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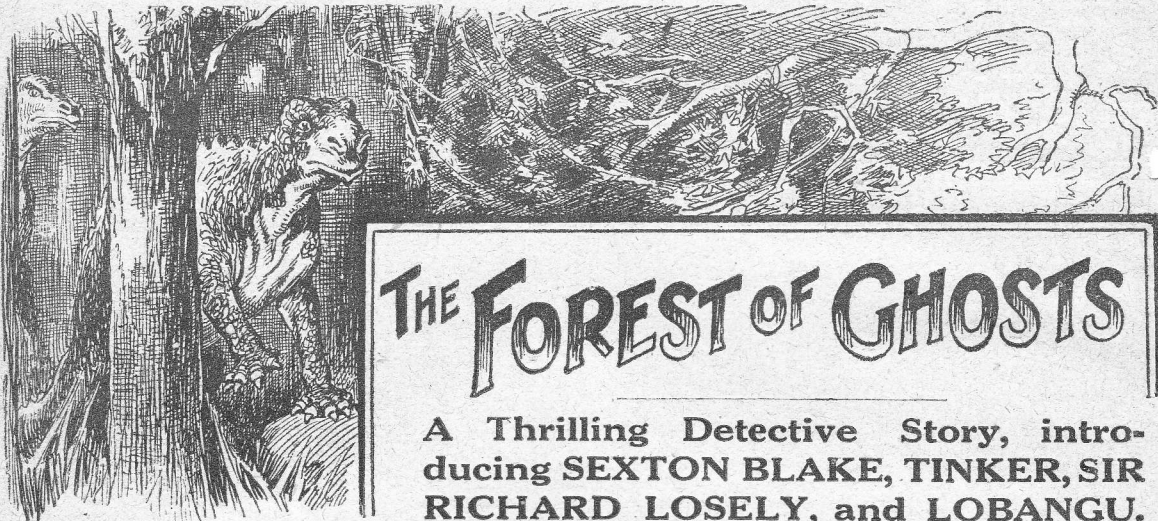


THE FOREST OF GHOSTS

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EVERY THURSDAY

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THE FOREST OF GHOSTS

A Thrilling Detective Story, introducing **SEXTON BLAKE, TINKER, SIR RICHARD LOSELY, and LOBANGU.**

THE FIRST CHAPTER. Sexton Blake Encounters Julius Strives.

THE inside measurement of the barrel of a point-four fifty revolver is, as the description accurately defines, so many decimal points of an inch.

Slightly under half, in fact. But when that revolver is fully loaded, and is looked at from the wrong end at a distance of a few feet, the muzzle has an uncanny knack of looking about as big as a bad half-crown. It seemed fully that size to Blake as he squinted at it.

He was carrying a very useful heavy automatic himself, but it happened to be in a holster at his belt, and the holster had rather a stiff buckle; also the leathern strap was sodden after twenty-four hours of tropical rain.

If the man with the four-fifty—which had a six-inch long barrel, by the way—had been a sportsman he might have waited till Blake had had time to worry that buckle free.

But he wasn't. He simply said very rudely and curtly: "Put 'em up!"

Blake was at a double disadvantage when this happened, because, apart from the little trouble of the rain-sodden strap, he had been down on his hands and knees grubbing away under the roots of a tree after a small lizard with which he had wanted to become more closely acquainted, much to the lizard's disgust.

It was the noise he had been making in the process of the grubbing which had prevented him hearing the stranger's approach.

He said a few brief, sharp, short words inwardly, and raised his hands, sitting back on his heels as he did so. He looked at the man with the gun curiously, and the more he looked the less he liked him.

He was certainly dirty. On the other hand, he held a heavy calibre revolver in his grimy paw. He wore a belt stuck as full of cartridges as a film-picture cowboy's, and behind him stood six Manoorie fighting men.

"This is an unexpected honour," said Blake drily. "At the same time I should like to point out to you that if you hadn't interrupted me just at a critical moment I should have caught a lizard I was after—jolly little beggar with red-and-gold spots on him. Any objection to

my putting my hands down? This position is rather tiresome. Also—"

Sexton Blake didn't finish the sentence, for the simple reason that the man with the red beard sprang forward and hit him across the mouth with the back of his unclean hand, and at the same time one of the Manoorie, in obedience to a gesture, sliced away Blake's belt, automatic, holsters, and all with razor-edged spear.

He wasn't over-careful about it, either, and the blood dripped from Blake's side where the steel had ripped shirt and singlet and skin.

Blake's eyes fairly blazed, but he was quite helpless, and it was no use wasting breath in sweet-words. Instead, he watched the red-bearded man through half-closed lids.

The latter had seized the belt which had been sliced away, and was going through it with feverish haste. It was one of those belts with several small pouches in it. One for a watch or compass, others for money, matches, papers, and odds and ends, including the inevitable phial of quinine tabloids; small necessities liable to get lost in camping after dark or breaking camp before dawn.

The man went through it thoroughly, and then flung it to one of the bearers, with an exclamation of disgust. Blake, no longer compelled to keep up his hands since he was unarmed, took a handkerchief out of his shirt-pocket and wiped his lips, which were bleeding. He had on a shirt-singlet, a pair of badly-frayed shorts, heavy boots, and stockings.

He dabbed at his side with his handkerchief after finishing with his lip, and then, with apparent carelessness, dropped the blood-stained handkerchief on the ground behind him.

Pulling out his cigarette-case and finding a stray match, he lit a cigarette. But it wasn't only a cigarette which he took from the case.

The Manoories are a quick-eyed race, and they were supposed to be watching him, though, as a matter of fact, they were really watching their master. Certainly, none of them saw Blake take from his battered old silver case a rather dirty, much-thumbed and much-creased bit of paper, folded small, and palm it in his right hand; nor did they see him a few seconds later slip it under the tree-root

behind him and poke it several inches down the hole which was properly the front-door of the little lizard with the red-and-gold spots.

The red-bearded man who had suddenly snatched the belt back and gone through it again turned on Blake in a fury.

"Where is it?" he shouted, shaking the belt in his rage.

Blake raised his eyebrows.

"It occurred to me that you were looking for something," he said, blowing out a perfect smoke-ring. "I'm afraid there's only a little loose change there. You see, money is quite useless in these parts."

"Where's the chart—Curtis' chart? You can't fool me! I know you've got it. You're Blake—Sexton Blake—and Curtis sent you the chart the day before he died."

Blake tried to blow a second smoke-ring through the first, but a little eddy of wind through the trees spoilt the effort.

"My name is certainly Blake," he said slowly. "It may be silly of me, but I've taken quite a fancy to it. I much prefer it, for instance, to Strives—Julius Strives."

"My good man, it's no good trying to clap your hand behind your back now. We haven't had the pleasure of meeting before, Mr. Strives, but I assure you that I am fairly well acquainted with your record."

"You turned up six years ago in this region, met Curtis, and eventually poisoned him with powdered glass in his coffee. He knew it, but too late. Before he died he managed to get a letter to me down to the coast by a boy he could trust. I happened to have saved his life once, and he was grateful. He gave a very fair description of you, and explained what a noxious beast you were. He mentioned, amongst other things, that you had lost the middle finger of your left hand in a brawl, and had a ragged knife-wound on your chin, which was now conveniently hidden by your beard."

"He told me how you had poisoned him and why, and added that if I came to this part of the world it was possible that I might run up against you, in which case his advice was that I should shoot you on sight, as it would simplify

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matters, and that he would regard it as a personal favour."

The red-bearded man snarled, showing his ugly wolflike teeth, and thrust his revolver into Blake's face.

"Shoot me, would you—me! I'll do any shooting there is going, curse you!"

"If you do you'll be comfortably hanged," said Blake quietly. "My camp is less than half a mile away, and my friend Sir Richard Loseby will be coming to look for me presently. If he hears a shot I don't think that either you or your friends with the filed teeth are likely to survive me by much more than an hour.

"You will certainly hang, for he is just as well acquainted with your past as I am.

"There are other friends of mine in camp, too, to say nothing of fifty Etbaia tribesmen, and, incidentally, you'll be no nearer getting that chart you were talking about just now."

Julius Strives stepped back, gnawing his lip. He knew the strength of Blake's party, because his own Manoori spies had been watching them for nearly a week past. He knew that what Blake said was true, but he did not know that Blake was bluffing him for purposes of his own.

Blake saw that the man was puzzled, and was hesitating.

"I should really put that gun away," he said, attempting another smoke-ring. "Or, if you feel that you really must use it—well, I should put the muzzle to your own head, and squeeze the trigger gently."

"*Fiât experimentum in corpore villi,* as one used to learn at school. In case you don't happen to know any Latin, let me explain that it means, roughly, try the experiment on your beastly self.

"You'll probably find it less unpleasant than being hanged, and a good deal quicker than the method of hanging used in these unsophisticated parts.

"Sir Richard is certain to hang you when he catches you, you know," he added persuasively. "Being one of his Majesty's duly authorised commissioners, he has full powers to do so."

"This isn't British territory!" snapped the red-bearded man.

Blake shrugged his shoulders.

"To be perfectly accurate, according to the latest surveys, it's no man's territory, unless your pals with the filed teeth claim it. But as they have only acquired it by wholesale murder, I don't think that their claim would 'cut much ice,' as the Americans say."

Strives turned and spoke to the Manooris, three of whom promptly flung themselves on Blake.

Resistance, under the circumstances, was quite useless. He was unarmed, hopelessly outnumbered, and taken at a disadvantage.

They bound him quickly, thrust a rough gag of bark into his mouth, and lashed him to a pole for all the world as though he had been a dead pig.

Then two of them shouldered the pole, one at either end, and the whole party set off through the forest at a jog-trot.

Blake, slung face-downwards, reflected on two things, which gave him a certain amount of satisfaction.

Firstly, the Manoori, and also Strives, had quite overlooked the fact that he had left a bloodstained handkerchief, a couple of cigarette-ends, and some spent matches behind him as guiding marks for Sir Richard and the others when they came to search for him.

Secondly, the man Strives was wearing boots, which left a beautifully clean track across the open spaces on the soft,

spongy ground, in a country where boots are as unknown an article of clothing as trousers.

Though he was tied by wrists and ankles, and the things which bound him hurt abominably, Sexton Blake was free to move his head, and by craning his neck this way and that, in itself a painful process, he was able to look about a bit and see as high as the waist of the men marching on either side of him, and what lay beyond.

For instance, he could see that, having left the trees behind, they were now traversing a sort of marsh or swamp, with only a knee-high growth on it.

Not tall elephant-grass or sun-grass, but stunted stuff which grew in tufts, and was in places unwholesomely green.

He quickly noticed something else, too. The swamp was evidently a dangerous one, with only intricate native paths through it.

The whole party moved in single file, twisting and turning till it would have made a self-respecting snake giddy to follow their trail.

Several times there came a warning order from one of the leading men or from Strives himself, and twice a man was careless or missed his footing, and there were sounds of squelching mud and a struggle as his next in line hauled him out.

Once, in fact, his own bearers blundered and nearly came to grief, and Strives raved at them like a madman until they struggled and were helped to firmer ground again.

Then suddenly the surface changed. There were boulders and rocks and short, crisp turf, and Blake was dumped down.

He could see the stars overhead, but all round him was a high ridge of earth.

He was evidently in a hollow depression of some sort on an island in the middle of the swamp.

A red glow sprang up, and he heard the crackling of brushwood and scented the reek of wood smoke.

The Manooris had lighted a fire, and a pretty big one.

He was surprised at this, for a fire at night would be visible for a considerable distance. And Strives might be many kinds of a blackguard, but he was cunning.

If he hadn't been, he would probably have been killed long ago. He was soon able to understand more clearly, however, for a couple of Manooris came to him, and one of them cut his bonds with a murderous-looking knife nearly a couple of feet long, and removed his gag. After which he curtly bade him get up in a sort of Arabic, which is the common language between tribe and tribe in those parts, and which Blake was thoroughly conversant with.

"Lord," said one of them mockingly, "be pleased to arise and come with us. Or," he added, grinning, "you will eat spear!"

Blake struggled to his feet with difficulty, and, having got on to them, promptly collapsed again, for the sudden restoration of circulation caused by cutting the binding ropes caused exquisite pain, and he was suffering agonies from cramp as well.

"Ho, ho!" laughed one of them. "See, he is like to our Lord Strivini when he has drunk much of the white devil-water out of the bottles of glass which are square!"

They wasted no more time, but, seizing him by either arm, dragged him towards the fire.

He made no attempt to resist, for, in the first place, it would have been worse than useless, and, in the second, he

wanted to save up all his strength for emergencies.

He guessed that he had a particularly unpleasant interview in front of him, and that Strivini, as the natives called him, having got him where he wanted him, would stop at nothing, even torture, to make him talk.

Meanwhile, he used his eyes.

His two guards dumped him down on a boulder of rock close to the fire, and, having relashed his hands as a precautionary measure, strolled off for a few paces, though they kept a keen watch on him.

The place in which he found himself was extraordinary enough. In fact, in all his travels he had never quite seen the like of it.

They were in a sort of rocky cup, roughly circular in shape, and perhaps fifty yards or more in diameter.

Blake realised that it was probably the top of a high hill or kopje which had once stood in the midst of a plain, and that at some time—goodness knows how many generations ago—either there had been a series of terrific rainy seasons, or some big river had burst its banks, or possibly both, and had swept over the plain, converting the place into an ocean of mud many feet deep—so deep, in fact, that the crest of the kopje had barely escaped being submerged, leaving it simply as a small island set in the midst of a vast swamp.

Later, partially through surface vegetation, and partly through natural drainage, the swamp-crust had hardened here and there, affording precarious footpaths for those who knew the secret of them.

Patches of brushwood had grown upon the hill-crest from time to time, and short, fine grass had partially covered the bare rock.

It formed an ideal refuge—a natural fort—for a body of men living at odds with their neighbours, for they could make quick raids, carry off their plunder, and get back across the swamps again by the secret paths, and once there they could defy an army.

It evidently had been used as a fort, too, for there were shelters built of heron-stone—solid masonry-work probably centuries old; and round the edge of the crater-like place ran a wall built of rough stones of obviously tremendous strength ten or twelve feet high and fully half as thick, with only a narrow opening at either end, barely big enough to admit two men abreast.

It would have taken light artillery to batter a breach in that wall; nothing less could have made any impression. Blake noticed, too, that the heron stone was elaborately carved, with strange devices and inscriptions of which he could make nothing; and whilst he was still puzzling over them Strives came out of the largest of the stone shelters.

"Snug little place, isn't it?" he said, grinning. "I found it five years ago, and it has come in mighty convenient at times, I can tell you.

"I suppose you think I'm a fool to have had that fire lighted? Even the flare of a match shows a long distance on a moonless night like this.

"My dear man, to be perfectly candid, I don't care a hang whether the glare of it is seen or not. There's five miles of swamp on that side, and nearer twenty over there, and death in every yard of it for those who don't know the secret paths.

"We're as safe from being raided here as we should be in the vaults of the Bank of England. My men, I see, have been fools enough to keep your wrists bound. Allow me!"

He leaned forward and cut the lashings.

"You haven't an earthly chance of getting away unless I choose," he explained, "so keeping you bound is silly. Back there, within half a mile of your own camp, things were different, and I admit I felt savage at not finding Curtis' chart on you.

"Now, then, you'd better have something to eat; and you look as if a good stiff drink was what you needed."

He clapped his hands, and a man brought food and a bottle of gin and glasses.

Blake ate hungrily, and swallowed the best part of a tumblerful of gin, because he was feeling pretty faint.

His meal finished, Blake found his battered cigarette-case, and lit a cigarette with a bit of wood out of the fire.

Strives then began to talk.

THE SECOND CHAPTER. The Secret Chart.

"CURTIS and I forgot the other here—no matter how or why we did. He used to talk sometimes over our camp-fires at night, and once he told me how a man named Blake—you, in fact—had got him off being hung for murder back in the Old Country."

"The man was innocent!" snapped Blake.

Again Strives shrugged.

"That's as may be. I don't know and don't care. Anyway, he was as grateful to you as if he had been guilty. He was always talking about doing you a good turn one day, and paying you back.

"Well, Curtis stumbled across something big up this way whilst I was away on an ivory-raiding show. It was gold, I know that much, and a lot of it, because he had a bad go of fever a while afterwards, and talked a lot whilst he was delicious.

"Also, he had a sort of chart or map, which he always wore in a belt next his skin. He had drawn the thing himself, and it gave directions and compass bearings. I got a glimpse of it once or twice, but never close enough to get a fair look at it.

"You say I poisoned him with glass in his coffee? Well, I suppose you're entitled to your own opinions. I admit that I wanted him dead, so that I could get that chart.

"When he was dead I stripped him and searched him, but the chart was gone. It was only three days afterwards that I found that one of his boys was gone, too. That he—Curtis, I mean—as soon as he realised that it was all up, had written for a long time one night, and that just before dawn he had sent off this particular boy of his own down to the coast, with many instructions and a 'book,' as the natives call a letter.

"He pegged out three or four hours after the boy had started.

"I knew where the chart had gone well enough then, of course. It had gone to you. You were the only man in the Old Country whose name he had ever mentioned particularly, and he had always said he meant to do you a good turn.

"I kept my ears open, and waited. Messages came travelling up the river from village to village—bush telegraph, you know—a little while back, and I learnt that three white men, with an expensive expedition, were on their way into the interior.

"I sent two of my spies into your camp lower down-stream about a week ago—two of my Manoori, who can both speak a little English. They came in ostensibly to peddle fish, and they hung about for the better part of a couple of days.

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"Then they returned, and brought me word that the three white men had a 'book,' which they studied much by the camp-fire at night, with a very big, dark man, whom they treated as an equal, and who seemed to be a 'capita' of sorts.

"I got them to describe the book, and it was certainly the chart which I had seen in Curtis' hands. It was, of course, just what I expected.

"Men don't fit out expensive expeditions to come up into the interior here to catch butterflies. They further told me that the book was always kept by a white lord, whose name was Baliki—that's the nearest they could get to Blake—who carried it in a little case of leather in his belt. That was good enough for me.

"I learnt that your party was well armed, with fifty native soldiers of a tribe my men didn't know, and that besides that you had many bearers.

"Well, I tossed up whether to fight for it, or to gamble on getting what I wanted by strategy. I can get together three thousand Manoori spears, if I want 'em, but that means expense. So, in the end, I took just a handful of men, and lay outside your camp, watching.

"My chance came, as you know, a little while back, and we collared you whilst you were out alone, chasing some fool lizard amongst the tree-roots, and there you are!"

"Here I am, certainly," said Blake; "but I don't see that you are any nearer getting hold of that chart you're after."

"I'll play fair," said Strives. "I'm not a hog, and I allow your expedition has cost you a lot of money. Say 'Halves,' and I'm content. Hang it, man, Curtis was my partner, wasn't he?"

"And you murdered him," said Blake. "You won't deal?" roared Strives, in a sudden rage. "Then, by thunder, I'll have the lot, if I have to call up every spear of the Manoori, and wipe your outfit off the earth!"

"You haven't got the chart yet," said Blake drily.

"No, by James; but I've got you, and I can make you squeal! Do you think I brought you here to keep you as a pet? Besides, for all I know, you may have the chart hidden about you. There are plenty of places you could stow it away in besides the belt where my spies saw you put it. We'll precious soon see!"

He called out sharply, and three or four of the Manoori came running up.

In a second they had seized Blake, whom Strives had covered with his big revolver, flung him down, and stripped him.

As each article of clothing was torn off him it was passed over to Strives to examine.

A glance sufficed for most of them. You can't hide much in a flannel singlet or a pair of ragged canvas shorts.

The boots took the greater part of Strives' attention as a possible hiding-place.

He probed them with the blade of his hunting-knife, and finally ripped up the soles and heels.

Blake, gracefully attired in his birthday costume, swore, because they were a favourite pair of his, and slapped vigorously at the mosquitoes, dozens of which were having a free supper off his bare skin.

Finally, Strives flung the mangled boots down, and sat glowering at Blake as the latter leisurely resumed his clothes.

"These Manoori of mine have some funny customs," said Strives, at last. "They're cruel devils, and they've got a knack of making their victims suffer by

anticipation. When they are going to torture a prisoner they tell him each day exactly what particular kind of Hades they are going to put him through on the morrow, and give him all night to think it over and imagine what it will be like.

"Well, I'm going to take a leaf out of their book. To-night my men are tired and need sleep; but to-morrow, unless you choose to be reasonable, I shall hand you over to them, and they shall see what they can do with some of those broad-bladed spears of theirs heated in the fire there.

"I've known one held against the inside of a man's thigh or laid across the bridge of his nose work wonders. That will be the beginning. I'll leave you to think it over now!"

Blake was seized and bound again, and flung down a little way from the fire. The Manooris curled themselves up in odd-and-end places, and Strives went off back to his stone shelter, from which there presently came the chink of glass against glass. There was apparently no need to set a sentry. Certainly none was set.

Blake rolled over to get the fire glare out of his eyes, tried to stretch his bonds a little to ease the pain of them, and let the blood circulate, and philosophically tried to settle himself down with as little discomfort as possible.

The night was of that unearthly stillness, such as is only to be found in the tropics—a night when a voice speaking in an undertone can be heard the better part of a mile away, and the cracking of a twig sounds like a rifle-shot.

Blake turned and twisted uneasily from time to time to ease his cramped limbs.

A Manoori somewhere on the far side of the smouldering fire muttered fitfully in his sleep, and a little while later a strange thing happened. The man nearest to Blake, though evidently still in a deep sleep, sprang to his feet, and, flinging his arms above his head, uttered a horrible wailing shriek, and dashed away into the darkness.

Tropical Africa—east, west, north, or south—has a gruesome history and gruesome legends and beliefs.

Something was moving somewhere not far away. Blake could sense it, though he had not actually heard any definite sound.

Several minutes passed, and again he was conscious of the feeling that something was creeping near to him, something was moving only a few yards away now.

He could hear nothing, nor could he see anything by turning his head, and he wondered.

It could scarcely be an animal, for no night-prowling beast would venture so near the fire, even though it was now burning low.

Then suddenly something warm was laid lightly over his mouth, and a voice, a well-known voice, whispered in his ear:

"Lie still, N'Kose! Lie very still, Untwana! It is I—Lobangu. All goes well, but there are three lying near by who already stir in their sleep, for the dawn is at hand!"

Blake heaved a sigh of relief, and felt a slight tug, tug! as a keen blade cut through the tough raw-hide thongs which bound him.

A half-burnt log dropped with a crash into the smouldering embers, and instantly Lobangu lay flat behind Blake amidst the short grass.

None of the Manooris took any notice, however. They were still drowsy, having overreached themselves the night before.

"Now, Untwana, my father!" whispered Lobangu. And Blake felt himself

swung lightly up off the ground and on to Lobangu's shoulder.

In another minute they were clear of the firelight, and Lobangu paused.

"Untwana, father of all the ghosts, how many men be there here?" asked Lobangu softly.

"Half a dozen, old man," said Blake, "and a white man whom I'll trouble you to leave alone until I can handle him myself!"

"Oho, N'Kose!" said Lobangu, and chuckled. "Seeing such a strong place, and one so hard to come by, we thought, maybe, that there might be the half of a regiment here!"

He chuckled again.

"We will eat this place up! But first of all, Untwana, we will put you safe."

"Safe, be hanged, you old scoundrel!" said Blake. "Lend me a gun. Any old thing will do. I've got a little private quarrel of my own to settle."

"Inkoos," said Lobangu, always sympathetic in the matter of a personal quarrel, and, lowering him gently to his feet, he handed him the automatic which he carried, and which Sir Richard Loseby had given him a long time ago.

He called it his "chatter-gun," or "the gun which speaks many times."

Blake took it, and promptly collapsed in a crumpled heap on the ground, his cramped legs refusing to support his weight.

"Rest there, Inkoos!" said Lobangu, and made a low, hissing noise like an angry snake.

In an instant from out of the shadows near the entrance a dozen dimly-seen forms came running swiftly.

Blake heard a shot and a roar, which could only have come from Sir Richard, then another shot, and something which looked vaguely like Tinker flashed by.

There were cries and yells and some answering shots and the rasp of steel, and then a soft, whimpering sound, and a thing like a piece of warm, moist red flannel was trying to wash Blake's face.

"Stop it, Pedro, you old fool!" said Blake. "Stop it, confound you! Don't slobber!" And he tried to shove the moist, red flannel away, only to encounter an icy cold black nose, and he laughed and gave up.

Meanwhile, the shots had ceased, and the noise of the fighting had died away.

Through the white dawn mists came stalking Sir Richard, a battered sun-helmet cocked on one side of his head, a revolver about the size of a young cannon in his hand, and blood dripping from a spear graze on his forearm.

"Bagged the lot but two!" he said cheerfully. "The white man got away and one other, but that's all. Had a private bolt-hole somewhere, and we daren't follow 'em across the swamps the way they went in this mist. Though Tinker and Lobangu are havin' a try, because old Lobangu says that you wanted that white johnny badly, and that he had promised to try and get him for you. Kind of personal affair, I gathered."

Blake laughed.

"Very personal," he said. "Chuck me a cigarette!"

Sir Richard passed him his case and some matches.

"Who are your pals?"

"The white man? He happens to be Strives, the man I told you about—the brute who murdered poor Curtis!"

Sir Richard whistled.

"You may well whistle!" said Blake drily. "He knows Curtis sent me that chart just before he died. He's seen it once or twice, and knows its value, though he doesn't know what it has to say."

"He got wind of our expedition through his spies, and has been dogging our heels for some time past. He's dangerous, too. Seems to have made himself a bit of a power in the land, and can command something like three thousand Manoori spears, or so he says.

"They're the best fighting tribe in these parts. According to Curtis, they've terrorised pretty well the whole region, you remember, looting and raiding all the river tribes for miles around—cannibals, too, when they get the chance. Did you notice their teeth?"

"Well, anyway, his spies warned him that I'd got the chart and carried it in my belt—as I did, you know—so he laid for me with half a dozen of his men.

"I was grubbing about after a new breed of lizard, and didn't hear him even until I found myself looking down

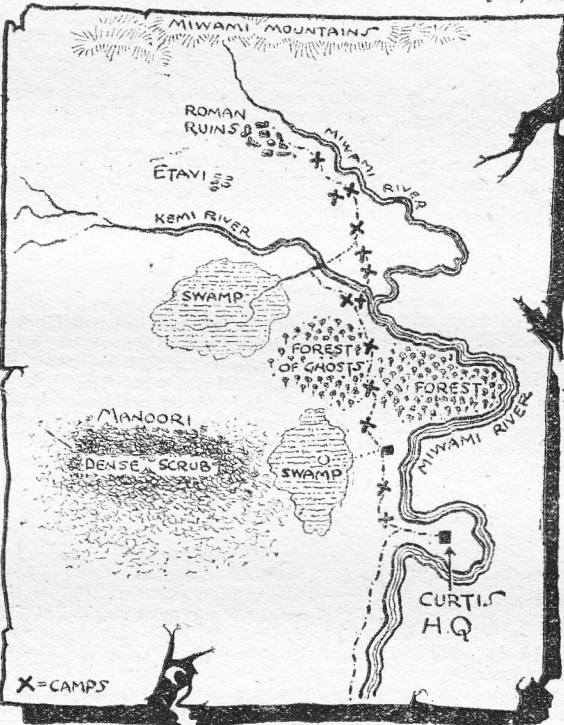
very strong, and might easily hold a young impi; and as we'd only brought a handful of his Ebaia with us he insisted on going forward to scout on his lonesome, whilst the rest of us waited just by the entrance, and—"

"Great Scott! What's this?" cried Blake, propping himself on one elbow.

Lobangu came stalking up through the mists, his big spear in his hand, and beside him padded a figure which looked like a clay model that's been put out in the rain.

"What have you caught, Lobangu?" asked Blake. "For goodness' sake, man, take it away! It smells—niffs—reeks! I won't have it here! Go and bury it!"

"N'kose!" said Lobangu gravely; and then, his usual dignity deserting him, he burst into a huge guffaw of laughter. "Look you, Untwana! Look again



THE CHART WHICH CURTIS SENT TO SEXTON BLAKE.



the barrel of his gun, when it was too late to argue."

"But how did you manage to get away with the chart?"

"Well, I'd been looking at it again only a little while before and shoved it into my cigarette-case for the time being. Consequently, whilst he was using swear-words over the belt, I slipped it out and shoved it down the lizard-hole."

Sir Richard nodded.

"It was Tinker who found it," he said. "That and our hadkerchief and some bootmarks which weren't yours. We laid Pedro on to those."

"I guessed you would. I left you all the signs I could under the circumstances. Strives was sure that you'd never find your way across that infernal swamp; but I knew that you'd lay Pedro on his trail and that Pedro would worry through all right. The thing that worried me was how many hours you'd be behind me. I was due to be grilled with hot spear-blades this morning. I wasn't feeling happy."

"As a matter of fact, we can't have been more than about four hours behind you. But when we got in sight of this place old Lobangu scented a trap. Suspicious old beggar he is, you know. Said that although we'd only been following a small party, this place was

more closely! It is M'lolo, the slippery one, and of a truth is he so well named, for very slippery he is, and, as thou sayest, he smells most horribly."

"Being very eager to overtake the white man, who with one other had got away, he gave chase across the swamps yonder, and I came following after, half the cast of a throwing-spear behind it maybe."

"Suddenly, at a turn in the path, I saw my Lord M'lolo splash off the path into a pool of grey-green slime of mud, and I had but just time to grab at the hair of his head and pull him free."

"Even so his mouth is so choked that he can only make strange noises in his throat—noises such as my Lord Pedro makes in his hunting dreams."

"My sainted aunt!" roared Sir Richard. "It is Tinker!"

Blake laughed till the tears ran down his face.

"This was worth it all!" he said weakly to nobody in particular. "Oh, well, it was worth it!"

"Grrr!" said Tinker angrily. "Gug-gug-goog!"

It was just about all he could say, but it seemed to mean a whole heap.

"Lobangu," said Blake, "somewhere over there is a spring or a pool of some sort. I know there is, because I saw

the Manooris going and coming with their drinking-pots. Take M'lolo there and wash him. Wash him inside as well as out, and then do it all over again!"

"Grr! G-grrr-grr!" said M'lolo, otherwise Tinker, and Lobangu marched him off.

"When he comes back, he'll tell you what an ungrateful beast you are," chuckled Sir Richard, "and that he was riskin' his life for you!"

"Smack his head for me, then, Spots, old man!" said Blake. "I'm not feeling quite up to it myself. After which you can help me bandage my wrists and ankles, and fix up something for my feet temporarily till we get back to camp. That brute Strives ripped up my boots searching for the chart. Seriously, the sooner we're out of this place and the other side of the swamp into camp the better. You've only got a dozen Etbaia with you and our four selves, and I don't suppose you and Tinker have more than fifty rounds of ammunition between you. If Strives were to come back with a crowd of his Manooris and catch us here, or in the act of crossing that swamp, we should be in a deuce of a hole."

They started within half an hour, and, using Pedro as a guide, crossed the swamp without mishap.

Two hours later they were safely back in camp.

"We must get out of this place in time!" cried Blake, looking up from sewing a pair of laces into his second-best boots. "That Strives johnny means mischief. Those Manooris of his have an absolutely wicked reputation, and we've no reason to doubt the fellow when he says that he can command three thousand spears. We'll break camp in a couple of hours' time. Meanwhile, let's have another look at that map. I've got an idea."

Tinker produced it, and spread it out open on the folding camp-table at which they had just been feeding.

It was a piece of common paper, soiled and worn and much creased where it had been folded and refolded scores of times.

It had no claim to artistic merit, having been roughly drawn with an indelible pencil, which had made violet smudges in places where the damp had got at it. But it was full of information, and they were pinning their faith to its accuracy in the main essentials. Curtis, according to Blake, had been a reliable man, well educated, and full of queer odd-and-end information.

The map showed the winding course of that particular section of the river which they had been following for many days, and which the map called the Miwanni.

It is not to be found on any official maps, for the simple reason that the country they were in was quite unexplored and unsurveyed, and the whole region is shown officially as a white blank space, sometimes having the words "Unknown Territory" printed across it in italics.

It was on a tolerably large scale, and Curtis' own route of march was indicated by a waving dotted line, with crosses for the camping-places.

Starting from Curtis' old headquarters, where he had lived or hunted for many seasons, and which they had left three days' march behind them already, it confined itself to the essentials of the route—for instance, it gave no indication of the great swamp from which they had just returned.

Curtis either was ignorant of the swamp, or, as it had been off his line, had simply ignored it.

Blake filled in the omission for their U. J.—No. 851.

own information. All that Curtis had written just there was "Manoori."

"So far as I can see," said Blake, "the place we're making for is about twelve long marches ahead, and there's at least one big river to cross. It's that river I'm looking to to put Strives off our trail."

"How?" asked Sir Richard.

"In this way. Strives is certain to put a spy or two on our trail as soon as possible, with orders to send in reports at short intervals, whilst he gets busy collecting his Manoori spearmen. He won't attempt to attack us at once. That wouldn't suit his game, for it's a hundred-to-one chance that either we should destroy the chart or that it would get lost in the general scrap; and in either of those cases he would be done, and have no chance of lifting the loot. He'll just go on getting his men ready, and rely on his spies for information as to our movements. And then, when we are close up to our journey's end, he'll attack. And he'll have three thousand men against Lobangu's fifty Etbaias, ourselves, and the bearers; and I don't suppose we can count on them to put up much of a fight."

"Well," said Sir Richard, "what then? I must say that I figure it out pretty much that way myself. But what's this river palaver of yours?"

"Just squint at the map, and you'll see," said Blake. "Straight ahead of us, a march or a couple of marches away, begins a weird stretch of country which Curtis has labelled the Forest of Ghosts, and four marches ahead we come to a branch river, the Kerni, which we shall have to cross. Now the main river, here, the Miwanni, is stuck full of islands, some of 'em three or four miles long, and just where the Kerni branches off you'll notice that the main stream makes a big bend.

"Without the chart, anyone might easily mistake that bend for a big island, and follow up the bank of the Kerni instead of the main stream, which is just what I want the Manoori to do. Lead 'em off the scent, as it were.

"There are two crosses marked at that point, indicating that Curtis camped there for two days; which, I take it, means that the river is a bit difficult. The bearers, all our gear, and all of us but one will cross the river at that point, and push on for all we're worth. But the one of us who stops behind, together with Lobangu and all his Etbaia, will follow up the near bank of the Kerni, leaving a broad trail. With luck, Strives and his Manoori will follow that.

"At any place that seems favourable, after the first march, those who have gone that way will take to the river at night, drift down with the stream, doubling on their tracks, as it were, and, landing on the far bank lower down, rejoin the main body."

"Wow, Inkoos," said Lobangu, "that is good talk, and my young men, as thou knowest, can swim as easily as cat, for we are riverfolk, we of the Etbaia."

"Wait, old fox," said Blake, "for that is but half the plan I have planned. Presently M'lolo shall get me a pencil such as this has been drawn with, and paper, and I will make a map very like this, only it shall not show the main stream beyond where this other river, the Kerni, joins it. That map I will fold and re-fold, and make it look old and weather-stained even as this one; and a march or a march and a half hence, it shall be dropped carelessly by the trail-side, where Strives' spies may find it. Nay, if possible, they shall see the dropping of it. Then they will go hot-foot back to their master with it, hoping for great reward; and we shall be well rid

of them, and, it may be, of the Manoori, too."

"My hat, old man, that's cute!" said Sir Richard. "That's what I call a number one scheme. Tinker, there was once a chap called the Governor of North Carolina, who had dashed common-sense views on some subjects. This is an occasion to be celebrated. Go and get some glasses out of the canteen-chest, and rust out a bottle of 'bubbly-water' from one of the cases. Lobangu wants buckin' up. His 'tummy all walk about,' as he calls it."

Lobangu grinned. Champagne and gramophones were two things which he could never resist. He was reputed to have no less than forty of the latter in the Royal Palace at Etbaia, and had been known on occasion, when sadly under the influence of bubbly-water, to set all forty going at once, playing different tunes, to the great delight of his wives and courtiers.

Tinker brought the glasses and a gilt-necked bottle, and they drank solemnly to the success of the scheme.

Suddenly Blake put his glass down on the table and raised his hand.

"Listen!" he said sharply; and they fell silent.

From far away came a faint, rhythmic, booming sound, shrill, staccato, and distinct.

Tap, tapetty, tap, tap! Then a quick roll—Tapetty, tapetty, tap, tap, tap!

THE THIRD CHAPTER, The March.

"THE Lokali!" said Sir Richard.

Blake nodded, and listened intently as the native bush-telegraph flung its message from hill to hill and along the streams. And other Lokali men, squatting in the forests, with a hollow log in front of them, over which was stretched a prepared goat-skin, drum-fashion, caught up the message, and passed it on, tapping it out on the stretched skins with the short, heavy sticks in their hands.

Blake spelt it out as it came through.

"Ye of the Manoori—tap, tap—bring all your spears to the great place. There is a killing and Strivini orders—tap, tap. Hasten—hasten. It is a great killing—tap, tap. Strivini needs you—tap. He who fails dies."

"Humph! That's businesslike, anyway," said Blake. "I thought friend Strives wouldn't lose much time. That message will bring him his three thousand spears on the jump; and the Manoori are no bad fighters. Lobangu, old man, your Etbaia will have their work cut out."

"N'kose," said Lobangu, nodding. "There will be fighting—much fighting—but not yet Untwana, for the red mist before my eyes is dim."

He spoke in a low voice, as though he were tired and drowsy. And almost at once he rose from the table and walked silently away towards the river.

"Curious old beggar," said Sir Richard, looking after him.

Blake looked grave.

"It spells trouble," he said. "Tinker, have you got that pencil and the paper? Thanks!"

Blake tore the paper to the exact dimensions of the original—as luck would have it, they were somewhat similar in texture and appearance—and carefully redrew a portion of the original, with variations.

Sir Richard, who was smoking a most villainous briar, and slapping at the mosquitoes which would browse on his bare arms, squinted at the work as it progressed, and laughed.

"You've missed your vocation, old

man. You ought to have been one of those forger johnnies one reads about in the papers," he said.

"Shut up!" snapped Blake, and went on with his work.

He folded and refolded the paper, with an eye on the creases in the original. Then frayed the edges a bit with the back of his knife, spilt a drop or two of water on it, and rubbed in a little dirt. Then he laid the two side by side and compared them.

"This," said he, picking up the 'fake,' "is a work of art. Tinker, get the men together, see to the loads, and go, and hoick out Lobangu. We march one time, Savvy?"

"Me savvy," said Tinker.

And within half an hour they were heading towards the Forest of Ghosts, an advance guard of the Etbaia leading, scouts thrown out a few hundred yards on either flank, and Blake, all by himself, some fifty paces in the rear, ostensibly to prevent any straggling on the part of the bearers.

At the second halt, to adjust loads—the halts come early at the beginning of a march—Blake, with a jerk of the head and a significant movement, beckoned to Lobangu. And Lobangu, whose dreamy mood had passed away completely, responded with a quick uplift of the hand, and, as the line moved on, fell back to join Blake.

"N'kose?" he said inquiringly.

"Look you, Lobangu," replied Blake. "I have it in my mind that there are men moving behind us—but four ears and four eyes be better than two."

They had covered perhaps a couple of miles before either of them spoke again, and during that time Lobangu had gone back along the track for some distance twice—once to look for an entirely imaginary snuff-box, the second to retrieve some cartridges which he had dropped purposely.

A few minutes later he silently rejoined Blake, who was marching along alone, a hundred yards or so in the rear of the column.

"Your ears told you truly, Untwana, my father," he said. "There be five of these Manooris men who follow on our heels the length of three spear-casts away. They are big men, very dark-skinned, and their tribal mark is three bars across the forehead—so!" And he drew three short parallel lines on the ground with the haft of his spear.

"It would seem to me, Untwana, that now would be a good time to drop the little paper. For the path runs straight hereabouts, and they watching us will assuredly see it fall."

Blake nodded.

"As well now as later," he said. "In fact, the sooner I drop it the sooner there is a chance of shaking them off."

"Even so, Untwana, and thus shall it be. I will go forward a little space, as though to hurry on the bearers, leaving you alone. Then shalt thou stop for a little space, as though to look at the little paper. Then, hurrying forward again, thou shalt let it fall unnoticed."

"I, for my part, having passed out of their sight, will take to the bush on this side here, and, returning a little way, will lie hidden, to watch what may befall. But wait until I give the signal, Untwana, which shall be when thou hearest my voice raised in anger, as though using strong words to the bearers for their laziness, for I must find a good place at which to leave the path unseen."

"It is a good plan, Lobangu," said Blake, "for these Manoori dogs have keen eyes."

"Go, thou, and bid the bearers hasten!"

He pointed angrily up the path as he spoke, and Lobangu, saluting humbly, hurried forward.

This bit of by-play being for the edification of the Manoori spies, to whom it would seem natural enough.

Blake's first precaution was to shift his heavy automatic into a handy position for quick shooting. Lobangu had managed to recover it for him after the fight in the swamps. There was the risk that the Manooris, seeing him alone, might try and rush him, and he had no intention of being hacked about by one of their killing-spears if he could help it.

Presently there was a tremendous uproar amongst the rear files of the bearers, and he could hear Lobangu calling down all sorts of horrible fates on them, their ancestors, and their ancestors' ancestors, who were quite undoubtedly a mixture of blue-ended tree-apes and the wild pigs of the bush.

Lobangu had a fine flow of language and a vivid imagination, and Blake chuckled. As a matter of fact, the bearers, forewarned of the storm to come, were also grinning and enjoying the joke hugely, lost in admiration at Lobangu's gifts of language.

Blake slowed down his pace, fumbled in his pockets, and, after a quick look round him, as though suspicious, produced the map—his own version of it, that is—and examined it carefully, standing a little sideways as he did so in order that the spies might get a clear view of it.

Then, refolding it carefully, he hurried on after the others, apparently mechanically thrusting the paper back into his pocket, instead of which he missed the pocket, and let it flutter to the ground.

From the thick bush on his left there came a faint hissing sound like that of an angry snake, and he knew that Lobangu had doubled back, and was watching.

Blake half-raised his hand, to show that he had heard the signal, and hurried on quickly.

A couple of minutes later he had joined the main body, and was marching along beside Tinker and Pedro.

A quarter of an hour passed—twenty minutes—and still there was no sign of Lobangu, and Blake began to feel anxious.

"I hope nothing's happened to the old beggar," he said to Tinker. "I'd never forgive myself if they got him—five to one is long odds."

"Don't you worry your head," said Tinker. "It would take more than five Manooris to get the old ruffian, and he's got his chatter-gun, besides that big spear of his. He's a rotten shot; but even he can hit a man if he's got the muzzle pressed good and hard against the other johnny's tummy."

Another five minutes went by, and Blake's uneasiness increased.

"I'm going back," he said, and called for the boy who was carrying his rifle.

"If you go, I go, too," said Tinker.

"We shall be a couple of miles from the main body, and two are better than one."

They had already started to retrace their steps, when round a bend a couple of hundred yards away they saw Lobangu coming along at that peculiar jog-trot of his, which covered the ground at a most surprising pace.

He was crooning a little war-song to himself, and round one arm was a rough bandage of leaves.

"Wow! Untwana, that was good talk back yonder!" he said cheerfully.

"They were quick with the spear, those Manooris."

"See, once I stumbled on a piece of dead stick, and in my clumsiness allowed one of them to touch me."

"Nay, it is nothing, Untwana—a mere graze! But I would not leave a blood-trail for other spies to follow up, it may be, so I checked the bleeding with these leaves. Later M'lolos shall give me some of the white bandages from the medicine-box."

"But what happened, old man?" asked Blake. "You were so long gone I was getting worried."

"Wow! Untwana, surely by now thou knowest me too well for such foolishness!"

"See, I lay hidden in the thick bush at just beyond where thou didst drop the paper drawing, and where I made a little hissing, as of an angry snake."

Blake nodded.

"Presently there came the Manooris—five of them—and they fell upon the paper eagerly, chattering like the tree-folk amongst themselves."

"And I—I waited until two of them went off with the paper, running very swiftly, for it was the great part of the plan, Untwana, that the paper should come safely to Strivinis' hand, and so I let them go."

"But I was in no mind that three should be left behind to spy on us. So, after a little while, I came upon them swiftly, as they were preparing to follow."

"The first man died quickly, for my spear took him in the throat, and he fell down."

"The other two fought well; but their spears were over heavy in the head for quick work, and soon they, too, fell, though one touched my arm as my foot slipped on a loose piece of stick, and the other, a very stubborn fighter, made great play with his shield, which was of very tough hide, and once nearly wrenched the spear from my hand."

When he was dead, also, I thought it was foolish talk to leave them lying there for any man to see. So one by one I took them to the river and threw them in."

"Then I covered my tracks carefully, and where the ground had been trampled in the fighting I strewed a little dead grass and other things, so that he who would mark the place must needs have sharp eyes."

"Now I am come to join you again, Untwana, and M'lolos shall get me a piece of the white bandage."

Towards the late afternoon the whole character of their surroundings began to change in a marked degree. The ground underfoot showed big outcrops of rock, and big boulders lay strewn about in all directions. The dense bush gave place to a thin fringe of trees, which in turn became a regular forest.

But the trees were all dead. So far as the eye could see in any direction there was not a live tree standing. They were all gaunt and shrivelled and grey. There was not a green speck or leaf or bit of foliage to be seen anywhere, nor was there any undergrowth, and in place of foliage the trees were festooned with long streamers of dead grey moss, which hung in trails thirty and forty feet long.

Not a bird was to be seen or heard anywhere, not a single creeping or climbing animal did they catch sight of, not so much as a bush-rat. Even the vety flies and mosquitoes seemed to avoid the place, and left them in peace.

A scene of more utter desolation it would be hard to imagine, and it was indescribably weird.

"Wow! Untwana," said Lobangu

under his breath. "this is in very truth the 'Forest of Ghosts,' as it is named on the paper, and thou being the father of all the ghosts are come to thine own land!"

"It's infernally uncanny!" said Tinker, with a shudder. "Fairly gives one the creeps!"

Blake frowned.

"According to Curtis' map we shouldn't have reached this till the end of to-morrow's march. I don't quite understand it," he said.

"We've found the map quite accurate, up to date, too, even to the position of his old camping-places. It will be awkward if it proves unreliable now. Our whole plan of campaign depends on its accuracy."

They tramped on for the better part of an hour in silence. There was no doubt about it that the place was fairly getting on their nerves.

Everywhere, wherever they looked, there was the same monotonous dead greyness and utter absence of life.

Sir Richard, who had been on in advance picking out the path, was coming back slowly down the line, looking, as Tinker said, "about as cheerful as a sick monkey with the mange."

"I've left Lobangu's second in command to take charge," he said. "The track's fairly easy to follow so long as we keep the river somewhere on our right."

"I got so blessed lonely up there in front all by myself, and this place is so beastly depressing, that I felt I must come back for a bit, even if it was only to talk to a silly ass like Tinker!"

"You should see the bearers, poor brutes! They're a good lot, and willing as they make 'em, but their eyes are sticking out of their heads, and their teeth fairly chattering with fright."

Blake nodded.

"They keep on looking back, too, which is always a bad sign. Tinker's afraid they'll stampede, and upon my soul I half believe they'd have done so before now except that we were close behind 'em."

"Lobangu, old man, you might cut on ahead, and bring back twenty of your Etbaia to form a rearguard."

"We can't risk losing bearers, for one thing, and if the poor beggars did bolt they'd only get cut up by the Manooris sooner or later."

"N'kosi!" said Lobangu, and went up along the line, assuming a great air of unconcern, chaffing some of the bearers as he passed, and getting a feeble grin out of some of them in response.

Presently he came back with twenty of his Etbaia fighting-men at his heels. Fine, big men, everyone of them trained warriors, and the pick of his own body-guard. They feared neither men nor devils, except Lobangu himself, and their own private devils, which were of a very special brand, kept for home consumption.

Each carried a Winchester repeater and a bandolier full of cartridges, in addition to the broad stabbing-spears and a brace of heavy knives. But even they had lost something of their usual jaunty, "you-go-and-be-hanged!" bearing.

They wheeled smartly to the rear of the column, and it was clear that their presence there heartened up the bearers considerably, or impressed them with the uselessness of trying to bolt, for there were no more glances thrown back over shoulders.

Suddenly Blake, who had been silent for a long time, exclaimed:

"I've got it!"

"Got what?" asked Sir Richard.

"The explanation," said Blake. "The U. J.—No. 851.

map's all right, but since Curtis drew it the place has altered.

"All this infernal moss is a growth, a parasite, which kills everything in the vegetation line that it attacks, and it spreads like anything."

"Since Curtis was here the beastly stuff has spread the better part of two marches westward; that's why we came across it earlier than we expected. I dare say it's spread north and south and east as well."

"Anyway, we shall know soon. The sun's getting low already, and by my reckoning we should be making the next of his old camps soon. We expected to make it easily before dark, and we've come along at a fair pace."

Sure enough, they had barely covered another couple of miles when a young Etbaia captain came hurrying down from the head of the column, and, saluting, said that they had come upon what was evidently an old camping-place a short distance away on the right of the track.

Sir Richard and the others went forward to inspect.

The man was undoubtedly right. There were the remains of several lean-to shelters, long since fallen into decay, and covered with the grey moss. Some heaps of charred and smoke-blackened stones showed the site of old cooking-fires, and there was a water-hole close by in which the water was clear and sweet.

"The first thing to be done is to set the bearers to clear a large space of this infernal moss," said Blake. "It's as dry as tinder, or as reindeer moss in summer-time, and if a spark were to get well hold of it the whole place would go off like a barrel of gunpowder."

"Jolly good thing, too," said Sir Richard. "It would clean the place up!"

"And us, too, old man," said Blake drily.

The bearers piled their loads, and were set to work, and even the Etbaia condescended to help.

Being so dry, the moss was easy stuff to clear, and long before darkness suddenly snapped down on them, a large space had been cleared to the bare earth and fires lit in a ring in the centre.

There was no lack of dry kindling wood, and the boys piled the fires high. "The bigger the blaze the bigger the safety, from ghosts and other nocturnal intruders" was their motto, and as the flames shot up redly, so their spirits rose, and for the first time for hours they chattered away gaily.

Blake's own tent and Sir Richard's were set up near a small fire apart, and the folding table and camp-chairs put ready. Within half an hour they had had a wash. The dust from the moss had covered them with a peculiarly fine grey powder, which it was hard to get off, and were enjoying a well-deserved meal.

They were just having coffee, and Sir Richard was sipping at a long glass of whisky and sparklet, whilst Blake was enjoying a cigarette, when from the far side of the camp there rose a terrific hullabaloo, and some of the bearers made a helter-skelter dash for the central fires, falling over each other as they did so, and yelling "Tagati! Tagati! Bewitched! Bewitched!"

Their fright was evidently real and genuine enough, for some of them had even left their food half finished, and many got pretty badly burnt through stumbling into the fires.

Blake, who had sprung to his feet at the first alarm, noticed that even the Etbaia sentries had drawn closer together as though for company's sake.

"What in the name of all that's won-

derful has taken the beggars?" he said testily. "Come on, you fellows!"

"Look at old Pedro," said Tinker. "His hackles are all up and he's growling like a musical-box. By Jove! Put your hand on him, he's trembling all over and wet with sweat."

Blake strode into the midst of the bearers, a light cane in his hand.

"What name this fool palaver?" he said angrily. "You make dem monkey noises, you lib for trouble one time, my word!" And he emphasised his remarks by a cut or two at the nearest bare backs.

"What for you no finish chop? I, too, much angry along you. You want to make blank fool noise, I'll give you something to make noise for!"

"Lord!" said one. "This is very bad juju. This place is full of ghosts. We have seen them, I and these others, even now, as we sit at meat. We are our Lord Baliki's servants, but this is a very bad ghost palaver, and our hearts are as water!"

"You are a pack of fools," said Blake cheerfully. "Do I, and does my Lord Lukuna and my Lord M'lolo know nothing of ghosts? If there be any ghosts here they are but poor timid, frightened things, who are afraid of our ju-ju, for as ye know well, we are very great smouti men, and can make the strangest kind of ju-ju. You are my servants. Do you think that I, Baliki, and my Lord Lukuna cannot protect our servants?"

Just then Lobangu, who had been the round of his Etbaia sentries, touched Blake on the arm.

"Untwana N'kose," he said in a low voice, "I have just been speaking with my young men, and of a truth there are strange things abroad in the forest here, for they themselves have seen, and as thou knowest they are to be trusted and are unafraid—not like these bearer folk, who are as children and prate of ghosts."

"My young men say that but a short while back there came out of the forest younder seven or more things very strange to see, moving slowly. As long as a man and a half they were, and half the height of a man, looking like great smooth stones which moved. Grey they were, as everything else is grey in this tagati place, and covered with some kind of scaly armour, which rattled as they moved, even as dry bones rattle. They had neither legs nor feet, and the head was hidden beneath the armour."

"Yet they can move quickly at need, for one of my young men made a cast with a throwing-spear. The spear indeed glanced off as a thrown stone glances off ice, but the thing turned and vanished amongst the trees, and its fellows with it."

"Well, I'm hanged!" said Blake, who had listened attentively. "What do you make of it, Spots?"

Sir Richard shrugged his shoulders.

"If one of the bearers had told me a yarn like that I should have kicked him for his health's sake. But Lobangu's Etbaia are a very different proposition, and apparently not one, but several of 'em saw the brutes. I wish I'd been there. Well, anyway, we've got to do something to satisfy those boys and keep 'em quiet. We must put up some sort of a bluff, and hope it comes off. Wait a minute, I've got an idea!"

He wrenched the lid off an empty case which stood near-by, and fastened it to the top of a stick about seven feet. Then, with a piece of charred wood taken from the camp-fire, he printed on it in large black letters:

"Trespassers will be prosecuted. By order!"

"That ought to satisfy the beggars!" he chuckled. "Come along—you, too, Tinker—we'll set this up on the far edge of the camp, and you and Spots must do an incantation or something."

Lobangu read the inscription, and so far forgot his dignity as to give vent to a huge guffaw.

Very solemnly the four of them and Pedro made their way between the camp-fires, watched anxiously and nervously by forty pairs of eyes. This was evidently big white magic of sorts, and one by one the bearers left their fires and came tip-toeing along in their wake.

On the far confines of the camp Blake fixed the post firmly in the soft ground, the ominous warning turned toward the forest, and the bearers, crowding round, gaped at the strange cabalistic signs.

"Now then, you others, it's your turn," said Blake.

"Come on, Tinker," said Sir Richard. "Do as I do!"

They bowed gravely three times to the board.

"Now with me, you young blighter," said Sir Richard. "Sing—howl, and for Heaven's sake look solemn and don't grin!"

Sir Richard lifted up his voice, which was rather like a foghorn when he tried to sing, and Tinker joined in.

"I've never seen a purple cow!" they chanted.

"I never wish to see one,

But I can tell you, anyhow,

I'd rather see than be one."

"Once more," gurgled Sir Richard, "and let her rip!"

They did it all over again, Blake and Lobangu standing stiffly at the salute, and as a climax Pedro, who never could stand Sir Richard's singing at any price, threw back his head and howled his soul out.

Then all four bowed low again.

"That," said Blake, "is a very fine ju-ju—heap strong ju-ju. This palaver is finished. Go back to your camp-fires and sleep. We start at dawn."

It might have been three hours later or a little more, and the whole camp was fast asleep save for a couple of Etbaia sentries watching the back trail, when Blake woke with a start and grabbed his automatic.

It was a curious scratching noise which had awakened him, and he sat up, listening.

It was a noise hard to define or even to locate with any exactness, and it was certainly unlike anything Blake could remember having heard before.

A dry, scraping rustle describes it as well as anything else, but the rustle of something heavy and unwieldy.

Then came another sound—two, to be exact. The first was a stifled groan cut off short in the middle, and the other was equally unmistakably the crunching of bone.

Blake leapt up and raised the flap of his tent. There was tolerably bright moonlight now, though the moon itself was low. It bathed the gaunt moss-hung trees in silver with a most eerie effect.

At first glance he could see nothing amiss. The camp-fires had burnt low. The bearers were all sleeping, scattered about the open space in weird attitudes.

The Etbaia formed an orderly group by themselves, and far down the back trail he could just catch sight of the two Etbaia sentries, guarding the danger point, standing leaning on their spears, their faces turned away from the camp.

He stepped out into the open, peering this way and that. There had been tragedy he knew, but he could see no sign of it; and then suddenly he noticed one of the bearers lying apparently asleep several yards from the nearest of

his fellows. Boys do get up and wander in their sleep sometimes—there was nothing in that; but the man's attitude struck him as curious, and he went swiftly to where he lay. Then he stopped with a sharp intake of breath.

The man, a Bomongo boy, lay spread-eagled out, as natives often lie in their sleep, but his head was crushed flat, the skull splintered to pulp. It was for all the world as though a steam-roller had passed over his head as it was turned sideways in sleep.

Blake glanced at the soft ground all around. There was nothing that could be definitely called a trail, but there were some curious, almost shapeless depressions in the soil, half obliterated by the dragging along of some heavy body. And even as he looked he heard once more that curious, scraping, scratching noise away on his right. He looked round quickly, and something moved in the uncertain moonlight—something that was silvery grey, and which at first glance might have been taken for a gigantic misshapen tortoise.

Moonlight tends to exaggerate the actual size of things; but Blake, remembering the young Etbaia's description, thought that he couldn't have been very far out.

The thing, whatever it was, looked a good nine feet long, and stood all of three feet above the ground at its highest point, which was about the middle of its back.

He flung up his automatic and fired, and then began to run, firing again and again.

The last of the heavy bullets was fired at a range of barely five feet.

For though, according to the Etbaia, the brutes could move fast when scared or hard pressed, Blake's first shot must have been a lucky one, and hit it hard, just as his last reduced it to an inert mass, which quivered a little and grew still.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Brute.

BY now the whole camp was in an uproar, caused by the firing, and the Etbaia sentries came rushing in at the alarm.

"In Heaven's name, what is it, old man?" asked Sir Richard, who had run up in his pyjamas, and a pair of mosquito boots, with a big revolver in either hand.

"Heaven knows!" said Blake, beginning to examine it. "It's either a prehistoric pup or the great-great-great-grandfather of some kind of creature of the Armadillo tribe, and it's killed one of our boys!"

It measured just over ten feet in all over its hinged, armoured shell, and its maximum height was a trifle over three; but from beneath the shell they pulled a great horny head not unlike a tortoise's, at the end of a long, flexible, scraggy neck.

The head alone measured twenty inches, and the neck, when fully extended, a couple of feet, giving it a total length of just on fourteen feet, with a maximum girth of about eight.

Blake prised open the bony jaws with his knife, and wedged them apart with a billet of wood.

"Look!" he said, pointing to the hideous yellow teeth. "It's a grass-eating, grain-crunching beast by nature. Its teeth are as flat as a horse's or a cow's. Perhaps it lives on this grey moss round here. After all, it's not unlike reindeer moss. Look at its armour. That horn must be two inches thick in places. Look where a couple of my heavy bullets have flicked off it, scarcely

chipping it, and all cunningly jointed like the armour of an old Chinese warrior.

"The brute must weigh a couple of tons, and I should think it could butt through the wall of a house without any particular bother. And the tremendous power of the jaws! Have you seen that poor beggar of a carrier's head? It's not bitten, it's just crunched flat!"

They got some strong poles, and with some difficulty levered the brute over on its back with a rattle and clash of its bone armour. The skin of the underside, though hideously wrinkled and of extraordinary toughness, was scaly—not armoured—and its four feet at the end of short, stumpy legs were horny and nearly circular.

"I want something to wash the taste out of my mouth," said Sir Richard. "Let's go and split a sparklet."

"My idea," said Blake, "is that the brutes aren't naturally harmful—they're certainly herb-eating, not carnivorous. Probably they're in the habit of using this water-hole, and we happened to camp bang in the light, between them and their drink supply."

"This brute killed that poor wretch of a bearer either because it was suspicious or afraid of him. You can see by the creature's armour-plating that he is designed for defence rather than offence, and I dare say he needed his armour pretty badly at times. As to his age, goodness knows he might have lived five hundred years, or he might have lived a thousand. Anyway, I'm going to turn in."

"I wish we could have taken him along and preserved him somehow, but we can't."

As events proved, they certainly couldn't have in any case, for at some time during the night an enterprising Bomongo boy had found that the flesh was very good to eat. It was not unlike alligator tail, as a matter of fact. Anyway, the Bomongo, having made his discovery, his friends joined in and indulged in a quiet orgy, with the result that when Blake and Sir Richard turned out the next morning there was precious little left but the armoured shell, and every bearer in camp was stuffed to repletion.

It was no use being angry with them. A feast didn't come their way every day of the week, and it was evidently equally impossible to hope to make a start before midday. So Blake contented himself with telling them that they'd have to make a double march the next day, or he'd flay them alive. To which threat they cheerfully responded by improvising a dismal dirge, hailing him as the "slayer of ghosts, and the maker of great ju-ju." For they attributed their great feast entirely to the magic virtues of the notice-board, and conveniently forgot about the troubles of their unfortunate comrade who had had his head squashed like a pancake, and whom they had buried in a shallow grave just outside the camp.

The evening of the fourth day brought them to the edge of the Kemi River, at the spot which Curtis had marked with a double cross, signifying a two-days' camp, and it was here that Blake's strategic work was to begin.

The moss-covered trees of the Forest of Ghosts they had left behind them shortly before, and for a belt of two miles deep along the near bank of the river vegetation was green and tropically luxuriant once more, and there was plenty of animal sign.

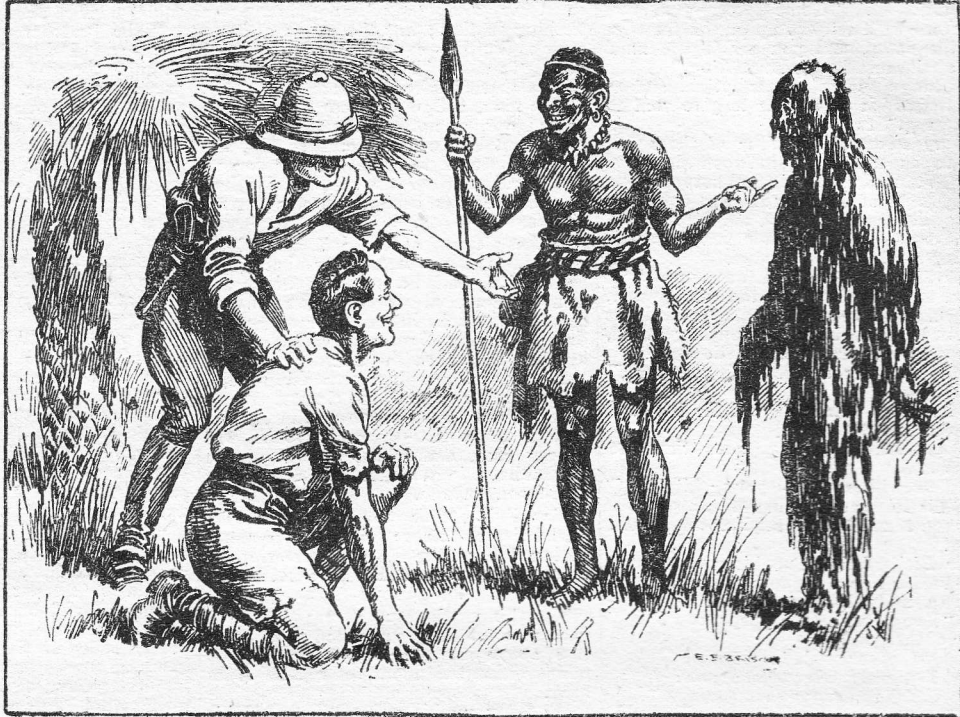
The river at its junction with the Miwami was swift, and for the most part shallow, with many sandbanks and occasional deep holes and channel passages.

It was by no means bank high, the

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"My sainted aunt!" roared Sir Richard. "It is Tinker!"

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big rains being over, and its breadth was about two hundred yards.

Here again Curtis' map, though rough, proved itself admirably accurate in essentials.

Anyone not possessing the original chart would have taken it for granted that the Kami was actually the continuation of the Miwami, and that the spur jutting out into the true Miwami River was merely an extra large island. It should be remembered that in Blake's faked map, which he had contrived to let fall into Strive's hands, the continuation of the real Miwami and the actual site of the ruins, which was their ultimate goal, were not shown at all.

Taking a leaf out of Curtis' book, they determined to follow his example and camp for two days to overhaul stores and equipments, and repack some of the loads.

They were well up to time, in spite of minor mishaps, and there had been no sign of Strives and his Manoori, though one night they had heard the "Lokali" talking from afar very faintly—so faintly as to be no more than a distant muttering which had been taken up and passed on out of range.

They were sitting in front of their tent after dinner the first night of camp, watching the moonlight play on the swirling waters of the Kemi.

Sir Richard was smoking his disreputable briar and holding a long glass in his other hand, and Tinker was alternately pulling Pedro's tail or tickling his nose with a piece of dry grass to try and make him sneeze.

"What d'you really expect to find at this place we're headin' for, old man?" asked Sir Richard, after a long silence.

Blake threw away the end of his cigarette and lit another.

"I can only tell you what Curtis said in his letter. He said that he wanted to do me a good turn, and that during his hunting trips he had heard various scraps of information and yarns from the natives about a legendary city built of stone—long empty, and deserted—and of things inlaid with yellow metal.

"I told you Curtis was chockful of all U. J.—No. 851.

sorts of odd-and-end seraps of information, and was by way of being a brilliant scholar. Well Curtis came and explored with a handful of his own boys, and he claims that he discovered the remains of what must once have been a very important city.

"Gold cups and vases on the tables, even the very plates from which they had just eaten.

"He said the stuff was of priceless value, and that their inlay work in gold was unique, and in such profusion that he was convinced there must be valuable gold mines somewhere in the district.

"He went on to say that it was too big a proposition for him to tackle single-handed, and that as he should never return to England he didn't want the loot, and was quite contented to live his remaining portion of life hunting with his natives. He was an elderly man, you know.

"Later, when he knew, or strongly suspected, that Strives had poisoned him and was trying to steal the map, he managed to scribble a few additional lines in pencil, though he must have been in great pain. Powdered glass is a beastly poison.

"That's literally all I know, except that before coming out I went and saw some of the big authorities and experts.

"They all agreed that the Romans at one time and another had certainly colonised as far south as the line I indicated, and even further. There was documentary evidence of that. They generally stuck to rivers and waterways for their colonial city-building sites, but that of the particular region I indicated nothing was known.

"There you have the whole thing in a nutshell, my dear Spots.

"It's a gamble, but I'm betting on Curtis turning up trumps. I wish I could be equally sure that we shall manage to dodge Strives and his infernal Manoori."

The next day was passed in repacking stores and lightening some of the loads; for now they had come to a point where forced marches would be the order of the day.

A good West African boy can carry

an enormous load. He can march with a big load; but if you want to get the very best out of him a forty-pound load is quite enough, and if less so much the better. Every extra pound knocked off below forty makes the boys fresher, more cheerful, and, if necessary, more capable of putting up a fight at a tight pinch.

Many comparatively valuable stores were ruthlessly jettisoned and heaved into the river to cut down weight to a bare minimum, but ammunition and all necessities were rigidly reserved.

Tinker and Lobangu had quessed up and down stream meanwhile, searching for a safe and easy ford for the bearers, and this they found within a hundred yards of the camp, probably the same which Curtis and his men had originally used.

The approach to it was hidden by thick bush and a fringe of sawgrass. There were two channels where the water ran deep and swift, but they were not wide, and with a couple of men standing on the sandbanks on either side holding taut a lifeline of strong knotted liana, it seemed feasible enough to get the bearers across without the loss of a load.

This was done an hour after the dawn of the second day's camp.

The bearers were got across safely, with only a few minor mishaps, and not a load was lost.

Lobangu's second-in-command and ten of the Etbaia were sent with them to maintain discipline, and with orders to wait at the second camping-place beyond the ford.

It was absolutely necessary for the scheme that Sir Richard, Blake, and Tinker should stop with the shore party, for their boot tracks being easily distinguishable, the Manoori scouts would soon notice if even one set of tracks was missing, and suspect that the party had divided. Old Pedro's spoor was also important.

Having finished a hasty breakfast of condensed milk and biscuits, they proceeded to obliterate every trace of where the river party had crossed the ford. This was entirely Lobangu's idea, for he was a cunning old warrior and an

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adept at covering a trail or laying traps for the unwary.

By his orders certain of the Etbaia made a camp fire close to the edge of the reeds and bush by the river bank, and when these were fairly alight they set fire to the reeds in half a dozen places.

The blaze would be invisible at any distance in the bright sunlight, and the smoke, of which there was little, for grass and bush were tinder-dry, drifted riverwards.

This served a double purpose. The fire entirely obliterated the bearers' trail to the ford, and also would render the ground underfoot so hot as to be impassable for the next forty or fifty hours to any barefooted Manoori.

In fact, to any Manoori scout there would be no trail left to follow but one—that along the bank of the Kami—which they would naturally mistake for the main river, and as for the grass and bush fire, they would merely set it down to carelessness and a sudden shift of the wind. Fires of that sort were common enough every day of the week. In other words, they banked on Strives and his Manoori following them. For along narrow bush-path trails even the best scouts would be hard put to it to say with precision how many men had passed—whether forty-four, the exact number of the party, or some ninety odd, the total number of the expedition, including all the bearers.

They struck camp at half-past six in the morning by Sir Richard's wrist-watch.

**THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
A Terrible Death.**

By Lobangu's orders, the Etbaia marched largely on their heels for the first mile or so and shortened their stride, walking as far apart as the track allowed, and constantly crossing and recrossing. This muddled up the trail and individual footprints, and the deep heel-marks suggested the presence of bearers carrying heavy loads. A man with a load on his head or

shoulders instinctively puts extra pressure on the heel to maintain his balance.

They marched, with one short break, until an hour before sundown. Then another halt was called, and Blake and Lobangu went forward alone.

Like all big rivers, the West African rivers are fed by smaller streams—sometimes in full flood, sometimes mere shallow rivulets, or a chain of pools. They were looking for one that would, at any rate, be ankle deep and hide their tracks—and they found it.

"Look you, Untwana," said Lobangu, "this should serve us well."

He took a flying leap across the stream and tried the ground on the far side.

It was soft and oozy, and, though not dangerous mud, it closed up as soon as a footprint was made, leaving a flat, oily surface, and no trace.

Lobangu paddled back.

"We will leave a trail to here, N'kose, then turn down-stream to the river, leaving no trace, and Strivini and his Manoori dogs will think that we have gone on yonder across the swamp, and hope to pick up our tracks further on. So, at least, we shall gain time."

"Wise talk," said Blake. "Now we will return and tell the plan; for the crossing should be made quickly, and we shall need a little of the light that is left. The crossing we will make in the dark."

As a matter of fact, they modified their plans a little, on account of the possibility of spies, though Lobangu and his Etbaia were positive that there were none.

They waited till dark before moving camp, and then, guided by Blake and Lobangu, made their way to the small stream. Down this they plunged and waded and stumbled until they came to the edge of the Kami, and there they waited until the moon should rise.

As soon as there was a little light they took to the water.

They landed on the eastern bank without mishap, and rested up for a little while. Then, steering mainly by compass bearing, they arrived in the dusk, to find the bearers chattering cheerfully by their

camp-fires under the watchful eyes of Lobangu's advance guard of Etbaia.

With the next dawn they were off again, and covered another two stages, as they were travelling light.

The scenery was open and exhilarating after the depressing influences of the Forest of Ghosts. But that night, as Sir Richard and the others sat over their meal, they heard the Lokali of the Manoori chattering again.

There was not a breath of wind, and the sound carried far and clear.

Clack-clack-clackety - clack-clack-clack, and a roll. Sharp and shrill it rang, and the local telegraphist was evidently operating on an instrument covered with thin-shaved wood instead of the proverbial goatskin.

"The white men have passed—have passed," it ran, "also the big lion-dog that is with them. We have seen the tracks, but have lost them in the swamp, which meets over the feet."

"Good egg!" said Sir Richard. "You've bluffed 'em finely, Lobangu, old man!" he said. And the next moment he dropped his disreputable old pipe, with a startled cuss-word; for out of nowhere, but less than a mile or so away, came a muffled roll, and then boom, boom, boom! A skir Lokali drum this time.

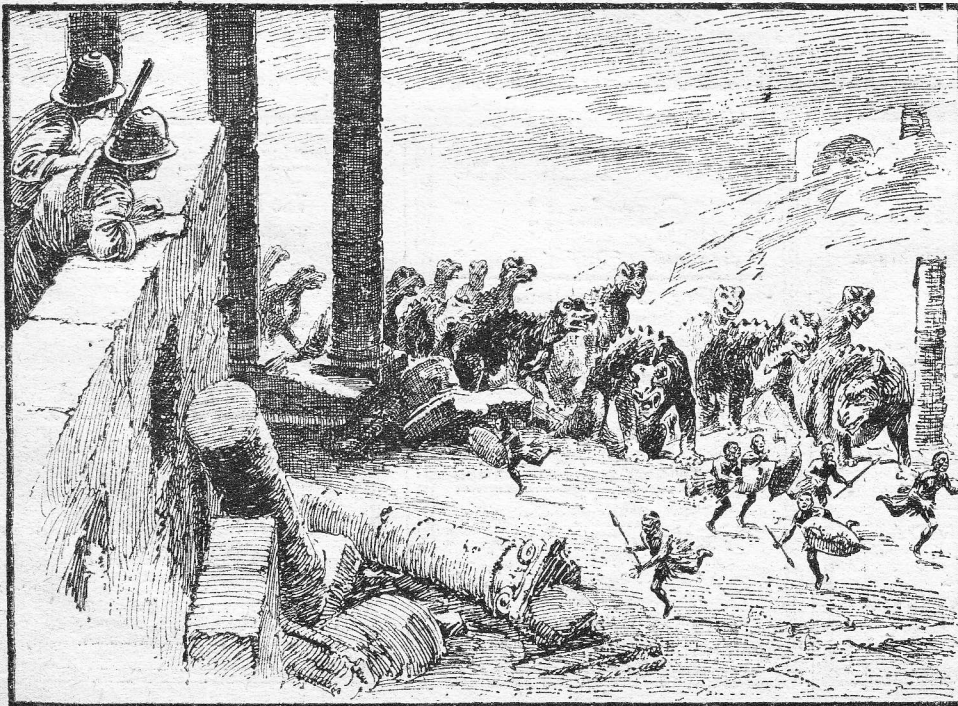
"They are here! They are here! Come quickly! We of the Etavi. Of the white men we do not know; but there are many bearers, carrying spears, and boxes of wood such as white men use. Greeting to the Manoori."

"Now, of all the rotten luck!" said Sir Richard.

Lobangu said nothing. He took one large pinch of snuff with grave solemnity, and then, with a turn of his head and a glance, he picked out thirty of his Etbaia and his second-in-command.

"Untwana," he said, "the plan was a good plan, but it has miscarried. Of these Etavi people we know nothing. N'kose, I, and my men go swiftly to find them and know more. When we have finished I think that they will send no other Lokali messages."

"Be careful, old man!" said Blake. "Don't get your crowd cut up. If they re



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Through the bright but uncertain moonlight, great grey things were creeping from the westward.

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too strong for you fall back at once, and we'll choose our own ground, and put up a fight that will knock sense into 'em!"

"Inkoos!" said Lobangu. And he and the Etbaia he had picked out vanished swiftly amongst the tall grasses.

"Well, we do seem to have struck it unlucky!" said Sir Richard. "We make a nice set of plans, go to a heap of trouble, and then—biff, bang! Here come those blooming Etavi, kickin' up a fuss! Who are the Etavi, anyway?"

"Well, said Blake, "if you ask me for a rough guess, I should say that the Etavi were some small, weak tribe, who have to pay tribute—salt and goats and things—to the Manoori, and that by bad luck, living on this side of the river, they've stumbled across our tracks—or, rather, our bearers'—for in their message they say that they have seen no white men, so they can't have hit our trail from the river. Hallo! Listen to that! They're evidently in a deuce of a funk."

The Lokali drum-talk went on again across the stillness of the night.

"We of the Etavi—help! The white men are here. They have crossed the river—also the lion dog and others of a tribe we do not know. Hasten, for we are but few spears, and there is a sickness in the villages."

"Might as well be livin' in a telephone exchange!" said Tinker, with a chuckle. "We'll probably hear someone bleating for number blanketty-blank Gerard, or nought-nought Bank in a minute!"

"Send spears quickly by the lower drift!" boomed the drum. "We of the Etavi will meet a—"

The message snapped off short in the midst of the sentence, and there followed a tense silence, broken by a faint, bleating cry which ended abruptly.

The best part of twenty minutes passed, and then two of the Etbaia sentries sprang swiftly to the salute with a faint rattle of their small fighting shields.

Lobangu strode into the circle of light, holding in one hand a big Lakali drum, and with the other a skinny and very frightened-looking, middle-aged man, whom he held by the scruff of the neck at arm's length, and regarded with a look of extreme disgust.

With a jerk of his arm he slung the unfortunate telegraphist of the Etavi into the nearest bush, which happened to be

of the "wait-a-bit-thorn" type, with spikes like fish-hooks, and as the man was in his birthday costume he yelled, and yelled still louder as a couple of grinning bearers dragged him out again, thorns and all.

Tinker, meanwhile, had reached out for the drum.

He took up the sticks, and was going to try a bit of telegraphy on his own, but Blake reached out and gripped his wrist.

"No, you don't, old man!" he said firmly. "We've got quite as much trouble as we want without your fooling with that. You jolly well leave it alone!"

"Oh, all right!" said Tinker huffily. "Have it your own way! Only what's the matter with giving Strives a bit of a jar? He's bound to pick up any message we send, and I've a notion to send him a startler. Make out we've been reinforced by a few million men, or something like that!"

Blake stared at him, and then grinned. "My hat, youngster! That's not a bad notion, after all. We might put the wind up 'em! What do you think, Spots?"

"Heap good scheme!" said Sir Richard. "Give me the jolly old drum, and let's have a whang at it!"

"No," said Blake. "This must be a pukka message! Your spelling is vile even in English! Heaven alone knows what it would be like in Manoori or Etavi, and we can't risk making mistakes! Lobangu, old man, send one of your Etbaia round the bearers, and see if there is a chap who can talk genuine Etavi, and can send a message properly."

As a matter of fact, there were several bearers who owned up to a working knowledge of the Etavi tongue, which in itself is akin to the Bomango, and a couple of them were trained Lakali men.

"Now," said Sir Richard, "the thing is to fake up a message. Tinker, you're a pretty useful liar, generally speaking. Got any suggestions?"

"We of the Etavi—" said Tinker solemnly. "Here, I say, this wants a bit of thinking out. We of the Etavi have had to flee from the lower drift, for the spears of the enemy are countless as thorns on a bush! Also, they have many

guns which speak loudly. We may not hold the drift. Ye of the Manoori may yet be in time!"

"I fancy that ought to do the trick," said Tinker, grinning. "It will keep the Manoori, Strives, & Co. messing about down by the river bank, and it makes us out to be a jolly sight stronger than we are."

Sexton Blake nodded.

"For an absolute ass, Tinker, I admit that you have occasional flashes of genius. We'll let it go at that, shall we?"

"Alas!" said Tinker. "I think it wouldn't be a bad thing if we got a Morse on us, one time!"

The next morning brought up a dense river mist with an eastward drift, and under cover of this they moved off quietly, heading roughly north and by west.

Of the Etavi they saw nothing at all. In the distance the Miwami mountains stood up sharp against the skyline when the mists had cleared, and over the open ground they made good progress.

It was just as the light grew level, casting long shadows, grotesque and strange, in that brief period before the tropical sunset, that Tinker who, with Pedro, was a hundred yards or so in front of the main body, gave a shout.

He had topped an undulating rise which gave a view of the flat plain beyond—a plain which, curiously enough by one of those freaks of tropical countries, might have been part and parcel of an English park, with its vivid green, smooth turf, and its tidily-shaped trees.

But that was not the reason of his shout.

The real reason was that a couple of miles away, or it may have been a bit more, was a veritable city, the proof positive of Curtis' strange story.

He had described it as a deserted town of Roman origin.

Deserted it certainly was, partly in ruins, where the weather had had its way of the masonry, but for the main part intact.

It was a stone-built city, and might at one time have housed a big population of many thousands of souls.

The big, arched gateway giving access to the walls on the south had partially collapsed. But the walls themselves, with

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their guard-houses and battlements, were intact. The two magnificent temples stood four-square to the winds, and a little to the left of the city proper was a great coliseum, with its tiered seats of stones.

From where they stood they could look straight down into the arena, and could even distinguish the black entrances of the archways, where the wild beasts had been caged.

"Well, I'm blest!" said Sir Richard. "In the words of the poet, 'Who would ever have thought of meetin' you here?'"

The last of the daylight snapped out even as they stood and stared, and the mountain ridges faded out against the night sky.

"There'll be a moon in a couple of hours' time," said Blake. "We'll camp where we are, and go on when it has risen."

"Confound the fellow!" he said, with several additions. "I did think we had floored him, or, at any rate, that Tinker's scheme would have given him that tired feeling, but he evidently means mischief."

Blake looked anxious. "He has three thousand spears!" he said quietly. "We have roughly ninety all told. Long odds, old man! I think that our one chance is to make a sprint for it, and make for one of the buildings. The nearest will serve as well as another, and the smaller the building the better, so long as the walls are solid."

They made a forced march of that last two miles, and gained the nearest of the houses, which stood on the outskirts of the city.

It was a big, solid building, with walls of hewn masonry, eight or ten feet thick, smooth-surfaced, offering neither hand

film of dust in the inner chambers, the place might have been vacated ten minutes since, instead of ten centuries. And: in spite of their haste, they paused and looked about them in awe and wonder, puzzled to guess what strange panic it could have been that had caused its inhabitants to rush out, never to return. The great entrance gates, with their bolts and bars and hinges of bronze, stood flung wide. Even the wicket had been left unsecured, and everywhere there were the same signs of frantic haste.

A feast of some sort had evidently been in progress when the horror came.

In the big central hall stood long, low tables, profusely laden with wonderful gold ewers and drinking vessels, and great dishes of gold and inlaid work. But now ewers and cups alike held no more than a few stained traces of the wine which had once filled them brim full.



TINKER
FINDS
"TROUBLE"
NAN-
TUCKET!

(An Incident
from Next
Week's Story.)

On no account miss
"DOUBLE-CROSSED!"
ORDER YOUR "U.J." TO-DAY!

There is always something mysterious about a tropical moonrise, something weird and eerie; but when it rises over a city built a thousand and more years ago it has to be seen to be believed. No ordinary words are adequate to describe its beauty.

Even the bearers moved quickly, and ceased their usual chattering.

They felt that they were bewitched. Tagati and the Etbaia were unusually silent.

The moon cast its silvery sheen over masonry and stonework, and the whole world seemed at peace, when once again across the silence came the savage roll of the war-drums.

Blake listened and glanced at Lobangu. "Strivini?" he said sharply; and Lobangu nodded.

Sir Richard used words that are not to be found in a self-respecting dictionary.

nor foot hold, and in the inner courtyard was a well of fresh water.

Like all private buildings of its period, it had no windows or openings facing outward, with the exception of the main entrance and a small wicket. Both of these were fastened by strong, heavy gates, with bronze fittings. The living-rooms and sleeping-chambers opened inwards on to the courtyards, where once there had been a bank for goldfish.

The roofs covering the rooms were flat and broad, thirty feet above ground level, and guarded by a low parapet.

The building itself stood on a hillock, and there were no other houses within arrow-flight of it.

But the strangest part of all was the condition in which they found it, exactly bearing out Curtis' written description.

Barring inevitable weather stains in the courtyards and an almost invisible

One big cup, studded with gems, had been overturned, and its contents spilt across the table, a few dried, flim-like flakes being all that was left of the rich falernian or palermine that the cup had once contained, and the dishes held no more than little shapeless heaps of dried dust.

Lamps, in which scented oils had long since dried and evaporated, stood about. On the walls there were wonderful frescoes and mosaics, their colours still fresh and untarnished, and priceless marbles and bronzes stood round the walls on carved pedestals.

But most mysterious and pathetic of all were the purely human personal treasures left scattered about on the low benches set round the tables and elsewhere.

Here lay a woman's discarded sandal, with turquoise-studded strappings—a U. J.—No. 351.

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sandal that had once fitted a small, delicately-shaped foot.

There, near a wine goblet, lay a golden armlet. At the foot of a couch was a richly wrought jewelled brooch, and everywhere silks of Cos, purple weavings of the old Tyrrian looms, and garments hastily flung aside. In the inner rooms, even in the slaves' quarters, all pointed to stricken haste and flight.

"Well, there's one thing," said Sir Richard. "If old man Curtis meant to do you a good turn, he certainly carried out his intentions.

"Why, this place alone must contain a young fortune. These things are priceless. You'd have every museum in Europe, to say nothing of America, fairly falling over each other to add a few specimens to their collections. And I take it that this is only a sample of what some of the other houses and the temples must contain. Pompeii is a fool to it.

"Curtis must certainly have been right about one thing. There must be some fabulously rich gold-mines in the district, and probably diamond workings as well. Look at that inlay work over there!"

Blake nodded.

"What we've got to look for just at present," he said drily, "is the arrival of Strives and his infernal Manoori. We can get along with the catalogue later on."

"Wise talk, Untwana," said Lobangu. "But this should be a strong place, and easily held. Thou and Lukuna and M'lolo, on the roof behind the parapet, with rifles, and I and my Etbaia and the bearers to hold the gates, will make it hard for these Manoori dogs to come at us. Water we have in plenty, and food, and plenty of the little brass shells for the chatter guns. Waw! But this is a nut against which Strivini may well break some teeth."

"Considering what Curtis has put us

U. J.—No. 850.

on to," said Blake, "I think it's up to me to wring Strivini's scraggy neck for him, quite apart from any little private accounts I have to settle with him. Come along! We'd better be getting busy. Great Scott! What on earth's that?"

Across the moonlit spaces had suddenly come a thin, high-pitched, wailing noise, shrill and uncanny, hinting at pain and unutterable lonesomeness and despair.

"This place is assuredly 'Tagati'—a place of witches," said Lobangu.

"Go and boil your head!" said Sir Richard testily. "Post your young men, and cut out that fool witch palaver. If I see so much as the hind-leg of one, I'll catch her, and make her marry you for her sins. You and your witches! Get a grip on yourself. You'll be having the bearers stampeding before you know where you are."

"Inkoos," said Lobangu penitently, "I have no fear of witches; and as for my wives, I have a certain small whip of rawhide with which to keep order. I go to see to the young men."

He turned and went swiftly, with a dignified stalk.

Sir Richard Blake and Tinker looked at one another and at Pedro, who was shivering.

"Pah!" said Sir Richard. "Where does this infernal reek of musk come from?"

And he was physically sick.

Blake looked out across the moonlit spaces.

"I should be afraid to say," he answered simply. "To tell you the plain truth, I believe I can guess, but I'm afraid to. I'm beginning to believe that the place is 'Tagati,' as Lobangu says."

"What is it you are afraid to guess?" growled Sir Richard, who was in a bad temper.

"The reason why this place was deserted by a panic-stricken crowd a thousand-and-

odd years ago? Let's go and have a look round. There may be a whole heap that's uncanny enough; but Strives is commonplace, and he's the problem we have to deal with for the moment." He fumbled for his glasses, and went up to the flat roof, followed by the others.

The Manoori, reinforced by a few stray Etavi, were heading across the open ground in semicircular formation, barely the half of a mile away.

The Manoori soon decreased their distance to a couple of hundred paces, which by moonlight is a good practical range.

Blake nestled down to his rifle, and squeezed the trigger. Strives he could not see, but the Manoori captains were noticeable by the leopard-skins they wore; and, alas! though they had a weakness for human chop, they came on bravely enough.

Lobangu and his Etbaia were also blazing away from below through the open gates, which they stood ready to close in case of a rush.

Suddenly, above the acrid fumes of burnt powder, there came that strong musklike smell again, and the thin, high-pitched, wailing sound, which made Pedro, in his turn, lift his head and howl.

Sir Richard laid down his rifle, and fumbled for fresh cartridges.

"What, in Heaven's name, is that beastly row?" he asked.

Blake's face showed white in the moonlight, a pale-gray white, and Sir Richard stared at him.

"Not hit, old man?" he asked.

Blake shook his head, and then suddenly, in a queer voice, he said just one word, "Look!" and stretched out a quivering forefinger.

Sir Richard looked, and gave a quick gasp, as though in pain.

It seemed to him that as though in a

flash they were back amidst the Forest of Ghosts.

The Manoori, too, had seen, and the two-horned semi-circle of their attack dwindled to a disorderly rabble, an incohesive, incoherent crowd of men, trying no longer to attack, but to fly for their lives.

Through the bright but uncertain moonlight great grey things were creeping from the westward.

Not in ones or twos, but literally in dozens. Creatures from the primeval swamps—creatures that rightly belonged to the time when men had no history. Strange, ungainly brutes, armoured and scaly of skin, with long, wizened necks, practically blind in anything stronger than a half light—this fact they established later on—but of a most surprising turn of speed.

They were bigger and heavier than those other of the Forest of Ghosts, less of the giant Armadillo type, and more of the lizard build, being longer and leaner in frame, with pitiful, attenuated membranes attached to either shoulder, which had once upon a time been wings capable of supporting their many tons of weight.

Tinker, staring, heard Blake's voice speaking in a dreamlike fashion.

"Now you can understand," he was saying. "We're in the great swamp belt. Hundreds of miles of swamp and marsh untouched, and, except for a few men like Curtis, unexplored. Why shouldn't these things be? The swamps are their homes. That's the explanation of the whole thing—of the sudden flight of the people who owned these houses and temples."

Sir Richard gripped his arm fiercely. "Look at that!" he shouted. "Curtis and you are quits."

Blake looked, and drew a sharp breath. Out of the mass of the flying Manoori one figure had separated itself.

It was Strives.

He was running for dear life, helmetless, almost shirtless, and obviously at his last gasp. He had even thrown away his rifle. But the ungainly, long-necked brute floundering behind him was travelling at twice his speed.

He stumbled and fell heavily, and the brute behind him, carried on by its own impetus, overshot him by yards, and went blundering past, snapping wildly in its endeavour to turn.

Whether Strives was stunned by the shock of his fall or not it was impossible to tell at that distance, but he lay still for a little, and then struggled to his knees.

They saw him grope for his revolver and fumble with the holster fastening.

Blake, watching, remembered how he, too, had fumbled a few seconds too late when Strives had suddenly came up and thrust the muzzle of a big-barrelled revolver into his face.

They saw the unwieldy animal turn—a marvellously quick turn for its bulk. Strives was still on his knees groping frantically.

Then there came a snap like the snapping of dry kindling-wood or a rotting hurdle, and Tinker cried out.

To Blake's mind the cry was such a one as he had heard before dawn by the river-trail, and the snapping noise also awoke memories of the night when he had found the bearer lying with his head and skull flattened like a pancake.

But now, when he looked, there was a difference. Strives had no head.

A headless trunk still knelt facing them—a nerveless arm and hand still gripped the leather holster—and then it toppled over sideways, with a lurching movement, and collapsed.

Three hundred yards beyond, a grey, indistinct mass was pursuing the fleeing Manoori.

With their leaders down, they had no stomach for further fighting, and the Etavi fled headlong with them in nameless fear.

Blake mopped his forehead with a ragged shirt-sleeve and glanced at Sir Richard.

"We've seen a good many strange things together, old man," he said. "Some pretty uncanny ones, too, but we've—"

Sir Richard nodded.

"If any man had described that to me at a dinner-table I should have called him a liar," he said. "No, I shouldn't," he added. "I should have laughed at him. Now, I should have been sorry if I had laughed."

Blake picked up his rifle.

"Coming?" he said briefly; and the strange thing was that though no further words passed, both Sir Richard and Tinker instinctively understood.

"Call Lobangu!" said Blake. "We'll take twenty of his Etbaia—the best shots he's got."

"Pedro can come on a lead. I'm going to clear this place out."

"If there are any more of those brutes lurking about, I'm going to see what an expanding bullet can do for them!"

He took out his case-knife and carefully and deliberately cut a crossed nick in half a dozen bullets, and he cut deep, so that they should be sure to "mush-room" out well and leave a hole of exit that you could put your fist into.

Then, without a word, they headed for the old arena. If there was a place where these strange things—these unclean things of the dead ages—could lurk, it was there.

It was early dawnlight when they entered the vast building, with its terraced seats and its old grey walls which had never known a roof.

Its arched entrances, big enough to admit four chariots abreast, had been the

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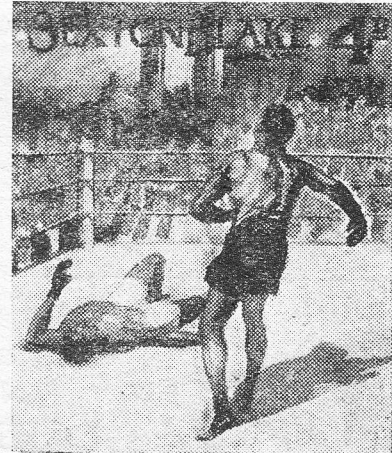
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reason of Blake's coming, but of the living things that should have been long ages dead, they found none.

Signs of their having been there and lived there they found abundance of, and equally abundant signs that they were omnivorous—eaters of flesh as well as herbs—unlike those back in the Forest of Ghosts, for there were crushed bones of animals and also bones which had once been human, and in the piled-up sand-drifts of the arena they found the fresh spoor of sealed, heavy feet.

Six long weeks they spent there in all amongst the remains of that old-world city, and of those three were expended in making dug-out canoes for transport.

This meant the cutting down of trees on the mountain slopes some miles away, and burning out the soft core with heated stones.

Clumsy craft they were at best, but they were watertight, and the return journey was all down-stream. Also they had things of great price to portage.

The gold-workings they found traces of in the Incivami Mountain ranges to the north-west, and Sir Richard took formal possession of them by hoisting a small flag made out of one of Tinker's remaining handkerchiefs.

Also he sent an urgent "Lokali" message humming down the coast, urging a rather bored and very ignorant Government to claim "all that territory lying between latitude so-and-so and longitude such-and-such as possessing valuable minerals and waterways." It was inadvisable to be too explicit in case of complications.

They had said good-bye to old Lobangu

and his Etbaia fifty miles short of the coast with a promise to forward him a batch of the latest gramophone records, a white silk-hat, and some sock-suspenders (which he used for decorative purposes on State occasions), and were sitting beneath the after-deck awning of a homeward-bound liner, when Sir Richard, who had been glancing through some month-old papers, burst out laughing.

"Look at that!" he said, pointing.

Blake read:

"An expedition is about to set out for the Manoori district, North-West Africa, in search of a prehistoric survival reported to have been seen—"

"Oh! Let's send 'em one as a pet!" said Blake. "We've had some, haven't we, Pedro, old thing?"

THE END.

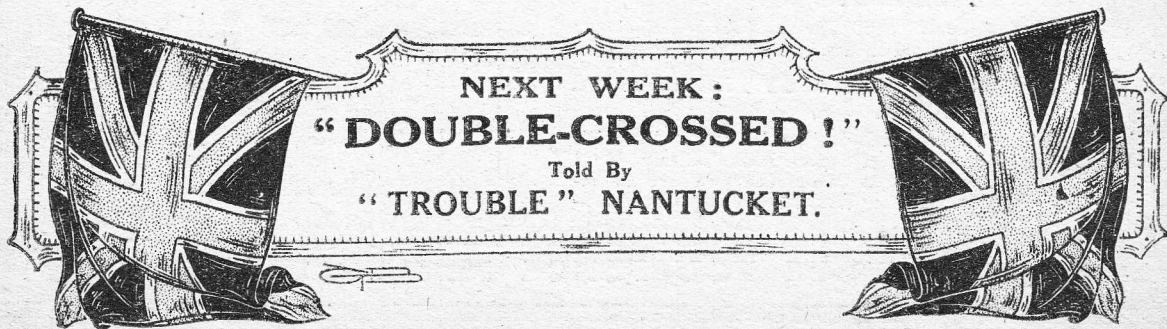
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MATCHES PLAYED SATURDAY, DECEMBER 13th.

£300 WON.

In this competition thirty-nine competitors each sent in a coupon correctly forecasting the results of all the matches. The prize of £300 has therefore been divided among:

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NEXT WEEK:

"DOUBLE-CROSSED!"

Told By

"TROUBLE" NANTUCKET.

THE FOUR SHADOWS



A Dramatic Story-Version of the Film of that Name.

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PEOPLE IN THE STORY.

RAGUL DE SAINT-DALMAS (nicknamed PALAS by the other convicts) is serving a life-sentence for a crime which he did not commit.

CHERI-BIBI, a typical gaol-bird, but a staunch friend.

ARIGONDE, FRIC-FRAC, LE CAID, and LE BECHEUR, all notorious criminals, and the sworn enemies of Palas.

Cherib-Bibi and Palas manage to escape from the State prison, which is situated on a lonely and barren island.

EPISODE III.

Towards the Light.

THEIR breath coming in sobbing gasps, their hearts pumping until it seemed that they must crack, Palas and Cheri-Bibi plunged through the dense forest, sometimes to be brought down by a trailing vine, at others having to tear their way through the bushes and plants which formed an almost insurmountable barrier.

For fully an hour they pushed forward, and then, in a state of exhaustion, Palas called a halt.

"We must rest for a while," he said, the strained expression upon his face proving that he must halt or collapse.

His companion stopped in his stride and listened. But not a sound of pursuit came to his quick ears. An almost uncanny silence pervaded the vast forest.

"It's safe enough to have a breather, I think," said Cheri-Bibi, slipping down to the other convict's side and stretching his big limbs with a contented and luxurious sigh. "The fire did the trick all right."

Palas nodded.

"And what is the next move in this exciting little game of hide-and-seek?"

A grim smile played about the old lag's thin lips as he made reply.

"I'm going to take you to my 'safe deposit,' my friend," he answered slowly. "I've a secret hiding-place in the trunk of a tree, and unless my memory is at fault—and I don't think it is—we are very near that tree at the moment."

"And what do you keep in that hiding-place, old man?" asked Palas curiously.

"Clothes, my friend, and weapons! Had those dogs of wardens caught us we should have had to submit without putting up a fight; but when I get a gun in my hand I shall feel equal to fackling the whole lot of 'em single-handed!"

"And having got clothes and a gun, what do you intend doing then?" pressed Palas, a glint of admiration in his eyes.

"I shall go all out to find Yoyo, an Indian

boy," answered Cheri-Bibi. "If only we can meet him, we are safe. I once saved the youngster's life, and in return he works for me in a secret place in this forest, a place where there is gold in plenty, more gold than you could ever take away, Palas."

"Saints, you're a wonderful fellow, Cheri!" vowed Palas. "If I hadn't got you to dry-nurse me I don't know what I should do. But your cut-and-dried plans make me eager to push ahead and inspect your safe-deposit!"

The other gave a laugh.

"Very well, my friend; let's get along at once."

The two fugitives rose to their feet, and, Cheri-Bibi taking the lead, pushed on through the forest.

For fully twenty minutes they forged ahead in silence, and then, stumbling upon a small glade, a cry of satisfaction escaped the old convict's lips.

"Palas," he cried, a note of excitement in his tones, "this is the place!"

He dived across the glade, and a moment later was rummaging in a hole at the foot of a tree whose great gnarled trunk seemed to reach to the blue sky itself.

An eager light in his eyes, Palas watched the kneeling figure bring his treasures from the hiding-place. Pieces of old sacking were the first things that came to light, to be followed by trousers and coats and a couple of hats. True, the articles were not improved by their long sojourn in this Nature's wardrobe, but they were as purple raiment to the glistening eyes of the two escaped convicts.

A couple of revolvers were the next things to be produced, the weapons being covered by waterproof cases. Ammunition followed, and as Cheri-Bibi twisted the cylinders round and saw that they worked easily a grunt of satisfaction escaped him.

"Nothing like a good revolver," he grinned, "especially when the other fellow's squinting down the bore! And now, friend Palas," he went on, "I think we'll start our toilet. I'm sorry I can't manage a razor, a shampoo, and some brilliantine, but when I cached these things I didn't anticipate escaping from the State prison with a one-time Parisian 'blood'!"

The chaffing remark brought a rather bitter laugh from Palas.

"No, I don't suppose you did, old man," he answered; "but I shall be able to have the luxuries you mention when I get back to Paris."

Without another word, the two men discarded their drab prison dress and slipped into the clothes which Cheri-Bibi had stored for a rainy day. And when the transformation was complete, both men looked at each other with a critical eye.

"Well," laughed the old lag, "I can't say that you are a Beau Brummel, Palas, but you certainly look a bit more like a human being than you did in that other suit."

Palas smiled, and surveyed his companion.

"Well, seeing that we're handing out compliments," he said, with laughter out compliments, "I must say that you remind me of the things I used to see in cornfields in the old days."

"What! Do I remind you of a poppy, then?"

Palas' laugh rang through the silent forest.

"Hardly that, old man," he said. "I was referring to a scarecrow!"

"Thanks!" grinned Cheri-Bibi. And then he swung round on his heel, his revolver poised for action, every sign of mirth gone from his face.

A rustling sound had come from the opposite side of the glade, followed by a thud.

Having been surrounded by enemies for so long, it was not surprising that Cheri-Bibi was on the defensive at once, yet no sooner did he see the cause of the sudden disturbance than he gave a cry of joy, rushed across the glade, and grabbed the dusky hand of the grinning Indian boy, whose dark eyes were dancing with joy.

"Palas," cried Cheri-Bibi, almost overcome at the unexpected meeting, "here's the very red imp that I was telling you about!"

"Yoyo?"

"The same! Come and shake his paw like a little gentleman!"

The necessary paw-shaking having taken place, Cheri-Bibi commenced to fire questions at the young Indian.

"And what the deuce were you doing perched up in that tree like a little dicky-bird?" he demanded. "And what did you want to fall down for?"

The grin died from the youngster's face as he looked up at the old convict.

"Four men came to the village an hour or so ago," he answered, "and they got to hear from the innkeeper that I'd found a gold streak. They chased me; but, knowing the forest better than they do, I managed to get away, and to climb that tree!"

Cheri-Bibi's eyes sought those of his friend at the mention of the four men, and his heart seemed to be turned to lead for the moment.

"Arigonde and his friends," he said bitterly. "What are they doing so near us, and what is their game, I wonder? Do they mean to shadow us, to give us away, to send us back to that soul-destroying Hades which we have just left? By heavens, rather than that should happen, I'll shoot them dead on sight! Come, Palas, we will go to the village without delay, and see what this scum have to say in the matter!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Off to Paris.

"VIN ROUGE, monsieur? Yes, monsieur."

The four men seated round the wine-stained table nodded to the innkeeper, and again their close-cropped heads came together, and then continued their low-voiced conversation.

"We must have money, my brothers," declared Arigonde, his small, evil eyes travelling from one face to another. "The Indian, Yoyo, has escaped us for the moment, but we must devise some other means of getting money—and at once."

The four escaped convicts were silent for a moment, and then, with a warning glance, Arigonde rose to his feet and crossed the room casually to where a little group of miners were playing cards.

He stood beside their table for a few minutes, and then gave vent to a low laugh which made the players look up at him.

"You are amused, monsieur?" queried one of their number.

"You are right, my friend," answered Arigonde. "I am amused that you should gamble at this childish game. The only way in which to have a real gamble amongst gentlemen is with the dice."

And even as he spoke he threw some dice upon the grimy table.

"What do you say to a little flutter, now?" he asked, in suave tones. "Just a mild gamble between gentlemen?"

The others were in nowise averse to this,

and the game of chance started. The other three convicts had joined Arigonde by this time, and the game was soon waxing fast and furious.

And Arigonde could not make a wrong call. Again and again he won, and soon a pile of notes were accumulating at his elbow.

His eyes bright with excitement, the gambling spirit gripping him, he swept the notes towards him, commiserating with his opponents upon their bad luck.

"Never mind, my friends," he cried, as Fortune smiled upon him once again, "the tide will turn in a moment."

"I think not," said a clear voice. "These dice are loaded."

Everyone turned upon the speaker, and when Arigonde's bright eyes rested upon the face of Palas he gave a savage snarl and leapt to his feet, overturning the table as he did so.

"You!" he breathed, looking for all the world like a wild animal. "You, you gaol-bird! I'll kill you for this!"

And then, without another word, he snatched his knife from its sheath and leapt at the tall figure before him.

Cheri-Bibi made a movement as though to intervene, but Palas pushed him aside.

"Hold off!" he breathed quickly, as he prepared to meet the attack. "I've been waiting for this opportunity for a long time."

There was no time for further words, for, gripping the murderous hand as it was about to descend, Palas threw his other arm round Arigonde, and commenced to bear him backwards. Tables were sent crashing to the floor, to be followed by the tinkle of breaking glass, and the stertorous breathing of the combatants could be heard above the scuffling of their feet.

From one side to another they swayed, neither of them being able to get the mastery.

Their primordial passions were roused. They were little better than savages—animals—each meaning to fight to the death, neither asking for quarter nor giving it.

And then, getting one foot behind his man, Palas sent him hurtling to the glass-strewn floor, the thud of the falling bodies shaking the room to its foundations.

Then began the most appalling phase of the grim fight.

Over and over the two figures rolled, the broken glass cutting into their flesh and drawing blood, but neither of them was conscious of pain; they were both consumed with the blood-lust, which would not be denied.

Things looked very black for Palas, when, with a sudden twist of his big body, Arigonde managed to get the uppermost position. And slowly but surely the hand which held his murderous-looking knife began to travel towards Palas' throat.

His rage lending him superhuman strength, the convict, his eyes blazing with a maniacal light, forced his weapon towards the vulnerable spot. Inch by inch the keen blade approached the straining muscles of Palas' throat, when, with one last despairing effort, he checked the terrible downward movement of the knife; and then, little by little, he forced the would-be assassin's wrist backwards till it was eventually resting on the dusty floor.

And the watchers saw that Arigonde was at the end of his tether, that his one great effort had failed.

It was now to be Palas' turn, and his strong fingers closed upon the other man's throat with a pressure that could have only one sinister ending.

Arigonde's face began to assume a purple hue, the staring eyes commenced to protrude in an unnatural manner, when, ringing through the room, there came a frenzied cry from Fric-Frac.

"Police! Police!"

And even as his voice came to the ears of the other men, he put his fingers to the small lamp on the wall and plunged the room into darkness.

Confusion reigned supreme. Making one blind rush for the door, the occupants, including Palas and Arigonde, were soon struggling up the quaint stone steps and making for the woods once again.

And hardly had the last of the men departed than a party of police entered the darkened room and looked round for a sign of the late occupants.

And the signs were many, for the disorder was indescribable. Chairs and tables were scattered about, and when one of the officers lit the little lamp his eyes fell upon the tell-tale stains in the dust.

"They've managed to spill some claret," he said, turning to the innkeeper.

"You're right, monsieur," said the fellow, smiling at the grim jest. "I'm glad my customers pay in advance."

"Now," said Cheri-Bibi, with a sigh of relief, "we have passed the frontier."

"Good!" said Palas.

The two friends, having escaped from the inn in which the fracas had occurred, had met Yoyo, the young Indian, who had taken them to his home and had supplied them with the money which he had been saving for Cheri-Bibi. The Indians had treated them with the greatest of kindness, giving them food and sleeping accommodation, and now, accompanied by Yoyo, they were making for Brazil, being anxious to get away from French Guiana, in which the State prison was situated.

"Palas, old man," said Cheri-Bibi, his lean features aglow with excitement and pleasure, "we are safe! All we've to do now is to make for the inn of Martinez, who is a friend of mine. He will fix you up with a decent suit of clothes and arrange everything—passports and papers—for your passage to Europe. He'll arrange these things in a matter of hours."

A look of supreme gratitude crossed the face of the other man.

"You are a good fellow, Cheri-Bibi," said Palas. "I don't know how to thank you enough for what you are doing for me."

The old convict growled an unintelligible Apache oath, and gave a shrug which said quite plainly, "Don't talk about it."

"Let's push on," said Palas, when, having rested themselves for ten minutes, the young Indian showed signs of going to sleep.

"Come on!" said Cheri-Bibi, at the same time giving Yoyo a playful dig in the lean ribs, which made that worthy jump to his feet with a blood-curdling yell.

And so they pressed forward, Cheri-Bibi, who seemed to know the country well, being the guide.

Half an hour passed, and then he pointed to a stark white tower about a quarter of a mile distant.

"That's the inn," he said; and not another word passed his lips until he stood outside the tall, wooden gates, upon which he rapped a peremptory summons with the butt of his revolver.

The travellers had not long to wait, for the door was thrown open immediately, and in the aperture stood the smiling figure of Martinez, accompanied by his buxom wife.

"Ah, Cheri-Bibi! Cheri-Bibi!" they cried in unison, and the next moment the escaped convict was being embraced by them.

Introductions having been gone through, the party made its way into the inn, where refreshments were soon forthcoming.

"And now, my friend, tell me all the news," said Martinez, when his guests had eaten.

And Cheri-Bibi plunged into his story, dwelling upon the escape from the State prison, of their dash away from the inn, of their sworn enemies—the Four Shadows.

"And you can arrange a boat for my friend, eh?" finished Cheri-Bibi. "He must get to Paris at all costs."

"Worry not," said Martinez, in a reassuring voice. "I will see to that. He shall sail on a liner which leaves for Europe on the morrow. But what of this fellow Arigonde and his companions? Do you think they will follow you to this place?"

Cheri-Bibi looked dubious.

"I think it is more than likely," he answered, with a glance at Palas. "However, Yoyo and I will take it in turns to mount watch on the tower, so that they cannot surprise us. And now I think it will be a good idea to turn in and get a few hours' sleep."

"And I'll take the first watch," Yoyo put in.

Cheri-Bibi raised no dissenting voice, but let the young Indian make his way to the tower.

Ten minutes later found the household of Martinez retired to their beds, and a dead silence settled upon the old inn.

The young Indian, meanwhile, was standing like a statue on the top of the tower,

his eyes fixed upon the moonlit stretch of road which led from the frontier. He had been there for perhaps a couple of hours, when four lengthening shadows showed plainly beneath him. He waited just long enough to assure himself that Arigonde and his gang had succeeded in tracking them, when, his pattering feet making scarcely a sound upon the stone steps, he burst into Cheri-Bibi's room.

The old convict was sitting up in a moment, his revolver poised, ready for action.

"You, Yoyo!" cried Cheri-Bibi. "What's the trouble?"

"The four shadows!" replied the young Indian. And Cheri-Bibi and Palas, who had wakened by this time, needed no further words to warn them of their peril.

In a moment they were out of bed and had roused Martinez, who produced some very useful-looking rifles.

"Let 'em come on!" growled the innkeeper, as the three men stood waiting the attack upon the door. And their wait was not a long one, for very soon a sturdy shoulder crashed against the panels, and no sooner had it done so than three shots rang out, splintering the glass and wood.

A wild yell came from the other side of the door, followed by the sound of quickly-retreating footsteps.

And Yoyo, who had once more taken up his position on the tower, saw the four figures tearing down the courtyard and mounting the wall, obviously in a state of surprise and dead funk. They had plainly hoped to surprise Palas and his friends, and the fact that they had been expected and repulsed perturbed them more than a little.

Casting furtive looks over their shoulders, they dropped over the wall, and were soon lost to sight.

Hearing the retreating footsteps and the yell of pain, Cheri-Bibi gave a hoarse laugh.

"We caught 'em napping that time, Palas," he said. "And now, in case there is any more trouble, there is something I want to say to you. Listen carefully. In Paris I have a friend who will do anything for me. His name is La Ficelle, and he keeps a grocer's shop in the Rue St. Rock, under the name of Hilaire. Go to him and say the one word 'Fate,' and all will be well. Understand?"

Palas nodded.

"I understand," he answered. "But what of you?"

"In order that you may be safe, I must get rid of Arigonde and his gang," said Cheri-Bibi simply.

The great liner was ploughing its way through the calm sea and steering for Europe. Most of the passengers, civil servants, and the like, were happy in the thought of getting back to "civilisation," as they termed it, but none were so happy as the ex-convict Palas, whose mind dwelt upon the possibility of his being able to join up in the French Army and "doing his bit" in the matter of driving the hated Bosche back to the Rhine.

Hours on end he sat upon the deck, gazing either at the lapping waves or at the calm, blue sky above.

A few days out from Brazil he was leaning over the rail, his mind a phantasmagoria of day-dreams, when a soft voice fell upon his ears.

"You have heard the great news, monsieur?" it asked.

Palas looked round slowly, and found himself looking into the face of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

"No, mademoiselle," he answered, in a low voice; "I have not."

"A wireless has been received announcing that the Germans have been repulsed."

A quiet smile crossed the man's lips. "I am glad," he said simply, and then fell into a moody silence once again. And a minute or so later the soft voice broke in upon his reverie.

"You are sad, monsieur?"

"Sad!"

Palas could have cried aloud at the irony of the remark which this beautiful girl had uttered in her innocence. How was she to know that he was an escaped convict, that he might be refused the opportunity of "doing his bit" for his beloved France?

End of Third Episode.

(Next Week: "The Fight by Day and by Night.")

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STOCKPORT COUNTY	v. LEICESTER CITY
TOTTENHAM HOTSPUR	v. BLACKPOOL
HULL CITY	v. FULHAM
BRENTFORD	v. SOUTHEND UNITED
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