pick off as many as possible ere they gain footing, and trust to our revolvers after that!"

"I fancy I know 'another way,' as the cookery-books say," replied Palmer grimly, throwing forward his rifle and sighting.

"They must never land at all. We should have a short shrift then!" he muttered.

Sidney had formed another plan, differing from the last. No longer marking at the men, he aimed for the boat. Could he effect the foundering of that craft, like its down-stream consort, but from a different cause? The canoe was of fragile construction; bow on, as it was, a shot on its curving water-line must create a large, jagged hole. He would try it.

"Blaze away at the men, Clem. Since we are the pipers let us call the tune!" Sidney shouted, then himself took careful aim.

No longer held in check like a fretful steed, the canoe was now whipped forward with all the strength of the brawny arms of the crew.

Palmer marked the foam-line swirling under the bows, took swift yet steady aim, as at a bird on the wing; then fired.

As he had hoped, the bullet ploughed a long, starred hole fair on the water-line, and instantly the boat began to fill.

But not yet were the blacks beaten, resourceful water-rats as they were. Tearing off their scanty garments they endeavoured to plug the leak, and one man, even more astute, spread a cloth over the gunwale, the suction of the water dragging the fabric against the fracture, partially filling the rent. Would that suffice? The distance was but short; would the damaged barque float it? True, most of the assailants had dropped their arms to act as salvors, but they could easily resume them; spears and clubs lay ready to hand; and, once on land, sheer weight of numbers might turn the odds of superior weapons.

But the nimble-witted Englishman was not yet at the end of his resources. His ready repeater still had more words to say. A second shot tore a huge, corresponding gap on the

other side; the bows were hopelessly broken. As well try to patch up a soaked paper-boat as that splintered canoe.

Almost ere her crew recognised it, the craft foundered under their feet, leaving them spluttering in the deep, swift stream. Good swimmers all, they were in no danger of drowning; some of the more resolute spirits even attempting to find footing on the islet. At that game, however, the Englishmen held a strong advantage, and every clinging savage was brushed off like a troublesome bluebottle. Away they swept on the swift current like a cargo of coconuts overturned, the fractured boat floating behind. Palmer guarded one side of the islet, Chifney the other, a tap on the head from a rifle-butt re-launching any stranded savage; and presently the two victors met at the tail of the islet, and watched the last of their enemies being carried resistlessly away.

"Whoop! What a day we're having. What wonderful stories will pass between these fellows and their chums lower down!" cheered Chifney.

CHAPTER 6.

THE MOONLIT VALLEY—A FRUITLESS SEARCH—AGAIN ASSAILED—AN UNACCOUNTABLE ESCAPE.

"Better get on while we may, the way seems clear ahead. Come along, Clem," said Palmer. "Should these fellows return (and they seem resolute rascals), let them find this islet deserted—the birds flown."

"Just so," agreed Chifney. "But what about getting home again? Have not we locked the door against ourselves? We may have some trouble in retracing our steps, old man."

"First, let us reach the 'valley of moonlight,' with its possible big diamond, then we will think of our return!" replied Palmer doggedly. "But," he added, more brightly, "we need not return by the same route unless we like. Further up the river lies Timbuctoo, now in the occupation of the French. From thence we can proceed, if we choose, through the French Soudan to Senegal. However, that all lies in the future."

"Wonderful stream, this," mused Chifney, "seems to be endless. This must be the river spoken of in the song of that name, it 'Goes on for ever.'"

"The Niger is nearly three thousand miles long from source to mouth," was Palmer's practical reply.

Starting again, they launched on the open waters ahead; but the lake or lagoon proved not nearly so large as anticipated, the banks soon closing in again, and after a few hours' paddling the prospectors found themselves again in the bosom of a mighty river, flowing through a rough, mountainous country, the channel broken and obstructed by rocks and rapids.

They spent that night under the bushes of the bank. Nothing more had been seen of the Bosos, or other hostile natives; but the white men deemed it unwise to risk a needless landing, especially as they were now close by the spot for which Palmer was making.

At noon on the following day, after taking an observation, Palmer announced the fact that they had made their point, had reached their destination.

"There," he said, with a ring of triumph in his voice, "the 'valley of moonlight' lies on the right bank; now to wake up the 'child of the moon!'"

"H'm! Hope it's not all moonshine!" muttered Chifney dubiously.

The strange river at this point again broadened out into another lake, of much larger proportions than that lower down—an inland sea it seemed—and not far distant on its waters lay an island of singular formation. Its face was smooth, its lines regular. It seemed square in shape, and in its broken peaks the explorers fancied they saw rather the ruins of cupolas and minarets than rugged mountain crags. It looked more like an old castle or stronghold than a desert isle.

That, however, was not the point of interest; ashore lay the mystic valley, and eagerly they headed their canoe for the bank.

Landing was somewhat difficult. Where the river's brim was not defended by thick, thorny, impenetrable scrub, it presented only an inaccessible cliff-face. But at length a passage was discovered in the massive, quay-like wall, a sharp, narrow cleft, that might almost have been cloven by a giant sword.

"Hey! Look there, Sid. Is that a milestone or a finger-post?" cried Chifney, as the canoe was slid into the orifice, which led to a rough flight of natural steps, ascending to the plateau above.

Following the direction of his friend's outstretched finger, Palmer saw, cut deep in the smooth, solid wall of the passage, two curved lines in the form of a heart—a repetition of the device that had appeared on the breast of the panther.

"Don't know, but it looks as though we were nearing the

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heart of the mystery," replied Palmer. "Push on, Clem. I'll fasten up the boat."

A scramble up the rude stairway, and the explorers found themselves on the cliff-top; but little rewarded their exertion.

The place was not a valley, in the ordinary sense, being bounded on the land side by rugged hills, the river running along the other face. It was a dreary spot, a fairly level plateau about a mile in length, by some three hundred yards in breadth at the widest point; the hills circling around like a strung bow, the crags bare and sterile, the plain rocky and sandy, a few coarse patches of rank grass only serving to accentuate the desolation. The river—the lake, rather—was a pleasanter prospect, stretching clear and cool into the far distance, the strange island looking more like an abandoned temple than ever.

"Don't think much of your fabled valley, Sid!" grumbled Chifney, ruefully surveying the dismal scene.

"Nevertheless, it is what we have come all the way to see," replied Palmer. "I am certain of my bearings. This is the spot, Clem. But, cheer up, it may look very different filled with moonlight. Still, my boy, you may require to possess your soul in patience for a little. According to the tradition, this 'child of the moon'—this diamond, I hope—is most clearly visible under the rays of the full moon at its zenith. The moon will not be perfect for two nights yet. Here we must remain."

They made camp in the boat in the fissure. The upper plateau was not an enticing ground, and they had no desire to be again caught unprepared by the Bosos, or kindred savages.

Till nightfall they waited; then, when the moon rose, a full, clear disc, almost perfect in shape, ascended to the plateau.

Here was a "valley of moonlight" indeed. The sandy circle was brimming with brightness. The beams appeared descending in literal showers, and their light was caught and reflected by innumerable points of fire. The men gasped; that lambent air seemed hard to breathe; they literally bathed in light. Swinging their hands, they actually felt it; as in a waterpool, their motions caused a ripple, ever extending.

Yet, after their first wonderment, they set to work in search of the greater marvel, the "child of the moon"—the big, shining diamond; but no such prodigy could they discover. Special gleams of light there were, varied in colour, bewildering in number as in dazzle; but all such proved on examination to be but split pebbles of the desert, facets of mica in the rocks, or a sheen reflected from the crystallised sands.

For hours they plodded to and fro, ever seeming on the point of success, ever meeting with disappointment; and at length, worn by wandering, depressed by dashed hopes, Palmer exclaimed:

"It's no use, Clem. The thing is not here. Let's return to the boat!"

"I have felt that notion for some time, Sid," was the reply; "but didn't like to hurt your feelings by saying so. The whole story is a fraud; the 'child of the moon' exists only in the imagination of credulous natives, whose brains have been turned by the beams."

Yet when they had reached their craft, and settled down gloomily, Palmer's dogged determination resumed its sway, and he remarked, partly to himself:

"Of course we could not find it. We looked at the wrong time, during the wrong phase of the moon. I will have another search two nights hence, when the orb is at the full."

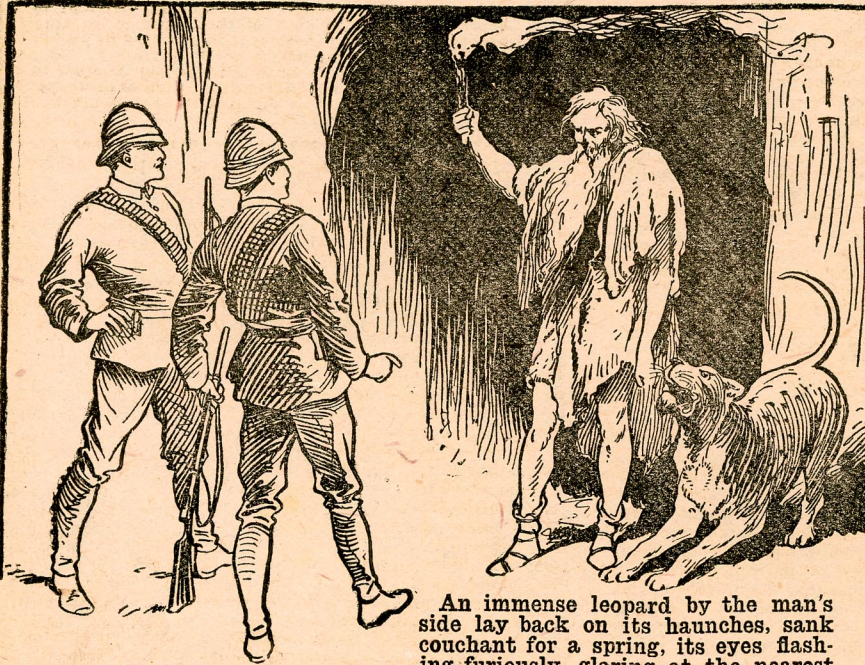
"Save us! His brain is turning also!" muttered Chifney.

For the remainder of the night Chifney slumbered heavily, Palmer dozed fitfully; but just on sunrise the sleeping man was suddenly aroused by a loud, startled shout from his chum.

"Up, Clem, up! Those pestilent Bosos are on us again!"

Ere Chifney had finished rubbing his heavy eyes, his chum had detached the painter, and shoved the canoe clear of the fissure into the lake, snatched up a paddle, and brought round her head.

A hurried glance around explained the situation. Two large war-canoes, filled with blacks, were struggling up the river, almost now debouching on the open water. Too well Chifney knew those vengeful forms; even now their savage, strident cries were borne shrill on the still morning air. Even had not his companion named them, Clement could not have mistaken the bloodthirsty river pirates, who had already so sorely beset them. The wolves were still on the trail.



An immense leopard by the man's side lay back on its haunches, sank couchant for a spring, its eyes flashing furiously, glaring at the nearest youth.

"Where to?" said Chiffney, snatching up a paddle, and digging away vigorously by the side of his friend, who already was rowing with all his might.

"To the island out yonder! We can there best make a stand. Remember our late experience!" snorted Palmer, between his strokes.

The isle lay on the still waters about a mile distant; but, as the crow flies, pursuers were nearer it than pursued, the latter having to shoot out diagonally into the lake. However, the war-canoes were still in the current—strong in the girt—and made but slow way; while the white men on the open water skimmed along like a bird, gaining with every paddle stroke.

Yet all too soon this advantage was lost; the blacks gained the lake. Then superior power enabled them to come up hand-over-hand; and, divining the point aimed at by the fugitives, they cut straight across, straining every nerve to intercept them.

"Push along, Clem. We'll do it yet!" cried Palmer. "We must, if we would save our lives; we should have no chance on the open water."

"We'll never do it!" groaned his less buoyant chum. "Oh, for a minute of that old bogey man—your friend Big-beard—to scare the wretches! He was never more sorely wanted than now."

"Row! Don't jaw!" was the brief reply. And, paddle they did, straining every muscle.

Would they gain their refuge? The island was rapidly rising, showing more like a ruin with every stroke; but faster still came on the furious followers.

Now their vengeful cries sounded loud and clear, accents of triumph in their tones; presently arrows began to fly, and though at first the shafts fell short, they dropped ever nearer, one of them latterly splintering on Chiffney's paddle with a tingling shock.

"It's all up, Sid. Let's drop our paddles; take to our rifles and die fighting!"

"No, no, Clem; push away! It's our only chance!"

Still on, like a hard-hunted rabbit making for its burrow, straining and striving with desperate, plunging strokes, till the trembling canoe seemed to leap and bound across the waters. Thicker flew the arrows; more than one struck the boat. Palmer's sun-helmet was pierced through and through the crown, but the wearer paused not to remove the missile. Yet their utmost exertions seemed futile. They were bound to be overtaken ere they could reach their vantage ground; and the despairing conviction was fast settling upon the white men that all was lost, when an event occurred that steeled their flagging muscles, and aroused fresh hope in their failing hearts.

In the grim struggle the hunted men had scarce remarked that the raucous chorus was gradually dying down. The canoes still came on; but the strident shrieks dwindled, and

lost their exultant ring. Now they ceased altogether; and more, the rowers stopped, as though struck with palsy.

Wonderingly Chiffney glanced forward at the island, half expecting to see the form of the mysterious Big-beard; but the shore was vacant, not a living thing appeared there.

"Row on, Clem. It may only be a feint, or a breath-pause, for the final dash," gasped Palmer. And in shot the canoe, like a homing-pigeon to its cot.

A broad, flat stone, almost level with the water, afforded a landing. Out sprang the youths, rifles in hand. Palmer hatched the canoe high on the shelf; then, darting up a short, sloping bank, the two men threw themselves behind a low parapet, prepared to bar the way to their pursuers. Now the white men were in a strong position. They could at least give good account of themselves, and sell their lives dearly.

Their assailants! Their pursuers! The Britons could scarce believe the evidence of their eyesight. The canoes had turned, the blacks were paddling dejectedly away. They had failed to close their fingers when their prey was actually within grasp.

And presently the two boats vanished round the bend, heading down the river.

CHAPTER 7.

THE RUINED TEMPLES—ENTOMBED IN THE CATACOMBS—A LEOPARD IN THE DARKNESS—DELIVERANCE.

"What is the meaning of it?" ejaculated Chiffney, at length. "I fancied at first that the old bogey, Big-beard, had scared away the blacks again; but there is no sign of our friend here."

"Is there not? What is that?" corrected Palmer, pointing to a smooth portion of the sloping rock, whereon was clearly chiselled the now familiar design of the heart.

"Then you couple those marks with the old man and beast-tamer, Sid?"

"I do, Clem; though I cannot explain the connection yet. Perhaps time will tell."

"But come, lad, since we are now unmolested, let us have a look at this place. It reminds me of views I have seen of some of the sacred islands of the Lower Nile."

"Right you are, Sid. Wait a moment, though. I see there are old buildings here; we may want a light during our explorations. I will cut a foot off our painter, it will serve as a torch, if need be. All right now; come on."

The face of the island on which the two Englishmen found themselves was about a quarter of a mile long, most of the distance being spanned by a colonnade, now falling into ruin, a number of date-palms, planted in line across the front, affording a restful shade.

Piercing the colonnade, the two reached and entered an ancient temple. The interior hall was about fifty feet wide, by over sixty in length; and fourteen massive columns supported the arching roof, the capitols being curiously and elaborately carved with various quaint forms of Eastern design.

In rear of this was a second, and much larger temple, but in much less perfect preservation. The roof was fallen, the floor encumbered; but here and there could be seen representations of the head of the Egyptian deity, Athor, and sculptured designs of Isis; while the walls were covered with cryptograms, and picture-readings, in the ancient style of Egyptian art—stiff and "wooden."

"The great altar once stood here," remarked Palmer.

"Did it?" replied Chiffney. "Then here is the priest's private passage down to the crypt. Let's explore the vaults, Sid. We may make a find there to rival your diamond!" And, lighting his flambeau, Clement led the way down a dark, corkscREW stairway, broken and ruined, into the depths below.

They found themselves in a long, arched passage, utterly dark, save for the gleam of their torch. Even the torchlight seemed smothered and beaten back, as if awed by the cimmerian

gloom of ages unknown, and the chill, deathly silence was weirdly oppressive.

Still Chiffney stepped forward inquisitively—albeit on tip-toe—holding his torch aloft, closely followed by his friend.

On they stole, through winding, devious ways, passing the mouth of more than one branching gallery, the passage they threaded being punctuated by deep alcoves.

"Catacombs, I fancy," whispered Palmer. "You are more likely to find old world mummies than jewels here, Clem."

"Maybe both," replied the leader. "Those old fellows often had their treasures buried with them, to enable them to cut a grand figure, and pay their way royally in the next world. So I have heard, at least."

"Hallo! What's that?"

There was a soft beat of wings—a quick, sharp rush of deathly cold air. A great, spreading form sprang from the gloom, and, dashing against the light, immediately extinguished it, plunging all in darkness—a darkness that might almost be felt.

"A great bat. I just caught sight of its looming shadow, and the shiver of its outspread wings," cried Palmer. "Light up again, Clem. I don't like the thought of the ghoulish thing in the darkness," he added nervously.

For some moments there was a strained pause; then Chiffney replied: "I can't find my matchbox, Sid. Haven't got it. Must have dropped the thing when I lighted the torch. Lend me yours. Quick, man! I like this black horror as little as yourself."

"Mercy on us! I have not mine with me. I left it in the canoe!" groaned Palmer. Then, rousing himself, he added, shudderingly: "Come, let us retrace our steps—let us leave this horrible charnel-house, and return to the living world. Give me your hand, Clem—so—we must not be separated!"

But, strive as they might, they found it impossible to discover the exit. The passage through which they had advanced had been crooked and devious, and in their curiosity they had not noted its general direction; other corridors branched off continually on either hand. And, after a long, painful wandering through the murk, feeling their way by the broken walls, stumbling over obstructions on the rough ground, they grew utterly bewildered, and the dismal conviction was forced upon them that they were utterly lost—hopelessly entangled in the mazy, subterranean labyrinth.

"I have led the way to ruin!" groaned Chiffney. "Death stares us in the face—and such a death! What can we do, Sid?"

"I don't know. Nothing but wait for it, I fancy," returned Palmer, equally gloomily. "Hush! Hark! What was that? Something stirred!"

A low, purring growl sounded ominously in the blackness. Death, in speedier form, was near.

"A leopard's snarl! I know the sound," breathed Palmer. "You have your revolver, Clem, as I have mine; our knives as well! Back to back, old chum, and let us meet the thing when it comes! At least we can die fighting, if we cannot see our foe!"

For some fateful moments they stood in thrilling pause, lack to back, weapons in hand, every nerve and sense at utmost strain, waiting for the death grapple. Then the weird silence was broken by a voice, deep and solemn, fitting accents for that ancient tomb.

"What rash mortals dare to intrude upon the sacred shades of Isis?"

"Ha!" cried Palmer. "You speak English. You are English. I cannot be mistaken in the tones. We are two Britons, who have accidentally lost ourselves in this dark labyrinth. Even now we are menaced by another danger—a wild beast is somewhere close by. In the name of our common country, I ask—may, demand—your aid."

"And shall have it!" answered the voice, now sweet and low.

Then, suddenly as midnight lightning, a great, dazzling flash arose, yet the flame burned steadily. And on his eyes becoming accustomed to the glare, Palmer discovered a man standing near, holding high a blazing torch—an old man, wearing a long white beard—Bonci-ba.

At the sudden illumination, an immense leopard by the man's side lay back on its haunches, sank couchant for a spring, its eyes, flashing furiously, glaring at the nearest youth; but a few words from Big-beard quelled the ferocity of the brute. A sentence, sharply uttered in an uncouth

tongue, caused it to lower its angry crest and veil its furious eyes; then, at a sign, it bounded away, and was lost in the darkness, though not before Palmer had clearly distinguished the heart-shaped mark on its breast.

Without a further word, the old man turned to the wall, and, feeling it over, pressing upon it, swung back a large portion of the seemingly solid rock, disclosing the foot of a spiral staircase, by which he took his stand, light in hand, saying briefly: "Mount; I follow."

No second invitation was necessary. And scrambling up the ruined steps, the two youths emerged from the hoary tombs, and plunged into light and life, finding themselves again in the smaller temple, where they were presently joined by their deliverer.

CHAPTER 8.

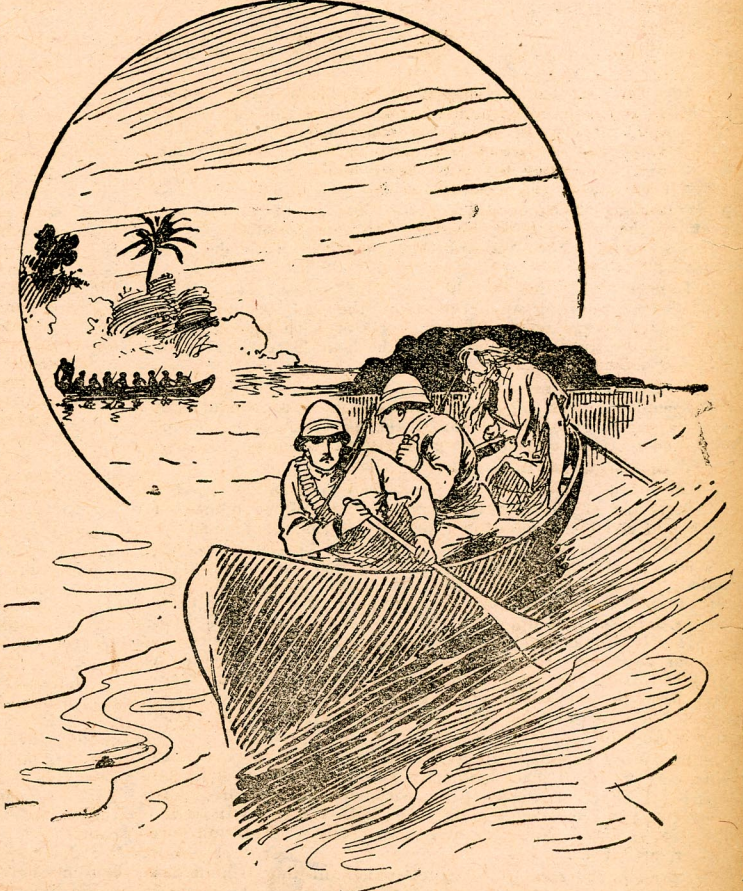
A MYSTERIOUS BEING—A WONDROUS STORY.

"You doubtless wonder at my timely appearances," said the old man, when the three had seated themselves in front of the colonnade, close by the canoe. "You marvel, perhaps, at my presence here, and would ask explanations; but tell me your story first—be candid and open with me—then, perhaps, I may be equally frank with you."

Accordingly Palmer related unreservedly the nature of their voyage, the object of his quest—"the child of the moon." "You know it, doubtless; have seen it, probably," the youth interpolated.

"Oh, yes. I know it well; have seen it often," was the quiet reply. "But you must not seek aid in your search from me. If you desire to wear it, you must win it for yourself. This much I will tell you, however. You are right in your supposition. You will only discover it, if at all, under the full moon at its zenith."

On the two youths mentioning their names, the old man started violently at the introduction to Clement Chiffney, and he closely questioned that youth regarding his parentage and relatives; but at last, in deference to the pleadings of the lads, consented to relate his own story.



So they started down stream—lusty life at the paddles, grim death at the rudder.

"Yes," he began, "as Mr. Palmer surmised, I am an Englishman, although for twenty years I have lived as an outcast in these wilds, consorting only with brute beasts, and the still more savage men.

"Of the cause of my exile, I scarcely care to speak at length, even now. Suffice it to say that in a great catastrophe I lost my wife, to whom I was tenderly attached, and to whom I had been married little more than a year. I think I lost my reason as well—I could not bear to mix with my countrymen, even to look upon my fellow-creatures. I fled to Sierra Leone, seeking the 'white man's grave'; but it would not receive me. Then I wandered aimlessly up country, and have roamed this district ever since.

"Yet I have still one tie binding me to England. I have a child there. At the time my wife was taken from me we had a baby-girl, scarcely a month old. Marvellously it survived the catastrophe that overwhelmed my poor wife; but as I could not take about an infant with me in my wanderings, I placed it in secure hands to tend and rear.

"I have never seen the child since—she must be a woman now; but I have not forgotten, or altogether neglected, my daughter. Once every year I write to her; once in every such interval I hear of her welfare, our communications passing through channels I myself established.

"My only regret now is that I shall never see her—that my Dorothy will never know her father, nor even her own kith and kin, for she has been brought up by the hands of strangers. But she wants for nothing. She has wealth in abundance. I settled all my means upon the babe ere I left England, and in this wilderness I have found further fortune. But what use have I for wealth here? I sent it all to Dorothy."

"You have not yet told us your own name, sir," suggested Palmer gently.

"My name, eh! You want to know that?" returned the old man quickly, feverishly. "Well," he continued, after a momentary pause, "I will tell you that also.

"It is John Hart."

As he spoke, he looked keenly, questioningly, at Chiffney rather than at his interrogator; but the name appeared to stir no familiar strain in the young man's memory.

"Hart!" cried Palmer, amazed. "Then, sir, it is you who have cut that heart-shaped mark all around this district, clipped it even on the breasts of furious beasts of prey?"

"Just so," replied Mr. Hart. "The notion struck me—doubtless it was a foolish one—but I marked the sign of my name wherever I went, just as one thoughtlessly scribbles or cuts his name or initials on some tree or rock. A bad habit, but what did it matter in this unknown land."

"All very well," said Sidney, "but you did not confine your markings to trees and rocks. What about your monogram on the breasts of the beasts? Can you tame their savage natures, sir? How else did they permit you to do your clipping?"

"Tame them!" cried the old man, "of course I can. Have not I been practising upon them for the last twenty years. Brutes are savage only with strangers, or with their natural foes. I have lived so intimately with them I have become a familiar friend.

"You marvel at my mastery over the beasts? To my mind my ascendancy over the human brutes is more wonderful; yet even these bloodthirsty, cannibalistic, piratical Bosos reverence and fear me, as you have good reason to know.

"Take the latest instance.

"On this island—which was formerly sacred to the worship of Osiris and of Isis—I have established one of my homes. I have laid strict commands on the natives that they must respect and avoid it. You have seen how my orders are obeyed. The sanguinary Bosos, hunting you for your heart's-blood, paused ere they reached the margin of the isle, and withdrew when you crossed the threshold. Not one of these blacks dare set foot upon this spot to save his life. His life? Poof! He thinks but little of that; my influence is much further reaching. Remember that fact should you be again pressed. Here you are absolutely safe from the Bosos. Here you have perfect sanctuary. I need not caution you not again to tempt the catacombs, but all the surface of the island is free to you.

"But now, friends, I must leave you. Nay, seek not to stay me; we shall meet again ere you turn your face homewards. I shall certainly speak with you once more, may even give you a message to carry back with you to civilisation; but that point I must consider more fully. Farewell, or, rather, au revoir!"

So saying, the strange being retired, vanishing behind the colonnade like the ghost of one of the priests of the ancient Egyptian religion, so long ago associated with the spot.

CHAPTER 9.

THE DIAMOND-HUNTER—A CLEVER EXPEDIENT—EUREKA—FRESH PERIL.

On the night of the full moon, Palmer and Chiffney stood again in the place known as the "valley of moonlight."

They had spent the interval quietly at the sacred isle, seeing no more of its mysterious master—or, indeed, of any human being—the sanguinary Bosos having put in no further appearance.

In the dusk of that fateful evening, the destined night, they had paddled across the lake, and put in at the cutting of their former landing, there remaining patiently until the appointed time.

As they lay waiting they noticed again the heart-mark. It appeared even fresher and sharper, as though recently cleaned and scraped. Was it a message from their mysterious protector, a guiding mark from their mystic friend? Who could say. Certainly it cheered them on like a "Bravo" from an ally.

As the moon neared her zenith, the two youths mounted to the plateau, and once more plunged into the bewildering radiance; but now the light and dazzle, the shivering shimmer, almost tangible, was greatly increased.

The sands underfoot stirred like molten gold, desert pebbles shone like jewels, fiery sparks darted and twinkled as though the ground was covered with millions of chameleon lizards.

The very air was alive with trembling light, the atmosphere palpitating with shimmering lustre; so strong beat the clear moon rays their weight and pressure as they fell were distinct.

Yet there was no sign of the "child of the moon." All that glorious lustre was intangible and unreal as a dream; dawn would bring the waking, showing the bare, desert scene in all its nakedness.

But, resolute and undeterred, Palmer strode across the plateau to the point indicated in the legend—the very centre of the plain—he having marked the exact spot by driving a stake on his previous visit, Chiffney, much more sceptical, but equally curious, plodding by his side.

They glanced nervously around as they plunged through the dazzling flood. So bright was the light, so intense the glow, it seemed as though their persons must be visible, their errand known to all the world.

And now the stake was all but reached; driven firmly, it had remained undisturbed, and now stood out like a black seal on that lustrous page.

Ere reaching it, Palmer suddenly halted, gripped his friend's arm, and silently pointed forward.

Streaming through the shimmering lustre, falling directly upon the peg, ran a long lambent line of brighter colour, like a thread of pale gold across the steely-blue of a polished Bessmer plate.

Then, with a wild cry, Sidney sprang forward, plunged into the radiance, and turned his face to the light. Instantly his features were transformed, losing the pale, deathlike hue of the moonbeams, flushing crimson under the beams.

There, far away on the right, high up on the hills, flashing in ruby and gold like the planet Mars on a clear, cloudless night, shone the fabled light.

"There! There! Look! Look!" he gasped. "The 'child of the moon!' The marvellous jewel!"

It was plain enough. There was no doubting its existence, but it was still far out of reach. At the lower end of the plateau close by the lake, where the river narrowed from the open waters, three tall peaks stood silhouetted against the starry canopy, and in the centre turret blazed the wonder. Yet others had seen it from that point; others had sought it, but all had failed to find it.

Impulsively Chiffney, who had joined his friend in the halo, made a rush towards it, but stopped dead after a few bounds, rubbing his bewildered eyes. The light suddenly went out. It was extinguished as quickly as though switched off by an electric lever.

From every point they tested the thing. In front, in rear, to right, to left; but always the light vanished when a few paces were made from the peg in any direction.

"It is out of reach; unapproachable—as secure in its isolation as the North Pole!" mumbled Chiffney.

But not for naught had Palmer bestowed long and careful thought over the problem; he was prepared for the check.

"No, no!" he cried. "I have a notion. I have considered this difficulty. Stand still by the peg, Clem. Remain on guard. Keep your eyes on the light. Do not lose sight of it for an instant!" Then he bounded off in the direction of the canoe.

Palmer spoke and acted like one distraught; but the youth had method in his madness. Almost directly he was back again, bearing a bundle in his arms. Part of his load was a light, wooden tripod, such as is used by land-surveyors; and

he fixed the legs firmly in the ground close by the peg, in the full blaze of the streaming light.

A powerful pocket telescope was next produced. The instrument was extended, and fixed upon the stand; laid and levelled, aiming at the glow.

"There!" he cried, after a long, steady stare, "look and see for yourself, Clem. The light burns straight in the centre of the lens; its brilliancy is dazzling; who says we cannot locate it?"

"Now, old chum," he continued, as Chiffney satisfied himself with a peep, "we must work this thing in company—and we'll do it, too. You make tracks, and by dawn be upon that centre peak. I will remain here, guarding the telescope; and so soon as there is light enough, you must turn your gaze upon me, and act according to my directions.

"See these two flags? the red pennon at arm outstretched means—move to your right; the blue pennant—to your left. One upraised means mount higher, depressed means descend.

"I will keep the telescope exactly in this position, Clem; and with daylight will bring you within its focus, right in the centre of the glass. Mark that spot, for there must lie the brilliant. Both flags upraised together and waved in triumph will be my signal. I will then join you as soon as possible. Now, off you go, old fellow. You shall be first at the cradle of the 'child of the moon,' but we will wake it together."

An hour after sunrise, after panting up the steep, Palmer joined his friend.

Chiffney was calmly seated near the top of the peak, his back against a rock, placidly puffing at his pipe—no sign of triumph in his attitude, but rather an expression of resigned disappointment; a sort of "I told you so" demeanour.

"Well, here you are at last, o.d fellow!" he cried. "I can congratulate you on your ingenuity, but that is all the reward you will find in this place. Here is the spot. I marked it carefully when you signalled; but there is neither child nor jewel about. Literally, it's all moonshine, Sid. See these mica veinings in the rock? They it must have been that caused the glitter."

Dumbly Palmer looked at his companion's mark—a cross scratched on an upright slab—and he shivered as though from a cold water douche. Yet even now his fancy was not quelled. He began seeking and sniffing around like an inquisitive terrier.

Suddenly he gave a wild shout, and a smart, upward spring.

"What's that?" he cried. "Eureka!"
Higher on the peak, almost at the summit, like a wart on an old man's brow, a little round knob stood out from the bare surface; and around the excrescence was cut that strange, yet familiar device, the sign of the heart—the lines freshly graven. The bulb, the size of a clenched fist, was of dull, whitish colour, differing completely from the blue rock in which it was imbedded, like an almond in a cake; but it showed neither fire nor lustre.

"That! It's only a common pebble!" exclaimed Chiffney contemptuously.

"I tell you it's the gem—a diamond of unheard of size!" cried Palmer. "I know something of jewels, and cannot be mistaken in this. Why, you noodle, don't you know that diamonds owe their fire to their treatment. An uncut stone in daylight is as lustreless as a lump of coal. And, see that mark? That proves I am right. Mr. Hart has lately traced his sign around the stone as a guide to us should we have perseverance enough for its discovery."

As the youth spoke, he had dropped on his knees beside the coveted object. A magazine-knife containing many appliances served as geological hammer, pick, and lever; and, gouging and delving, scraping and scratching, he at length detached the knob—which was even larger than it had seemed at first—and held in his hands the "child of the moon."

Still sceptical, Chiffney had not taken much interest in the disinterment; but, standing idly, surveyed the panorama outspread below.

Suddenly he started, gazed fixedly, then shouted:
"Up, Sid, up! Quit that wretched stone—diamond or pebble! Here are the Bosos once more. By George! they are after us again."

CHAPTER 10.

A RACE FOR LIFE—HUNTED HOME—A PARTHIAN SHAFT.

True was the call.

Springing to his feet, slipping his treasure into his jacket-pocket as he leaped, Palmer followed his companion's startled gaze, and viewed the ominous thunder-cloud that had so suddenly arisen on his sunny sky.

Out on the plateau, close by their landing-place, surrounding the cutting, indeed, in which lay the white men's canoe, more than a score of black figures were running and swarming. Reduced by distance, they looked like a body of ants; yet

they were clearly distinguishable as the river pirates, the sanguinary Bosos, the implacable enemies of the explorers.

The natives did not appear to have reached the canoe—they were pouncing upon it; but just as some of their number were about to descend the gully, others of the band caught sight of the white men, standing prominently upon the peak.

At once a wolfish howl was raised, the rush on the boat was stayed; and, turning instead upon the living prey, the whole black pack came flying along the plateau, yelling and yelping like hounds, with the quarry full in view.

"Cornered!" cried Chiffney. "Cut off from our base. Our rifles, our reserve ammunition, all our stores and effects are in the canoe. We have only our revolvers with us, and some spare cartridges in our belts. Well, we must do the best we can with these. We will make a stand here, Sid. The position is in our favour. We can roll down rocks, and, perhaps, bowl over some of those wretches as they climb up, then trust to our barkers!"

"Perhaps we can do better," replied Palmer, darting a swift, searching look around. "Yes, yes; I have it. We will beat these demons at their own game; check them with their own pieces."

"Look! They have landed lower down the lake, and scouted up the plateau. See! there are their two boats lying on the strand at the mouth of the river. We are actually nearer the canoes than are their owners. As I live, the boats are entirely unwatched and unguarded. Let us make a dash for them, Clem. If they have cut us off from our own boat, we will secure theirs. We will launch on the lake and laugh at them!"

"Bravo, Sid! Good boy! I'm with you!" agreed Chiffney briefly.

There was no time to spare, the blacks were coming on like bloodhounds, baying as fiercely; and the English youths quickly withdrew behind the peak, bringing the massive rocks between themselves and their vengeful adversaries. The menaced ones hoped that the assailants, fearing an ambuscade, or, at least, a stout defence, might moderate their advance, and ascend with greater caution.

But, not for an instant did the youths pause to witness the result of their blind. No sooner were they hidden from view, than they made swift tracks towards the enemy's flotilla. The boats themselves were now out of sight; but their direction had been noted, and with headlong speed the white men made for them.

Yet the further side of the hills was even more broken and rugged than the valley face. Huge, jagged boulders barred the way, deep fissures gaped and yawned; but onwards they plunged, scrambling over or circling round the rocks, leaping the gaps where they could, dashing diagonally down the mountain, heading generally in the desired direction.

On they rushed, in silence, save for their panting breaths, or the occasional rumbling crash of a dislodged boulder, as it rolled smashing into some ravine.

At length they gained the base of the shoulder of the hill—the rocky spur ended some distance from the water, and a rough slope only lay between. And there were the coveted boats. The two canoes lay with their bows on the beach, absolutely unguarded, not two hundred yards away.

"Now for it!" panted Palmer. And the two lads rushed down the incline, like racers covering the last lap.

But now they were viewed. A shrill, surprised yell from the summit caused them to glance back, and several black figures could be seen on the position they had just abandoned. Other enemies were storming the hill on the front side, and at once the course of the whole pursuing pack was diverted, the blacks coming streaming along and down the spur, evidently fathoming the ruse of the fugitives, resolved to cut them off and overwhelm them ere they could get afloat. For the sore-pressed whites it was a race for existence—life the prize, death the penalty.

Yet they were nearer the goal; the ground, too, was in their favour, and Clem and Sid reached the boats some distance in advance.

Chiffney seized one of them at once, calling upon Palmer to aid him in its launch; but Sidney paused to give momentary attention to the other craft. A few hard kicks at its fragile bottom stove it in, rendering it quite unseaworthy; then the provident youth flew to assist his friend.

The boat was a big one, yet fairly light, and their joint exertions sufficed to float it. Then, wading in as far as possible, they sprang on board with a parting shove that shot the craft out into the lake.

And none too soon. Already the shore was lined, a rush of spears whistling overhead, one of which carried away Palmer's helmet, impaled on its point; but paddles lay there in plenty, and, working desperately, the two rowed themselves out of range.

But not beyond arrow-flight. Some of the Bosos strung their

bows, and venomous missiles began to fly, the human targets protecting themselves as best they could behind the side of the craft. And, fortunately, the black fellows were disorganised through the surprise, some of the band turning their attention to the damaged boat, even attempting to float it—a futile effort—and presently the fugitives drew beyond reach of harm.

"How now? Where to?" breathed Chiffney briefly.
 "To our own boat," was the unexpected reply. "See! these rascals have abandoned it in their hunt for us. It lies just as we left it. We can gain it first, I think. We must, at least attempt it, Clem, as all our stores and defences are in it."
 "Right, as usual, old chum!" was the hearty response.

Thus the hunted ones headed for the cutting, the savages following along the shore; but soon the quick-witted blacks defined the manoeuvre, and set off, yelling, for the landing-place, resolved to secure the prize they had neglected.

But now fortune further favoured the whites. They had a straight course, and although the boat was large, she travelled fast under a couple of paddles vigorously wielded.

On the other hand, the way of the Bosos was rough and broken. There was no path whatever, and they had to make such progress as they could over broken rocks, gaps, and fissures. The curving shore-line, moreover, added to the actual distance.

Thus it happened that the water-party reached the gap first. The big canoe was run alongside the smaller one (the latter just as it had been left). Chiffney sprang on board his familiar craft; but Palmer paused, as before, to smash the one canoe before launching in the other, thus baffling pursuit. He made a vigorous stamp on the bottom; but, his foot slipping, missed his kick, and did no damage. He was then half in, half out of his own canoe, the revengeful savages were drawing close, their strident cries sounding even louder on the ear; and, without waiting to repeat the blow, he shoved the craft he was abandoning out into the lake, and scrambled in beside his friend, shooting out the smaller canoe with the same action.

Again the two were hard-pressed. Scarce was the gully cleared ere the outwitted and vindictive Bosos gained the cliffs above. Well was it, then, for the white men that the blacks were so blown and spent with running and scrambling, they lacked their wonted strength and skill with their weapons. A few spears were thrown, but the missiles lacked aim and power.

Yet Palmer had committed a mistake. In his frantic haste he had but launched the big canoe into the lake. Drifting derelict, he had supposed it beyond reach from the land; but the youth had forgotten that his pursuers were water-rats.

Ere the oversight could be rectified, half a dozen black forms plunged into the lake; the drifting boat was secured, and dragged to land; then, quickly manned, it set off in pursuit.

"How now, Sid?" queried Chiffney, seeking advice as usual.
 "Back to the island, of course!" replied Palmer shortly.
 "Mr. Hart told us those demons dare not land there! Of that we had proof last voyage. Peg away, Clem. Paddle your hardest. I think we can do it as we did before."

But two paddles are weak against a dozen. The smaller canoe had gained a considerable lead, but faster and faster came on the bigger craft behind; the blacks, enraged by previous defeats, striving their utmost to snatch victory at the finish.

Nearer and nearer loomed the island, the City of Refuge; but closer and closer drew the avenging crowd. Fate trembled in the balance. The leading boat seemed to have crossed the imaginary line barring the prohibited isle, but still the pursuers came on. Had they overlooked, or forgotten the injunction? Did they dare to disobey their dreaded Big-beard? So close they came, only a couple of lengths separated the two crafts; it looked as though they would land together, locked in furious fight. Palmer was about to drop his paddle and grasp his weapons, to fight like a cornered lion, when suddenly the following boat swerved, rounded, and as she came broadside on, a flight of arrows was discharged.

Yet, in the haste of the movement, the aim was bad; the shafts flew overhead, most of them rattling and splintering against the rocky shore.

But not all. As the bows twanged, a figure suddenly appeared on the parapet of the isle, a familiar form, that of Mr. Hart; and, swif as he came, a missile as sharply found its mark. An arrow entered deeply into his breast, pinning his long white beard to his chest.

Appalled, the natives were stunned into momentary silence; then a terrified shout arose. "Bonci-ba! Bonci-ba!" they wailed, their cries ear-piercing as an Irish "keen." Then with swift strokes they paddled away, still wailing as they went.

The stricken man stood still as a statue for a few seconds; then his form swayed and lurched; he pitched heavily down the slope, and would have rolled into the lake had not he been caught in the strong arms of Clement Chiffney.

CHAPTER 11.

A STRANGE RECOGNITION—DEATH OF BIG-BEARD—A WEIRD FUNERAL—JOURNEY—"ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL."

"Are you much hurt, sir? Do you suffer much pain?" inquired Chiffney concernedly, when the two youths had carried the wounded man into the first temple, and laid him on their cloaks.

"Hurt? Ay, fatally! Pain? Yes, I feel the pangs of death upon me!" muttered the stricken one.

"Surely not. At least, let us do what we can," said Palmer. "This arrow is but a slender one," he added, carefully withdrawing the insidious shaft.

"It is poisoned," replied the wounded man; "tipped with the venom of the whistle-snake. I feel the poison stirring in my blood now; nothing can stop or even arrest its spread. Why talk of it when I have so short a time to live?"

"Met you the child of the moon's face to face?" he inquired.

"There it is, sir," replied Palmer, taking the knob from his pocket.

"So. I felt sure you would succeed, but doubtless my mark served for guidance. Ay, I have been of some use to you, and may be yet; now I ask a service in return." Then, addressing Chiffney, he said, slowly and clearly:

"Clement Chiffney, what was your mother's maiden name?"

"Mary Hart, sir," replied that youth. "Why—why—is it possible—"

The dying man stopped him with a wave, adding another query.

"And did you never hear of your mother's brother, John Hart?"

"Yes, sir, often when I was young; but as that of a dead man. My mother cherishes his memory even now. But, he died long ago—at least, we have always supposed so. Travelling with his wife and infant daughter in Russia, the party was involved in accident in which hundreds of lives were lost. With much difficulty the lady was traced, but she was amongst the dead, and had already been buried. No sign could be found of the father or the child; but it seemed certain they had perished also. Scores of the dead had been buried unidentified. But can it be—is it possible—"

"Not only possible, but certain," returned the old man, smiling faintly. "Clement Chiffney, I am your uncle, John Hart. My story, since that frightful catastrophe, I have already told you; such reasons as I had for my seclusion have been already related.

"I indicated I had a request to make. Here it is—the petition of a man on the threshold of death. Clement Chiffney, you must return at once to England, and seek out my daughter, your cousin, Dorothy Hart. There is where she is to be found. I had already decided to ask you to do this, and had written down the address. You will find her wealthy. I left her ample means when I went away, and have considerably added to her estate from here. But she is living amongst strangers, in a foreign land. That must not be. She should know and be known to her own kith and kin. Introduce yourself to her, Clement. Present her to my sister, your mother; then let her future be as seems best. Give her her father's dying message, his undying love; and say that although I have seemed to neglect her for a lifetime, I never have forgotten her for a day.

"One more request, and that on my own behalf. Death is pressing me hard; I fear him not, yet I would not be buried like a dead dog in the desert. I would that my bones were laid in consecrated ground.

"You must carry my body to Goa, nephew Clement. There is a mission station, and there would I be buried.

"Even in death will I protect you. Listen both. Alone, you have but little chance to pass down the river. The sanguinary Bosos, infuriated by their losses, are waiting for you like hungry wolves. By yourselves you could never pass their lairs and ambushes. But, mark me; for your sakes and mine.

"You must fix my corpse in the stern of your canoe. Must seat and secure my dead body, in a lifelike position. That will be ample protection. The Bosos will not dare molest a craft steered by Bonci-ba.

"Now I have done. Death's cold hand is closing over my heart. All that I have asked will you promise to perform—will you pledge yourselves to one who is now entering the shades of death?"

"I promise, uncle," replied Chiffney brokenly.

Palmer simply grasped the old man's hand in silence. Then, a tremor shook the old limbs, the grey head fell back, a pale, greenish hue overspread the palid features, the jaw dropped. Big-beard was dead.

To the very letter the will of the deceased was executed, his wishes carried out.

Tenderly, with the utmost reverence, the body of Mr. Hart

was placed in the stern of the canoe and there firmly fixed, the position appearing perfectly natural—that of a sitting man in active life, keenly on the alert, his hand resting upon the steering paddle.

So they started down stream, lusty life at the paddles, grim death at the rudder. A weird journey, which, however, proved uninterrupted.

Black faces peered at the voyagers from amongst the verdure on the banks, often scowlingly; but the boat bearing Bonci-ba was sacred to the Bosos, only his name, with a tremulous prayer for grace, sometimes came whispering across the waters.

All nature recognised the presence of its friend and master. Monkeys called and chatted familiarly, pausing for the reply that came not. Gaudy paroquettes and gay macaws screamed salutations and passed a friendly message; the very reeds on the banks as they stirred and shook, the forest trees as they rustled their leaves, acknowledged the presence of their lord; the whole atmosphere seemed alive with the breathing, tingling name—"Bonci-ba! Bonci-ba!"—a weird, thrilling whisper that continuously enwrapped the canoe on its course down stream; a fitting requiem for that old lover of nature on his last journey; a perfect funeral for the voluntary exile.

The body was buried at Goa, in consecrated ground, under the ministrations of the mission chaplain, and there the wanderer found rest.

Both youths returned to England by the next opportunity, Chiffney to carry out the behests of his lately recovered, lately lost uncle; Palmer to deal with his wondrous find.

Chiffney found Dorothy Hart at the address given, and

afforded the girl some consolation for the loss of the father she had never known, by introducing his cousin to a large circle of sympathetic relatives.

But the two soon developed a more tender tie. Clement and Dorothy propose to adopt a closer relation than cousinship. They are engaged to be married. It is true, Dorothy Hart is a considerable heiress, while Clement Chiffney is but a poor man; but the girl declares that the fortune her fiancée has brought her in the wealth of love she now enjoys far outweighs any worldly riches.

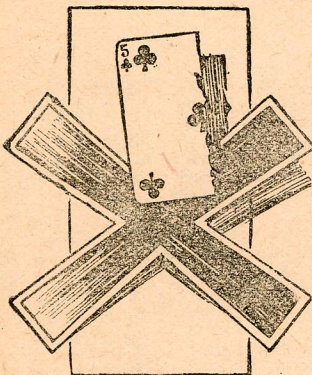
Sidney Palmer found the diamond by far to exceed his most sanguine expectations.

Cleaned and polished, it weighed over one thousand carats, and was pronounced by experts to be practically perfect. The Orloff diamond, previously the largest known in the world, and which is now set in the Russian sceptre, and cost the Empress Catherine £90,000, weighs only 194½ carats; while our own Koh-i-noor, our Queen's biggest brilliant, scales but 106 carats (though the latter was materially reduced by unskilful cutting).

Palmer's find proved worth a kingdom—an empire. So transcendent was its value, it was far beyond the purse of any single purchaser, noble or parvenu, kingly or private.

The fortunate finder has had it cut up and divided; portions have been put on the market and disposed of; and already Sidney Palmer finds himself a twice told millionaire, his wondrous fortune firmly built upon the most firm foundation—hard cash and real estate—yet it has all accrued from the fabled "child of the moon."

THE END.



THE SIGN OF THE SCARLET CROSS

By CLAUD HEATHCOTE,

Author of "Four British Boys," "Val the Boy Acrobat," "Roy Royal of St. Miriam's," "The Red Light," "Dick Danvers," &c.

BEGIN HERE.

The mysterious sign of the Scarlet Cross—what is it? If you wish to take part in the absorbing quest in which so many readers have been engaged week by week by means of the strange story, now for the first time told in our pages, you can do so by reading the following summary of the chief events which have already been unfolded:

The starting point of the story is the fifteenth birthday of Harry. Harry and his supposed father, Pierre Evison, are about to celebrate the occasion, when Harry's great chum, Shaggy, a newsboy, enters, and tells them that a body has been dragged from the Thames at Limehouse, and that on the breast of the dead man is a strange tattoo—a scarlet cross, and half of the five of clubs. On hearing this, Pierre Evison turns deadly pale.

Harry asks Shaggy to tea. The newsboy tells his chum that he has a few papers to sell first, and goes out.

He does not return, and Harry sets out in search of him.

In the street he meets Paul Lamaret, who asks if he knows where Pierre Evison lives. Harry directs him to their home, and goes on his way.

A few moments later Paul Lamaret enters, and tells him that he has come to take his life because he has not killed one Horace Temple, as he promised to do. The pair fight with rapiers, and Pierre is mortally wounded. The murderer escapes.

On Harry's return he discovers Pierre dying, and is told by him that he is not his son; that his family name is Temple; and that he must beware of the Lamarets, all of whom are marked on the breast with the scarlet cross and the half of the five of clubs. Then he falls back dead.

Through the craftiness of Mawker, a lodger in the house and the father of a fair girl, Angela, Harry is next day arrested on a charge of theft. But he escapes from the policeman, for the purpose of placing some mementoes on the breast of Pierre.

To accomplish this, he is compelled to visit the mortuary at midnight, and while discharging this sacred duty, a lady (whose face he cannot see) enters and places a bunch of flowers on the shroud. Harry afterwards overhears a conversation between this mysterious lady and the organist of the church. Then, having fulfilled his duty, he voluntarily gives himself up to the police.

He is tried, and sentenced to be sent to a reformatory for a year. He escapes, in company with a lad called Probyn. They are heard by Merrick, the reformatory bully, who arouses the officials. Probyn stays behind.

Harry tramps to London, and finds Shaggy.

Harry is supposed to have been shot. Together Shaggy and he go to Stentham, and put up at the village inn. Paul Lamaret and a Mr. Trevelyan are also staying there.

Mr. Trevelyan and Lamaret fight a duel, in which Lamaret is wounded. Mr. Trevelyan disappears. Harry learns from Lamaret's mutterings that Mr. Trevelyan is really his father, Horace Temple.

Lamaret is carried to the inn. One day Merrick, who turns out to be Lamaret's son, visits the wounded man, and tells him how he has been deceived in thinking Harry dead. Lamaret disappears.

On Harry's return to London he discovers that a furore has been created by a great operatic artiste, known as Pauline Anconia. He is amazed to find that this brilliant vocalist is the lady who placed the bunch of flowers on Pierre Evison's shroud in the mortuary. Lamaret again turns up, disguised as an old crossing-sweeper. Neither Harry nor Shaggy is aware that their enemy is so near; and while Harry is engaged in writing to Probyn at the reformatory, he is startled by the door opening and the entrance of the reformatory bully. The pair are fighting when Lord Persyth enters, and asks Harry the secret of Anconia's life. Harry refuses to tell him anything, and walks to the window. He sees his father walking below.

THE STORY OF AN ATTEMPT TO ROB THE BANK OF ENGLAND.
See next Friday's "UNION JACK."

CHAPTER 61.

ON THE TRACK AND OFF IT—THE CROSSING-SWEEPER'S RUSE.

"What's wrong—what's the matter?" demanded Lord Forsyth, coming to the window where Harry was standing.

Harry did not answer. He stood there for a moment as one mesmerised, watching the figure of his father as it went along the street. Then he cried:

"I will return in a few minutes!"

Before the astonished lord could protest, Harry had rushed past him and down the stairs.

By the time Harry had reached the street, his father had disappeared round the corner. He quickly ran to the top of the thoroughfare, where there was unfortunately a network of streets. To his chagrin he could see nothing of his father.

Harry stood deliberating; then plunged down the nearest. He looked anxiously to right and left as he flew along, skilfully steering his way between the pedestrians.

He came to the junction of the road without any sign of the figure he so longed to find. He stood there for an instant baffled and disappointed. Then he darted off again, and came into the broader thoroughfare of Charing Cross Road.

There in the distance was the figure he was in search of.

But almost at the moment of his discovery he heard a shout raised of "Stop thief! Stop thief!"

At first he took no notice of the shout. Then he stopped, and saw a number of people rushing along in the same direction.

All unconscious of whom they were pursuing, he again started off. Then he suddenly felt himself tripped up, and thrown to the pavement with such violence that he was powerless to rise.

He lay there stunned by the fall. When he returned to his senses he found himself the centre of a crowd of people, with his shirt-collar open and his brow and face drenched with water.

"Give 'im air!" someone was crying.

But the only consequence of this injunction was that instead of giving him more air, the crowd continued to press closer and closer around him (as is the way with crowds) and give him less.

"What—what does it mean?" asked Harry, feeling very bruised and bewildered.

"Why, it means they've made a mistake, and hit you over the head for another," said the man who had been holding him. "A hum-mizzler* snatched some pieces (money) out of the deaf old crossing-sweeper's hand. He raised the halloo, and as you was running people thought it was you as did the snatching."

As the man spoke, Harry rose with difficulty to his feet, and saw foremost amongst the crowd Zachariah Troad (alias Lamaret), the deaf crossing-sweeper.

He was wringing his hands, the picture of grief.

"Oh, I'm so sorry—so sorry, Mr. Hobbs!" he wailed. "I would rather have lost every farthing I had than that this should have happened. Poor young man—poor young man, I hope you're not much hurt!"

"I shall soon be right again!" said Harry bravely. "It's not so much the knock-down; but I—I—was running after someone whom I wanted very much to speak to, and I don't know when I shall see him again."

"And all my fault—all my fault!" groaned Zachariah Troad. "Oh, I shall never forgive myself—never! You gave me a shelter from the snow, and through me you get nearly killed—never, never!"

"All right, old 'un! But steady with that shouting trumpet, or you'll have my eye out."

While Troad had been expressing his grief, he wildly flourished about him at the same time his ear-trumpet.

Once or twice it had approached dangerously near to the man who had assisted Harry to his feet; and so he had at length made an emphatic protest.

"Let me help you along," said Mr. Troad, flashing a look of indignation at the man who had raised this protest. "I may be old and feeble; but I can always give a helping hand to the weak."

"No, thank you, Mr. Troad," said Harry, down the ear-trumpet. "I think I can manage to get along by myself now."

"But as I made you lose your friend, I ought to help you to find him. So do let me go with you."

"It's no use my going in search of him to-day. I must put it off till to-morrow."

"Well, give me your friend's address, and I'll hunt him up for you."

"Alas! I haven't his address. I wish I had."

The crowd had by this time melted away, and Harry turned

* Slang for thief who is clever at effecting an escape.

homeward with an aching head, while Mr. Troad, in spite of his protests, kept by his side, still mumbling as he went along his regret.

"I hope you haven't lost much, Mr. Troad?" said Harry, when he at length reached his lodgings.

"Not so much—only about eighteenpence."

"How did it happen?"

"Well, you see, I was just counting my morning's takings in my hand at the side of the kerb, with my broom under my left arm, when somebody—I hadn't time to see who it was—rushed up to me, and snatched the money from my hand. I immediately shouted out at the top of my voice—'Stop thief! Stop thief!' The cry was taken up by the crowd, and everybody started to run. I couldn't run, and lost tracks of the thief. Suddenly I heard a shout of 'Nabbed him! Nabbed him!' Then I saw the crowd gathered round a struggling figure of some kind. I hurried as fast as my trembling old legs would let me to the spot. Judge of my amazement when on reaching the crowd I found that they had made a mistake, and nabbed you instead of the thief. I could have torn my hair, and theirs too—indeed I could!"

Harry smiled.

"I'm afraid that tearing your hair wouldn't have done much good, though you seem to have a little to spare."

Harry playfully referred to the hair of Troad, which was long and unkempt—so much so that a boy would occasionally call after him, "Get yer 'air out!"

"I meant to have had a crop to-morrow," said Troad mournfully; "but now that I've lost that money I'll have to do without it for a few weeks longer."

"A few weeks!" cried Harry. "Why, it'll be down to your feet by that time. But here we are. Thank you for coming with me, and—good-day!"

"You're sure there's nothing I can do for you before I go?"

"Nothing."

Harry mounted to his lodgings in much slower time than he had descended from them. Though he had good-naturedly tried to keep up a smiling face in the presence of Troad, he was quite downcast when he reached his room.

On entering it he found a slip of paper, with some writing on it, on the table. He remembered that when he had rushed out in search of his father he had left Lord Forsyth in the room. Though the note was not signed, it was evidently from him.

"In consequence of your hasty exit from the room, our interview came to an abrupt and unexpected termination. It is unnecessary for me to repeat the offer I have already made you; but should you at any time see fit to alter your decision—or to give me any information at any time about the divine singer—you will find me at my chambers in St. James's Street."

"I don't think that I shall ever trouble your lordship; but, still, one never knows," thought Harry.

Then he carefully folded up the note and put it in his pocket.

Meanwhile, Zachariah Troad, alias Paul Lamaret, returned to his crossing in a much more satisfied mood than that which marked Harry's return to his room.

"The old bird always comes back to the young one's nest!" he smiled to himself, with that cruel smile of his which even his patriarchal beard could not altogether disguise. "That was a lucky idea of mine to prevent them from meeting, and succeeded to a T. I thought I should make one or two discoveries by hovering round about the youngster's diggings. I must not be in too great a hurry to strike. There are things in the background which I never suspected. What is the meaning of the beautiful singer's interest in the youngster? And what was the meaning of Lord Forsyth's visit? I must find out these things; and then—then will come the moment to strike. When I strike this time there must be no mistake!"

CHAPTER 62.

SHAGGY'S "BLUE FUNK"—AN INVITATION TO TEA—THE CURSE.

After bathing his bruises and a brief rest, Harry once more started out and wandered about the streets of London, gazing eagerly into men's faces in the hope that he might meet with his father.

In this way he traversed many weary miles, without finding the face he so longed to see.

At length, weary and footsore, he gave up the search for that day—or, rather, night; for as he returned to St. Giles's it was chiming the hour of midnight.

Shaggy gave a sigh of relief as he entered.

"Thank goodness you've turned up at last, Harry. I've been in a blue funk for an hour past, wondering what had happened to you. My golden locks were just beginning to turn grey. Look at 'em! Au the starch's gone out of 'em;

and when the starch's gone, I'm just like Samson was when he had his hair cut—good for nothing. What have yer been up to?"

Shaggy's hair, indeed, was not quite so bristly as usual, though even in its dejected condition it would have done credit to a porcupine.

Harry at once told Shaggy of his day's adventures.

"Merrick returned—your father returned!" cried Shaggy, when Harry had concluded.

He gave a prolonged whistle.

"Well, what's that meant to suggest?" asked Harry.

"Nothing in pertickler, except keep yer weather-eye open for the scorcher!"

"The scorcher?"

"Yes, Lamaret. He'll be a-hovering around presently, as sure as my name's Sammy Hobbs, otherwise Shaggy. Then there'll be ructions—see if there won't."

"But he'll have to keep pretty quiet, else he'll be nabbed by the police. That's our strong card, Shaggy."

"P'raps!" assented Shaggy, rubbing vigorously at his hair as though in search of inspiration. "It may be our strong card; but yer never know what false cards Lamaret's got up his sleeve, and when he means a-playing on 'em. Now, it's clear enough how Lamaret got away from the inn at Stentham."

"How?"

"Why, Merrick helped him, of course."

The same idea had occurred to Harry, but he wished to see whether that of his friend corresponded with it.

"Very likely; and they're both equally liable to be captured by the police. So that I'm partly safeguarded against Merrick. He dare not split on me, because he fears that I may split on him."

"I shouldn't trust him a bit more than I'd trust Lamaret. He's a worthy son of a worthy father. They're slippery customers. You don't know when you've got 'em. When you've got 'em, they ain't there, as Pat remarked of the flea. But we won't worry any more about that to-night. I've got a letter from a young lady—guess who?"

"Angela?" said Harry eagerly.

"Good shot. Guessed it in one. Don't be jealous, because you're supposed to be dead, you know. You've guessed who wrote the letter, but you can't guess what's in the letter?"

"I'm not a wizard, Shaggy; so out with it."

Shaggy handed Harry the letter.

"Dear Shaggy," it read, "you and your friend promised to call on father and me on the day you met me at the hospital. You have not yet fulfilled your promise, so can you call upon us to-morrow at four and take a cup of tea with us? Father has been very anxious to see you. Someone else will be there, whose name I will not mention. You must wait till the time comes for an introduction."

"Dare we go, Harry?" asked Shaggy, when Harry had finished the letter.

"Certainly."

"Old Mawker's eyes are like ferrets, you know; and you'll have both him and Angela watching you closely all the evening."

"I don't in the least mind so far as Angela is concerned."

"I didn't suppose you did," laughed Shaggy; "but Mawker's a loss of another colour."

"Mawker's a loss of another colour, as you elegantly put it. I mean to let Angela know by some means or other who I am; but I don't want to add to the list of my enemies by letting Mawker into the secret. Still, no matter what happens, we'll accept the invitation to tea. By the by, who is the 'someone' whose name she will not mention?"

They spent some time in guessing, and then went to bed. Shaggy did not sleep until long after Harry. He had an idea that the tea to which they had been invited would be much more agreeable to his chum—and scarcely less so to himself—if he could only manage to get rid of Mawker during the repast.

Before Shaggy went to sleep he had hit upon a simple method of accomplishing his designs.

At four prompt on the following day, Harry and Shaggy presented themselves at the familiar house where Mawker and Angela lived.

A strange feeling of awe came over Harry as he mounted the staircase. That was the house in which so many eventful things had happened. There Pierre Evison had been killed by Lamaret. Up that staircase he had mounted on the evening of his fifteenth birthday to find Pierre dying. Down it the poor fellow's body had been carried to the mortuary. Yes; much had happened in that house; but how much more had happened since?

"I'm so sorry," said Angela, as she opened the door in response to their knock, "but a messenger came for father a quarter of an hour ago from Mr. Kibes, an old friend of his. He was bound to go; but he'll come back as soon as he can."

Harry's heart leapt with joy. Shaggy pulled a long and deeply-mournful face.

"I'm sorry—so very sorry, Angela—that your father has been called away. It's a great pity, because he used to be such an amusing old cuss—"

He stopped for breath, as Harry's elbow had come sharply into contact with his ribs.

"I mean, such a kind-hearted old gen'tleman, who was very fond of the rising generation, and was just as much at home at a wedding-party as a funeral."

Again Harry's elbow found its way to Shaggy's ribs, but Shaggy only grinned. Fortunately, Angela led the way into the room as he spoke, and Shaggy's remarks were cut short by a young lady rising from a chair and coming forward to greet them.

It was Peggie Probyn.

They were both as much delighted as surprised; but Harry was puzzled. Had she refused Pauline Anconia's offer to provide her with a home?

"You wonder at finding Peggie here?" smiled Angela, seeing the puzzled expression on Harry's face. "But the explanation is simple. She is going to Mademoiselle Anconia's to-night; but wished to spend the afternoon before going to her new quarters with me, and—and—her other friends. You are her friends, are you not?"

"The best, with one exception, that I could have found, Angela dear," said Peggie, flushing with delight.

Shaggy's ready tongue was unusually quiet. In presence of Peggie he turned as red as his hair; and suddenly made desperate efforts to smooth the latter, in the vain hope that he would give to it a more orderly and genteel appearance.

With Mawker absent that tea-party was a very pleasant one, notwithstanding the fact that, owing to Shaggy trying to steal glances at Peggie over the top of his tea-cup at the moment he was engaged in drinking the hot tea, he was once or twice on the point of choking himself.

The chief pleasure of it all was that Peggie had quite recovered from her accident, and was now going to a home which was like a palace compared to her old, miserable home in Bermondsey.

Tea over, both girls put on their hats. Angela was going to see Peggie to her new home.

"Do you and your cousin care to wait for father, Shaggy?" asked Angela. "I thought he would be in before this. Mr. Kibes is keeping him longer than I expected."

Shaggy's mouth broadened.

"Very likely he's having tea with Mr. Kibes, and Mr. Kibes finds his society so agreeable that he's asked him to stay to supper; but, if you don't mind, instead of waiting for your father, Angela, we'd much rather come with you; wouldn't we, cousin?"

"Certainly," assented Harry.

"Very well. So you shall," said Angela. "I'll just leave a note for father, so that he'll know where I've gone."

As Angela went to her desk, and took out a piece of writing-paper and pencil, Harry felt that his opportunity had come.

I READ THEM MYSELF!

So far no one has been able to exactly define the percentage of the reading public that does and does not read serial stories. That large numbers appreciate this feature of most up-to-date journals there can be no doubt; but, on the other hand, there are doubtless many who protest that they "haven't the time" for such reading. These miss several good books a year, while the excuse is scarcely valid, for the time spent in their perusal, spread over weeks, would be infinitesimal, even to the busiest of people. Modern serial stories are often

the product of some of the cleverest pens in the country, while to skilful fictionists they yield incomes that would have made many of the old novelists' mouths water.

The autumn serial novel which will commence in next week's "Answers" should not be missed, even by the most confirmed non-serial reader. It has been specially written for "Answers" by the author of "Convict 99" and "In the Shadow of Guilt," and will be found one of the most enthralling narratives ever penned. First instalment in "Answers," on sale Tuesday, October 18th, price 1d.

"Go on ahead with Peggie," whispered Harry to his ohum. "We'll follow in a minute or so."

Shaggy gladly obeyed his friend's request, and passed out with Peggie, while Harry stood by the door waiting until Angela had finished her brief note to her father.

When she had finished she looked up with some astonishment, to find that Harry had quickly closed the door and came towards her as she rose from the seat at which she had been writing.

She shrank back in some alarm. "There's no need for fear, Angela. Don't you know me?" he said, in a voice that was quivering with emotion.

He hastily took off his false moustache and wig as he spoke.

"Harry—Harry Evison!" she cried. "No, no; surely it cannot be. Harry is dead; and yet—you are strangely like him. Yes, yes!"—she advanced nearer to him, and her clear, truthful eyes were regarding him steadfastly in the face—"you are Harry! Thank Heaven!—thank Heaven! We thought him dead, and he is alive. What is the meaning of it? Why have you deceived us?"

She was so overcome with emotion that she sank into a phair.

"Because I could not help myself, Angela, otherwise I would never have deceived you! We are not all masters of our fate, and—and—that dreadful curse of the Scarlet Cross has been upon me!"

"Still—still—I do not understand; but—but—I know you speak the truth, Harry. That is enough. Thank Heaven!"—again she cried, in the same fervent tones as before—"that you are alive—and well—well—are you not?"

"Well? Quite well." "And has that curse of which you just now spoke—the curse of the Scarlet Cross—gone from you? Is there nothing now to fear?"

"Alas! No. That blighting shadow still hangs over me. Heaven only knows whether it will ever be otherwise! I

sometimes think that it would have been better for me, Angela, were I really dead and buried, as people believe I am."

His head drooped. He stood before her bowed and sorrowful.

"Hush, Harry—hush!" she said, coming to him and placing her hand gently on his shoulder. "That is not like you, Harry. You used to be so brave, so hopeful, so happy."

"Yes, Angela, so I may have been; but that was before I knew aught of the dark shadow that rested on my life. Perhaps that was why all knowledge of it was kept from me for so long?"

"When did you first learn, then, of this curse that is resting on your life?"

"On that night when poor Pierre Evison met his death in the room above."

"How awful! Poor, poor Harry!" she said, her hand still resting consolingly on his shoulder. "Let's see, what was his assassin's name? Lamaret, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Lamaret—curse him, and cursed be the name! Ah, I have reason to hate him and all who bear that name with a deadly hate! The name of Lamaret—"

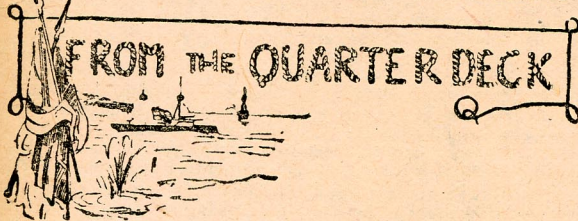
Harry came to a sudden pause. His face turned a ghastly white. He was trembling all over as one smitten with the palsy. He was looking into the eyes of the gentle girl before him with horror.

Carried away by the intensity of his feelings, he had forgotten the stern truth he had so recently discovered—that Angela, the pure and stainless girl before him, who had ever soared high above him as a star in the heavens when night was darkest, bore the name which he was at that moment cursing; that she was a member of the family who seemed banded against his with unquenchable hate!

"What—what's the matter, Harry?" she asked, looking into his face with alarm.

(To be continued in next Friday's UNION JACK.)

The Editor's Chat with his Readers.



Will you readers kindly remember that all letters for me must be addressed, in future, to

2, HARMSWORTH BUILDINGS,
CARMELITE STREET,
LONDON, E.C.

Numbers of experiments have been made to test the speed and destination of corked bottles thrown into the sea at various portions of the world.

The most remarkable example I ever heard of, "Farintosh," was that in which a bottle travelled 6,000 miles in about two years and a half—roughly, at the rate of 6½ miles a day. It travelled from 63 degrees south latitude and 60 degrees west longitude to Western Australia.

The latest thing in lifebelts is a decided novelty. It is a reproduction of the ordinary lifebelt carried aboard ship on a larger scale. But it is so arranged that damage to one part will not cause it to sink. Despite its great size, it is very light, and can easily be handled by one man, and it does not matter how it is thrown into the water; it always turns the right side up. It has a series of ropes fastened to it, to which corks are attached, so that persons in the water at a distance can draw themselves up to it. Seven men standing on it do not sink the buoy, so that it will be seen that it is capable of saving a large number of persons if they hold on to it.

The strangest duel ever fought, "Matador," is the one in which two vaqueros were the principal actors. It took place in Mexico some years ago, and lariats were the weapons used. Each endeavoured to lasso the other. After an hour's hard work, one of the combatants was secured by the flying noose, and the victor dragged him off his horse and shot him dead.

One of the most amusing duels was that in which Sainte Beuve was engaged. Shortly after he had taken up his posi-

tion rain began to fall, upon which Sainte Beuve called for his umbrella. The expostulations of his seconds were of no avail. "I don't object to getting killed," he said, "but I object to getting wet."

A duel under water was fought in 1792, by two divers who had been commissioned to examine the wreck of the "Royal George."

The only two words in the English language, "B. T.," which contain all the vowels in their proper order are "abominous" and "facetious."

I propose very shortly to start a Competition corner in the UNION JACK. A large number of prizes will be given each week, and everyone will stand an equal chance of winning one. Look out for an announcement on this page.

All code books carried on warships have leaden backs, to make them sink if lost overboard, "S." The letters in the book, moreover, are printed with a peculiar ink, which fades away when it comes in contact with the water. To make things still more safe, the letters are changed every few months by the Navy Department. Even on the warships few officers know their vessel's official signal code.

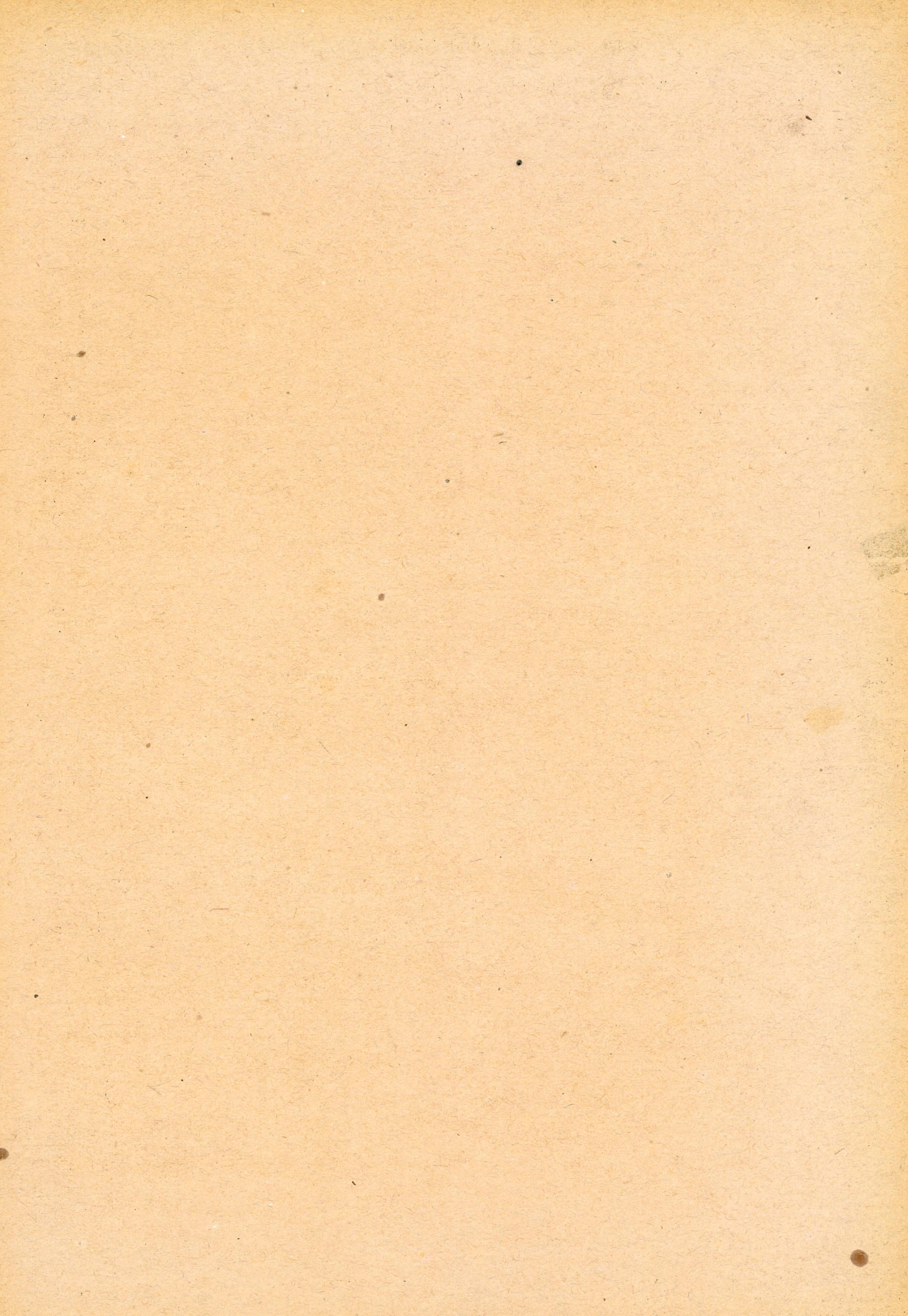
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2. M * * A * * T * E * T * *
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4. P * T * * S * * 'S * W * * S * Y
5. E * W * R * S' * H * * L * * E
5. B * * C * * M * * P * * L *

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The Prizes will be awarded in order of correctness, and in cases of equality will be added together and divided. A Prize is guaranteed to every competitor sending in correct solutions to all the Puzzle Words.

Notice.—The Competition will CLOSE on SATURDAY, October 22nd, and orders from those taking part in it should be sent in as early as possible. The Prizes will be awarded and the result posted to reach competitors by Monday, October 24th.

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