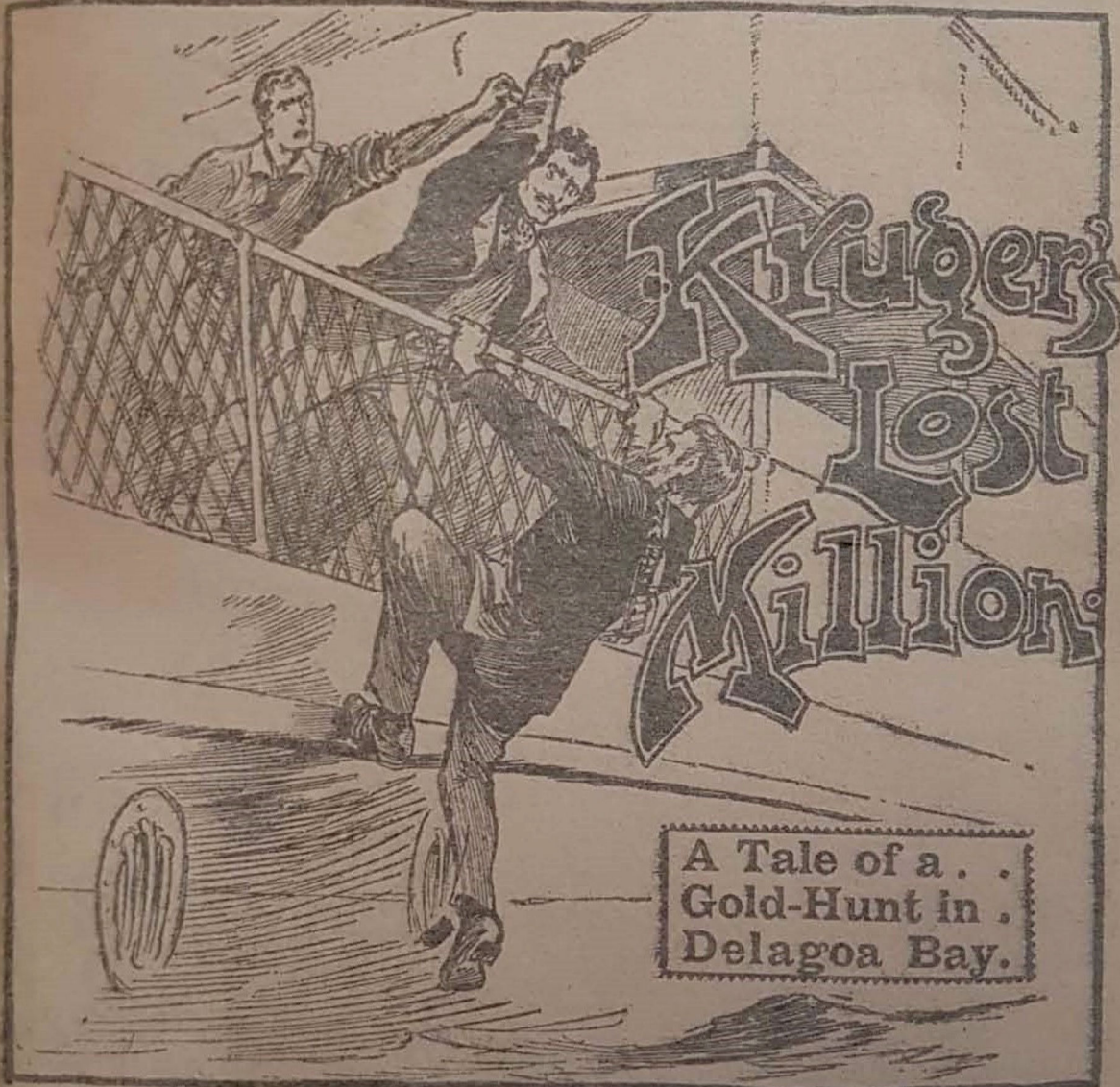


IN QUEST OF KRUGER'S GOLD.

THE UNION JACK

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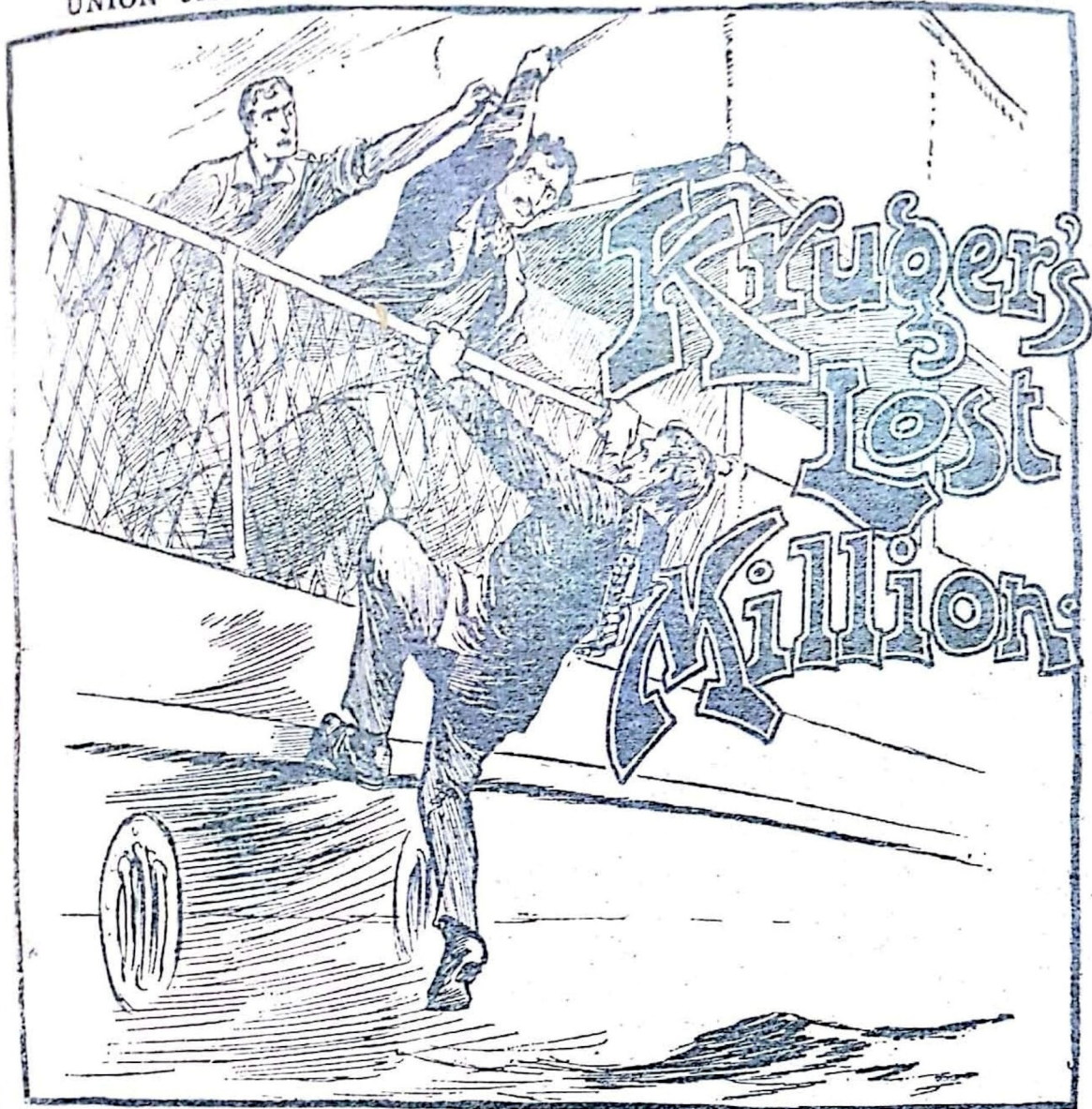
A LONG, COMPLETE STORY
EVERY FRIDAY.



A Tale of a . . .
Gold-Hunt in . . .
Delagoa Bay.

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No. 346



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A TALE OF A GOLD-HUNT IN DELAGOA BAY.

By CHARLES HAMILTON, Author of "The Prisoner of Shantung," &c.

CHAPTER I.

A Strange Find in the Forest—How Oom Paul Lost his Million.

"Baas, did you hear it?"
Babyaan, the Zulu, spoke in a hushed voice, while his sinewy hand gripped the arm of Bernard Blake, and brought him to an abrupt halt.

"I heard nothing, Babyaan," Blake said, in an equally low tone. "Your ears are as keen as a gemsbok's. What is it?"

The dense tropical forest—which covers most of Portuguese East Africa—lay around them, silent save for the suiker-vogels that chirped amongst the wagenboom.

The sound that had caught the keen ear of the Zulu was repeated, and this time both heard it.

It was a low, feeble moan, as of a man in the direst agony, with barely strength enough to voice his suffering.

The Zulu, ever suspicious, parted the eugar-bushes on his right with a cautious hand. The opening thus made disclosed a scene that brought an exclamation of horror to the lips of Bernard Blake.

A man—a Portuguese by his attire and swarthy face—lay upon his back on the other side of the bush. His uniform was rent and stained; in his nerveless hand he yet grasped a broken poniard.

The blood, clotted upon his face and clothing, came from

three terrible wounds, any one of which would have been fatal. The marvel was that he yet breathed.

"Good heavens!" Blake ejaculated, "who has done this thing?"

Babyaan gave a grim smile.

"Black Gerrart, the Boer," he replied. "Dis man is the Portuguese commandante of Fort Franca, near Lorenzo Marques. He left the fort in company with Gerrart and his men. There has been treachery, baas."

The dying man did not seem aware of the presence of the Englishman and the Zulu, until the former knelt by his side, and placed water to his lips.

Then his eyes opened, and he looked with a wondering gaze upon the man who succoured him.

"Fear nothing," said Bernard reassuringly, as the man's fingers trembled upon the remnant of his poniard. "I am an Englishman—your friend. Can I do you any service? Do you understand me?"

The Portuguese made an effort, and spoke in English, but so feebly that Blake could hardly catch his words:

"Senhor, who are you, and how came you here?"

"I am hunting on this coast. My home is in Cape Town, but I am up here to shoot lions. The Zulu is my comrade."

There came a pleased look into Babyaan's dark eyes as Blake said this. He was in Blake's service; but a spirit of comrade-

ship had grown up between them, and he was deeply attached to the white man, who had treated him as an equal.

"No," said Blake, astonished at the unexpected question. "But, I can make you rich."

Blake thought that the dying man's mind was wandering, and perhaps he felt expressed as much: for the Portuguese said quickly:

"Don't think I am mad. I can tell you where to find gold and diamonds worth a million of English money!"

"I don't doubt you, senhor," said Bernard, to humour him.

"I am Colonel Carnice. I am commandant at Fort Franca, where a partition is placed to watch for smugglers. Senhor, I am ashamed to say that I have, for Kruger's gold, connived at gun-running for the Boers. Gerrart Drude—Black Gerrart—was the agent who dealt with me. Ah, a thousand curses upon the traitor! Caramba! he has done me to death!"

The Portuguese broke off with a gasp; but a fresh draught of cool water revived him, and he continued pantingly:

"You know that, since the tide of war turned against him, the President of the Transvaal has been shipping to Europe immense sums—the plunder accumulated by extortions from the Outlanders and robbery of the mines. Many vessels have sailed out of Delagoa Bay with Kruger's gold, but one of them came to grief on the rocks."

Bernard Blake listened with renewed interest. Was there, after all, something of fact in this story of treasure?

"It was the 'Scheide,' a steamer belonging to a Lorenzo Marques trader. Gerrart Drude brought to her the box of gold and diamonds—a princely fortune for Oom Paul when he fled to Europe. The 'Scheide' went down, and Oom Paul's millions was lost—lost to him, but not to the world. It is my belief that Black Gerrart scouted the 'Scheide,' in order to obtain the treasure for himself. For the wreck is still above water, in the cove of San Marco. I suspected what the villain Boer was at, and he agreed with me to seek the treasure and share it. I confess that otherwise I should have had him pecked. But he was deceiving me. He lured me here, and his men shot me down. I have lain in anguish for hours since they left me."

Again the Portuguese broke off, and an ashy pallor crept over his dusky face.

Bernard Blake, seeing that the end was terribly near, would have stopped his speaking; but the Portuguese went on feverishly:

"Senhor, the lost million of Oom Paul is free to whomsoever can find it. Will you find it, and avenge me upon that traitor Boer? If he finds it, 'twill be in the hands of a bitter foe of Britain. It has been sunk at sea, and therefore belongs to the finder. Oh, I would give my heart's blood for revenge upon Black Gerrart!"

The words, upon the lips of a man about to appear before his Maker, were not pleasant to hear.

But Bernard Blake thought of Kruger's lost million. He believed the tale of the Portuguese commandant. This gold, forcibly seized by one of Britain's foes, was surely a lawful prize to whoever could take it!

"What do you say, Babyaan?" he asked.

The Zulu's great black eyes were eager.

"Seek do treasure, baas," he replied. "Babyaan will help you."

The eyes of the Portuguese glittered with unnatural light. He had the vengeful hate of a fiery Southern nature. And what more delicious revenge than to snatch from Black Gerrart the vast fortune which the Boer now deemed securely within his grasp!

"Consent, senhor," he panted, "to make a search of the cove of San Marco. Black Gerrart intends to seize an English vessel, now lying upon the coast, near the mouth of the Limpopo. The crew of this yacht he will throw into the sea. That was our plan—save your countrymen!"

That decided Bernard.

"I will take the trail," he said.

The commandant snapped his teeth.

"Good, good! But take care; for Black Gerrart has twelve men, all good shots. They were of De Wet's boat, and deserted when Kruger sailed for Europe. To-night—they attack—the yacht—"

Further utterance was prevented by a horrible hemorrhage, brought on by the effort of speaking.

There was a short, agonized wrestle, and the commandant expired. The Englishman closed his glassy eyes with a gentle touch. The commandant had been as bad a man as the Boer he hated, perhaps; but he was dead now, and death wiped out everything.

Bernard Blake stretched out his hand to his Zulu comrade.

"We came to hunt lions," he said; "but we are to hunt jackals instead—Boer jackals—with a big fortune at the end of the hunt. We will seek Kruger's lost million, you and I, and we'll find it and share it, my brave Babyaan. My hand is to you!"

White hand and black hand, a clear, bright, and deathful glint. That was to be true and large.

CHAPTER 2.

The Yacht in the Limpopo. The Portuguese and the Attack—Boer against Portuguese.

Moonlight—the glorious moonlight of heavy clouds—a silver flood upon land and sea.

Like a sheet of white glass, the sea lay upon its broad side into the cove, between high, trackless forests.

At a point where the mangrove swamps bore a stretch of golden sand, a small vessel lay upon the beach.

It was a yacht, by name the "Aphrodite," well suited to the light and graceful craft.

Her sails were furled as she lay upon the beach, tugging at her cable with the motion of the slight watchmen paced the deck, but entirely without a notion of danger; for he looked neither to land nor sea.

Two human forms emerged from the fringe of the forest, it met the beach, and came down to the water's edge. He saw them not.

One was a powerful Zulu; the other a white man, a little more than a boy, but with a developed and athletic and limbs full of the elasticity of health and strength. The pair were Babyaan and his white master, upon their way to succour.

"Babyaan, that must be the vessel Colonel Carnice spoke of. It is a yacht, and clearly English, though she does not seem to have any of the marks of the Boers. And there are as yet no signs of the Boers."

The Zulu gave a keen and scrutinizing glance round the cove.

"We are here first, baas. It is well."

"I will hail the yacht," Blake put his hands to his mouth and shouted: "Ayo, the yacht!"

The solitary watcher of the deck gave a start, and, upon the gangway, stared at the two dark figures upon the beach. Then Blake, to his surprise, caught the glint of his pistol.

"Who are you?" came ringing back from the yacht.

"Strangers are not wanted here!"

"I am an Englishman, as you appear to be. I come to warn you of a great danger that hangs over you, and to bid you get out!"

"Wait a bit!" The yachtman stepped to the companion, and called out: "Catanzaro!"

"What is it, caro capitano?" asked a sleepy voice.

"Strangers—and danger!"

"Caramba!"

All trace of sleepiness vanished from the voice that, less than a minute a hurly Portuguese, armed with silver and gold, came up. Although he was not in uniform, he being indicated that he had been a soldier.

"The 'caro capitano' repeated to Catanzaro what Blake had said.

"Shall we allow him on board, senhor?"

The Portuguese smiled cunningly.

"Assuredly, Captain Leyburn. They are but two. If they are not what they represent, have we not a dozen men? Why here? The sea is deep, and the Indian Ocean does not eat sharks!"

The Englishman shuddered, but made no reply.

Senhor Catanzaro called up the men of the yacht, and swarthy men of Portuguese race, many of them with a drop of Kafir blood in their veins—all of them fierce-looking, hard and beetle-browed.

A light skiff was lowered, and Captain Leyburn and a sailor took it across the twenty fathoms of water that separated the "Aphrodite" from the shelving beach.

"Enter, sir," said the yachtman. "I am George Leyburn, owner and commander of the 'Aphrodite' yacht."

In a few minutes Bernard Blake and Babyaan stood upon the deck of the cutter yacht, and they instantly drew close together, and stood on guard, when they found themselves in the presence of a band of armed men.

"We are honoured," said Blake. "Do you always receive visitors with your garrison under arms?"

"That depends," said Cifante Catanzaro, "upon the number of visitors we receive. One cannot be too careful, especially in a land of danger. You come, you say, to do us a favour. Be plain yourself."

Blake liked neither the words nor the tone of the Portuguese. In very brief terms he explained how Colonel Carnice had warned him of the intended attack upon the yacht. He said nothing, however, of the lost million of Oom Paul. That was his own secret.

"So Carnice and Black Gerrart fell out!" exclaimed Catanzaro, laughing. "It was natural. Senhor, we are deeply beholden to you. I am Cifante Catanzaro. I had the yacht."



in the army of Portugal. I am the—the partner—
 Captain Leyburn in the voyage of his yacht?" said Blake.
 "May I ask what brings you to the Limpopo?" said Blake.
 "Not a single face on board the 'Aphrodite' impressed
 me favorably. He had expected to find an English ship.
 It was, indeed, English, and so was the captain, but
 the crew were foreigners, and this Catanzaro seemed to
 be a more authoritative man than Captain Leyburn did.
 'Where is gold-seekers?' said Cifuentes, with a bland smile.
 'What gold here?' ejaculated Blake.

"Do not the Limpopo flow through a gold-bearing
 river? May not the river bed be carpeted with the precious
 metal?"

"It is a very rich, no thought this the wildest.
 The Portuguese changed the subject.

"Senior Ingleso, will you level your rifle upon our side in
 the night with the Boers?"

"That was my idea, sir. I shall be very happy to help."
 "Good! I thank you."

The men of the "Aphrodite" were posted at once, to be in
 readiness for the attack.

Blake and Babyaan had a place near the binnacle. There,
 Leyburn took the opportunity of whispering to his master,
 "Has a had place for us, baas. Senhor Catanzaro great
 man!"

"Do you know him, Babyaan?"

"He was Colonel Carman's second in command at Fort
 Yonck, baas. All dese men loafers of Lorenzo Marques."

"Babyaan, there's something wrong about this vessel. I
 don't like the look of affairs here."

"Some Portuguese hab stole ship, baas?" suggested the
 benighted Zulu.

The same idea had dimly occurred to Blake.
 "But, then, Leyburn is undoubtedly an Englishman,
 Babyaan. However, there's no—who the dickens is that?"

A strange voice—a female voice of the most melodious
 sweetness—had fallen upon the ear of Bernard Blake.

"Father, what is all this? Are you expecting an attack?"

"Yes, Florento," answered Captain Leyburn. "You must
 stay below."

Blake looked round in time to see a graceful, girlish
 form disappear into the companionway.

He was amazed. Leyburn had a daughter, then, and she
 was a passenger on the yacht? The sweet voice he had heard
 tingled in his ear until the alarm drew all his thoughts to
 the coming strife.

"Here come the Dutch!" ejaculated Cifuentes Catanzaro.
 A long canoe, propelled by muffled paddles, was sweeping
 steadily down the Limpopo.

An unwatchful eye might have taken it for a floating trunk,
 for the Boers had spread a great piece of canvas, painted
 brown, over it, and this hid the paddlers, and disguised the
 shape of the canoe. Only the head of the steersman could be
 seen, or, rather, his hat, an enormous one of felt, which almost
 hid him.

"A cunning device!" ejaculated Catanzaro, with a sneering
 chuckle. "Senhoro, watch me send that steersman rolling over
 the stern!"

His rifle was cautiously pushed out of a porthole, and in-
 stead and sighted it with deliberation.

Blake frowned a little. It seemed like murder. But, after
 all, the Dutchmen were coming to take the "Aphrodite" by
 surprise, with murderous intent.

A clear, crackling report broke the stillness of the moonlit
 river.

The Boer steersman sprang up erect, uttering a loud cry
 that expressed more of surprise than pain.

But the bullet was in a vital place. He spun round, and
 fell, and disappeared into the water, only the widening circles
 on the surface remaining to show where he had sunk.

In that brief moment a human life had been snuffed out
 like a candle, and a dark soul sent to face its Judge.

From the Portuguese band burst a loud laugh. As if by
 magic the canvas was flung from the boat, and a dozen rifles
 appeared, and a volley of Mauser bullets hailed upon the
 yacht.

The conflict had commenced. The Boers had failed to carry
 out the intended surprise, but their dogged courage would not
 allow them to retreat without an attempt to gain their object.

The canoe, in a minute more, crashed against the side of
 the "Aphrodite," and shots rang out at close quarters.

But here the Dutch were at a great disadvantage. On the
 boundless yell, on kloof, and kraatz, and koppie, they were
 a match for treble their number of Portuguese. Even Lord
 Robert's pallant men had often been worsted by them and
 their fellows when they followed De Wet upon the plains of
 the Orange River Colony. But upon the water they had no
 chance against Catanzaro and his nimble bravos.

Bullets, or other pontards, struck them down as they strove
 to climb aboard. Gerrard Drude, their leader, a gigantic Boer,
 with long hair and beard of the blackest hue, led them
 bravely. He gained the taffrail, and, with one leg over it,
 aimed his rifle at a Portuguese, and shot him dead.

Bernard Blake rushed at him with clubbed gun, and knocked
 him backwards. He clung, however, to the ornamental rail
 along the stern, left stunned, and wholly at the mercy of the
 Englishman.

Blake did not repeat the blow. He had no personal quarrel
 with Gerrard, and he hated to strike a fallen foe.

The Boer attempt to board was now ended. The canoe, with
 half its crew dead or disabled, floated away, followed by the
 bullets of the exultant Portuguese. Cifuentes Catanzaro, see-
 ing Black Gerrard clinging blindly to the taffrail, rushed
 towards him. A long poniard, already stained to the hilt,
 was in his hand.

"This ends our rivalry, senior burgher!" shouted Catanzaro,
 as his blade circled over the defenceless head of the
 Boer.

"Portuguese dog!" hissed Black Gerrard, glaring fierce de-
 fiance, and showing no sign of flinching.

Before the dagger could descend, a grip of iron was laid
 upon the arm of the Portuguese, and the stroke was stayed
 mid way.

Turning, with a growl of rage, Catanzaro saw that it was
 Bernard Blake, who interposed between him and his victim.

"Unhand me, Senior Ingleso!" he yelled.

"Come, Senhor Catanzaro, that would be a coward's stroke!
 It is not worthy of a soldier to slay a helpless man!"

"Who, in diavolo's name, constituted you judge of my
 actions? Black Gerrard is my foe, and I will kill him!"

The tone of the Portuguese roused Blake's anger.
 "You shall not kill him!" he said curtly.

"Perdidos!"

Catanzaro strove to wrench his hand free, but Blake gave
 his wrist a twist that forced him to drop the poniard. Find-
 ing that the Briton was more than his match, the Portuguese
 ceased to struggle. He stood quivering with rage, regarding
 Blake with a glare of deadly animosity.

"Babyaan," said Blake coolly, "give Black Gerrard a rope
 down to the water, so that he can swim ashore."

It is to be feared that the Zulu's ideas were rather in accord-
 ance with Catanzaro's than Blake's. But he made no demur.

He caught a rope, and gave the end to the Boer.

"Comrades," shrieked Catanzaro, "Black Gerrard is es-
 caping! Kill him!"

The Portuguese ruffians rushed aft with their rifles, but,
 with Babyaan's assistance, Drude had reached the water, and
 was swimming ashore with vigorous strokes. Some shots were
 fired after him, but without effect. Blake had saved his life,
 for, had he dropped from the taffrail into the water, the
 impetus of his fall would have made him stick fast in the
 sand, the water being very shallow under the yacht's stern.

Then he would have been a helpless target for the rifles above.

"Caramba!" roared Cifuentes, as the Boer dragged himself
 ashore, and disappeared into the forest, unburt by the hurried
 shots, "he is gone, then, and you, Ingleso, are the cause of
 it!"

"I am ready to take the consequences, senior!" replied
 Blake disdainfully.

It seemed that Catanzaro was about to order an attack. His
 brow was black, and his eyes scintillating with rage.

But Blake and Babyaan, side by side, with their magazine-
 rifles held ready for use, were a formidable pair to tackle,
 and it struck Catanzaro that ere they could be slain they
 would make some vacancies among his crew. He had already
 lost three men; he could not afford to lose more. His ex-
 pression slowly changed.

"Senior," he said, "you have acted foolishly, and done no
 harm; but I cannot quarrel with the man whose timely warn-
 ing saved us all."

Blake was quite willing to accept the olive-branch.

"I have no desire to quarrel," he said. "Let us say no
 more about it."

"You do not intend to leave us yet?" said Catanzaro. "You
 will accept the hospitality of the 'Aphrodite' at least until
 the morning? Besides, I have a proposition to make to you."

"A proposition?"

Blake looked at him.

"Yes; concerning Kruger's lost million!"
 Blake could only stare at him in amazement.

CHAPTER 3.

A Strange Alliance—At Sea—The Covers of San Marco—Blake in Hot Water.

Bernard Blake passed the remainder of the night aboard
 the "Aphrodite."

The words of Dom Cifuentes had aroused his curiosity and
 made him uneasy. He understood now that the men of the

yacht knew all about the sunken million of Oom Paul, and, doubtless, were in search of it.

He had other rivals, then, besides Black Gerrard's band! As a craft of some kind was necessary to search the caverns of San Marco, the Portuguese seemed to hold the best hand, so far.

Blake was not without expectation of a treacherous attack during the hours devoted to slumber, and so he and Babyaan took turns to watch in the cabin assigned to them; but no one attempted to enter it.

In the morning Blake was summoned to breakfast in the cuddy, while the Zulu joined the crew's mess in the tiny galley.

Leyburn and Catanzaro sat down to the meal with Blake; but he saw nothing of the captain's daughter, of whom he had caught a glimpse in the moonlight the night before. He was interested in the girl, and he ventured to inquire of Leyburn concerning her.

The yachtsman replied briefly that Miss Leyburn breakfasted in her own cabin. Blake saw a shade pass over Catanzaro's face when this was said, and he drew from it the conclusion that the Portuguese admired Florence; that she avoided him, and that this avoidance galled him sorely. Catanzaro caught the Englishman's eye fixed upon him, and scowled. Blake's reflection was clear to him.

But, when the meal was over, his good-humour returned, and he referred to the proposition he had mentioned to Blake.

"You are in search for Kruger's lost million, senhor," he remarked. "As Colonel Carnian was shot by Black Gerrard, I am certain that he would tell you all, to make trouble for the Boer."

"I do not deny it," answered Blake. "I have guessed also that you are here to look for the lost cargo of the 'Scheldt!'"

"Perfectly correct. My proposition, then, is that you join us, make common cause against the Boers, and share equally in the treasure when it is found."

The manner of the Portuguese lieutenant was open and cordial. Blake had a suspicion that there was treachery under it, but he did not show it. He assumed an air of reflection.

"It is a fair offer," he said; "but, before I agree, I must consult my comrade, Babyaan."

"Comrade! A black savage your comrade!" sneered Dom Cifuento.

"He is no savage," said Blake, frowning; "and I warn you not to let him hear you call him one, otherwise you may find an assagai through your heart the next moment!"

"Bah! However, consult him if you like."

Blake left the cuddy to seek the Zulu. As soon as he was gone, Captain Leyburn looked questioningly at his companion.

"Cifuento, what fiend's game are you playing now?" he said abruptly. "You don't mean to keep faith with Blake—you know you don't!"

Dom Cifuento smiled, showing his white teeth.

"Better have a man of his calibre as a friend than as an enemy, Dom Jorge. Let him assist us in the hunt. Let him lend his rifle's aid against the Dutch. When the treasure is found, and we have it safe—*cospetto!* there is room in the Indian Ocean for him and his friend."

The Englishman brought his clenched fist down upon the table with a crash that made the crockery dance.

"Cifuento, you are a scoundrel. Hear this. I will blow out your brains, and run the 'Aphrodite' upon the nearest reef, before I'll allow such villainous treachery and ingratitude!"

A glare of rage blazed in the eyes of the Portuguese, but it was gone like a flash. Dom Cifuento never lost any points by giving way to his temper.

"Pooh! out! What a Tartar you are, Dom Jorge! I did but jest. If this Britisher proves true to us, he shall be one of ourselves."

George Leyburn still looked suspicious. He clearly distrusted the lieutenant.

"Clear your brow, caro capitano!" laughed Catanzaro. "Think of the million we are about to unearth—that will make us rich for life, and, above all, will make me a worthy match for Donna Florence!"

But Leyburn's brow only grew darker.

"I've already told you, Cifuento, that Florence dislikes you. Even if the reverse were the case, I would not permit her to marry such a man as you. Don't speak upon the subject again, or there will be trouble, I warn you!"

And he strode away abruptly.

"Curse your English pride!" hissed the Portuguese, scowling after the receding form. "It will have a fall soon. Ere long, with my poniard at your throat, you will be willing to give me Florence as the price of your life, and then I doubt if I shall spare you!"

It will be seen that the "Aphrodite" was a hotbed of dissimulation and treacherous hatred. Sooner or later there was certain to be an explosion.

Early in the morning the anchor was weighed, and the little vessel stood out of the mouth of the Limpopo.

The weather was fair and the breeze fresh, and the day an inspiring sight as she bowled over the sparkling bay, her bellying canvas gleaming white in the sun.

Blake, who watched the Portuguese cautiously, saw two or three of them were expert at their work; the bunglers. He marvelled that Captain Leyburn should have upon a dangerous coast with a crew of bunglers. But probably the men were chosen rather for their skill with rifle and poniard than for seamanship.

Blake had been a sailor before he was a yachtsman, and he felt a keen delight at seeing the bay stretched out before him. The vast expanse of heaving waves, the breaking of the sea, and overhead the dimly visible clouds, the scene he loved, and unconsciously he had breathed more deeply, when the vessel was about to start for the Limpopo, and headed for Delagoa Bay.

Although she did not hug the coast, the cliffs were visible from the deck, and far away, among the low hills, a keen eye could distinguish the summits of the Transvaal Mountains, beyond which lay the Transvaal, the territories of Briton and Boer.

The Portuguese are the most backward of the races of Africa, and their enormous territories are very thinly peopled by whites. Hundreds of miles may be travelled without a white face being seen.

This fact was pleasing to Cifuento Catanzaro, for he wished to be seen and watched on his expedition to the caverns of San Marco.

At a certain spot on the northern side of Delagoa Bay, between the mouth of the Limpopo and the town of Lorenzo Marques, lay a great range of grey cliffs, which could be seen for miles across the bay.

Some terrific convulsion in past ages had rent and shattered the cliff-range, and left them in the most fantastic and grotesque forms, besides splitting chasms among them into which the sea had penetrated.

Amid vast piles of tortured rock there now existed a mass of unknown extent—some dry, some flooded—most of them connected with each other by fissures and crevices.

In the old days of Lorenzo Marques a band of escaped slaves had sought refuge in these gloomy caverns, and, pending the force sent to recapture them, had been massacred to the last man. It was natural that stories should rise that people were haunted the caves, and there were few of the coast settlers who dared to venture inside them.

"Have you ever explored these caverns, senhor?" Blake asked Dom Cifuento, looking at the great cliffs, clearly defined against the sky, as the "Aphrodite" ran southward into Delagoa Bay.

"Si, senhor, in part. Smugglers have often concealed goods there, and I have often led detachments from Fort Franso to rout them out."

"It is said that rumblings are frequently heard there, as if portending a new convulsion."

"It may be so," Catanzaro shrugged his shoulders. "So long as they last a few days more, they may be swallowed up by Hades, for all I care."

The "Aphrodite" entered a channel between a great and bank, scarce covered by the sea, and a gigantic cliff, which was sheer as the wall of a house. Captain Leyburn put his best man at the wheel, and took frequent soundings, the yacht moving crawling through the water. Other banks, marked by heavy foam where the waves broke upon them, appeared ahead.

"Strike the topmast!" Catanzaro exclaimed suddenly. Down it went, and the yacht, with her height thus reduced, followed the channel into a yawning cavern, the entrance of which appeared as black as Erebus, viewed from outside.

The channel ended in a pool—or, rather, lake—filling one side of the cavern, and there the anchor was let go.

"A splendid harbour!" Blake remarked. "If the worst hurricane blew outside, you would hardly feel it here."

"Hark! what is that?"

It was a low, faint rumble, which seemed to proceed from beyond the rocky walls of the cavern.

"Maldito!" said one of the Portuguese. "does that mean an earthquake?"

"Nonsense, Mongio! Doubtless the echo of the breaking waves in one of these natural vaults," replied Dom Cifuento carelessly.

No more was said upon the subject, but Blake noticed that Babyaan looked uneasy.

Black as the cavern had seemed when viewed from without, it was not really dark within. The searching sunshine of the bay was exchanged for a cool half-light—a grateful relief to the perspiring yachtsmen. The light proceeded from innumerable fissures in the rocky roof, through which glimpses of the sky could occasionally be seen.

"And now we are here," observed Catanzaro, after a pause. "let me have your answer, Senhor Blake. Will you join us?"

"I will—^{as} a comrade, to share peril and fortune. Babyaan says the same. The Zulu nodded his head. "So long as you and your men are faithful to us, we will be so to you. That's all."

"I am satisfied." They shook hands upon it carelessly enough. Blake did not trust his new comrades, and he would not take the trouble to assume a liking he did not feel. Mere politeness was all Senior Catanzaro had to expect from him.

Blake's motives in accepting the sham alliance would be hard to analyze. If he refused, he would have to fight for life against long odds. He felt sure of that. But that did not much influence his decision. Perhaps it was the lovely girl he had caught a single glimpse of who caused him to remain.

In Luyburn, Blake saw only a weak, easily-led man, almost completely under the domination of Catanzaro. What a position for a young and beautiful girl, on board a vessel with a ferocious foreign crew, led by a regular bandit, with only such feeble protection! Blake's chivalry was aroused by the thought, and perhaps he was a little smitten as well.

As for Babyaan, he had no wish that was not his master's. If Blake had told him to swim from Inyack Island to Lorenzo Marques, he would have obeyed without question, in sublime disregard of sharks and currents.

Bernard, who was curious to see something of the interior of the caverns of San Marco, took his rifle and strolled away, after a whispered warning to Babyaan to be on the alert while he was gone.

A short distance from the "Aphrodite" several smaller caves branched off from the main one, and at the extremity of one of them Blake saw the gleam of sunshine.

Keeping this before him, he emerged into the open air. He was now at the landward side of the cliff, in the interior of which the yacht lay. Before him the land was rugged and wild, broken into ridges and kloofs. In one place he saw something that rather startled him—the "spoor" of a lion upon a patch of soft sand. The track led into the cavern. It was not pleasant to think that, in reaching the open air, he had passed the terrible beast, lurking somewhere in the shadows.

"I wonder if he will come upon the Portuguese!" muttered Blake. "Ha, ha! He will be an eagle in a dove-cot, and no mistake. I can imagine how the beggars will run when they see him!"

"Mynheer, put up your hands! You are our prisoner!" A guttural voice—English vilely accented—almost at Blake's elbow!

Gripping his Lee-Metford, he whirled round, only to find two levelled Mausers staring him in the face.

Two Boers, clad in cotton jackets, leathern crackers, huge boots, and felt hats, loomed up from behind a rock; and Blake, covered by their rifles, was utterly at their mercy.

He was not slow to realise the fact, and, though surrender is a hateful word to a Briton, he had no alternative except death. So he grounded his rifle and nodded with the best grace he could.

"You have me foul, comrades!" said he, laughing not very heartily. "I am your prisoner. You belong to Black Gerrart's band!"

"Yes, mynheer," replied the English-speaking Boer, stepping forward and disarming the Briton; "Black Gerrart is our captain. Are you the cursed Englander who helped the Portuguese last night?"

"I am. But between men of courage there should be no grudges for hard knocks given in fair fight."

The Boer nodded slowly. "Ach, dot is right, mynheer! But I dink Gerrart Drude will have you sho! You Englanders are always in the way."

"Yes, that's so. We're in Kruger's way and De Wet's way, and we were in Joubert's way and Cronje's way," said Blake recklessly.

He got only a scowl by way of reply, and the Boers marched him off over the rocks in grim silence.

CHAPTER 4.

The Boer and the Briton—Black Gerrart Explains—The Lion's Spoor.

Under an overhanging cliff, about ten minutes' brisk walk from the outlet of the cavern, and in the deepest part of a rugged kloof, Black Gerrart had pitched his camp.

Some shaggy Transvaal ponies were tethered near the little spring that flowed in the kloof, and the Boers, who looked weary and hot, were sitting or lying in the shade, and resting after a hard ride.

Black Gerrart's bearded face was gloomy. A rugged, self-willed, but not bad-hearted man, he was determined and relentless when he had set his mind upon an object. The possession of ex-President Kruger's missing million was his object now, and he had not deemed it difficult of accomplishment at first; but now he found himself baffled and beaten, and by an enemy whom he despised. Six men he had lost in the fight on the Limpopo. Had he been defeated by Britishers, it would not

have exasperated him so much; but to be put to flight by Portuguese—and those merely the scum of Lorenzo Marques—cut him to the quick.

He started up in surprise when the two Boers appeared with the disarmed Englishman between them, and took the pipe from his mouth.

"Ach, a prisoner!" he exclaimed. "You followed the spoor of a lion to find a rooinek! Is he of the enemy?"

"Ja, mynheer Drude." "Shooz him, then!"

And Black Gerrart sat down calmly, regarding his pipe. "By Jove!" said Blake coolly, "you don't believe in wasting time over a prisoner, Black Gerrart."

Preva to excess himself, Drude liked courage in others. He looked at the Briton from under his black, bushy brows.

"Who are you, rooinek?" he asked abruptly.



Resistance was useless. Bernard Blake had no alternative but to give up his arms and allow himself to be marched back to the Boer camp, a prisoner.

"My name is Bernard Blake, and I am a loyal subject of Queen Victoria, as you ought to be." The Boer smiled grimly.

"Never while there is a corner of the veldt unshadowed by your eternal Union Jack!" he cried. "Lord Roberts has conquered the Transvaal, and Paul Kruger has fled like a poltroon, but Black Gerrart is not conquered."

"The game is played out, mynheer. It's no disgrace to knuckle under when the odds are against you."

The Boer waved his hands, as if dismissing the subject. His keen eyes remained fixed upon the frank, bold, English face.

"I have seen you before," he said abruptly. "I know your features and your voice. Were you aboard the yacht last night?"

"If I hadn't been, you would be dead now, mynheer!" "Ach! I recollect. 'Twas a rooinek who kept the dagger of Catanzaro from my throat. You was the man."

"I am, and perhaps now you will withdraw your order. One good turn deserves another: that's my creed."

Black Gerrart signed to the two captors, and Blake stood a freeman.

"An Englander shall not outdo me," said Black Gerrart. "Mynheer, you are at liberty to depart; but, first, I should like a talk with you."

"Fire away," said Blake, seating himself upon a boulder facing the burgher, and tranquilly lighting a cigarette.

"You have come here with Catanzaro in search of the box of gold and diamonds in the wreck of the 'Seidlich'?" "I make no secret of that."

"By what right do you seek the treasure?" "By as good a right as yours, probably." "Listen. I do not seek it for myself, but for my country."

Paul Kruger began to send our wealth away when he found the tide of war running against him. I and many others imagined that it was to be used in the purchase of arms and mercenaries, to drive the rooineks into the sea. I was one of the president's agents at Lorenzo Marques. But I discovered the president's game up, was bent upon that game Paul, considering the game up, was bent upon feathering his own nest. The gold was for him, for Leyds, for anybody or anything except a new revolt in the Transvaal!" And Black Gerrart laughed bitterly.

Blake could not help feeling a certain sympathy for the speaker. There was something about this obstinate determination, this refusal to accept defeat, even when the last hope was gone, that appealed to him as a Briton. It was impolitic, unwise, ungracious; but there was a touch of the heroic in it.

Black Gerrart, with his gloomy resolve, his visionary ideas of a fresh rebellion in the Transvaal, cut a better figure than the ex-president, flying to Europe with his boxes of gold!

"Then I decided," Drude resumed, "that I would baffle Kruger, in part, at least. I had a consignment under my care more precious than any of the former ones; for, besides gold, the chest contained a hoard of diamonds. A million at least was the total value. I embarked upon the 'Scheidt'. I scuttled her. Captain and crew abandoned her in boats, but, with my rifle, I guarded the treasure-chest, and refused to let it be taken from the ship. Then I ran the sinking 'Scheidt' into one of these caverns, and the treasure was saved from the sea. I left the caverns on this, the landward, side, and a tramp that nearly ended me brought me back to the settlements. I intended to charter a small vessel, man it with my friends, and bring away the million. But the moment I was seen I was arrested and brought to Fort Franca."

"By Colonel Carnian's orders?"

"Yes. He had heard the tale of the captain of the 'Scheidt' and my guarding of the treasure told him all. He told me he knew that the chest was above the sea, and gave me the choice of sharing with him, or being pontarred. What could I do? Caught in a trap, I dissimulated to save my life. I confessed where the treasure was, and agreed with him to seek it and share it. In his conceit he never guessed that, humble and submissive as I seemed, I was fooling him. He told me of an English yacht, anchored in the Limpopo; proposed that we should seize it, and use it to convey the chest to safety. He set out with me—the fool! I led him to his death. As soon as my men were collected, and the rascal Portuguese was ready to lead us to the 'Aphrodite,' we gave him a volley, and left him dead in the forest."

"You did not leave him dead?"

"What?"

"I found him still living, and he put me upon the track of Kruger's lost million."

"Well, it matters little, since he is dead now. But, cony, found it! his lieutenant, Catanzaro, must have spied upon us, and learned all, for, when we attacked the yacht, he was already in possession of it, as you know."

"I went to it, to warn the yachtsmen of your intended attack, of which Colonel Carnian had warned me. But, is it a fact that the yacht originally had an English crew, and does not belong to the Portuguese?"

"It is certain. And you—a Briton—have joined Catanzaro, who, doubtless, massacred the crew when he stole the yacht!"

"I don't understand it," said Blake, with a puzzled look. "The captain, George Leyburn, is English, and his daughter is on board."

"Colonel Carnian told me the names of the officers. Leyburn was the name of the first mate, mynheer."

A shade came over Blake's face. Florence's father a mutineer, leagued with men who were practically pirates? Was Florence, then, not the gentle, innocent girl he had imagined her to be? What did it all mean?

"I have told you all this, not without a motive," continued Black Gerrart, and he bent his eyes upon Blake's serious face. "You saved my life; you are a brave man, and these Portuguese cut-throats are no fit associates for you. Abandon them: You don't think Catanzaro will keep faith with you if it's to his interest to break it? Mynheer, I am sorry to have you for an enemy, for I am grateful to you, and I respect you. But, if you follow Catanzaro, I cannot spare you when we meet again."

Blake shook his head decidedly.

"If you recover this million, mynheer, you intend to use it against England. As a loyal Briton, I cannot stand by idly and see you do it. You are doing your duty as you see it. I must do mine."

This was a new view to the Boer. He thought over it, and slowly nodded his head.

"Perhaps you are right, rooinek. We must, then, be foes."

"Unless you abandon your quest," Blake suggested.

"When the Limpopo runs backward, and Majuba Hill flows to the void," the Boer said coldly.

There was a pause.

"How did you get here?" Blake asked, looking round curiously. "Your horses must have found it stiff work."

"Yes; they are nearly worn out, some of them lame. When we failed to take the yacht, I knew Catanzaro would come by land. It was a frightful ride, but I had done it on some once, and we managed it."

"But the treasure-chest will not be easily carried away thus?" Blake said cunningly.

The contents can be divided into packages, one for each horse," replied Black Gerrart.

Blake thought to himself that if the horses were stampeded or killed, the Boers would be in a fix, but he kept the thought to himself.

"We are quits, now," Black Gerrart said, raising and holding out his hand frankly. "If we meet again—I hope we shall not—it will be war."

"So be it."

Blake gave him a cordial hand grip, and strode back the way he had come.

As he reentered the cavern, he noticed again the lion's spoor, and he felt sure that the animal was within the cave, for nowhere could he see return tracks. He kept a wary look-out, and the sound of a footstep made him raise his rifle. Black Gerrart had chivalrously given him back his weapons—but it was only Babyaan.

"We think you lost, baas," said the faithful Zulu. "Come to look for you."

Blake related his experiences, and Babyaan's eyes glittered. Like all the South African natives, he hated the Dutch. He was willing and anxious to come to blows with Black Gerrart and his band.

"We must not strike the first blow," Blake said, dreading the Zulu's thoughts. "Scout if you like, but don't strike except in self-defence."

Babyaan nodded, and went on down the track to the Wood. Sure that battle must come sooner or later, he wished to reconnoitre the enemy's position, and "size up" his future antagonists.

Blake had forgotten the lion while talking to his black comrade, but it was soon brought back to his memory.

As he drew near the anchorage of the "Aphrodite," a loud and terrible roar awoke every echo of the cavern, and to it succeeded a shrill scream, a shot, and a yell of despair.

"Heavens!—a woman's scream! It must be Miss Leyburn! He hurried forward with ready rifle.

CHAPTER 5.

Blake Tackles the Lion—Florence Saved—Leyburn's Story—What Babyaan Did.

The aspect of the "Aphrodite," as it appeared to Blake, was certainly startling in the extreme.

Upon the gaff were perched two Portuguese, whose faces were white with terror. They had climbed there to elude the terrible beast that stalked to and fro upon the deck.

"Twas a lion, a full-grown animal of gigantic size, with bristling mane and flaming eyes, and jaws flecked with foam."

A leap had carried it to the deck of the yacht from the rocky bank of the pool into the middle of the Portuguese, who had scattered in the wildest dismay. One, whose yell Blake had heard, lay upon the planks, horribly mangled by the fierce brute, and breathing his last. Excepting for the two negroes upon the gaff, the crew had escaped below. Catanzaro's pale face looked out from the cuddy window upon the deck, but he dared not venture forth.

All this Blake saw at a single glance; but what made him turn pale was the sight of Florence Leyburn, at the head of the lion.

The girl had been on deck when the lion appeared, and the rush of the crew to escape below prevented her from getting back into the cabins.

She had sprung desperately into the little boat that swung from the davits; but the vessel being so small made the boat within easy distance of the lion, and Blake saw with horror that his rolling eyes frequently turned in the direction of the half-swooning girl.

"Cowards!" muttered Blake. "They have scared themselves, and left her to perish! Heaven help me to save her!"

The girl, in her wild and uncontrollable terror, was screaming for help, and her cries fixed the attention of the lion upon her.

Blake trembled for her; but he needed all his coolness and nerve, and, with an effort, he collected himself.

His rifle was lifted, and carefully aimed, and, sharp as a whip-crack, the report rang out.

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The bullet hit the lion in the loins, and brought a roar from his mighty throat that rivalled the roar of thunder. He turned away from Florence, seeking his new foe, and, as he moved, he trailed his left hind-leg helplessly behind him. Blake had aimed to disable his resistless spring; and had succeeded.

As the eyes, alive with demoniac ferocity, were bent upon him, Blake fired again, and the light of one of them went out like a snuffed candle. The brute roared again, and strove to spring, but fell short on the gangway.

A stream of fire seemed to issue from the magazine-rifle then, and every bullet hit the yelling animal in some vital place, as he crawled towards Blake, with his shattered leg dragging.

His ten shots expended, Blake retreated, and climbed a boulder to be out of the lion's reach while he reloaded the Leclere. The roars now changed to moaning growls, and the lion, almost spent, tried to escape. Ten bullets in his body had taken the pounce out of him.

Then the Portuguese, recovering their courage, sallied forth, and with blade and bullet finished the beast they had not dared to face while it retained its strength.

Blake, unheeding the "Viva, sonnet!" which they bestowed upon him, hurried on board the yacht, and went to Florence, who had quit the boat, and was now on deck. Cifuentes had taken the pounce to her also.

"See here, you are weak, exhausted. Accept my arm."

She gave him a glance of scorn that brought the blood rushing to his earthy face. Then she turned contemptuously from him, and held out both her hands, with an impulsive gesture, to Bernard Blake.

"So, I do not know your name, but I thank you from my heart. You have saved my life, and the lives, perhaps, of all on board. Heavens, what would my father have thought if he had returned and found me—"

She broke off, shivering and trembling, as she imagined the horrible fate that would have been hers but for Bernard Blake.

"Captain Leyburn, then, is absent?" asked Blake, glad to turn her mind from the subject of his own exploit.

He had wondered why the captain had not tackled the lion. "Yes; he has gone to explore the caverns."

Florence gladly accepted Blake's arm to her cabin, and there he left her. In his memory her pale and lovely face, her sweet eyes swimming in grateful tears, remained clear. How beautiful she was! His heart was beating hard when he left her.

"I love her, I love her!" he muttered. And, when he returned to the deck, he seemed to be treading on air.

The carcass of the lion was dragged to the mouth of the cavern, and flung into the sea, where the sharks of Delagoa Bay speedily made an end of the one-time monarch of the forest and the redden. The dead Portuguese was disposed of in the same manner, and almost as callously. Between these outcasts—the debris of a disorderly town—there was little feeling of comradeship.

Cifuentes avoided speaking to Blake. No coward in ordinary perils, he yet had not had sufficient courage to encounter the lion. From such a conflict a brave man might have emerged undamaged, but for the circumstance that such shrinkers left a helpless girl at the mercy of the monster.

Catanzaro loved Florence in his own way, and now he was for ever degraded and rendered ignoble in her eyes. She had cried in her distress for aid, and he, her hero, who had looked below like a coward. The recollection of it made his face burn with shame. Worst of all, this hateful Englishman had risked his life and rescued Florence, thus offering a contrast to his own conduct. Many a glance of poisonous hatred the lieutenant threw at Blake.

When Captain Leyburn came back, he saw that something had gone wrong; but Dom Cifuentes refused to explain. Leyburn sought Florence, from whom he heard the whole story.

Blake was astonished when Leyburn rushed up to him, clasping his hand, and pouring out incoherent thanks. He passed the matter off lightly. But Leyburn was as enraged with Catanzaro as he was grateful to Blake. Leaving our hero, he stalked up to the Portuguese with a scowling brow.

A dangerous gleam came into Cifuentes's eyes. He was not afraid of Leyburn, and he was in a humour for a quarrel.

"You are a coward!" the seaman bellowed out, shaking his fist in the face of the soldier.

Catanzaro's hand flew to his belt, and a poniard glittered in the air, circling over his head as he threw up his hand to strike.

One second more would have seen the unprepared Englishman withering in his blood. But Blake saw the peril, and he snatched up a pistol and fired just in time. The poniard, shattered by the well-aimed shot, flew out of Catanzaro's hand.

The Portuguese went white with rage, and Leyburn grew absolutely purple. They would have sprung upon each other had not Blake interposed.

"Drop it, you pair of fools!" said the young man coolly. "There's nothing to be gained by punching each other's heads."

Catanzaro, always Machiavellian, gulped down his rage. From that moment George Leyburn was deemed, but the Portuguese always hid his hand until he struck.

"Maldito," he said, "I have no desire to quarrel. I was hasty."

"I do not withdraw my words!" answered Leyburn.

Catanzaro shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"Look here, Leyburn," said Blake, without ceremony. "You have no right to taunt him. You know the kind of man he was when you joined him in a criminal enterprise."

"Criminal!" exclaimed Leyburn fiercely.

"Mutiny and piracy are, I believe, criminal," Blake said calmly.

Leyburn gasped, and his face went red and white.

"Curse you, how do you know?"

"I met Black Gerrart to-day in a boat beyond the caves, and he told me the whole story of Kruger's lost million. You were chief mate of this vessel, and are no more a captain than I am."

The young adventurer's plain speaking was something of a shock to George Leyburn. He gaped at Blake speechlessly.

"The only reason I have for remaining with such a gang," continued Blake, after ascertaining that Dom Cifuentes was no longer in hearing, "is this. You have placed a lady in danger by your foolish conduct, and I feel bound, as a man of honour, to stand by her in a time of peril."

"Say what you like; I deserve it all," Leyburn replied, his head sinking. Then, with the desire of a weak man to disclaim responsibility, he continued: "It is all the fault of Cifuentes Catanzaro. But for him, I should be an honourable man to-day."

To this Blake made no reply. Leyburn, leaning upon the taffrail, and moodily staring down into the black lake, continued:

"I'll tell you how it was. It is true that I was chief mate of this vessel. I had been offered a responsible post by a shipping company of Lorenzo Marques, and sailed there in his yacht, the captain and owner giving me permission to bring my daughter on board, as she was to be with me at Lorenzo Marques. The post was given me, you understand, by the company's agent in London. I preferred sailing in this yacht to making the trip in one of the steamers. Besides, I had little money, and the pay was good. It was not until after we were at sea that I found out that Captain Leclere was in love with Florence, and that he had planned to get her in his power, and that I had blindly fallen into his trap. To do him justice, he wished to make her his wife. He was honourable in his way."

Leyburn paused, his brow growing darker.

"It was an unpleasant position," remarked Blake.

"I hoped we should soon reach Lorenzo Marques, and my uneasiness would be over. But at sea a captain is a czar. He coolly told me that he didn't intend to enter Delagoa Bay at all, and cast anchor in the mouth of the Limpopo. I looked, then, for an opportunity of escaping with Florence. But Captain Leclere's men were his own creatures, and everything was against me. The second day of our stay in the river, we were boarded by the Portuguese from Fort France, headed by Colonel Carnian and Lieutenant Catanzaro. The former readily accepted a bribe from Leclere as the price of non-interference. The latter was an old friend of mine. I confided in him. He saw Florence, and was struck by her beauty. He agreed to assist me. He told me the story of Kruger's lost million, which he had learned by playing the spy and eaves-dropper when Black Gerrart was with the colonel. To be short, I agreed to help him to capture the 'Aphrodite.' Mr. Blake, when you came on board, it was only four hours since Captain Leclere and his crew had been poniarded and flung to the sharks!" said Leyburn hoarsely.

Blake shuddered.

"It was Catanzaro's doing. I wished him to merely assist me to escape with Florence; but the only condition upon which he would aid me was that the crew should be massacred to prevent the telling of tales, and that the yacht should be used to search for the lost million. Captain Leclere had lately shown insolence towards Florence, and his men were all my foes. I allowed Catanzaro to have his way."

"I am glad you made this explanation," Blake said slowly.

"You are not so much to blame as I deemed. But did it not strike you that Cifuentes Catanzaro would be a dangerous man to serve—at least, as bad as Leclere?"

"A drowning man catches at any straw. Besides, I had known Cifuentes well in the past, and done him more than one service. Even now, in spite of your doubts, I don't think he means to play me false. There is honour among thieves, you know!" said Leyburn, with a bitter laugh.

"The sooner this voyage is over the better," Blake said easily. "Of course, it is impossible to turn back now. But if you choose to take the boat to-night, and attempt to convey Miss Leyburn to Lorenzo Marques, my honour and I will gladly assist you."

Leyburn shook his head.

"Such an attempt would be madness, Mr. Blake."

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"It would be risky, but perhaps better than remaining in Catanzaro's power."

"No, no! Believe me, Catanzaro's thoughts are all given to the lost million."

Blake was very doubtful about that, but he said no more. It was useless for him to urge, when Leyburn's mind was made up. Besides, he reflected that Catanzaro might not be so bad after all. Leyburn ought to know his character. And to set out for Lorenzo Marques in an open boat would be a desperate expedient, only justified by extreme peril.

Babyaan returned a little later, and Blake was startled to see stains of crimson upon his assegai and the border of his kaross. "You remember what I told you, Babyaan?" the Englishman said. "I hope you have not attacked the Boers?"

The Zulu grinned. "No, baas. Babyaan only kill boss. If Dutch find treasure, dey not carry it away easy now. All on foot, baas."

"Have you really killed all their horses, Babyaan?"

"Ebery one. Me creep like snake. Kill with assegai. Boers not see me!" the Zulu explained, grinning.

Blake told Dom Cifuento what had happened, and the Portuguese was greatly pleased.

"The Boers are crippled without their horses," he remarked. "Their only resource will be another attempt to capture the 'Aphrodite,' against which we must guard."

CHAPTER 6.

Leyburn's Terrible Fate—The Sorrow of Florence—Blake Speaks Plainly—The Expedition.

Leyburn's absence from the yacht had been for the purpose of exploring the caverns, in search of the wreck of the "Scheldt."

He had not been unsuccessful, having found pieces of wreckage, which indicated that the hulk was not far away; but he had not actually seen the "Scheldt" itself. He had come back to report, but his quarrel with Catanzaro drove the matter from his mind. However, a patched-up peace having been agreed to, he told his discoveries, and Dom Cifuento left the "Aphrodite" with him to see the traces he had found. The lieutenant left orders with the crew to keep a sharp look-out for Boers, and to shoot on sight if enemies appeared.

In about an hour, the Portuguese returned alone. He was very pale, but cool and collected. His look made Bernard Blake uneasy.

"Where is Captain Leyburn, senhor?" he asked.

"Dead!" crisply replied the lieutenant.

"Dead! What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say. George Leyburn is dead. He fell into a crevice and broke his neck. I am about to send men to bring his body in."

Blake laid his hand upon the soldier's shoulder, and looked him directly in the eyes.

"Cifuento Catanzaro," he said sternly, "have you murdered George Leyburn?"

"Diavolo! caro senhor, what a question!" said the Portuguese, shrugging his shoulders.

"Leyburn was not a man to tumble blindly into an abyss," continued Blake; "but a treacherous push might have done the business."

"Maldito, you had better hold an inquest!" sneered Catanzaro, and, turning to the grinning crew, he gave directions for finding the body.

A couple of men went to fetch it, and soon George Leyburn was brought back a corpse to the vessel he had lately left in health and strength.

Blake looked at him. Leyburn was quite dead. His neck had been broken by his fall, as well as a leg, and some of his ribs. He was covered with mud and sand. His face, cut and bruised, was a ghastly sight.

Mongio and Baptiste, the two men who had carried him back, told how they had found him at the bottom of a deep crevice in an adjacent cavern. He had fallen in, and must have struck the rocky bottom with terrific force. It was a terrible fate, and the more terrible from its suddenness.

Blake had hardly any doubt that it was murder, and that Catanzaro had deliberately led Leyburn to the crevice to assassinate him. But there was no proof of this, and, if there had been, what could Blake do? Force was on the side of Catanzaro.

How would Florence take the news of her father's death? What a shock for the poor girl!

Blake resolved to break it to her. He descended to the cabins, and knocked at Florence's door.

It was opened by the coloured girl who waited upon Miss Leyburn.

"Come in, Mr. Blake!" said Florence's sweet voice. The cabin was small, but comfortable. The sleeping-apartment was beyond it, a curtained doorway connecting them.

Florence rose to meet Blake. She had quite recovered from her scare, and, the colour returning to her face, made her

look lovelier than ever. Blake, as he took the hand frankly extended, wondered how he could deliver the terrible message he had brought.

"Has anything happened?" exclaimed Florence, as she saw his pale face in the lamplight; for night had now fallen.

"I have had news for you, Miss Leyburn," he faltered. She looked at him with scared and startled eyes.

"My father!" she breathed. "What has happened to him?"

His pitying eyes told her voicelessly. She tottered, pressing her hand to her heart.

"Oh, my father! my father!"

It was a wail of sorrow that went to the heart of Bernard Blake.

"Miss Leyburn! Florence!" he exclaimed, and his arm was flung round her falling form, supporting her just in time.

Heavy sobs shook her frame. The violence of her grief alarmed him. He placed her upon a couch, and called the coloured girl to her aid. But Florence, recovering her calmness to some extent, after the first burst of grief, rose, the tears still streaming from her eyes, but her lips firm.

"Where is he? Take me to him," she said.

The seamen had carried the dead man into his own cabin, and thither Blake led Florence. Then, understanding that she wished to be alone, he quietly withdrew.

On deck the Portuguese were chuckling and grinning, as over some rare joke. From their talk, Blake soon saw that no one believed Leyburn's death to have been an accident. Catanzaro loved Florence. Leyburn had stood in his way, and Catanzaro had flung him into the crevice to get rid of him. That was the general opinion of the crew.

"But why does he make all this pretence?" Baptiste remarked. "A thrust of a poniard would have been simpler."

"For the senhorita's sake, dull-head," replied Mongio. "He doesn't want her to know that he killed her father."

Blake felt a sickness of heart. He had had little doubt before, but now he was quite certain. Leyburn would have done better to trust to Captain Leclerc, who, at least, shrank from crime, though unscrupulous enough. In trusting Catanzaro he trusted a tiger, who turned and rent him, as might have been expected.

"Portugee cursed bad man!" Babyaan said to his master. "Babyaan sure he killed the white baas."

"I am sure of it, too, Babyaan," said Blake, gloomily.

"But what are we to do?"

"Trek!" was the Zulu's laconic advice.

"And leave Miss Leyburn to his mercy, Babyaan?"

"Take her, too."

"How?"

"Boat. We know coast as well as forest and veldt. In boat, we reach Lorenzo Marques. Portuguese and Boer fight it out."

"Are you as willing as I am to give up all idea of sharing the lost million of Com Paul?"

"Babyaan not want money," answered the Zulu. Blake thought a good deal over the Zulu's words; but it was not practicable to act at once. While Florence was distracted with grief for her father it would be futile to mention the matter to her.

That night Blake and Babyaan watched and slept by turns, as before. Fortunately for them! For at midnight a stealthy footstep was heard outside the cabin, and a hand touched the door. Blake cocked his pistol, and the sound scared away whoever was outside. The stealthy footsteps passed on up the companion-ladder.

When Babyaan woke, and took his turn. Blake told him what had occurred, and the Zulu kept on the alert till dawn; but the footsteps were heard no more.

When Blake went up in the morning, Catanzaro gave him a peculiar look, which he did not find it difficult to interpret. He walked straight up to the Portuguese officer.

"Which of your men did you instruct to assassinate me last night, when you thought I was asleep, senhor?" he asked coolly.

The Portuguese gave a violent start.

"You are mistaken, senhor!" he stammered.

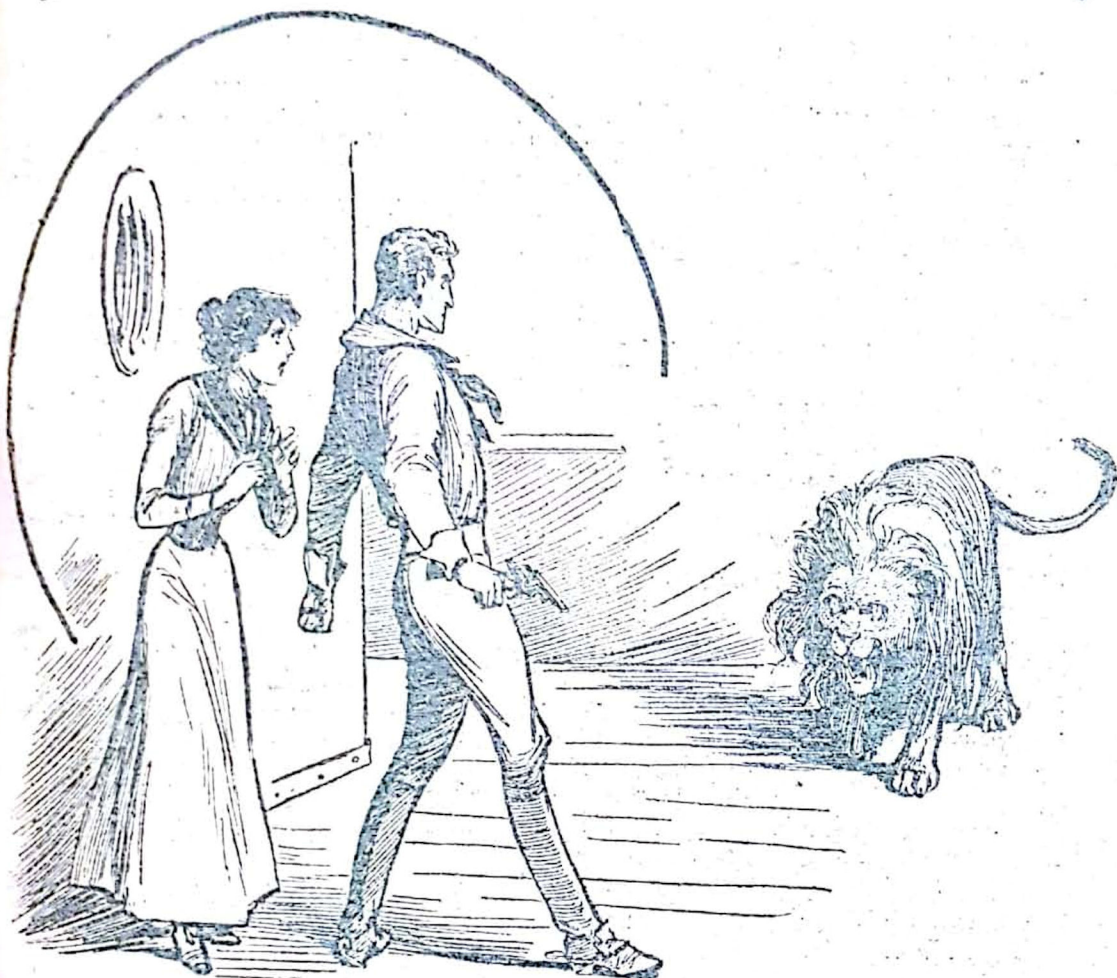
"Perhaps it was you yourself?" suggested Blake, with his hand upon the butt of his revolver.

Catanzaro had seen Bernard's skill with firearms, and prudence made him repress his desire to draw a poniard and lunge at the Englishman.

"I assure you, senhor, that you are mistaken. You must have been dreaming," he said blandly.

"All right, we'll call it a dream if you like," assented Blake. "But, mark this, the next time I dream anything of that kind, there will be trouble, that's all!"

He left Catanzaro scowling with fury. "he shall not carry his haughty English head so high much longer! But



Wounded in the leg, the kingly beast still advanced, roaring thunderously. Bernard had aimed to baulk its deadly spring, and had succeeded.

"But I cannot afford to lose any more of my men while there is danger from the Boers, he should not live another hour!" During the morning, Catanzaro made preparations to follow up the clues found by the unfortunate Leyburn to the wreck of the "Scheldt."

It was necessary for the seekers to go in force, for the Boers, knowing the exact location of the wreck, might be already there to defend it.

Dom Cifuento did not wish to leave both Blake and Babyaan on board while he was gone, having a strong suspicion that they would attempt to seize the yacht and sail, and leave him in the lurch. He, therefore, asked the Englishman to join his party.

"Thanks," replied Blake curtly; "but I have no desire to be pushed into a crevice! I'll stay where I am!"

"You won't! I'm not going to risk losing the yacht!" Cifuento replied bluntly.

"You want me as a hostage, then?"

"Yes; and if you won't come, I'll compel Miss Leyburn to accompany us!"

"What would that concern me?"

"Jab! pouf! Don't I know why you stick to the 'Aphrodite'? Do you think I am blind?"

Blake coloured a little.

"Meet Miss Leyburn, and you will have to reckon with me," he said. "But I will come with you. Remember that at the first sign of treachery I shall shoot to kill!"

"I have a good memory!" said the Portuguese, with a smile.

Blake went to Babyaan, and told him where he was going. "Remain on board, Babyaan," he said. "I want Florence—I mean Miss Leyburn—to have a friend at hand if she needs one."

"Keep very sharp look-out, baas," said the Zulu anxiously. "Portuguese kill you if he can!"

"If he can safely, you mean. I shall be as safe there as here, comrade. Besides, they won't try any tricks when we may at any moment be attacked by Black Gerrart. My rifle is on their side, you know, and, without conceit, I am worth any three of them."

Before he left the "Aphrodite," Blake sought Florence. He found her pale, grief-stricken, but calm.

The violence of her grief had subsided; and she was composed again, but the picture of sorrow. His heart bled for her. He longed for a lover's privilege to take her in his arms and whisper consolation, but this feeling he carefully hid.

He told her he was going, and that Babyaan was at her call if she wanted him, and she thanked him with a feeble smile.

"Poor girl!" he murmured, when he left her. "But this sorrow shall be followed by happiness, if my love can make her happy."

Mongio and Baptiste were left aboard the yacht with Babyaan; the other six men went with Dom Cifuento and Blake.

As soon as the party left the yacht, it was moved out of the entombed lake and the cavern, and anchored among the sandbanks. Cifuento was nervous of an attack upon the vessel during his absence, but out among the sandbanks he considered her beyond the reach of the Boers, as they had no boat.

He little dreamed of what would happen before he set eyes upon the trim little "Aphrodite" again.

CHAPTER 7.

Black Gerrart Attacks—The Surprise—The Success of the Boers.

Notwithstanding the sharp watch kept by the Boers, Black Gerrart had seen nothing of the cunning Zulu, when, creeping

like a snake among the shadows of the rocks, he had despatched the horses with sure strokes of his assegai.

But when the Boers went to look at the tethered animals, as attend to their wants, they discovered at once what had been done.

Black Gerrart, filled with rage at the destruction, aware a valley of cultured Dutch curses; but, as that was not likely to mend matters, he soon recovered his usual serious composure.

His position was altered now. Left without horses, what could he do? Once before, after seeing the scuttled "Aphrodite" into the cavern, he had made the journey from the cliffs of San Marco to Lorenzo Marques on foot. But he was a giant of strength, and even he had been utterly done up by the journey. His men were hardly capable of it. Besides, since the murder of Colonel Carnian, it was impossible for him to venture back to the Portuguese settlements. He had intended to carry off the treasure, and push through the forests to the Transvaal, and find security in some region there to which the Union Jack had not yet penetrated. But, without horses, he and his men were stranded.

He thought long over the matter, with gloomily-wrinkled brows, and at length his slow brain reached the conclusion to which the keen Catanzaro had jumped at once, when told of the killing of the horses.

"Comrades, our only recourse is to take the 'Aphrodite,'" he said.

The Boers all nodded. They were ready for anything. Like bloodhounds upon a trail, they did not wish to quit until the quarry was run down.

Having come to this decision, Black Gerrart turned the matter over in his mind to find the ways and means. First he sent his sharpest man, Jan Stroom, to spy out the Portuguese position. Stroom had no difficulty in finding the "Aphrodite," and he soon returned to his leader with a description of what he had seen.

Black Gerrart made up his mind.

"We will keep a scout near the yacht to watch. When the Portuguese leave in search of the 'Scheldt,' we'll seize the vessel."

When Catanzaro's party, then, left the "Aphrodite" to follow the traces discovered by poor Leyburn, keen eyes were watching their departure from a distance, and, within ten minutes, Gerrart Drude knew that the vessel was deprived of nearly all its defenders.

The Boers at once advanced into the cavern, but, to their chagrin, the "Aphrodite" had been taken out among the sandbanks.

"She is beyond our reach, as we have no boat," said Jan Stroom.

"Not so," replied the black-bearded leader. "If we cannot play the lion, we must play the snake. Three of us can swim, and three, therefore, must capture the 'Aphrodite.'"

Fearfully dangerous as the work was, in a region of sharks and quicksands, the old followers of De Wet made no demur.

Three men—Black Gerrart, Jan Stroom, and Peter Schmidt—divested themselves of most of their clothing, and, armed only with their hunting-knives, took to the water.

Ahead the "Aphrodite" there was neither expectation nor preparation; the attack was quite unlooked for.

Babyaan, who knew that in any unguarded moment he might feel a poniard in his back, kept at a distance from Baptiste and Mongio, the two Portuguese left in charge of the yacht.

Having nothing to occupy his mind, he seated himself in the cuddy, and talked to Miss Leyburn's coloured maid, vastly impressing the negro girl with his stories of the forest and the veldt.

Baptiste and Mongio, on deck, sat in the shade of a sail, and played monte, buenos, and malditos, following the lucky or unlucky turns of the cards, and, thus occupied, they quite forgot that they were supposed to be keeping watch.

Any sounds the approaching Boers might have made were completely drowned by the rumbling that proceeded from the caverns of San Marco. This noise had now become continuous, with very rare intervals of silence, and the Portuguese, accustomed to it, ceased to take note of it.

Babyaan was the only man rendered uneasy by the ominous sound. He knew that an earthquake was impending; but even he did not guess how near the catastrophe was.

Behind the careless gamblers a head rose above the stern rail of the yacht. Black Gerrart hung where he had hung before, on the night when Bernard Blake saved him from the poniard of Catanzaro.

Keen eyes, glaring out, hyena-like, under the black brows, took in every detail of the deck, and a flash of triumph sparkled for a moment in their depths.

Slowly, silently, the giant Boer drew his long limbs above the taffrail of the "Aphrodite," and across it.

Then he turned and gave his assistance to his two followers, and a couple of minutes more saw the three safe on deck.

Still immersed in their game, and shadowed by the tall they had arranged to keep off the burning sun, the two doomed Portuguese heard nothing, saw nothing. The leopard stealing cunning of these brawny, heavy-handed Boers, as they stole upon the rapt gamblers.

Armed only with knives, the success of the Boers depended upon their getting to close quarters unseen. For Baptiste and Mongio had their rifles across their knees, prepared for use if the alarm were once given.

"Caramba, what ill-luck!" Mongio exclaimed, bitterly.

Baptiste chuckled.

"Pordios, you cannot always win, hombre. I—"

The words ended abruptly, and the voice of the speaker died away in a low groan of anguish.

A knife, driven by a powerful hand, had struck him over the shoulder, piercing his breast and his heart, and he fell back dead at the feet of Black Gerrart.

At the same moment, two long blades jarred together in the breast of Mongio, and he gasped out his last breath in a "Caramba!"

A slow grin stole over Gerrart Drude's sombre, bearded face.

"That is ended," he said. "Take their rifles and follow me. Shoot without mercy, but spare the Englander if he surrenders, and also the Zulu who helped me to escape, if they are on board."

Black Gerrart's scout had seen the expedition start, but had been too far off to distinguish its members, in the shady light of the cavern, so that Drude did not know exactly whom he had to encounter on board the "Aphrodite."

The Boers had only three steps to descend into the cuddy. There Babyaan, the Zulu, and the negro girl, Diana, were utterly astounded by their appearance.

Babyaan's assegai was uplifted at once, but Jan Stroom and Pieter Schmidt levelled their rifles, taken from the butchered Portuguese.

The Zulu hesitated. Had they fired, his assegai would have claimed at least one victim ere he fell. But he saw in Black Gerrart's face a wish to spare him, and, brave as he was, he did not desire to die if he could help it.

"Put down your spear, boy," said Black Gerrart. "Are you not the Zulu who helped me away from this vessel when the Portuguese lieutenant would have stabbed me?"

Babyaan nodded. He did not think it expedient to explain just then that he had acted by Bernard Blake's orders, in opposition to his own wishes.

"Then your life is safe if you surrender. Drop your assegai at once! We are not to be trifled with."

"Answer me dis first—do ye mean harm to Miss Leyburn?" asked the Zulu, with the assegai still poised ready to strike.

One life was his to take, if they came to blows, and the knowledge of it on both sides gave him the power to parley.

"Who is Miss Leyburn?" Black Gerrart asked. "Oh, I recollect, Blake mentioned Leyburn's daughter to me. What do you take us for, dikkop?" and the brows contracted; "she is safe with us."

"Massa Blake left me to guard her; but me trust you, baas!" And the Zulu threw down his assegai.

"Are there any others of Catanzaro's men on board?"

"There was two of dem on deck."

Black Gerrart showed his bloodstained knife.

"There are no others?"

"No, baas."

"Ja, good!" And Black Gerrart reflected for a minute.

"Your master, then, has gone with Catanzaro?"

Babyaan nodded.

"You may go to Miss Leyburn, and tell her what has happened, and assure her that there is no cause for her to be alarmed."

Babyaan did so. Florence listened to him with apathy. Her father, whom she had dearly loved in spite of his faults, was dead! Nothing else interested her. What did it matter if Portuguese or Boers were in possession of the yacht, so long as they left her alone with her grief?

Black Gerrart and his men were not particularly skilful seamen, but they handled the yacht fairly well.

Baptiste and Mongio being flung into the sea, the Boers took the "Aphrodite" back to the lake entombed in the cavern.

If she were still out among the sandbanks when Catanzaro returned, he would call for a boat, and, of course, quickly discover that the yacht was in the hands of Black Gerrart. But if the Portuguese found her in the cavern, he would naturally think that Baptiste and Mongio had brought her in again.

And, when the returning treasure-seekers came unexpectably within range of the Mausers, would not one volley end for ever their claim to Oom Paul's lost million? Black Gerrart chuckled grimly at the prospect.

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The yacht was placed in her former anchorage, and Drude's men, who had been left behind, went on board, and the three who had captured the craft resumed the garments they had left in the cave when they swam on their perilous errand. And then Black Gerrart waited impatiently for the return of the Portuguese.

Mouthing the great and humble of the subterranean cavern, the Boers, whose new leader and more threatening; but the Boers, who were now absorbed now by the thought of the treasure that was almost within their grasp, were heedless, and had no heed of Nature's solemn warning.

CHAPTER 8.

The "Scheidt"—Kruzer's Lost Million Found—The Return—The Forlorn Hope.

"By the saints, we are on the right track now, brave comrades!" exclaimed Cifuentis Catanzaro, in a voice of delight. They had reached an extensive cavern, nearly half a mile from the anchorage of the "Aphrodite."

An arm of the sea penetrated it, and the wavelets swished and curled upon a stretch of white sand.

Piles of wreckage, spars and blocks, and coils of rope lay about—a indication that they were close to a wreck.

And what wreck could be there in the lonely caverns of San Marco save that of the scuttled "Scheidt?"

"This is the cavern into which Black Gerrart steered the sailing ship," the Portuguese continued, looking round eagerly; "there is no doubt of it. Keep your eyes open for the enemy, lads. Black Gerrart and his men may be here to defend the chest of riches, and we may have to fight."

"There is the bulk!" exclaimed Blake, pointing to a dark object that lay further in the obscurity of the cavern; "but it may be bristling with Mauser rifles for all we know."

The lieutenant ordered his men to separate, surround the "Scheidt," and close in, keeping under cover of the boulders that strewed the cavern—vast masses of rock, detached from the strata above by the last earthquake.

The approach to the shattered hulk was made with great caution; but no sound of cracking Mausers broke the stillness. It soon became clear that the "Scheidt" was untenanted.

She had probably been battered by the breakers when Black Gerrart steered her landward, for she was a mere wreck—her masts and yards broken, and her rigging in shreds, and much of it gone. She was deeply embedded in the sand, and lay over nearly on her side, so that the hole the scuttler had made in her could be seen. She must have been waterlogged when Black Gerrart ran her aground; the wonder was that he had succeeded in getting her ashore at all.

"Here she is, what the breakers have left of her," said Catanzaro, as he stepped, not without difficulty, upon the sloping deck. "And now to find the treasure-chest. Senhor Blake, will it please you to keep a look-out for the enemy while we search?"

"As you like," Blake replied indifferently.

He was thinking, not of Kruzer's lost million, but of the pale, sorrowful face and swimming eyes of Florence Leyburn.

The Portuguese scrambled into the vessel, and had no difficulty in breaking into the strong-room in the stern.

A roll of exultant triumph went up as they gathered around the treasure-chest—the iron-bound box containing the precious metal, and still more precious stones, for which blood had been shed like water.

"We have found it!" said Catanzaro hoarsely, his black eyes sparkling.

"Yes, there it was!

Considering the loneliness of the desolate caverns, Black Gerrart had taken no pains to conceal it. It had remained just as he had left it in the strong-room of the "Scheidt."

"How are we to get it to the 'Aphrodite'?" remarked one of the men. "It is heavy, and not a handy thing to carry."

Catanzaro reflected for a moment.

"We will bring the box of the 'Aphrodite' round by sea," he said. "Then we can place the chest in it, and row it to the yacht. We can leave the chest here—"

He paused. The chest had remained long enough to prove the security of the cavern, certainly. Yet he could not, once having it in his possession, make up his mind to leave it unprotected.

"One man can fetch the boat," he went on. "Do you, Alcidio, go, while we remain to guard the chest. You will return here with the boat in less than an hour. Hasten, for I shall not feel secure until it is aboard the yacht."

Alcidio now lightly departed. Then Catanzaro broke the fastenings of the chest, and the ruffians feasted their eyes upon the treasure.

Tranvaal sovereigns in rolls, valuable securities—above all, diamonds! The stones were in little packages, and Catanzaro, when he examined them, cried exultantly that they alone were worth nearly a million.

Greedy eyes were bent upon the treasure. Florence marvelled at the brutal faces of the outcasts of Lourenço Marques.

But one consideration kept the bandits from flying at each other's throats, to satisfy the desire to possess all which even savagely felt—the knowledge that at any moment they might be assailed by the common foe.

Though reluctant to lose sight of the treasure, Catanzaro closed up the chest, when he had examined it, for security. He did not wish his ruffian fingers to wander among the priceless gems.

"Hallo!" Blake called out suddenly. "Did you hear that? Something must be wrong at the yacht. I know the ring of the Mauser!"

It was the report of a rifle, echoing through the caverns, from the direction of the "Aphrodite."

The hunter had now become so used to the subterranean rumbling that it hardly interfered with his hearing, and Blake heard the rifle-shot just as if there had been silence in the caverns of San Marco. He even fancied that he heard a cry of pain succeed the shot.

The Portuguese, with alarm in their swarthy faces, were out of the wreck in a moment.

"Alcidio has fallen in with the Boers," said Catanzaro decidedly. "We shall not get the boat, and the foe are between us and the yacht."

It was a disquieting situation, though only what might have been expected. Dom Cifuentis had known that something of the kind must happen whenever he left the yacht in quest of the lost million.

"It will be a battle, then," remarked Blake.

"It is inevitable now," Catanzaro looked at Bernard.

"Senhor, you have joined us, but I know how you regard the alliance. It binds you little. But you have seen Black Gerrart—you know his hopes and aims. If the lost million falls into his hands, you know how he will use it. Lord Roberts already has his hands full to hold the Boer guerrillas in check. If this resolute and irreconcilable man is let loose with a million at his command, what will be the result? Arms and ammunition will once more pour into the Transvaal, with hundreds of German and Dutch mercenaries. He will even arm and raise the natives, for he will stop at nothing in his hatred of the 'rooineks.'"

"I know it."

"You are a subject of Queen Victoria. It is your duty to keep this million out of Black Gerrart's hands. If it is shared among my bandits, no harm is done. If Gerrart Drude soaks it, the pacification of South Africa may be delayed for months. If you do not join me heart and soul against these Boers, you are a traitor to your Queen!"

"Cease!" exclaimed Bernard impatiently. "I know my duty without lessons from you. I saved Black Gerrart's life, and he spared me; so we are quits. I will fight to the death to keep the treasure out of his clutches!"

The Portuguese was satisfied. He wanted the aid of Bernard's unerring rifle in the coming fight. Above all, he wished to be sure that the Briton would not desert to the Boers.

"I am glad—per Dios—that I did not kill him last night, after all!" he muttered cynically.

Bernard Blake was in a rather gloomy mood. He had hoped to avoid a conflict with Black Gerrart. But his duty was clear. Apart from any desire of his own to handle the lost million, he must not let it fall into the hands of a bitter foe of Britain if he could help it. After all, Briton and Boer were still killing and being killed on the other side of the Portuguese frontier. Why should not the same take place here? Still, he was disquieted.

The Portuguese marched at once. It was now necessary to leave the treasure for a time. Soon they came in sight of the cavern-lake, with the "Aphrodite" anchored there. And a hundred yards from the vessel lay Alcidio, shot through the heart.

"We are coming to a crisis now," Blake remarked. "If Black Gerrart retains possession of the 'Aphrodite,' he can starve us out, as he controls our supplies. Then he can walk off with the treasure. We must retake the yacht, and I have a plan for doing it."

The lake in which the yacht lay was banked on the nearer side by the level floor of the cavern. On the other side the extremity of the cave was formed by a wall of rock, washed by the lake. Black Gerrart had anchored the yacht as near this rocky wall as he could, to leave a wide stretch of water between the vessel and the landing place.

The rocky wall was rough, full of fissures, and bristling with projections. Active men could swim across the lake at a distance from the yacht, climb the cave-wall, work their way along it to a point above the yacht, and then a long jump would land them upon the deck.

It was simple enough, but risky; for, if the Boers were on the look-out for such a trick, they would be able to pick off the climbers like partridges as they clung to the cliff.

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"By our Lady of Zanzibar," cried the lieutenant gleefully, "the 'Union Jack' is yours, Blake, you have retaken the yacht for us!"

Blake directed his shoulder. "I will need nerve and courage, and these qualities are not conspicuous in your men." The three men crossed the lake at a shallow place, their fire-arms held above their heads.

The ascent upon the rocky wall was even easier than Blake had anticipated.

A ledge was nearly perpendicular, the ledges and fissures offered a good hold for hands and feet, and the climb proved no more difficult than the ascent of a ship's cross-trees.

Blake, sword-footed as a chamois, led, and Catanzaro came next. Slowly but steadily they worked their way along the cliff, now rising, now ascending, Blake picking the easiest way, the others following his movements.

"By Bacchus, this Englishman is invaluable!" thought Catanzaro. "I am almost sorry that I have sworn to plant my poniard in his heart!"

CHAPTER 9.

A Daring Attack—The Fight for the Yacht—Blake Taken—Black Gerrart Wins.

Black Gerrart was "slim" in his Dutch way, but he never thought of looking for an attack coming from the blank wall of rock that rose upon the port-side of the "Aphrodite."

As the Portuguese treasure-hunters could only have with them sufficient rations for a few days, he looked for a bold attack upon his hunger rendered them desperate; but he looked for it to be made as he would have made it himself.

When night came on, he went into the former captain's cabin for a spell of sleep; for he was pretty well exhausted by now. His men had rested during the afternoon, while he kept watch for the Portuguese.

He gave them injunctions to keep an alert watch for the enemy, and they did so; but all their attention was turned toward the cave, and they bestowed not a glance upon the rock wall, looming up dimly upon the other side of the yacht.

They did not hear, in the ceaseless rumbling that filled the cavern—louder at this point—an occasional scratch or scrape upon the rock.

They did not see the dark forms and fierce eyes slowly drawing nearer to the silent vessel.

Below, Black Gerrart, trusting to their vigilance, lay in heavy slumber.

In her cabin, Florence Leyburn had sobbed herself to sleep. The body of George Leyburn still lay stiff and stark in the bunk he had often slept in when life was in his veins.

Habyaan had been shut up in the hold—a close prisoner, but treated with considerable kindness by the Dutchmen. The Zulu took things calmly, and he was sleeping like a top.

On deck the sleepy Boers watched and waited. They had taken the yacht by surprise, and mercilessly slain its guardians, but a few hours before. The same measure was about to be dealt to them.

There was something eerie, unearthly, in the vast cavern, the still lake, and the growl of Nature's forces at work beneath them.

A piece of stone, accidentally detached by the Portuguese, dropped into the buried lake with a sullen splash.

The sound startled the Boers. Catanzaro shuddered. If they opened fire now, the climbers would be swept from the wall. And their eyes were now peering through the gloom towards the cliff.

It was Bernard Blake who saved the situation.

"Forward!" he shouted.

And with a flying leap he landed upon the yacht. A revolver was in his hand. As his feet touched the deck he began to shoot, and reeling forms lurched to right and left.

With a fierce, screaming shout, the Portuguese followed the Englishman. One fell silent, and disappeared under the black waters. One was struck by a random Boer bullet, and fell across the bulwarks a corpse. But four landed beside Blake, and the Dutch, utterly unprepared, were nowhere.

Jan Stroom and Pieter Schmidt, chancing to be close to the cuddy steps, plunged below, and joined Black Gerrart, who had been instantly awakened by the sound of firearms. But the others, shot down or pounded, were hurled into the sea, and the cleared deck remained to the assailants.

"There are some of the ladreses below!" exclaimed Catanzaro. "Come on! We must finish the work while we are at it!"

But the first Portuguese to set foot upon the companion went rolling down to the bottom, struck by three bullets.

The three Boers were on the defensive, and their Mausers were ready for a fight to a finish.

Cifuento Catanzaro leaped away from the steps with a bitter oath.

"What can be done now?" he growled.

The voice of Black Gerrart came tingling from below, hoarse with rage and savage defiance.

"The yacht is not yours yet, Catanzaro. I will not let her go fire before you shall retake her!"

Bernard Blake looked alarmed. The desperate Boer was quite capable of carrying out his threat, and what, then, would he do of Florence Leyburn?

"We must not give him time to do it, anyhow!" he whispered.

"How are we to get at them, Blake?"

"The cabin windows in the stern. Get a rope from some where, and lower me down. I can take them in flank from the cabin!"

Catanzaro would not have taken the risk himself; but he did not object to letting Bernard take it, and in a minute more the iron-nerved young Briton was dangling before the window of the captain's cabin. It would be a close squeeze in, but he opened upon the companion-way.

But Black Gerrart was "slim" enough to suspect the little game of the rooinck. He had observed that only the jolly of the main cabin were large enough to admit a man. Leaving Stroom and Schmidt to watch the hatchway, he voluntarily stationed himself by the window, and he smiled grimly as he saw the swinging form loom blackly outside.

Keeping in the shadow, he allowed Blake to squeeze into the cabin. He recognized the man who had saved his life, and a merciful impulse led him to change the knife he had intended to use for a clubbed pistol.

As Blake's foot touched the carpet, the Boer's muscular arm rose and fell. A crushing, grinding concussion, a thousand lights dancing before his eyes, and Bernard Blake sank down senseless.

Black Gerrart chuckled. He did not trouble to look at the fallen man, for he knew his blow had made sure of Blake until morning. He waited for another to ascend, but none came. He quitted the window, and went back to Stroom and Schmidt.

"The rooinck!" he explained.

"Is he dead, mynheer?"

"No; but he will not move again until to-morrow. He is the only one of the foea that I feared. We shall not have any great trouble with the Portuguese. Come with me, Schmidt. Keep watch here, Stroom."

Cifuento Catanzaro waited in vain for the sound of Blake's first shot at the Boers, which was to be the signal for a rush down the hatchway.

He heard nothing of what had passed, but he was driven to the conclusion that Blake had been met and disposed of by the Boers.

He was irritated and a little scared. He began to be doubtful how the conflict would end. He had only two men left, and Black Gerrart had as many, and better men.

A sound at the skylight over the cuddy drew his attention. The deck was flush, and the skylight was raised about eighteen inches above it. Did the Dutch mean to make a sally through it?

His glittering eyes were fixed upon it. One of the frames swung open as the cord below was pulled. At the opening a foot had appeared.

Catanzaro's rifle cracked, and his bullet pierced the hal. It was withdrawn, and a chuckle followed. The Portuguese cursed as he realized that the tempting target had been raised on a rifle-muzzle merely to draw his fire.

"What will be the end of this infernal deadlock!" he muttered, gnawing his lip with impatient rage.

The answer came in a very unexpected manner.

There sounded a clatter of heavy boots upon the deck, and at the startled Portuguese turned in amazement, two sharp shots struck two of them down, mortally wounded.

Cifuento Catanzaro, black with rage and despair, found himself face to face with Gerrart Drude.

"How the Boer had come there, he knew not. He only knew that he was there, and he only knew that for a moment; for Black Gerrart was quick to fire, and the Portuguese fell upon his face.

The Boer turned the body over with his foot, and looked at him.

"Caramba!"

It was a faint murmur, and, the moment after it had left his lips, Catanzaro expired.

The long fight for Kruger's lost million was ended. But was Black Gerrart destined to carry it back to the Transvaal?

Bernard Blake came slowly and painfully back to consciousness. His head ached, his throat was parched, and for a time he hardly remembered what had occurred.

The sight of Black Gerrart bending over him brought back his recollection in a flash, and he rose, rather unsteadily, with the Dutchman's assistance.

He had been carried on deck. It was morning, and the sea was glimmering through the fissures in the cavern.

"What has happened?" he exclaimed.

DON'T FORGET!—The UNION JACK is published every Friday, and next week's issue will contain a Thrilling Tale of Mystery, entitled, THE IRON DWARF.

"You are my prisoner, mynheer!"
 "I can see that. But Catanzaro and the Portuguese—where are they?"
 Black Gerrart smiled grimly, and pointed to the sea.
 "Dead!"
 "Is that the yacht's yours?"
 "Miss. It was I who stanned you in the cabin. Then I turned the tables upon the Portuguese. I left Jan Stroom to make a noise at the cabin skylight, to keep the attention of the Portuguese upon it. Then Schmidt and I carried out a plan which had been suggested to me by the way you reached the 'Aphrodite.' We lowered ourselves from the cabin window, and fastened above our heads, and sprang to the sea with our feet fastened upon the deck just as you had done."

"And Catanzaro?"
 "He and his went down under our feet."
 Blake cast a glance along the deserted deck.
 "Where are your men?"
 "None in the boat to fetch the treasure-chest from the wreck of the 'Sensit.' Ah, here they are!"
 The boat came alongside. Blake looked on gloomily as the chest was hauled aboard.

His position was not pleasant. He had set himself to keep the treasure out of the grasp of the Boers, and he had failed. As the ominous rumbling among the caves smote his ears, he muttered:

"I almost wish an earthquake would swallow up the yacht and the treasure, even if I went with them. All my work ends in this!"
 "Ach, you look sad, mynheer!" Black Gerrart remarked. "Accept your defeat. You did all that man could do. Our contest is ended, and I bear you no malice. Your life is safe. You and your Zulu shall have the boat, and take Miss Leyburn to Lorenzo Marques whenever you like."

Blake brightened somewhat. After all, Florence was safe, and he was more concerned for her than for Kruger's million.
 "Give me your word," continued Drude, "to attempt nothing against me or the treasure, and you are a free man."
 "And if I do not promise?"

The hard, rugged face of the Boer became harder, grimmer.
 "I cannot stick at trifles in the cause of my country, mynheer Roodinck. You give your parole, or you sink beneath these dark waters!"

Blake had no alternative. He pledged his word, for himself and Babyaan. The Zulu was then released from his confinement, and Bernard went down to tell Florence what had been decided upon.

A light boat, with a small sail filling in the breeze, danced upon the blue waters of Delagoa Bay. It contained four voyagers—Blake and Babyaan, and Florence and her maid, the coloured girl Dina.

George Leyburn's body had been laid to rest in the recesses of the caverns of San Marco. Florence had gratefully accepted Bernard Blake's offer to take her to the town of Lorenzo Marques, where she could communicate with her friends.

The boat was well provisioned, and, before parting, Gerrart had pressed upon Blake a diamond from the chest, which was all our hero ever obtained of Oom Paul's treasure.

When the boat left the "Aphrodite," and moved off among the sandbanks, Bernard looked back, with anxious eyes. The rumbling of the subterranean disturbances seemed more menacing when heard from outside. The sea, too, was strangely agitated, foam appearing upon the surface without apparent cause. The black face of the Zulu showed deep concern. He dreaded a convulsion before the boat had time to escape beyond its influence.

"Take de oars, massa!" he exclaimed. "Dere will be shake-up soon, and, if we here, we be swallowed in de sea!"
 "But the 'Aphrodite,' Babyaan!"
 "Ship safer den little boat, boss. Besides, we hab lady to tink ob."

"I am not afraid," said Florence, smiling faintly.
 "Still, there is danger here," Blake said. "Our lives hang upon a thread while we were within that fearful place. The Zulu has grown more terrible even in the last ten minutes."

Propelled by sail and oars, the skiff flew over the curling waves.

Blake, as he rowed, sometimes looked back, and at length he saw the white canvas of the "Aphrodite" at the mouth of the cavern. He saw it—but only for a moment. Then a cry of utter horror broke from his lips.

Black Gerrart had delayed too long. The rocky cliffs were in the throes of the long-threatened earthquake.

As Blake gazed, the rugged arch of the cavern seemed to fall like the curtain of a theatre, and the beautiful little yacht was buried under thousands of tons of rock.

Where the lake, the channel, the yacht, had been, a turbid sea washed over a pile of broken granite.

Buried for ever, the "Aphrodite" lay crushed beneath that mighty mass, with the great treasure and the men who had found it. Black Gerrart had gained the prize he sought, and had perished with it in his grasp.

The boat was picked up by a Lorenzo Marques trader, and the voyagers landed at that town. There their trials were over; but it was long before they forgot that last terrible scene, the closing act of the long tragedy.

Excepting for the diamond which Black Gerrart had given him, and which he always retained, Blake touched none of the lost million. But he hardly regretted that; for at the caverns of San Marco he had won something infinitely more precious to him—the love of Florence Leyburn.

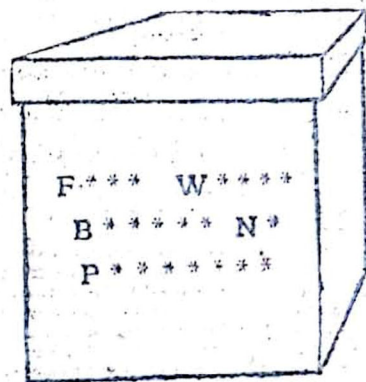
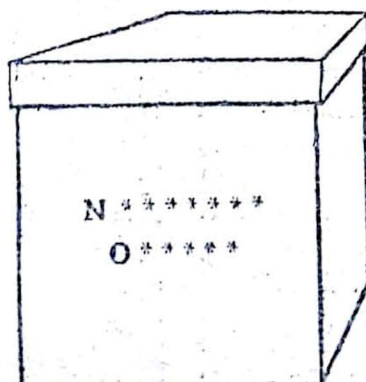
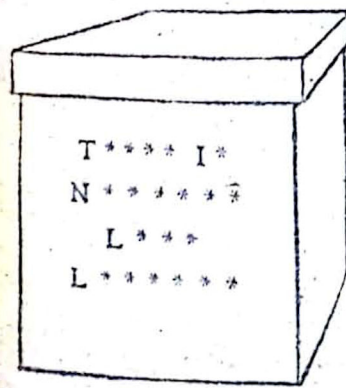
THE END.

CONCLUSION OF OUR CHRISTMAS-BOX COMPETITION.

FIRST PRIZE, £1 Cash. Fifty Consolation Prizes.

On each of the boxes below appears a Proverb or Motto, only the first letter of each word being given. Can you fill up the blanks? Each star stands for one letter.

THIRD (AND LAST) LIST.



10. Write your answers clearly on the dotted lines.
 11. THIS IS THE THIRD AND LAST LIST. Having written down all the answers (or as many as you can do), send the Three Lists, together with your full name and address, to THE COMPETITION EDITOR, UNION JACK, 24, Tudor Street, London, E.C. Latest date for sending in, MONDAY, DECEMBER 17th.
 12. The First Prize of £1 Sterling will be awarded to the Sender of the First Correct Set opened, or divided between two or more readers, at the Editor's discretion. All the Prizes will be sent off in good time for Christmas.