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FACING THE FOE

A TALE OF THE NIGER



No. 482

Suddenly he felt a looseness about his body. The rope which bound him to the tree slipped to the ground. It had been cut!

FACING THE FOE!

A TALE OF THE NIGER

By CHARLES HAMILTON.



CHAPTER 1.

In the Wilds of West Africa—A Forest Tragedy.

BACK!

The report of a rifle rang sharply through the dense tropical forest, and a piercing cry followed the shot.

Kit Russell sprang to his feet.

"Do you hear that, Hannibal?"

The burly negro nodded.

"Mo hear him, Massa Kit. Somebody hurt. S'pose we go—"

"Come along."

They had camped under a massive baobab on the bank of the Niger. It was a hot day, even for West Africa. Myriads of mosquitoes buzzed in the drowsy air.

Kit picked up his rifle and plunged into the forest, with Hannibal at his heels.

As they advanced, forcing a passage through stubborn bush and clinging creeper, the sound of voices fell upon their ears.

"So I've run you down at last, Gaston Duplex! Where is Mademoiselle Pontmercy?"

A harsh, savage voice, speaking in French. The reply was in the same tongue, in faint and feeble tones.

"Where you shall never find her, Captain Duroc. You may kill me, but for her you shall seek in vain!"

"Parbleu! we will see about that! You are not in these forests alone, I am sure of that. Mademoiselle is not far off.

Gaston Duplex, the sands of your life are running out. If you would die in peace, tell me where to find mademoiselle!"

"Never! I have wronged her enough, without placing her in the hands of such a scoundrel as you are."

"Well, I shall find her. Just pin him to the earth with your bayonet!"

It was at this moment that Kit Russell and Hannibal burst upon the scene.

Kit's eyes gleamed with fierce indignation at what he saw.

A man was stretched upon the sward. From his side oozed a dark-red stream, and the line of death was in his face.

Looking down upon him stood a tall, powerfully built man in the garb of a French officer. A smoking rifle was in his hand.

He had a single companion, a native soldier, who, in obedience to his barbarous order, was lifting his rifle to drive his bayonet into the breast of the wounded man.

"You scoundrel!"

Kit's rifle cracked as he sprang from the trees, and Yusef, with a strangled cry, reeled and fell beside his intended victim.

The French captain uttered a fierce oath as he spun round to face the new-comers. His hand fell upon his sabre.

But he faced them only for a moment. Kit was springing at him, and Hannibal's finger was pressing a trigger. Discretion, clearly, was the better part of valour in this case. So the Frenchman realised at once. He bounded into the forest, and Hannibal's bullet missed him by a foot or more.

Kit was dashing in pursuit when the wounded man called faintly to him.

"Monsieur, a moi—a moi!"

Kit halted.

"Follow him, Hannibal, and kill him if you can find him!"

The black giant nodded, and disappeared among the trees.

Yusef, the Senegalese soldier, was drawing his last breath; Kit did not even glance at him. He dropped on one knee by the side of Gaston Duplex.

"My poor fellow, can I aid you?"

"I am dying. That scoundrel has murdered me. Mon Dieu! what will become of Claire Pontmercy?" The hollow eyes scanned eagerly the frank, manly face of the young Englishman.

"Monsieur, it was noble and generous of you to come to a stranger's aid. Are you generous enough to risk your life to save a lady who is in terrible danger?"

A flash came into Kit Russell's eyes.

"I am at your orders. Who is the lady, and what is her peril?"

"She—is— Mon Dieu!"

The voice of Duplex died away in gasps. It was evident that the end was very near.

Kit looked anxious. The dying Frenchman's words had roused his interest.

He had a flask of brandy slung to his belt. In a moment he had poured a dose of the spirit between the whitening lips of Duplex.

It partially revived him. He spoke again, but in tones so low that Kit had to bend his head to catch the words.

"She—Claire—she is at Magnolia Point. She alone holds the clue to the diamonds of King Tippoo. Duroc—and I—we both sought the diamonds. But I was first—I carried her off—I—I—oh!"

Again his voice died away.

A brief but terrible struggle shook his form. The light of life faded from the ghastly face.

With a slight shudder Kit rose.

The disjointed sentences of Duplex had given him a partial insight into the mystery.

A priceless secret held by a girl, and sought by two desperate men!

Both scoundrels, probably; but she had chanced to fall into the clutches of the better of the two. And his death left her exposed to the perils of the African forest.

Kit had no hesitation in deciding what course he should pursue.

"I will seek her, then! I will find her. I will save her from her enemies!"

There were footsteps amongst the baobabs. It was Hannibal returning.

Perspiration was thick upon his brow. His black face expressed disappointment.

"You did not find him?"

Hannibal shook his woolly head.

"De French trash gib me de slip, Massa Kit. He got clean away."

"Better luck next time. Hannibal, are you ready for a new trail?"

"Eber ready when you say de word, Massa Kit."

"It's a trail of danger, Hannibal; but I know you won't shrink from that."

Hannibal grinned.

"Danger an me ole friends, Massa Kit. Me go anywhere Massa Kit lead."

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"Do you know Magnolia Point?"
 "Yes. Up de Niger, close to de French frontier."
 "That's our destination, and you're the guide. Help me to holler out a grave for this poor fellow, and then we'll be off. I'll explain as we go along. Moments may be precious."
 In ten minutes they were en route.

CHAPTER 2.

At Magnolia Point—Yatenga the Half-Breed—The Enemy in Sight—Kit's Defiance—The Attack.

"MASSA KIT!"

"Well, Hannibal?"

"Dat Magnolia Point."

A wide swampy river, golden in the sunshine, bearing on its bosom vast masses of driftwood, rolled between banks clothed in luxuriant tropical vegetation.

It was the Niger, the great river so long shrouded in mystery, now at last opened up by intrepid explorers.

Where the Niger made a southerly bend, a "point" of land jutted into the yellow flood. The "point" was thickly grown with magnolias, the musky scent of which the breeze wafted to Kit and Hannibal as they came up the river.

Kit looked keenly at the jutting "point." He could see no sign of a habitation.

"According to Gaston Duplex, mademoiselle is there, Hannibal. Let us search."

They advanced into the magnolias. The keen eyes of the negro scanned earth and bush for traces. He uttered a low exclamation, and stopped Kit abruptly with a touch on the arm.

"Look, Massa Kit!"

A thick clump of magnolias lay before them. Beyond, they could see a small clearing.

At the foot of a towering baobab a hut stood. On a log outside a man sat cleaning a rifle.

"Me know him," whispered Hannibal. "He Yatenga de half-breed. Bery big rascal!"

Kit, looking at the man, could quite believe Hannibal's statement.

The dirty yellow skin, neither black nor white, betrayed the half-breed, and the brutal face and cunning eyes sufficiently indicated his character.

"This must be the place we seek," muttered Kit. "Yatenga, then, was the companion of Duplex. The lady is a prisoner, and this half-breed is left on guard."

"Dat so, Massa Kit."

"Although we come from his master, he is not likely to receive us as friends."

"Him bery big scoundrel, Massa Kit. Hab been slaver. Spose me blow him brains out?"

"Well, no, old fellow, I really think that would be a little too summary."

"Bery much safer, Massa Kit."

"Still, we'll give him the choice of surrender," replied Kit. "Ah, look! Is that mademoiselle?"

A girl had suddenly appeared in the open doorway of the hut.

A slim and graceful girl, with a fair, sweet face, and large, dark, wistful eyes.

She stood at the door looking towards the Niger, glimpses of which could be caught through the openings of the bush.

Her face was sad, and a sigh left her lips as she looked.

The half-breed glanced at her. She spoke to him in English, with a slight French accent.

"Your master is long absent, Yatenga."

The half-breed nodded. She gave another glance towards the river, and stepped back into the hut.

"Now, Hannibal," Kit whispered.

Yatenga's glance had followed the girl. He was quite unprepared for what was coming.

"Yatenga, you are a prisoner!"

The half-breed sprang up, to find two levelled rifles staring him in the face.

A glitter of rage leaped into his eyes. His dusky hand flew to his knife.

"Drop that, you fool!" Kit's voice was full of menace. "Do you want to die?"

With a sullen scowl Yatenga relinquished his knife. He had no chance, and he was sensible enough to see it.

"Bind him, Hannibal!"

Yatenga gnashed his white teeth; but he held out his hands for the bonds.

Hannibal grinned as he bound together the wrists of the half-breed.

Kit stepped to the door of the hut. He swept off his hat as he met the girl's startled glance.

"Mademoiselle Pontmercy?"

She bowed her head. Her face was full of intense amazement.

"I am Kit Russell. I am your friend. I was sent here by Gaston Duplex."

Distrust came into her eyes.

"Gaston Duplex was to me a gaoler, monsieur."

"I know it; but in his last hour he was sorry for that."

"In his last hour?"

"He is dead."

"Mon Dieu!"

"He was shot down under the baobabs by Captain Duroc." Kit concisely detailed the death scene in the forest. "He has wronged you; but his last thought was for your safety. I am at your service, mademoiselle."

There were tears gleaming in Claire's dark eyes now.

"Oh, monsieur, it is brave, noble, of you to interest yourself in a perfect stranger. No one was ever more in need of help than I, beset by enemies as I am. To regain my freedom at the hands of M. Duplex, I had consented even to give him the secret he sought—to allow him to take the fortune which is mine by right. And now—"

Crack!

It was a sharp, ringing rifle-shot. The black face of Hannibal appeared at the door.

"Massa Kit!" The negro's face was aglow with excitement. He had a smoking rifle in his hand. "Massa Kit, de enemy!"

"The enemy?"

"De French trash!"

Kit muttered a malediction as he sprang from the hut. His keen, flashing glance swept to right and left.

Through the openings of the magnolias he caught glimpses of five or six moving figures. He knew the garb of the French West African native soldiers.

Captain Duroc had arrived, then!

Kit smiled grimly.

"He has lost no time, Hannibal. It will be a fight, then. So be it."

Hannibal dragged the bound half-breed into the hut. Kit followed. He closed the door and looked for a fastening.

"There are bars here, monsieur," said Claire. She was strangely calm as she helped Kit to place the bars in the sockets. "Is it Captain Duroc yonder?"

"I believe so; though I cannot understand how it is that he is here so soon."

Claire shuddered slightly.

"Duroc!" she murmured. "Oh, I am lost, then!"

"Not at all," Kit said quietly. "There does not appear to be a large party of them; and if the odds are not too great we shall beat them yet."

She looked at him with shining eyes.

"And will you risk, perhaps lose, your life for a cause which is nothing to you, and which you know nothing of?"

"It is sufficient, mademoiselle, that you are a woman, and that you are in danger."

He looked from the barred square which formed the window.

The French, on the edge of the clearing, were scanning the hut and its vicinity, but did not seem to care to leave the cover of the magnolias.

"Ah, there's Duroc!"

The Frenchman stepped boldly into view. He had a white flag in his hand, and was advancing resolutely towards the hut.

There was a certain admiration in the eyes of Kit Russell.

"He does not lack nerve. After all, he does not know that we shall respect the white flag. What does he want—to parley, or to spy out our defences?"

The Frenchman halted at a half-dozen paces from the hut. He caught sight of Kit's face at the window. He made an ironical salute.

"So you are here, Monsieur l'Anglais?"

"I am here," Kit replied crisply. "What do you want?"

"My wants, I believe, are the same as yours. I want the diamonds of King Tippoo, to which Mademoiselle Pontmercy can give the clue."

Kit flushed angrily.

"You scoundrel!"

Duroc shrugged his shoulders.

"You do not, then, seek the treasure of which mademoiselle possesses the secret?" he asked, fixing his keen, narrow eyes upon the Englishman's face.

"If you were within reach of my hand my answer to that question would be a blow!"

"Why, then, are you here at all? Only for the love of meddling?"

"Begone, or I shall forget the flag you carry!"

"Let me say what I came to say. I desire no quarrel with you. If you came here to defeat my plans, you will see now that you have undertaken an impossible task. Force is on my side. I offer you a free passage. Retire while there is yet time."

Kit laughed scornfully.

"I have never yet run from danger, monsieur. I do not intend to begin now."

"You refuse to go?"
 "Decidedly."
 "Then your blood be upon your own head!"
 Kit gave a careless shrug.
 "So be it."
 Duroc ground his teeth.
 "And now you are finished, monsieur," Kit continued,
 "I listen to me. I am here to defend Mademoiselle Pontmercy.
 Attack at your peril. My comrade and I are good shots. We
 shall shoot to kill. Now go!"
 "You shall die like a dog!" The Frenchman's eyes blazed
 with malignant hatred. "Curse you, you shall pay dearly
 for your meddling!"
 "Go before I lose patience!"
 Captain Duroc turned as if to go. Then, with lightning-like
 swiftness, he swung round, with a revolver in his hand, and
 fired full at the face of the Englishman framed in the window.

CHAPTER 3.

Black Treachery—A Fight Against Odds—Fortune
Favours the Brave.

A SHARP cry left Kit Russell's lips, and he reeled back,
 with a splash of blood across his face.
 A scream of terror broke from Claire—a roar of
 rage from Hannibal.

The negro caught Kit as he fell, and supported him in his
 powerful arms. His black face was wild with rage and grief.
 "Mon Dieu! is he killed, then?" cried Claire.

Crash!
 There was a thunder of blows at the door.
 "Massa Kit! Massa Kit!"
 "I'm all right, Hannibal!" Kit straightened up, passing
 his hand dazedly across his forehead. "Oh, the treacherous
 cur!"

The Frenchman had intended to send the bullet through
 his brain, but Kit, though taken by surprise by Duroc's foul
 treachery, had made a quick movement as the pistol cracked,
 and the bullet had gashed along his temple instead of penetrating
 his forehead. It had torn away a strip of skin, and made
 the blood flow freely, but the hurt was only superficial.

Crash!
 At the moment Duroc fired his men rushed forward and
 joined him before the hut. The door shook and groaned
 under a rain of blows from sabres and the butt-ends of rifles.
 Kit hastily wiped the blood from his eyes. His face set
 grimly.

"It's for life or death now, Hannibal. They've taken an
 advantage by foul play, but we'll beat them yet."

"No tink so, Massa Kit."
 The door, by no means a stout one, was yielding to the
 furious assault. The assailants being close to it, the defenders
 could not fire upon them from the window without exposing
 themselves. They could only wait till the door was down.
 In that confined space a terrible struggle was about to take
 place.

Kit turned to Claire Pontmercy. She was deadly pale, and
 her hand was pressed to her heart.

"Mademoiselle, retire to the inner room. You must not
 be exposed to the firing."

She hesitated for a moment; then she bowed her head,
 and passed into the inner apartment.

Crash!
 A wide gap appeared down the whole length of the door. A
 ray of sunlight fell across the floor of the hut.

The muzzle of a rifle was thrust in at the aperture. A
 bullet whizzed across the hut, and buried itself in the wall.

At the same moment Kit pulled trigger. There was a fearful
 cry without.

"Diablo!" It was the furious voice of Captain Duroc.
 "Break in the door, you fools!"

A still more terrible crash resounded. The door fell shattered.
 Six forms were seen at the opening.

"Now, Hannibal!" cried Kit.
 Crack! Crack!

Two Senegalese soldiers rolled over on the fallen door. Three
 more stumbled furiously in, led by Duroc.

Kit's revolver was levelled. He fired at Duroc, but the
 Frenchman dodged alertly, and, leaping forward, slashed at the
 Englishman with his sabre. Kit, in his turn, eluded the sabre-
 stroke, and sprang at the captain, clutching his throat and
 bearing him backwards. Duroc lost his footing, and both went
 down.

Hannibal had clubbed his rifle. It was a terrible weapon
 in the hands of the gigantic negro. He sprang fiercely to meet
 the rush of the Senegalese, and two of the soldiers went down
 like ninpins under the whirling rifle-butt.

The last Senegalese sprang back, and, shortening his arm,
 lunged with his bayonet at Hannibal. The clubbed rifle
 dashed the steel aside, and then crashed into the soldier's
 face, cracking his skull like an egg-shell.

Kit and Duroc, oblivious of the rest, were struggling furiously.
 Duroc had lost his sabre, Kit his revolver.

Suddenly Duroc tore himself loose, and leaped to his feet.
 The last Senegalese was down, and Hannibal was springing
 to aid Kit.

For a single instant the Frenchman stood, pale, desperate,
 maddened.

Escape was cut off, and his feet were upon him.

Then a tiger-like spring carried him into the inner room.
 There was a woman's scream of terror. Kit dashed madly
 after him.

"My life for hers!" yelled the Frenchman. Claire was in
 his clutch. His knife was at her breast. He glared ferocious
 defiance at Kit, at Hannibal. "My life for hers! Stand
 back, or she dies!"

"Hound! Coward!" burst from the Englishman. But
 he halted.

Duroc laughed mockingly.
 He was master of the situation.

In that terrible moment, when doom appeared certain,
 this idea had flashed to him.

His life for hers!
 It was his last chance, and he saw that he had played a
 trump.

"Hold your hand, Hannibal!" muttered Kit.
 The negro, his eyes aflame with rage, lowered his hand.

He grated his teeth savagely.
 "You may kill me, but you cannot save her." Duroc had
 recovered his coolness. A sneering smile was upon his sallow
 face. "Take your choice, Monsieur l'Anglais! Life for me,
 or death for her!"

The girl's face was like marble.
 "Oh, mon Dieu!" she murmured. "Mon Dieu!"

Kit panted with rage.
 "Release her, scoundrel! Take your life. You are safe; I
 pledge my word."

Duroc released the girl. Liar and traitor as he was himself,
 he knew that Kit was made of different stuff, and he felt that
 he could rely upon the Englishman's word. In fact, he had
 no choice in the matter.

"Now go," said Kit hoarsely; "I give you two minutes to
 seek safety."

"Give me my weapons!"

"I shall not. Hannibal, take his knife. Snakes like you,
 Captain Duroc, are safer with their fangs drawn."

"A thousand curses—"

"Begone!"

"I go now, it is true, but—"

Kit grasped his revolver. Captain Duroc did not stop to
 finish. He rushed from the hut and vanished into the magnolias.

Claire breathed a deep sigh of relief.
 "He is gone, mademoiselle; but he will come back. He
 will not leave us a moment longer than it takes him to obtain
 reinforcements. I had hoped to make sure of him, but now—"

"Let us fly, monsieur!"

"For myself, I would not think of flight, but for you, mademoi-
 selle, safety lies in a rapid journey to the settlements. How
 near at hand Captain Duroc may have confederates I cannot
 tell. Moments may be precious. Will you prepare, then, for
 a journey?"

"This instant," gladly assented Claire.
 Kit reflected for a moment.

"How did Duplex bring you to this place, mademoiselle?"
 he asked.

"Down the Niger, from the French territory."

"And his canoe—doubtless it is still here?"

"Doubtless. When M. Duplex went away this morning, he
 went on foot through the bush."

Kit smiled with satisfaction.
 "We are in luck. You could never reach the settlements
 afoot, Mademoiselle Pontmercy. I was thinking of a raft;
 but since there is a canoe, that will serve us better. Do you
 know where it is kept?"

"Under the magnolias by the bank. Yatenga can tell you
 where."

"Ah! that is true." Kit turned to the bound and sullen
 half-breed. "Yatenga, where is the canoe?"

"Find out!"

"See if you can knock some of the obstinacy out of this
 scoundrel, Hannibal."

"Yes, Massa Kit."

Hannibal's method was simple and efficacious. He picked
 up the half-breed and slammed his head against the wall until
 he howled for mercy.

"Where is the canoe, Yatenga?"

"I will show you."

"I thought you would. Loosen his legs, Hannibal."

The half-breed, grinding his teeth, guided the negro to the
 place. The canoe was cunningly concealed in a hollow of the
 bank. Hannibal soon had it out.

"Dis bery good, Massa Kit. But what we do with dis
 feller?"

Kit looked doubtful at the half-breed. To keep him a
 prisoner was out of the question. To set him free was to let

lose a ferocious enemy. And yet—to kill him in cold blood—Kit could not make up his mind to that.

Hannibal, if left to himself, would soon have settled the matter. Yatenga could see that, and he fixed his eyes anxiously upon the Englishman. All his insolence was gone now.

"Spare my life, monsieur," he exclaimed. "Give me freedom, and I will swear—"

Kit scrutinized the treacherous yellow face, the shifty, cunning eyes. Little promise of faith was to be read there.

"No, Yatenga, you need not swear," he said. "It is I who will swear. I swear that if you cross my path again I will kill you like a dog. Remember that—and go!"

The half-breed's black eyes glittered venomously.

"I will remember," he said, showing his teeth.

Hannibal cast him loose, and he disappeared into the bush.

At a little distance he stopped, and turned down towards the Niger. He stood in the bushes watching this broad-faced shining red in the light of the sunset.

He waited till he saw a canoe shoot out from the dark-green bank of Magnolia Point. It passed him as it glided down the river.

A spasm of hate crossed the yellow face. He shook his fist at the figures in the canoe.

"Go; but you are not out of danger yet." The half-breed hissed the words through his clenched teeth. "I will yet have King Tippoo's diamonds, and revenge upon that cursed Englishman—red revenge!"

CHAPTER 4.

Down the Niger—King Tippoo's Diamonds—Kit's Quest.

DOWN the Niger, winding amongst the huge masses of driftwood, the canoe swiftly passed in the light of the setting sun.

Hannibal was paddling. Kit sat with his rifle across his knees, watchful for peril. Mademoiselle Pontmercy was near him. The girl's face was very thoughtful.

"Monsieur Rusell," she said abruptly, "are you not curious to know the cause of this conflict in which you are risking your life?"

Kit smiled.

"I admit it, mademoiselle. But I do not ask you to gratify my curiosity unless you wish to do so."

"I have nothing to conceal, monsieur; and you have well proved that I can trust you." She paused for a moment, and then resumed. "I hold a secret, a clue to a fortune. Of that both Duplex and Duroc sought to rob me."

"You have heard of Tippoo, the native King of Kandi? A few months ago a French column under Captain Duroc occupied Kandi. The excuse was that he was a slaver. The real reason was that he possessed the diamonds which are cached at the Lion Island."

"King Tippoo knew what Duroc's aim was, and before he reached Kandi Tippoo sent away the treasure. My father, an ivory merchant, who traded with the Baribis, was then at Kandi. It was to him that King Tippoo entrusted the diamonds. He knew he could rely upon M. Pontmercy."

"My father carried out his orders. He crossed the frontier into the British territory, and buried the diamonds on Lion Island in the Niger. Then he came back to the settlements, where I then was."

"You know, probably, the fate of King Tippoo. He and most of his warriors were killed in resisting the French."

"To whom, then, did the diamonds belong? Not to Captain Duroc, who had sought to steal them. Not to the French Colonial Government, who had ordered the massacre of Kandi. To whom should they fall but to the man who had been a faithful friend to King Tippoo while he lived?"

Kit nodded.

"It is true, mademoiselle. M. Pontmercy had the only claim to the treasure."

"M. Pontmercy knew, however, that he would not be permitted to hold it in peace, and he made his arrangements to recover the treasure and to escape with it to the English settlements. Before he could carry out his plan the blow fell. The tears welled into the girl's dark eyes. "Our bungalow was attacked. My father, struck by a bullet, fell dead before my eyes. I remained a prisoner in the hands of Gaston Duplex."

There was silence for a few minutes. Hannibal skilfully guided the canoes through the mazes of the driftwood.

"Duplex was a trader who had had dealings with King Tippoo. Knowing that M. Pontmercy held the secret of the diamonds, he had resolved that he would be beforehand with Captain Duroc."

"My father, fearing what in fact happened, had told me of the secret of the cache. Duplex guessed as much, and he was determined that I should be his guide to the treasure."

"But I—I determined, for my part, that he should not profit by his crime, and I would tell him nothing. He was furious. He brought me to Magnolia Point, a nook in the wilderness where he had no fear of my friends finding me. There he threatened I should remain a prisoner until I consented to guide him to King Tippoo's diamonds."

"For a long time I was firm; but Duroc's soldiers were harsh and menacing. Yatenga, the half-breed, the emissary of the secret from my lips."

Kit's brow darkened.

"This wounded! If I had known that—"

"At length, hopeless equality of courage and of power, I yielded. That was yesterday."

"But last night Duplex discovered that Duroc's soldiers were at hand. He was terribly alarmed. He had not thought that Duroc would dare to lead his soldiers into the English territory. He decided to put off seeking the diamonds until the morning was clear. This morning he ventured into the forest to learn the movements of the enemy. For he did not know whether Duroc had some clue to his place of concealment at Magnolia Point. He appears to have run blindly into the hands of Duroc."

"He deserved his fate," said Kit. "And now, Mademoiselle, cached diamonds?"

"If it be possible."

"You have said that you trust me?"

"I should indeed be ungrateful if I did not," said Claire earnestly.

"Why, then, should we not halt at Lion Island on our way to the settlements and recover the diamonds?"

"Do you, then, know the island?"

"Well, I camped there once with Hannibal while on a hunting expedition. It is about a day's journey down the Niger from Magnolia Point. If you know the precise spot of the cache—"

"My father gave me an exact description. I am sure that I could find it."

"Then nothing could be simpler."

"You are right, monsieur. Once the diamonds are safe at Lagos I shall be secure from the pursuit of Captain Duroc."

"To-morrow," said Kit, "the diamonds of King Tippoo will be in our hands."

He little guessed what was destined to happen before he saw the glitter of King Tippoo's diamonds.

Night descended like a veil upon the Niger and the primal forest.

Darkness lay upon the bosom of the mighty river, broken only by the scintillating stars, set like points of fire in the shadowy heavens.

It was Hannibal, who knew the Niger like a book, who fixed the spot for camping.

A low isle covered with baobab-trees and yam-vines, lying lone amidst the rolling flood, was the camping-place he selected. It would have been difficult to find a more secure one. Neither savage man nor savage beast could reach them there.

Kit built a hut of branches for Claire, placing in it her belongings, which he had brought from Magnolia Point.

No fire was lighted. Kit knew too well the perils of the wilderness. Light or smoke might bring upon them foes black or white.

Hannibal, standing like a black statue under a baobab, kept first watch. Kit stretched himself in the canoe, and slept. From his dreams the beautiful face of Claire Pontmercy was not absent.

CHAPTER 5.

Captain Duroc's New Ally—Yatenga the Guide.

WHILE Kit and his companions camped upon the isle in the Niger, their enemies were camping at Magnolia Point.

A few words will explain the movements of Captain Duroc.

Two days ago he had crossed the frontier at the head of a score of Senegalese soldiers, in quest of Duplex and his prisoner, Claire.

They had been scattered up and down the Niger, seeking for traces of the kidnapper, when Kit and Hannibal first took part in this drama of the African wilderness.

After the death of Duplex Captain Duroc had fallen in with some of his scouts, and with them he had followed Kit's trail to Magnolia Point. He had not stayed to collect his whole force, for that would have allowed Kit time to escape.

Whether Kit had gone, by Duplex's direction, to seek Claire, the captain did not know. But he thought it probable, and he followed this as his only clue.

He was right; but at Magnolia Point he found defeat instead of victory, as we have related.

His defeat, however, had only the effect of rendering him more savagely determined to gain his ends.

Besides his greed of the treasure, he was now spurred on by hatred of the young Briton who had twice defeated him.

He collected his scattered soldiers as rapidly as possible, and hastened back to Magnolia Point at the head of fourteen Senegalese.

YOU MUST NOT MISS READING our grand complete sea story "Jim the Castaway," by Captain Fergus Haviland, next Friday in the UNION JACK.

If the Englishman still lingered there, Duroc's revenge was certain. But the captain was not surprised to find that Kit had gone, taking with him Mademoiselle Pontmercy. The Kit had gone, taking with him Mademoiselle Pontmercy. The Kit had gone, taking with him Mademoiselle Pontmercy. The Kit had gone, taking with him Mademoiselle Pontmercy.

It was already dark, and further search that night was futile. Captain Duroc camped amongst the magnolias, and waited for dawn.

While his men slept, rolled in their blankets round the fire, the captain sat upon a log, smoking a cheroot and staring gloomily at the dull red embers.

The task he had set himself was full of difficulty. In which direction had the fugitives gone? By the river, or would daylight reveal a track through the bush? With the start they had, what chance had he of running them down before they found safety at the British posts on the Niger?

He rose with an exasperated gesture, and flung away his cheroot.

"Diablo! Will it never be morning?"

"Monsieur!"

Duroc started, and looked sharply round.

It was a low voice from the magnolias. Duroc grasped a pistol.

"Who speaks?"

"Hold your fire. I am a friend!"

"Stand forth, then!"

A lithe form stepped from the bush, and stood before the Frenchman.

Duroc ran his eyes over the yellow, dusky face, the glittering orbs, as treacherous as a snake's. He was not favourably impressed.

"I am Yatenga. I was the companion of Gaston Duplex.

I helped him carry off Mademoiselle Pontmercy. By my hand her father fell."

The Frenchman's pistol rose to a level.

"Have you come to seek death, then?"

he said. "You shall share your master's fate!"

The half-breed changed colour; but he replied composedly.

"Mademoiselle Pontmercy holds the clue to the hidden diamonds. If you do not find her the Englishman will seize upon the treasure of King Tippoo!"

"What of that?"

"I can tell you where to seek the girl and her companions." Duroc's eyes glistened. He thrust the pistol back into his belt.

He understood now Yatenga's object in coming to his camp. You know whither they are gone, Yatenga?"

"I watched them leave Magnolia Point."

"Pardieu! that is excellent. If you can help me find that cursed Englishman you shall claim a liberal share of the treasure when we unearth it."

"It is a bargain!"

"And now, whither did they go?"

"Down the Niger in a canoe; the same in which Duplex brought mademoiselle from the French territory."

"A canoe!" Captain Duroc wrinkled his brow thoughtfully. "Their pursuit will be difficult."

"On the contrary—it will be easy."

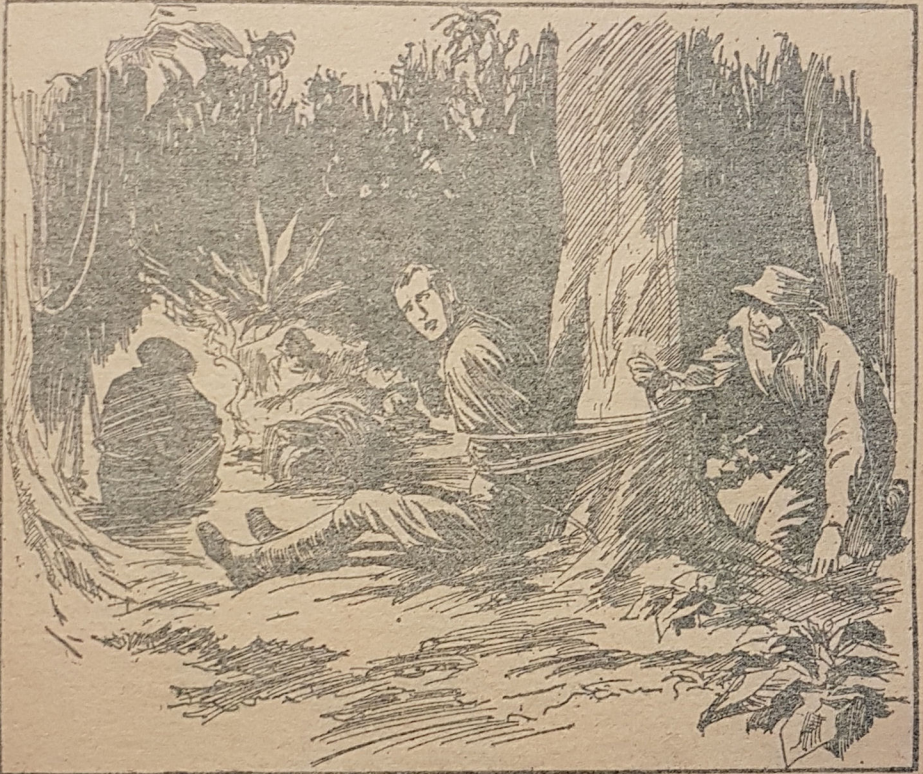
"How so?"

"It is their intention to make for the settlements down the Niger. To do so they must follow the windings of the river."

"Doubtless."

"Fast Sikasso the Niger makes a great curve to the east. If you cut across the loop in a direct line, you will not only recover the start they have gained, but get ahead of them. I am certain of it," said Yatenga.

"Pardieu! but this scoundrel is an acquisition," the captain muttered.



Suddenly he felt a looseness about his body—the rope which bound him to the tree slipped to the ground. It had been cut!

As the sun climbed the sky a glimmer of reflected light appeared ahead through the openings of the forest.

Captain Duroc uttered an exclamation of satisfaction.

"The Niger!"

CHAPTER 6.

The Ambuscade—Caught Napping—in the Enemy's Hands.

AT the moment that Captain Duroc beheld the Niger Kit, ten miles further up the river, was stepping into the canoe.

At the break of dawn the voyagers had breakfasted, and ere the sun showed himself above the tree-tops they were afloat.

Kit knew the value of time; though, of course, he could not be aware of the cunning manœuvre his deadly enemy had executed.

The current of the Niger, now swift, now sluggish, bore them steadily onward towards the settlements; but unfortunately also towards the French ambush.

Kit had erected a shelter of broad palm-leaves to protect Claire from the burning sun. He sat near her, watchful, alert, prepared for danger. Hannibal used the paddle, munching a yam at the same time.

The life of the forest and of the river had awakened. Crocodiles floated lazily by the canoe; brilliant-hued fishes sported in the water. In the trees along the banks chattered swarms of monkeys and parrots. Myriads of fitting insects whirred and buzzed in the sunshine.

"JIM THE CASTAWAY" is the title of Captain Fergus Haviland's thrilling long, complete novel, describing the adventures of Jim the Castaway, and his discovery of his father.

The sun rose higher. Navigation amongst the cumbering driftwood was difficult sometimes, and sometimes dangerous. The speed of the canoe was not great.

"Golly, ain't it hot!" ejaculated Hannibal, down whose black face the perspiration poured in streams.

The sun was near the zenith now. Kit pointed to a little isle, a tangled mass of tropical vegetation, rising from the shining waters a short distance ahead.

"We halt there for noon," he said.

The noonday halt is indispensable to the African traveller. The heat was, in fact, growing insufferable.

The canoe floated towards the isle.

Little did the voyagers dream that from its tangled thickets fierce eyes were watching their every motion.

"By the gods," chuckled Captain Duroc, "it seems that they are going to land here!"

Duroc had chosen the isle for the place of his ambush, as giving him a greater command of the river than either bank could do.

Amongst the huge trees, hidden by the yam-vines, the Senegalese soldiers were stretched in the shade.

At a word from Captain Duroc they were up and on the alert. Yatenga's evil eyes glittered as he peered through the vines at the approaching boat.

"Could anything be luckier?" Duroc rubbed his hands with glee. "We should have stopped them with a volley, but that would have been at the risk of hitting mademoiselle, and losing the clue to the treasure. Ma foi! they are placing themselves in my hands in the most obliging way. This is better than I could have expected."

The canoe came nearer. The occupants appeared not to have the slightest suspicion of the presence of the French upon the isle.

"Keep close, mes enfants. Let them land, and then, when I give the word, rush out, and seize them. No firing. It will not be needed, and we must not risk losing mademoiselle."

The canoe touched the isle. Hannibal secured it to a projecting root, and sprang ashore.

Kit, after a keen glance at the trees, seeing nothing suspicious, stepped ashore, and gave his hand to Claire.

"Seize them!"

There was a sudden, startling rush, and in the twinkling of an eye Kit and Hannibal were in the grip of many hands.

The surprise was complete!

Kit went crashing down, helpless in the grip of four brawny Senegalese.

Hannibal, surprised as he was, made a tremendous effort to fling off his assailants.

He staggered, lurching over like an uprooted tree, and went splash into the river, with two Senegalese still clinging to him like cats.

While Kit writhed ineffectually in the grasp of the Senegalese, Hannibal made a gallant fight.

His brawny fist was dashed like a hammer into the face of one of his assailants, and the soldier, with a moan, slid under the water.

The other, feeling his powerlessness in the giant's grip, shrieked for aid.

"Shoot, shoot!" shouted Captain Duroc.

At the risk of hitting their comrade, the soldiers blazed away at Hannibal.

Hannibal, with a loud cry, released the Senegalese, and disappeared beneath the surface of the Niger.

The half-drowned soldier scrambled ashore, white and gasping; but the man who had felt the weight of Hannibal's huge fist floated down the river like a log. He was dead!

Captain Duroc swept the river with his glance. He could see no sign of Hannibal.

"Watch for him, mes enfants. If the body rises riddle it, and make sure."

But the body did not rise.

CHAPTER 7.

The Ransom—Claire Speaks—En Route for Lion Island.

Kit had ceased to struggle. He was a prisoner, and there was nothing to be gained by a futile resistance.

The Senegalese grip was still upon him. Yatenga stood over him, his dirty, yellow face wrinkled into a mocking grin.

"It is my turn this time, monsieur!"

Kit met his savage eyes calmly.

"You cur! I wish I had put a bullet through your cowardly heart."

The half-breed grinned.

"Doubtless. But you did not, and you will never have a second chance."

And, stooping over the helpless Englishman, he drew his knife to strike.

Kit closed his eyes with an involuntary shudder.

A moment more, and the blade would have been buried to the hilt in his heart.

But in that moment Claire Fontmercy sprang forward and grasped the arm of the half-breed. With a frantic clutch she dragged it aside, and the blow missed its mark.

"Away!" snarled the half-breed. For a moment it seemed that he would turn his weapon upon the courageous girl herself. His eyes were scintillating with rage.

"Back, madman!" Captain Duroc's hand fell upon his shoulder. He was jerked back and flung heavily to the earth.

Claire faced Duroc. Her hands were clasped, her face full of entreaty.

"Spare him! spare him!"

Duroc looked at her with a sneering smile upon his sallow face.

"He is my enemy; why should I spare him, mademoiselle? You ask too much. The man who has twice baffled me has no mercy to expect at my hands."

"Nor does he ask it," broke in Kit crisply. "Do you worst, you scoundrel!"

The Frenchman's eyes glittered.

"Have you disarmed him, mes enfants? Rope him securely, and let him rise."

Kit's arms were bound behind his back, and he was jerked to his feet.

He looked for nothing but immediate death, but he showed no sign of fear.

He had faced grim death too often to shrink from it now. The Frenchman surveyed him mockingly. Secretly he was exasperated by the calm self-possession of his prisoner.

"So this is the end, Monsieur l'Anglais!"

Kit shrugged his shoulders.

"I warned you that you would pay dearly for your meddling. I have promised myself the pleasure of having you shot. Are you ready?"

"Quite."

Duroc bit his lip.

"Well, then, since you are ready, I will not keep you waiting."

And he turned to give an order to his men.

"Stop, monsieur!" Claire made a swift step towards him.

"Listen to me."

"Well?"

"It is in quest of King Tipoo's diamonds that you have crossed the frontier?"

"Doubtless."

"I alone hold the clue to the cache."

"That is why I have sought you, mademoiselle."

"Well, monsieur, I swear to you that if you take the life of Kit Russell I will die before I will reveal the secret of the cache."

Duroc smiled grimly.

"Your secret for his life? Is that it, mademoiselle?"

"That is it."

The captain reflected. Claire waited in tense anxiety. Kit was silent. Life was dear to him; and if he lived, another turn of fortune's wheel might place him at the top and make the Frenchman the "under dog."

Not that he believed that Duroc would keep faith. He judged the man's character too well for that.

The diamonds once unearthed, Duroc would kill his prisoner, if only for the sake of security.

But if time were gained, there was a possibility of escape. There would be an interval, and in that interval many things might happen.

"I accept the ransom." A peculiar look flitted across Duroc's face. "Your secret for his life, mademoiselle. It is a bargain."

"On your word of honour?"

"On my word of honour."

"I am satisfied."

Kit gave an imperceptible shrug of the shoulders. Duroc's word of honour cost him little.

"And now, mademoiselle, the secret? When King Tipoo's diamonds are in my hands, Kit Russell is a free man. Where is the cache?"

"Upon an isle on the Niger," Claire said, with an effort. "It is called Lion Island."

"Yatenga!"

The half-breed came at the call.

"Do you know Lion Island?"

Yatenga nodded. His eyes glistened.

"Where is it?"

"Down the Niger, monsieur."

"Could we reach it to-night?"

Yatenga shook his head.

"Diable! When, then?"

"Noon to-morrow."

"That is a long time. However, we are in no great haste now. And you are sure, mademoiselle, that you will know the precise spot of the cache?"

"I am sure."

"You have a paper—a plan—or what?"

On no account miss reading JIM THE CASTAWAY, a grand, exciting sea tale. Order at once, and then you are certain of getting it.

"None. By the description my father gave, and the sketch he showed me, I shall know it."

"Good. In two hours we start."
Kit was placed under guard. A shelter of palm branches was thrown up for Claire, back amongst the tamarinds. Thither she withdrew from the rude gaze of the soldiers.

In the shade of the trees the Senegalese prepared a meal, of which a remnant was given to Kit.

Then they sprawled on the sward, waiting for the spell of heat to pass.

Kit meanwhile sat with his back to a baobab, thinking.

His thoughts were not pleasant. So far he could not see a chance of escape. And the thought of Hannibal troubled him.

Duroc and his men believed him dead. They had not the slightest doubt that, struck by their bullets, the brave negro had sunk for ever into the oozy depths of the Niger.

But Kit doubted it. The fact that the body had not been seen to rise gave him hope, for he knew that Hannibal, together with the strength of the lion, possessed the cunning of the fox. Finding a struggle hopeless, had he perhaps "played possum," and so given his enemies the slip?

Kit thought it possible. The wish, perhaps, was father to the thought. It will be easily understood that his anxiety was keen.

If Hannibal lived he would never abandon his comrade—Kit knew that.

If he lived! But perhaps he was lying cold and quiet in the slimy bed of the Niger. And at that grim thought Kit shivered.

From his black reflections he was roused by the preparations of the French for the expedition.

Claire was placed in the canoe with Kit, Duroc, and Yatenga. The little craft would hold no more.

The Senegalese formed a raft for themselves, in the primitive West African fashion, by collecting a number of drifting logs and binding them together with the wild vines.

A raft large enough to bear the whole party securely was formed in half an hour.

"Allons!" said Captain Duroc.

The sluggish current bore them down the Niger.

CHAPTER 3.

The Camp—A Terrible Ordeal—A Staunch Comrade—Yatenga's Treachery—On the Track.

RIGHT again—grim darkness drearily brooding on forest and river.

Well into the night the treasure-seekers had prolonged the journey. It was close upon midnight when Duroc gave the order to stop.

Canoe and raft were moored to the bank. The soldiers, glad to stretch themselves on land again, camped on the edge of the forest.

Kit was dragged ashore and placed at the foot of a tree. Round his body, and round the tree-trunk, a stout rope was wound, and knotted with vindictive thoroughness by Yatenga.

Thus secured to the tree, and with his wrists still bound behind him, Kit realised that his chance of escape that night was nil.

He had looked forward to the darkness with some degree of hope. It almost died away now.

A but of branches was, as usual, erected for Claire.

After the evening meal the black soldiers sprawled on the turf in their blankets and slept soundly.

Yatenga stretched himself at a little distance from the rest in the dense black shadow of a baobab tree. Probably he had a motive for that.

Silence and slumber reigned in the French camp.

But Kit Russell did not sleep.

The cramp in his arms was too acute to allow him to close his eyes.

Besides, with death awaiting him on the morrow, he was in no mood for slumber.

Did Hannibal yet live?

Upon the answer to that question his life depended. And his hope was growing fainter.

His sleepless eyes were upon the camp. He thought he saw a moving shadow where Yatenga had lain down.

But the obscurity there was dense, and he was not sure. He did not give the matter much thought. The movements of the half-breed were nothing to him.

Suddenly a faint rustle in the thicket behind him came to his alert ear.

A strange, thrilling shiver ran over him.

He listened intently. Somebody or something was approaching him from behind, creeping through the bush with the stealthiness of a panther.

Perhaps it was a wild beast seeking prey. The tree to which he was bound was on the edge of the camping-ground.

Behind him lay the primeval forest. His bonds rendered him an easy victim for lion or jaguar.

And yet—it might be a lion, but it might be Hannibal.

The doubt was agony. He could not turn his head. He could only wait in nerve-racking suspense.

Minute succeeded minute. The sweat was heavy upon his brow.

The thing, whatever it was, was close behind the tree now. It was crouching there. The rustling had ceased.

Kit set his teeth and remained grimly silent. Was it rescue or death?

Suddenly he felt a looseness about his body. The rope which bound him to the tree slipped to the ground. It had been cut.

Almost a sob rose to Kit's throat. It was rescue, then!

He drew a deep breath, and, with an effort, rose to his feet. A glance he gave at the camp—all was silent there. A second more, and he had passed round the tree.

"Dis way, Massa Kit!"

It was the faintest of whispers. A strong hand grasped his arm and led him through the bush.

Out of earshot of the French camp they halted, beside the broad river, upon which the starlight brightly fell. Then Hannibal's knife glided over the rope that fastened Kit's arms. The Englishman stood free.

But the circulation, suddenly restored to his cramped limbs, was agony. In spite of his iron self-control, a low moan forced itself from Kit's lips.

"Massa not wounded?" Hannibal asked anxiously.

"No. I shall be all right soon. I owe you my life, Hannibal. By Heaven, I'll get even with that cur Duroc before I'm much older!" He gritted his teeth. "But tell me, old chap, how did you get away?"

Hannibal grinned.

He related his doings with a good deal of pride in his own cunning.

It had been as Kit suspected.

Hannibal had dived before the French fire could reach him. The cry he gave was uttered only to deceive his enemies.

To linger was to die. But if he escaped he could rescue his master if living, and avenge him if dead. That was his reasoning.

He swam under water as far as he could. When he came up he was hidden by the thick mangroves of the river bank. Thence he easily gained the shore and the shelter of the forest.

He did not go far. He watched the French. When the voyage down the Niger commenced he saw Kit placed in the canoe. That relieved him of his worst fears.

Keeping in the screen of the forest, he followed the French down the Niger. When they camped on the shore Hannibal was at hand. The rest we know.

"You're a true chum, Hannibal," Kit said, grasping his hand as he finished his tale.

"Me die for Massa Kit," said Hannibal simply.

"I know you would, old chap."

"But what we do now, Massa Kit? De French trash still hab de lady."

"Yes, and I'll have her out of his hands or leave my bones on the banks of the Niger."

Hannibal looked doubtful.

He was ready to follow Kit anywhere, but his devotion did not blind him to the facts.

There were more than a dozen Senegalese soldiers at the orders of Captain Duroc. No wonder Hannibal shook his woolly head as he thought over the situation.

Kit was thinking hard. His glance rested upon the mighty river, gleaming like silver in the clear light of the stars.

Suddenly he gave a start and grasped his companion's arm.

"Look, Hannibal!"

He pointed to the river.

Hannibal, looking, uttered a low exclamation of amazement.

A canoe was gliding down the silver river. The starlight fell full upon the face of the man who paddled—a dusky, yellow face—the face of Yatenga, the half-breed.

In the stern of the canoe a second form was visible, lying still and prostrate, wrapped in a cloak.

A single word fell from the lips of Kit Russell.

"Claire!"

Yatenga, the half-breed, did not close his eyes when he lay down in the dense shadow of the baobab, on the edge of the camp.

He lay quiet, seemingly in slumber, but his keen black eyes were glittering like a cat's in the dark.

When the camp was silent he rose. It was then that Kit had observed his motion, without dreaming of what the half-breed had in his mind.

Silent as a snake, Yatenga stepped into the bush.

He made his way to the roughly constructed hut of branches and palm-leaves which sheltered Claire.

The girl, the sport of so strange a destiny, lay sleeping upon a bed of leaves. The unaccustomed fatigue had induced a heavy slumber. The sound of regular breathing guided the half-breed.

Claire woke suddenly. She awoke to feel a hand upon her lips—to hear a threatening whisper.

JIM THE CASTAWAY, our next week's grand complete story, published on Friday, is by the author of "Dismissed His Ship," that splendid tale of modern naval warfare, published some time ago.

"Silence! A word—a sound—and——"

Yatenga did not finish.

He felt the girl shiver and then become strangely still. She had swooned in her terror.

Yatenga grinned with satisfaction.

Wrapping her cloak about her, he lifted her in his arms and passed from the hut.

Still silence reigned in the French camp. The Senegalese slept like dogs. Captain Duroc was dreaming golden dreams.

Yatenga laid his burden by the margin of the river. There he left her.

A minute later he reappeared. He was wading and towing the canoe.

Claire was quite unconscious. He lifted her into the canoe and stepped in after her. A shove sent the little skiff out into the stream.

The half-breed used the paddle with swift, silent strokes. Little did he dream what eyes were upon him as he passed down the river.

Kit drew a deep breath. His brain was in a whirl.

"It's Claire, Hannibal! The half-breed has taken her out of the hands of Duroc." His eyes gleamed. "And he is going to Lion Island."

There could be no doubt at all upon that point.

Yatenga's object could only be to force Claire to show him the cache, and to escape with the diamonds before the Frenchman could follow and baffle him.

"He is going to Lion Island. Well, we shall follow and find the scoundrel there."

Hannibal grinned.

"Come on den, Massa Kit. But wait a bit—we hab no rifles."

Kit had forgotten for the moment that he was unarmed. Before he could speak Hannibal continued:

"We manage dat."

"How?"

The negro made a gesture towards the camp.

"And now let's be on the track, Hannibal!"

They turned their faces to the south and set off at a swinging pace through the silent aisles of the forest.

The river was lost to sight; but they knew the country well. They would strike the Niger again opposite the isle of treasure.

It would be an easy matter to float across on a piece of driftwood. Dawn glimmering up from the east found them still tramping steadily on.

CHAPTER 9.

The Isle of the Cache—The Diamonds at Last—The Fate of Yatenga—The Enemy in Sight.

CLAIRE PONTMERCY shuddered and opened her eyes. She stared round her in bewilderment.

It was broad day and she was lying on the sward in the shade of the palms. Close at hand rolled the sunlit river.

The canoe was fast to a sapling at the water's edge. Yatenga, the half-breed, sat on a log, munching yams.

Claire strove to rise. She was free. The bonds and the gag had been removed. She rose dizzily and leaned against a tree for support. Her head was aching, her senses reeling.

The half-breed looked at her and grinned like an exultant ghoul.

"Where am I?" gasped Claire, pressing her hand to her forehead.

"This is Lion Island."

"Lion Island!"

"The isle of the treasure." He grinned again. "It is I, Yatenga, who have won the race for King Tippoo's diamonds."

She did not reply. He continued, in a tone of boastful satisfaction:

"Duroc was a fool. He thought I would guide him to Lion Island and then be content with a handful of gold, flung to me like offal to a dog. Peste! I have used him simply to tear you from the Englishman. He served my turn, and now I have thrown him aside. The diamonds are mine—mine alone."

"Mademoiselle, where is the cache?"

"The cache!" stammered Claire.

"I have brought you here to ask you that. I cannot afford delay, for Captain Duroc will take my trail and stick to it like a hungry jaguar. Ere noon I must be far away. Understand, mademoiselle, that the scorples you found in Gaston Duplex you will not find in me." His voice, his look, grew savagely menacing. "Where is the cache?"

Still she was silent. He came closer to her.

"If you do not speak I will wring the secret from your lips. Bah! are you mad enough to rouse my anger?"

"I will do as you wish," Claire said quietly.

His savage face cleared.

"You are wise, mademoiselle."

He gave her food and drink. Her faculties were clear now. A dull ache in the head alone remained to recall the horror of the night.

She looked about her. The isle was small, a speck in the mighty

Niger. In shape it bore some fanciful resemblance to the head of a lion. Hence its name.

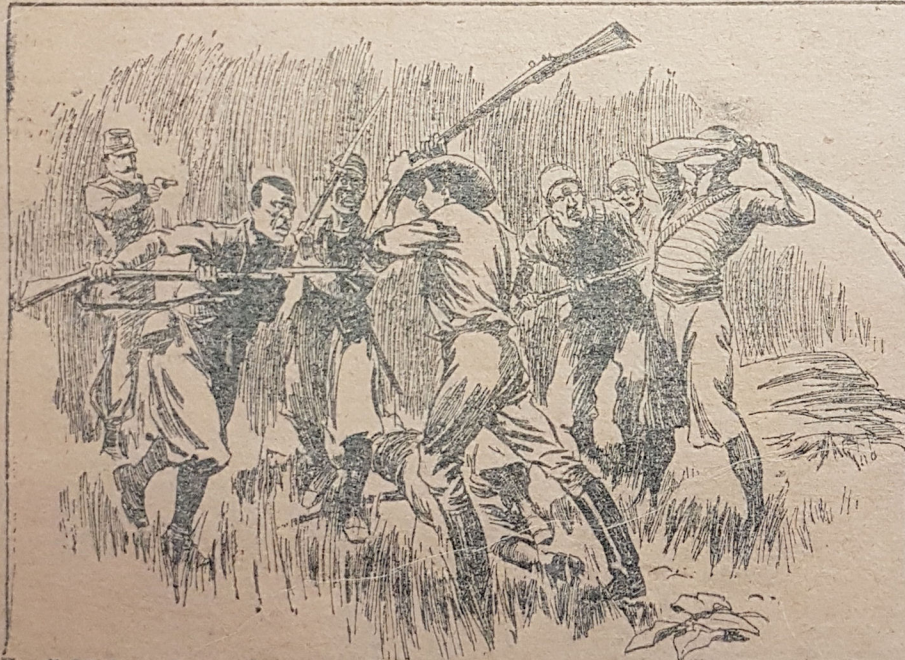
Although Claire had never set foot upon it before, yet its features were not unfamiliar to her. The sketch M. Pontmercy had drawn had not been allowed to remain in existence, in case it should fall into rival hands; but it had not been destroyed until every detail was indelibly impressed upon the memory of Claire.

We need not describe minutely the seeking which followed. Half an hour had elapsed when the girl finally stopped at the foot of a baobab tree, almost in the centre of the little isle.

The half-breed had followed her movements eagerly.

"And the cache——"

"Is there."



Hannibal clubbed his rifle. It was a terrible weapon in the hands of the gigantic negro. He sprang fiercely to meet the rush of the Senegalese, and two of the soldiers went down like ninepins.

"Black trash sleep like logs. Dey stick rifle against tree and take off bandolier. Me manage it."

Kit looked serious.

"It's risky, Hannibal. If one wakes——"

"Hannibal enter lion's den without waking lion," the negro replied confidently. "Massa Kit see."

"All right."

Hannibal disappeared into the bush. Kit waited in tense anxiety.

But his uneasiness was of only a few minutes' duration. Hannibal reappeared, grinning with satisfaction. He carried a couple of rifles and a bandolier.

"Me done it, Massa Kit."

Kit nodded.

One Halfpenny.



"The diamonds! Mine at last!" "No, scoundrel; not yours yet!" Yatenga stood for a moment as if turned to stone. Kit sprang from the thicket with levelled rifle. Hannibal was at his side.

He flung himself down, knife in hand. The soil was soft. He tore and scraped it away.

Claire stood watching him with calm eyes. She did not care. What had happened to Kit Russell? Was it not certain that, finding her gone, Duroc had killed a useless prisoner?

She felt that it was so. And, thinking so, she cared little for the loss of the treasure which had been so fatal to her friends.

The half-breed uttered a sudden exclamation. He rose, his eyes ablaze, his breath coming thick and fast. In his hands was a half-rotten wooden coffer.

"The diamonds! Mine at last!"

"No, scoundrel, not yours yet!"

It was the voice of Kit Russell!

Yatenga stood for a moment as if turned to stone. Claire's pale face went red, then white again.

Kit sprang from the thicket with levelled rifle. Hannibal was at his side.

"Not yours yet, Yatenga," laughed Kit.

The half-breed made a convulsive movement. He clasped the precious coffer to his breast.

His rifle lay on the ground. His knife was in the excavation. Kit's deadly muzzel was looking him in the eyes.

There are moments when the veriest poltroon is brave. Yatenga felt that he would die rather than surrender the coffer of diamonds.

He gave a kind of snarl and made a desperate spring to escape.

"Stop, or—"

But he did not stop, and Kit pulled the trigger. The bullet gashed along the half-breed's shoulder. He lurched, but sprang on.

Hannibal's rifle was levelled; his eye was gleaming along the barrel.

Crack!

Yatenga fell heavily upon his face. He did not stir again.

The coffer struck the earth and broke. There was a blaze of diamonds glittering in the sunshine.

Hannibal chuckled.

"Golly, Massa Kit, dat fellow not trouble Missey Claire no more."

Kit had turned to Claire.

"We are in time," he smiled. "You are safe now, mademoiselle, and the diamonds are yours."

"Ah! it is not the diamonds I care for; but—but I feared he had killed you!"

"Duroc? Doubtless he would have done so. I owe my freedom to Hannibal. But we must not linger—the enemy are too near."

Hannibal was picking up the diamonds. There were more than a hundred, roughly and wastefully cut, but evidently of immense value. They had adorned the kaross of a savage king. To white men they represented a fortune.

To white men they represented a fortune.

Kit's eyes glistened as he looked at them.

"I congratulate you, Mademoiselle Pontmercy. In Europe these stones will bring you certainly not less than thirty thousand pounds!"

"So much?"

"Quite."

"I shall take only a third. You and your comrade must share equally with me."

Kit shook his head with a smile.

"Not at all. We—the dence!"

"What is the matter?"

"The bloodhounds are at hand. Hannibal, old man, it's a fight to the death this time."

It was the enemy in sight!

CHAPTER 10.

Run Down—Facing the Foe—A Fight to the Bitter End.

KIT stuck a cartridge into his rifle. He stood in the thicket, and looked up the river.

Down the Niger, directly for Lion Island, floated the raft of the enemy.

Some of the Senegalese were punting with long, slender saplings. Captain Duroc was searching the river with eager

eyes. He had heard the firing at the isle, and it had placed him on the *qui vive*.

Less than half an hour after the departure of Yatenga, Duroc had discovered what had happened. His amazement and rage may be imagined.

Claire gone, and Kit gone! At first he could only conclude that they had gone together; but when he found that Yatenga also had vanished he arrived nearer the truth.

He understood the game of the treacherous half-breed—to reach Lion Island first, and to lay hands upon the treasure.

What had become of his English prisoner was comparatively unimportant. It was the half-breed he was to seek.

He questioned his men. Some of them knew the Niger—one of them was acquainted with Lion Island. The raft was launched without a moment more of delay.

That Yatenga would lose no time Duroc knew; but a chance was left the Frenchman. The cache would not be unearthed in a moment. He might yet overtake the half-breed before he could disappear into the trackless wilderness with his booty.

The sound of firing upon Lion Island warned Duroc that someone, at all events, was there.

He scanned it eagerly with his eyes as the raft drifted nearer. Suddenly a voice, ringing from the verdant shore of the island, made the Frenchman start with amazement.

"Captain Duroc!"

The captain gritted his teeth.

"Kit Russell, by all that's accursed! In the name of Satan, how came he there? Where is Yatenga, then?"

"Captain Duroc, I warn you not to advance upon us."

Duroc laughed scoffingly.

"You shall not escape me again, you English hound!"

"I have warned you. Upon your head be the blood that is shed."

"Fire! mes enfants. Fire on the thicket!"

The Senegalese rifles began to crackle. The raft kept on straight for the islet.

Kit's eyes glistened.

"Death, then, to them or to us!" he exclaimed. "Be it so, Mademoiselle, remain in the shelter of the baobab. Blaze away, Hannibal, and make every shot tell!"

He flung up his rifle and fired. A Senegalese who was taking aim pitched forward heavily into the water.

Hannibal fired at captain Duroc, but the Frenchman moved at the same moment, and the bullet killed a Senegalese behind him.

Duroc dropped behind the cover of a log, and ordered his men to lie down. In this position they were far less exposed to the fire.

But Kit and Hannibal were splendid marksmen. A head or a leg, a finger, even, sufficed them for a target. They watched like hawks, and did not lose a chance.

Again and again they fired ere the raft touched the isle. Not one shot was wasted. At each fell a black soldier, dead or disabled.

Duroc gritted his teeth as he saw his men thus decimated; but he was helpless. He could only curse and wait.

The raft jammed on the oozy border of the isle.

"Follow me, mes braves!"

Duroc sprang up with gleaming eyes. His revolver was gripped in his hand. But there were only four Senegalese to follow him.

The five of them scrambled fiercely ashore.

Crack! crack!

To each shot a Senegalese soldier fell.

There was no time for reloading. The assailants crashed through the screen of thicket, and the conflict became hand to hand.

Kit and his comrade clubbed their rifles to defend themselves from the flashing bayonets.

Captain Duroc, felling a pace behind the two Senegalese, levelled his revolver at Kit.

Kit, fully engaged with a brawny soldier, seemed at the mercy of the Frenchman.

A gleam of ferocious triumph lighted Duroc's eyes as his finger touched the trigger.

A moment more would have given him his revenge. Already, in anticipation, he saw his enemy rolling at his feet.

But it was not to be!

Before he could pull the trigger there rang out the sharp report of a rifle. It was the rifle of Yatenga, in the hands of Claire.

With a face white as death the girl pulled the trigger. The revolver fell from the hands of Duroc as a bullet struck him on the elbow, breaking the bone. He uttered a terrible cry, and reeled against a tree.

Claire flung down the rifle with a shudder.

"Mon Dieu! mon Dieu!" she murmured.

There was a heavy groan and a fall. Hannibal had disposed of his adversary.

"Hannibal!"

It was Kit who called. The bayonet was almost at his breast. Hannibal sprang to his aid. A crashing blow relieved Kit of his assailant.

"Thanks, old fellow! Ah! there goes Duroc!"

Duroc, wounded, defeated, realised that the game was up. He thought only of saving his life. He was springing back towards the river.

Hannibal was about to bound in pursuit when Kit caught his arm.

"Let him go."

"But, Massa Kit—"

"Bah! he can do us no further harm. Let him go!"

Splash went Duroc into the Niger, swimming strongly, though with but one arm.

Suddenly he gave a terrible cry, and, flinging up his hand, disappeared beneath the water.

"He's under!" Kit ejaculated. "What does that mean?"

Hannibal shivered.

"Crocodile, Massa Kit."

"Good heavens!"

Kit scanned the water with eager eyes; but the Frenchman did not rise to the surface.

In the depths of the Niger Captain Duroc had met his fate.

With the journey to the settlements, now unshadowed by peril, we shall not deal. The three arrived safely at Lagos; and at Lagos they did not part.

For in the wilds of the Niger, in the shadow of danger and death, Kit had learned to love the girl for whom he had risked his life while she was yet a stranger. And Claire—was it not natural that she should love the fearless Englishman who had won for her her freedom and her fortune?

So farewell to Kit Russell, who won love and fortune whilst facing the foe!

THE END.

INTERESTING TO READERS.

LEAVING THE ARMY.

I often receive letters from readers anxious to join the Army, but I never before remember receiving a note from anyone who, having joined the service, now regrets his step and wishes to enter civilian life again.

Here is J. I.'s case: Two months ago he was induced by a friend already in the Army to leave his situation and join the ranks. Since that time J. I. bitterly regrets having been persuaded to take this step, especially as his widow mother wishes him home again, and is inconsolable at his absence.

I cannot say that I admire the spirit of a fellow who joins the Army and then wishes to withdraw from it after a term of two months. Even if the life does not fulfil his expectations, and he finds the strict discipline irksome, I think, if there was much of a man about him, he would make up his mind to make the best of it, and, whatever his regrets may be, to keep them to himself.

However, J. I. wants to know how he can purchase his discharge from the Army; so I suppose I ought to give him the information.

First of all he will need to get the consent of his commanding officer, and, this having been obtained, on the payment of a sum of £10 he will be permitted to leave the service.

PLUMBERS IN THE ROYAL NAVY.

"Tich" has served his time with a master plumber, and now would like to get a post as plumber on one of His Majesty's ships.

Providing he is a good workman, and of sound physique, he should have no difficulty in doing this. The age limit is between 18 and 28.

The examination is a fairly simple one. For instance, a plumber's mate will be set the task of wiping underhand and branching points, whilst a plumber, in addition to this, must be able to make a bend and turn up a double corner on a piece of sheet lead with a dresser. Technical phraseology, this, but "Tich," as one used to the trade, will be able to understand exactly the nature of the examination.

THE CARE OF RABBITS.

Two readers this week ask me for instructions on keeping rabbits. A well-known fancier has supplied us with the following advice, which, if followed, will ensure a nice, healthy stock.

(1) Be careful to give the rabbits a dark, dry sleeping place. Oat-straw or hay makes the best bedding, and it must be changed often. (2) Give them oats principally, and for a change peas, maize, beans or rice. (3) Green food they can also have, such as cabbage, kale, clover. But never give them greenstuff wet. (4) The food should be given regularly every morning, noon and evening. (5) Always keep the hutch clean.

Look out for Herbert Maxwell's Grand New Serial, "The Pioneers of the Pampas," commencing in the UNION JACK shortly.