

In the Depths of the Dark Continent

or, The Vengeance of Van Vincent

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Chapter I

Murder!

The little village of Edgewater was covered by the inky pall of night.

The big clock on the steeple of the town hall had just tolled the hour of twelve.

Ever since night set in the clouds had been heavy and threatening, and as the midnight hour arrived the storm burst forth in all its fury.

The wind arose to a perfect hurricane, and the rain came down in torrents.

Van Vincent, a bright, handsome youth of eighteen years, who is to figure as the hero of this story, was awakened from his slumber by the creaking of the beams and timbers in the old-fashioned house he called his home.

Van was an orphan, as far as he knew, and lived with an uncle, who was reported as being very wealthy, though the house he lived in and his everyday appearance would not lead anyone to think so.

The last Van had ever heard of his father he had gone to Africa with an exploring party.

That was fifteen years before, and up to this time none of the party had ever returned.

Ralph Vincent, the uncle of Van, had given the boy a good education, and obtained for him the situation of bookkeeper in the largest store in Edgewater.

Consequently Van loved and respected his uncle, who had often declared that the boy should inherit what little he possessed in earthly goods.

As Van was awakened by the violence of the storm on the night upon which our story opens, he felt rather uneasy.

He had been aroused from a bad dream, and it took him several seconds to realize that he was home and in bed.

„My!“ he exclaimed, leaping out of bed; „this is a fearful storm. I must close the window.“

He started toward a window, the sash of which was lowered slightly, allowing the rain to dash into the room.

Just as he did so he heard a blood-curdling cry that nearly froze his soul with horror.

„Help! murder! mur—“

For the space of ten seconds Van stood as if transfixed.

The terrible cry came from his uncle’s room, which was on the first floor, and almost directly beneath him.

The boy knew, too, that it was his uncle’s voice that uttered the cries, and seizing a revolver from the drawer of the bureau in his room, he darted downstairs.

Reaching the door of the room whence the cries came, he found it locked.

Van Vincent was not the sort to be balked very easily when he started to do a thing. Taking a few steps backward, he let his whole weight go against the door and forced it from its hinges.

The next instant he was in the room.

Almost the first object he saw was a man clambering from an open window.

He raised his revolver, but too late! the intruder dropped to the ground below and was lost in the storm and darkness.

Van made a move to spring through the window after him, but a faint voice coming from the bed checked him.

„Van, c-c-come h-e-re!“

The next moment the boy was at the side of the bed, where his uncle lay in a pool of blood, breathing heavily.

„Van, I have been murdered!“ exclaimed Ralph Vincent, faintly.

The look on his uncle’s face told Van that what he said was true.

Just at that moment an old man called Ben, who was the only male servant about the house, came rushing in the room in a terrified manner.

„Oh, Lord!“ he exclaimed, wildly. „Whatever has happened, Mr. Vincent?“

„Silence, Ben!“ spoke up the dying man. „Van, hand me a glass of brandy and I will try and describe my murderer so that you may hunt him down and bring him to justice.“

Half bewildered, Van did as he was directed, while the servant strove to quench the blood that was flowing from a ghastly wound in his employer’s side.

Instead of making him rally, the glass of brandy set the dying man to coughing, and when the spell ceased he was so weak that he could not speak above a whisper.

He managed to articulate the words:

„Doc Clancy—an old enemy to our family—sandy mustache—thumb missing from right hand!“

These were the last words Ralph Vincent ever spoke, for the next moment he fell back and his soul fled to its Maker.

What lay upon the bed now was a heap of senseless clay.

„Heaven save us! but this is awful!“ groaned Ben, the servant. „Who committed this terrible crime, Master Van?“

„A man named Doc Clancy; that is what uncle stated with his dying breath. Do you know or have you ever heard of such a person, Ben?“

Van turned his gaze full upon the servant as he spoke, but one glance in old Ben's eyes told him plainly that he knew nothing whatever about the murderer.

„You had better go and rouse some of the neighbors, Ben,“ spoke up Van, after a pause. „I will wait here till you come back.“

„Yes, sir,“ and old Ben was off like a shot.

In less than half an hour a dozen or more people were gathered at the scene of the tragedy.

But no one touched the corpse until the coroner arrived, shortly after daylight.

An examination showed that Ralph Vincent had been stabbed through the right lung by some unknown person, and this was the verdict rendered by the coroner's jury.

All that day a crowd of the villagers thronged the house, and Van went about among them like one in a dream, hardly able to realize what had happened a few short hours before.

But his uncle's last words rang constantly in the boy's ears, and he made up his mind that as soon as the funeral was over he would start out to hunt down the villain called Doc Clancy, who had a thumb missing from his right hand.

The day of the funeral came, and the remains of Ralph Vincent were interred.

Then came the reading of the will, and, to Van's astonishment, a man whom he had never seen before was present.

Before the will was read the lawyer introduced the stranger to Van as an own cousin and a nephew of the murdered man, who had just returned from a foreign port the day following the crime.

Van was not a great deal surprised at this, as he knew he had cousins whom he had never seen.

But what was his astonishment when the will had been read and he found that he had been utterly ignored by his uncle, and that John Moreland, the stranger, came in for the entire property?

But there it was in black and white, with his uncle's signature and those of the witnesses.

The eyes of all those assembled in the room were turned upon Van when this startling fact came to light.

But the boy was not a bit more pale than he had been since the murder, and regarding the looks of the inmates of the room as a question put to him, he said in a clear, calm voice:

„I care not for the fact that my uncle left me out of his will. He has always been kind to me since I can remember, and I appreciated it and loved him. My mission now is to hunt down his murderer and bring him to justice, and I swear to do it. Cousin John Moreland, I congratulate you on being the heir to uncle's estate. Accept my hand on it.“

As Van clasped the hand of John Moreland a sudden thrill shot through his frame, and he glanced downward.

The hand he held in his own was minus the thumb.

In the twinkling of an eye Van's whole manner changed.

With the force of an enraged lion he seized the man by the throat and hurled him back against the wall.

Then in a voice that rang out like a clarion note, he exclaimed:

„I accuse this man of being the murderer of my uncle!“

Chapter II

A Plucky Chase.

As Van Vincent's startling words rang out a low murmur of surprise came from the assemblage.

Not one offered to make a move until the lawyer stepped quickly forward, and seizing the boy by the shoulder, pulled him away from John Moreland, whose face had turned the color of ashes.

Van pushed the lawyer away from him rather roughly.

„I registered a vow to hunt the murderer down,“ said he in the same clear voice, „but did not expect to find him so quick. There he stands before us all. What have you to say against the charge, Doc Clancy?“

The boy had no sooner uttered the name of Doc Clancy than, quick as a flash, John Moreland rushed from the room.

His action was so sudden no one could intercept him.

„That proves his guilt,“ cried Van, now in a high pitch of excitement. „I am going after him, and will not return until I have caught him and brought him to justice!“

Seizing his hat, Van left the room and dashed outside after the accused murderer.

He beheld him running across a field in the direction of the railway station.

Van glanced at his watch.

A train for New York was due in three minutes, and he knew full well that a good runner could just about reach the depot in that time.

And the villain had a good three hundred yards' start of him!

Van Vincent was an excellent runner, but, strive as he might, he could not gain upon the fleeing stranger.

Over fences and ditches went the pursued and pursuer, until the broad lane leading to the station was reached.

Van heard the shrill whistle of a locomotive, and his heart sank within him.

He knew that the train was coming.

It reached the depot just as John Moreland came to the track.

The villain knew that he would not have time enough to reach the platform to board the train, so he clambered upon the last car from the ground.

The train stopped about half a minute, which gave Van time to get within a hundred feet of it before it started.

But he was too late.

The bell rang, and away went the train, with John Moreland standing on the platform of the rear car, shaking his fist at Van in a derisive manner.

Van stood still in his tracks until the train had disappeared from sight, and then, without answering the station master's query as to what the matter was, started slowly back to the house where he had lived for so many years.

When he reached it he found no one there but Ben, the old servant, and to him he stated that he was going away.

Van had about four hundred dollars that he had saved, and he at once got this and placed it in a stanch, leather pocketbook, which he put in the inside pocket of his vest.

He next packed a few things in a satchel, and then set out slowly for the depot.

Another train would be along in about thirty-five minutes, which would bring him to New York one hour behind the man he was chasing.

As Van walked along thinking over the general appearance of Doc Clancy—for he was sure that John Moreland was no other than he—it occurred to him that the man had some of the characteristics of a seaman about him.

This gave the plucky boy an idea.

If Doc Clancy really was a follower of the sea, would he not most likely ship aboard some vessel to make his escape? He had been publicly branded as a murderer, and his action in fleeing from his accuser was pretty good proof that he was guilty of the charge.

This was the way Van reasoned, and he concluded to make his way to the shipping district as soon as he reached New York.

He reached the depot and purchased his ticket, and the train came along a few minutes later and whirled him toward his destination.

Van was not playing the part of an amateur detective because he had any particular hankering after that profession, but because he had made a solemn vow to hunt down the murderer of his uncle.

He would try and locate his man, and then call the New York police to his aid.

The distance by rail to New York was not great, and an hour later our hero was walking down West Street in the busy metropolis.

He had often been to the city, and consequently knew something about it.

The boy did not stop until he reached the South Ferry, and then, acting on an uncontrollable impulse, he boarded a South Street car and took up his position on the platform with the driver.

He had not rode over ten blocks when he gave such a start that the car driver made an involuntary movement to catch him, thinking he was going to fall from the platform.

But Van did not notice him. The boy's eyes were riveted upon the back of a man who was just entering the door of a saloon.

As he passed through the doorway the object of his gaze turned his head around for a single instant.

„That's the murderer!“ exclaimed Van, and with a single bound he sprang from the car platform into the street, leaving the driver staring at his retreating form in blank amazement.

Van was satisfied that the man he saw was Doc Clancy, alias John Moreland. He had the features and general appearance of the villain stamped too deeply upon his mind to be deceived.

With a bound he dashed upon the sidewalk, nearly upsetting a passer-by, and then hurried into the saloon.

It was just after six in the evening, and the place was crowded with a set of laboring men who had stopped in to quench their thirst on their way home from work.

As the bar was but a small place, Van had great difficulty in squeezing through the motley gathering.

The boy did not notice the rough looks that were bestowed upon him as he elbowed his way through the crowd toward the rear of the saloon.

He was bent upon finding his man, and he forgot all else.

Van was young and impulsive, and he made a great mistake when he entered that saloon upon the errand he was bent, as he afterward found out.

Just as he came abreast of the lunch counter the place contained he saw Moreland enter a doorway in the rear and start up a flight of stairs.

Like a flash Van was after him, and a moment later he flung the door open and darted breathlessly up the stairs.

When he reached the top he found himself in a gloomy hallway of narrow dimensions.

It was too dark for him to discern the person he sought, but he could hear the sound of footsteps on the uncarpeted floor.

It was just at that moment that it occurred to Van for the first time that he had made a mistake.

„I ought to have brought a policeman with me,“ he thought. „But it is too late now. I will capture that man or die!“

Rash boy! He had not taken ten steps along the hallway when a figure suddenly confronted him; there was a dull thud, and Van Vincent sank to the floor with a thousand stars flashing before his eyes.

Chapter III

Carried to Sea.

When Van Vincent returned to consciousness he felt so stiff and sore that he was scarcely able to hold up his head.

His throat and tongue were dry and parched, and he was so badly dazed that it took him several minutes to recollect what had happened.

As it gradually came to him he opened his eyes, expecting to find himself in the hallway where he had lost his senses.

But imagine the boy's surprise when he beheld a dirty lantern swinging back and forth from the ceiling of a seven-by-nine room.

Then it occurred to Van that the building he was in appeared to be moving in a violent manner.

He rose to a sitting posture and found himself in a narrow bunk, instead of being upon the floor, as he expected.

„I must have been moved,“ he muttered. „Doc Clancy must certainly have had a hand in this. I wonder where I am, anyhow? This looks like a bunk on a ship. Great heavens! can it be possible that I have been drugged and shipped to sea?“

The thought no sooner struck our hero than he glanced at his clothes.

An exclamation of dismay escaped his lips.

His neat-fitting business suit had been removed and a dirty outfit, such as seamen wear, substituted in place of it.

Van no longer had any doubt as to his being aboard a ship.

He now saw plainly what caused the rocking motion.

But, instead of giving way to a fit of despair, as most boys of his age would have done in like circumstances, he calmly clambered from the bunk and proceeded to examine the costume he wore.

Unbuttoning a greasy, blue pea jacket, he found, to his great joy, that he still wore his own vest.

But on placing his hand in the inner pocket of the garment he found his pocket-book to be missing.

„I have been robbed and kidnaped!“ he muttered in a tone of great vehemence; „and Doc Clancy is at the bottom of it—of that I am sure. But never mind! Though this vessel takes me to the very ends of the earth, I will yet get on the track of the villain who murdered my uncle, and then woe to him!“

Van uttered the last part of his thoughts in a rather loud voice, and he had scarcely done so when a gruff tone the other side of the partition sang out:

„What’s ther matter there, ye cussed landlubber? Have ye come to yer senses yet?“

„Hello!“ returned Van. „Who are you? Come in here; I would like to talk to you.“

„All right, youngster; I’ll obleege ye!“

The next moment a portion of the partition was removed and a rough-looking man came through.

Van assumed an air of boldness.

„Sit down,“ said he, „and tell me where I am.“

„Well, you are a cool un!“ observed the man. „But since ye have asked me, I’ll tell you. Young man, you are on board ther MARY NEWMAN, which are a tradin’ schooner, bound for ther African coast. We are now jist outside of Sandy Hook, an’ blowin’ along afore a stiff breeze.“

„Who brought me here?“ questioned our hero, not affecting the least bit of surprise.

„I don’t know, my boy. I suppose ther captain was short of hands, and collared ye while ye were drunk. Sich things are often done, yer know.“

„Do you believe that is the way I came to be here?“

„Can’t say whether I do or not, youngster. I am ther mate of ther vessel, an’ I never asks ther captain anything about his private business. All that I knows is that you an’ a feller a little older than you are were brought aboard together in a drunken state, an’ I took it for granted that you were chums, an’ had either shipped of yer own accord, or else been collared while ye were sleepin’ off ther loads ye had on.“

„What sort of a looking chap was it who came aboard with me?“ asked Van.

„He is a rather homely feller, with a big, red beard, but is a good sailor, though.“

„Well,“ resumed our hero, after a pause, „I suppose I will have to make the best of it, but I tell you plainly that I have been robbed and kidnaped.“

„If that is so, young man, take my advice, an’ say nothin’ about it while ye are on board ther MARY NEWMAN,“ returned the man, with a look that told plainly that he meant well toward the boy.

„I’ll take your advice, sir,“ returned Van, promptly. „I suppose I will be used fairly well as long as I do the best I can, and attend to my duties aboard the ship?“

„Ye will if I have got anything ter say about it. Boy, put her there. I’ve taken a likin’ ter ye. My name are Lank Edwards, an’ as long as ye stick ter me I’ll be your friend, even if everybody else on board goes back on ye!“

„Thank you for those words, Mr. Edwards,“ said Van, shaking the mate by the hand.

„Now, my boy, ye had better lay down for an hour or so, an’ by that time it’ll be daylight. I’ll go an’ report to ther captain that ye are gittin’ along all right, an’ ain’t kickin’ ‘cause ye are goin’ ter sea in his vessel.“

With these words the mate crawled through the aperture in the partition, and carefully closed it after him.

When he had gone Van sat down on the edge of his bunk to think over his situation.

He was very much disappointed over what had befallen him, but something seemed to whisper in his ear that things would come out all right in the end, so he resolved to say nothing and make the best of it.

In about an hour and a half he noticed a faint gray light stealing through the grating overhead, and he knew that morning had arrived.

A few minutes later he heard some one in the adjoining room, and, almost immediately after, the sliding door in the partition opened.

Van saw the kindly face of the mate looking in at him, and he hailed it with a sigh of relief.

„It’s all right, young feller; ther captain has put ye under my charge. Come on out of yer prison, an’ take breakfast with me. After that you will have ter take up yer quarters in ther forecandle.“

Glad enough to leave the dingy place, Van crawled through the hole, and found himself in a portion of the ship’s cabin.

The mate showed him where the water was, and the boy took a good wash.

After this he felt much better.

A few minutes later the cook entered with a steaming breakfast, the sight of which made Van’s mouth water.

He had not realized that he was hungry until now, and he ate as only a hungry mortal can.

Van’s first meal aboard the MARY NEWMAN was his best, as he found out afterward.

The table the captain and mates ate from was far different from that of the forecandle.

When breakfast was over the mate conducted our hero to the forecandle, and pointed out his bunk to him.

From that moment the rough part of Van Vincent’s life began.

The crew, for the most part, were a grimy, villainous-looking set.

But Van was built of the sort of material that never flinches, and he took things as they came in a philosophical way.

Almost the first person he saw when he went on watch for the first time was a sailor with a heavy red beard that nearly concealed his face.

Van at once judged this to be the person who came aboard the vessel in such a mysterious manner, and when he got the opportunity, he broached the subject to him.

The sailor acknowledged such to be the case, but evaded all the questions the boy put to him.

Van sized him up pretty well, and made up his mind that the fellow was a villain of the first water.

About an hour after his brief conversation with the red-whiskered sailor, Van saw him coiling a length of rope.

To catch on to the way it was done so neatly, he watched him keenly.

Suddenly Van gave a start.

He noticed that the man was minus a thumb, and that, too, from his right hand.

He thought of Doc Clancy, his uncle's murderer, but said nothing.

What if this man was the scoundrel in disguise?

Chapter IV

On the Congo River.

Van kept a good watch upon the red-whiskered sailor during the voyage, and every day he became more and more satisfied that he was no other than Doc Clancy, alias John Moreland.

At length the stormy Atlantic was crossed, and one day, when the sun was so hot that it fairly melted the pitch on her decks, the MARY NEWMAN came to anchor at the mouth of the Congo River, on the African coast.

Lank Edwards, the mate, had been as good as his word, and had indeed been a friend to our hero during the voyage.

Though Van did not like the life of a sailor any too well, he got along fairly enough, thinking all the while that he would yet corner the murderer of his uncle, and be the means of having him conveyed to the United States to stand trial.

As it was past noon when the ship came to anchor, the captain concluded to wait till morning before he proceeded ten miles up the river to a trading station.

A canvas awning was stretched over the deck, and the crew of the Mary Newman lay under this in a listless manner, waiting for the sun to go down so they could get the cool breeze which invariably comes after nightfall in that latitude.

Van noticed that the red-whiskered sailor appeared to be very uneasy, and he concluded to watch him closely.

The afternoon passed and darkness came, and with it the cooling breeze they so much desired.

Van was in the second watch, and, consequently, he turned into his bunk soon after mess.

But it was so warm below decks that he could not sleep, and after tossing about for perhaps an hour, he went on deck and crawled into a fold of the main jib, which made a first-class hammock.

It was cool and refreshing, and the boy soon fell asleep.

He was awakened perhaps two hours later by a wild commotion on deck.

In the twinkling of an eye he dropped from the sail and gazed about him.

A heavy smoke completely blinded him for a moment, and then he knew what was the matter.

The ship was on fire!

Even as this fact occurred to him, a bright column of flame leaped from the forward hatch, and the tarred rigging catching fire, it seemed as if a hundred writhing, fiery serpents were shooting skyward.

Under the supervision of the captain and mates the sailors were trying manfully to subdue the flames, and Van rushed forward and joined them.

But the fire kept on increasing, and at the end of fifteen minutes the captain saw it was useless to attempt to save the ship.

Reluctantly he gave the order to lower the boats, and convey what could be saved of the cargo ashore.

Van ran into the forecabin to get the few things he possessed before the ship was abandoned.

As he reached his bunk a cry of horror escaped his lips.

By the light of the blazing rigging he saw the body of a man lying in a pool of blood in the bunk he had so lately occupied.

„Great heavens!“ exclaimed the boy, „this is the work of the red-whiskered sailor, and I firmly believe he mistook this man for me. Poor fellow! he no doubt crawled in my bunk after I left it, thinking it was cooler there. I am now sure the man with the thumbless hand is Doc Clancy.“

But there was no time for any further speculation, and Van knew this well.

Seizing his little bundle, he dashed up the companion way and ran to assist the crew in loading the boats.

One of these was missing, as well as two of the crew, and the captain was at a loss to understand it.

Van ran his eye over the group of sailors, and saw that the red-whiskered fellow was one of the missing ones.

He quickly informed the mate of what he knew.

„It was he who set ther ship afire, then!“ exclaimed Lank Edwards. „We'll chase him up an' catch him yet, see if we don't.“

The flames were now gaining rapid headway, and it behooved those on board the doomed vessel to be as expeditious as possible.

Two of the boats were loaded and sent to the shore, which was less than half a mile distant.

When these returned, the captain considered it no longer safe to stay aboard.

All hands tumbled into the boats and pushed off.

By the time they reached the shore the vessel was entirely enveloped in a pillar of flame, and though the sight was a truly grand one, the sailors did not relish it to any great degree.

„Well, boys,“ said the captain, sadly, „I have got enough money to pay you what wages are coming to you. I might as well do it right here, as we will never go aboard the good MARY NEWMAN again.“

He proceeded to count out the money, and each man was called up in his turn.

Van received seventeen dollars and fifty cents for the time he put in aboard the ship.

„Now, then,“ observed the captain, when all had been paid off, „I propose that we get in the boats and row up the river to a little town called Sonhow.“

„To-night?“ asked the mate.

„Yes; right away.“

„How about hunting after the fellow who fired the ship?“

„There is no proof that anyone did do it. I believe the two who are missing were burned up before they could get out of the forecastle.“

„Well, I don't,“ returned the mate.

„All right, Mr. Edwards,“ spoke up the captain, a little testily, „every one is welcome to his own opinion. If you want to start out on a wild-goose chase, why, go on; I am going to Sonhow.“

All save three sided with the captain, and they at once started for the boats.

Those who remained were our hero, the mate, and a young sailor named Gregory.

Van was determined to try and find the trail of Doc Clancy, and the mate was with him because he liked the boy for his pluck and earnestness in hunting down the murderer of his uncle.

Gregory wanted to find the red-whiskered man, because the sailor who had been murdered was his half-brother.

„Well, what are you going to do about it?“ called out the captain from the water's edge.

„We have decided to stay where we are till daylight,“ replied the mate.

„All right, then. Come down here and we will divide up the things, and as there are three boats, you may have one of them.“

The three walked to the spot.

The main part of the burned vessel's cargo consisted of trinkets, calicoes, cheap jewelry, etc., to trade with the natives for various African products.

All that had been saved from the ship was four cases of these, a number of firearms, and a good supply of sea-biscuit and salt.

The three that decided to wait were given one of the cases, six rifles, a dozen revolvers, with ample ammunition for both, and a barrel of sea-biscuit and about one-fourth of a sack of salt.

„You might need the guns and pistols if you stay around this wild country very long,“ said the captain, as the two boats pushed off and headed up the river.

„Good-by!“ cried Van. „We are going to find the man who burned the ship. Success to you all!“

The sailors gave a cheer, and in a few minutes the boats were lost in the darkness.

Our hero and his two companions then sat down in their boat and watched the still burning hull of the Mary Newman.

It must have been near midnight ere the hull sank from sight, and then the three lay down in the bottom of the boat and slept till sunrise.

Van, who was an excellent shot with the rifle, managed to shoot a couple of birds resembling partridges, and these made them a fair breakfast.

Then they pushed off their boat and started up the river.

They had not proceeded over a mile when they came upon the two boats which had left them the night before.

They seemed to be drifting down the river with not a soul in either of them, and curious to know what was the matter, they rowed toward them with all their might.

When they reached them, ejaculations of horror went up from all three.

In the boats were the dead bodies of the captain and those who had set out with him, literally hacked to pieces.

„Great God!“ groaned Van. „Is this to be our fate, I wonder?“

Neither the mate or Gregory chose to answer his question, but pushed away from the horrible sight with all possible speed.

Just then a rifle shot rang out on the still morning air.

The mate threw up his arms and fell to the bottom of the boat.

Van seized his rifle and turned his gaze to the shore.

Standing at the edge of a clump of tall reeds was Doc Clancy!

Chapter V

The Exploring Party.

As soon as Van Vincent beheld Doc Clancy on the shore of the river he raised his rifle to shoot the villain in his tracks.

But before he could cover him a chorus of yells rang out, and half a dozen white men and a score of blacks burst from the cover of the reeds and fired a volley at those in the boat.

This so disconcerted our hero that he toppled over backward and landed in a heap in the bottom of the boat.

Doc Clancy took it for granted that the boy had been hit by a bullet, and a shout of triumph left his lips.

But none of the shots fired from the shore had harmed our three friends. The mate, who had fallen first, had only been grazed on the side of his head by the bullet from Clancy's rifle.

As Van attempted to rise to his feet again, the mate cautioned him to lie still, and Gregory, who had already sought seclusion behind the thwarts, seconded the motion.

„Lay low,“ said the sailor, in a whisper. „We'll make 'em believe we are dead.“

„That's our only show,“ added the mate. „If they leave us alone for a few minutes we'll drift out of range; ther tide is runnin' out like a race horse!“

But Doc Clancy and his villainous allies were not yet satisfied. A minute or so later our friends heard the creaking of oars in the rowlocks, and peering over the thwart, he beheld the murderer of his uncle, and the white men he had seen on the shore, rowing toward them with all their might.

He quickly told his two companions what he saw.

„We've got ter fight it out,“ observed the mate, grimly. „Git that barrel of hard tack an' ther bag of salt together; we'll git behind 'em an' commence it right away afore they git any closer.“

Van and Gregory followed the mate's advice, and a minute later they opened fire upon those in the approaching boat.

Of course their shots were returned, but the bullets could not penetrate the barrel and sack of salt, and the three remained unharmed.

Van had the satisfaction of seeing two of the men in the pursuing boat fall under the fire made by himself and companions.

But Doc Clancy, though continually exposed, had not been hit.

Though the villain seemed to bear a charmed life, he concluded to proceed a little more cautiously.

He gave orders to the men to make a circle and row around so as to get on the other side of the boat.

When Van saw this he began to grow very uneasy.

Our three friends were truly in a bad box. If they attempted to row the boat so as to get away from Clancy and his crowd, they would surely be shot down; and if they remained quietly where they were it would only be a question of time before they would be wiped out.

Before they had time to decide upon what action to take they were astonished to hear a number of rifle shots up the river.

They lifted their heads quickly and glanced at those who were pursuing them.

Doc Clancy and his gang were making for the shore with all their might.

And no wonder! for down the river a boat was being rapidly rowed by half a dozen stalwart blacks.

In the bow was a small swivel cannon, the muzzle of which pointed at the miscreants in the boat in a threatening manner.

Standing upright in the boat were three white men, who were armed to the teeth.

„Hurrah!“ yelled Van, waving his hat. „You are just in time, friends.“

An answering cheer came from the boat, and our friends breathed a sigh of relief.

As soon as Doc Clancy reached the shore he sprang into the tall reeds and disappeared, followed by his four surviving allies.

Five minutes more and the approaching boat reached our friends.

Van explained who he and his companions were in a very few words.

The three men who had come to their rescue at such an opportune moment shook hands with them in a cordial manner, and made the drifting boat fast to their own.

„Now,“ said the younger of the strangers, who was not over twenty-three years of age, „since you have told us who you are, I'll tell you who and what we are. We are three Englishmen, who have come to this continent to make explorations and endeavor to find some wonderful spot where the foot of civilized man has never trod. My name is Jack Howard; this gentleman on my right is Prof. Drearland, who intends to write a book on what we discover; and the other gentleman is Dr. Pestle, who came with us to keep us in good health by aid of the large stock of medicines and hard-earned experience he has with him.“

„I am sure we are very glad to meet you all,“ returned Van, with a tone of deep sincerity. „But who are those men who attacked us? One of them we know, but the others are strangers.“

„They are six men whom we hired to accompany us on our trip. Yesterday morning they struck for more wages, and because their demand was refused they attempted to kill us and take our outfit from us. We got the best of it, however, and they took to the forest and left us. This morning we heard rifle shots down the river, and thought we would come down and see what was in the wind.“

„If there was six of 'em when they left you, there are only four now,“ remarked Lank Edwards, in a grim manner. „Two of ther villains have turned up their toes.“

„Yes,“ put in Van; „but they have got Doc Clancy with them, and he is a match for any two ordinary men, as far as wickedness goes.“

„Suppose you go up to our camp with us?“ said Jack Howard, after a pause.

„Certainly,“ returned our hero. „We have got no other place to go just at present.“

Howard gave the word, and the blacks began rowing the boat up the stream with long, steady strokes.

Though Van was some years his junior, Jack Howard took a strong notion to him, and as he was one of those blunt kind of fellows, he was not long in telling him so.

„It is mutual, I assure you,“ returned our hero; and the two from that moment became inseparable friends.

About a mile up the river the boats came to a stop on the left bank.

It was a very picturesque spot. The gorgeous African flowers of many hues, trailing vines, broad-leafed and giant cacti could be seen on every hand.

On a little knoll in the midst of these surroundings was the camp of the English explorers.

Two tents were pitched in the background, which served to keep off the dew while the men slept.

The negroes, who had been hired in place of the villainous whites, slept on the ground, close to burning fires, without any covering over them, unless it rained, and in that case Jack Howard told them they could haul the boat up and crawl under it.

After Van Vincent had announced his intention of hunting down Doc Clancy until he had been caught, Jack Howard offered to go in with him in the enterprise if he and his two companions would join the exploring party.

Van broached the subject to the mate and Gregory, and they readily agreed to it.

„Very well,“ said our hero to Howard, „your offer is accepted. We join your party and proceed with you in your explorations, so long as we do not turn from the trail of Doc Clancy.“

„We will follow him, even if he goes to the very heart of this wild continent!“ exclaimed Jack Howard, warmly.

The party remained in camp until slightly past noon, and they would not have left it then had it not been that an unforeseen circumstance took place.

While they were eating dinner one of the blacks came rushing up with the intelligence that the bad white men had just gone up the river in their boat.

The river was nearly straight at this point, and, rushing down to the water's edge, Van and Jack Howard saw Doc Clancy and his allies proceeding rapidly up the stream.

Already they were over half a mile away, and our friends did not deem it worth while to shoot at them.

But the camp was quickly broken up and all its belongings packed in the boat owned by the Englishmen, which was strong and commodious, and large enough for all hands.

Being aware of this fact, our hero concluded to leave their boat where it was.

When everything was in readiness all hands got into the boat, and the blacks started to row up the river in the wake of Doc Clancy.

Chapter VI

A Slight Adventure.

The boat owned by the explorers was much heavier than that in which Doc Clancy and his villainous crowd had gone up the river.

Thus the latter could be rowed faster, and it did not take our friends long to see that they were gradually being left behind.

„Our intention was to follow this river until we reached the branch that flows northward,“ said Jack Howard. „We then would go up that as far as we could, and then make the rest of our travels on foot. The man you call Doc Clancy is leading us over the very course we want to take, so far.“

„But he might change his course,“ spoke up Van.

„It doesn't matter whether he does or not,“ returned the young Englishman. „We will follow him wherever he goes. The professor, doctor and myself came to Africa principally for adventure, and I am sure we will get enough of it if we keep on the trail of a murderer and a number of scoundrels who are as bad as he is.“

They continued on their way up the river, keeping a sharp lookout on either bank so as not to run in an ambush.

When night came they went ashore at a pleasant-looking spot and pitched their camp.

As soon as darkness set in the wild beasts of the forest began to make themselves heard.

The blacks promptly built a number of fires to keep them away.

The two tents were utilized by the six who constituted the party of whites.

The air was very warm and close, and the ceaseless hum of the insects made it almost impossible for Van to sleep during the first part of the night.

As he was to stand watch with Jack Howard the last four hours of the night, it behooved him to catch as much sleep as he could.

It was past midnight when he fell into a doze.

He was just dropping off into a sound slumber when he was awakened by the shrill cry of a female in the near vicinity.

Quick as a flash, he sprang to his feet and listened.

„Help—help! Oh, save me!“

Again the cry was repeated.

In the twinkling of an eye the whole camp was aroused.

Seizing their rifles, Van and Jack Howard sprang through the dense undergrowth in the direction the cries came from.

It was tedious work forcing their way through the thorns and dank weeds, but they accomplished it in short order.

As they emerged into an opening about two hundred yards from their camp they beheld a truly startling scene.

A young and beautiful girl was struggling in the midst of four men, who had seized her and were making efforts to stifle her cries.

Both Van and Jack were astonished beyond measure when they beheld the fair creature, who was as white and as civilized in appearance as they were, in those wild parts.

But neither lacked in coolness, and the next instant their rifles were leveled at the men, while the voice of Jack Howard rang out:

„Hands up, you cowards! Unhand that lady at once, or you die!“

Had a bombshell exploded in their midst the four villains could not have been more astonished.

With one accord they let go their hold upon their captive and turned their startled gaze upon the intruders.

As they did so, Van gave a low cry of astonishment.

One of the men was no other than Doc Clancy!

As his eyes rested upon the villain our hero forgot everything else, and, with a single bound, sprang forward and seized Clancy by the throat.

„I have got you at last, you murderous scoundrel!“ he cried. „Down on your knees, or I will choke the life from you.“

Again was Van Vincent too rash.

With a muttered oath Doc Clancy tore himself from the infuriated boy's clutch and struck him a fearful blow between the eyes.

Jack Howard was unable, at that moment, to render Van any assistance, as he had caught the girl in his arms to keep her from falling to the ground.

By the time he had gently deposited her upon the ground the four scoundrels were lost in the mazes of the forest, and Van was struggling to his feet in a dazed manner.

The whole thing took place in less than a minute, and by the time the mate and the rest of those belonging to the camp reached the scene, it was all over.

The mate and Prof. Drearland conducted Van back to camp, followed by Jack, who carried the unconscious girl in his arms.

They had scarcely reached it when they heard the hurried splashing of oars, which told them that Doc Clancy and his crowd had taken to their boat and were proceeding up the river.

By the aid of a little brandy Jack Howard managed to bring his fair charge out of her faint, and when her eyes rested upon the kindly faces about her a sigh of relief left the girl's lips.

She explained how she came to be in the clutches of the rascally men in a very few words.

She was from the little town of Cooloo, where she had always lived. Her parents were natives of Cape Town, but since her earliest infancy had lived on the banks of the Congo River.

Her father made his living by hunting and trapping, and had started with a boat load of skins down the river, to a trading station a few miles from its mouth.

The girl, who gave her name as Masie Langford, accompanied her father on his trip.

That night they camped on the banks of the river about a quarter of a mile above our friends.

Being a little restless, Masie left her tent near midnight and strolled down to the water's edge.

She had scarcely reached it when she was pounced upon by four men and carried off into the forest.

She did not get an opportunity to cry out until she uttered the screams heard by our friends.

Just as the girl concluded her story the blast of a horn was heard from a point up the river.

„That is father!“ exclaimed the girl. „He has just found out that I am missing. I must go to him at once. I am much obliged to you, gentlemen, for your kindness.“

She turned her bright eyes upon Jack Howard as she spoke.

That young man promptly took the hint and offered to escort her back to her father.

Accordingly the two set out along the river bank, our hero and his companions taking seats about the fire to await Jack's return.

It was the best part of an hour before the young man got back, and when he did so, he said he had placed the girl safely under her father's care, who seemed to be a nice old man, indeed, and was a very talkative one, too.

„Masie Langford is too nice a girl to be living in these wilds,“ said he after a pause. „But, pshaw! I suppose that is the last we shall ever see of her.“

The next morning the party once more set out on their journey up the river.

Jack Howard was on the lookout for the boat of Langford, the hunter, but as that had gone down the river at the breaking of day, he did not get an opportunity to see the girl he had become suddenly interested in.

And so they kept on for five days, finding traces of Doc Clancy on the banks of the river almost every night.

They had now reached a branch of the river which pointed northeast toward the very heart of the unknown interior.

It did not take them long to find that Clancy had gone that way, as traces of camp fires could be found on the bank.

„I was sure they would go this way,“ said Jack Howard. „Clancy's companions know the course we had mapped out, and they think we are in search of some vast treasure; and, consequently, they want to get there ahead of us.“

The further our friends proceeded up the now narrow stream, the more dangers they were forced to encounter.

Crocodiles were now as thick as the hair on the back of a dog, and they were careful not to run the boat against any of the ferocious creatures.

The climate at this point was very bad. It was so hot during the day that none of our friends dared trust themselves in the sun over ten minutes at a time; and at night a heavy, poisonous dew would fall, the fumes of which threatened to give all hands the fever.

But, thanks to Dr. Pestle's ample supply of medicine, all kept in excellent health.

Two weeks had elapsed since they had started up the river, and they had now reached a point where it was impossible to proceed any further with the boat.

Chapter VII

Van's Peril.

Jack Howard and his companions were admirably equipped for an overland journey through the African wilds.

It did not take them a great while to outfit Van, the mate and Gregory, the sailor, as well as they were themselves.

Each one of the six wore high top boots, buckskin breeches, and broad-brimmed straw hats. They also carried knapsacks over their shoulders, which were well filled with useful articles.

Before starting out on foot they hauled their boat well up from the muddy stream and covered it with boughs and leaves, as they found Doc Clancy had done before them.

By the looks of the trail made by the murderer and his followers they must have arrived there fully two days in advance of our friends.

This part of the country was so thickly wooded that in many places the rays of the sun never reached the ground.

Poisonous serpents held carnival here, and the explorers had to be continually on the watch for them.

Just before sunset they came to a halt, weary from their first day's tramp.

Thus far they had not been molested by savages, though they had passed through the domain of more than one band.

If they had been a large, regular organized exploring party, they would have had no end of trouble, as they would then have visited black tribes, supposed to be friendly, and begged permission of them to proceed through the various kingdoms.

In this way their presence would become known to every tribe within fifty miles of them, no matter in what section they might be, as was the case with Stanley and other great explorers.

But our little party were in for it on their own hook, and asked permission from no one to travel on their way.

They would be all right so long as they were not intercepted by some roving band.

Jack Howard calculated that they were now in a section of country where no one had ever been before, save the natives and the villains they were following.

Prof. Drearland made a rather lengthy note of this, and seemed much pleased at his young friend's idea of it.

The professor was a curious sort of a man. Some people would have said that he was better fitted to become a village schoolmaster than to go roaming about the wilds of the interior of Africa.

Probably he was; but that is not for us to say now. True, the professor was not the bravest man on earth in the time of danger.

But Dr. Pestle! he was a regular cyclone when necessity demanded it. He could shoot as well as anybody in the party, and that is saying a great deal, for Van and Jack were excellent shots.

They managed to put in quite a comfortable night of it, and at the first signs of daylight they were up and ready to resume their journey.

They managed to make a light breakfast from some sardines and sea biscuit found in their knapsacks, which they ate as they made their way through the gully.

It did not take Van long to discover that they were following a dry water course, and he was soon surprised at seeing footprints in the sand and gravel it contained.

The footprints were made by men of civilized habits, too, for the tracks were those of boots or shoes.

„We are in luck!“ our hero exclaimed. „Doc Clancy and his companion have gone this way. It will only be a question of time now before I will capture the scoundrel and force a written confession that he murdered my uncle from him.“

„If you can get him to do that you will not have a great deal of trouble in taking him back to the United States,“ returned Jack Howard.

„I don't believe Doc Clancy will ever see ther States ag'in,“ observed Lank Edwards.

„Why?“ asked Van.

„'Cause, he'll git killed afore we git through with him.“

„If he does my uncle's murder will be avenged. Only I should like to see the villain die with a rope around his neck.“

„He might die a wuss death than bein' hung,“ said the mate. „You can't tell what'll happen in this strange country,“ and Lank Edwards shrugged his shoulders.

No one made any reply to the mate's words, and the party continued on in silence.

They noticed that the water course led them up a gradual ascent, and the professor reckoned that it would conduct them to a range of mountains.

When noon arrived they were still in the gully, and all hands were ravenously hungry.

Though they could have shot lots of game during the morning, they did not do it for fear that the natives might be in pursuit of them and hear the report of their rifles.

But now it was getting to be a case of necessity, and Jack Howard said he was dying for a roasted chunk of meat, and did not propose to go any further until he got it.

„We may as well camp right here,“ he went on. „It is as good a place as we can find; and while the rest of you are getting a fire going, Van and I will go into the woods a little way and get something for dinner.“

This was satisfactory to all hands, so they came to a halt. Van and Jack at once left the gully and started on their mission.

They had not gone far, however, before they encountered a boy running, and behind him a half dozen savages. Both opened fire at once, and when the rescue was effected they took him back to the camp. There the latter explained that he was Joseph Hedgewood, the son of an Englishman, who had been killed by the savages, and who had left him an orphan and homeless. He was small and fair, with large, dark eyes and abundant dark hair. He wore a corduroy suit, much too large for his slender form, and his feet were encased in a pair of stout leather boots that were, however, small and shapely. All of the company looked at him quizzically, but when they perceived he was so young and tender they agreed to take him under their protection.

He, for his part, was diffident and wanted to serve them in the capacity of servant, but to that all objected.

„No, you won't,“ exclaimed Jack. „We have enough servants.“

So he was installed as a companion, and when the first meal had passed he was as much at home as any of them.

That afternoon they proceeded onward, and when night fell they concluded to look for a suitable place to pitch their camp. Accordingly they pushed up the water course to where a gradual descent of perhaps a foot to every hundred yards became apparent.

„We will land in some beautiful valley that is inhabited solely by Amazons, see if we don't," said Prof. Drearland.

„That is yet to be found out, professor. I wouldn't make a note of it yet, if I were you," returned Jack Howard.

As far as they could see they were in a richly wooded valley.

But not a sign of anything human could be seen, save, perhaps, a well-beaten path that led from the mouth of the passage into the depths of the forest.

„I told you we would come out into a beautiful valley!" exclaimed the professor. „Now, let us follow this path, and in due time we will come upon the Amazons."

„It seems to me that you are getting remarkably brave all at once, professor," returned Jack Howard.

The professor was about to make some retort when a rather startling occurrence took place.

With shrill, warlike cries, fully half a hundred women burst from the cover of the trees and surrounded the party.

Chapter VIII

A Woman's Paradise.

Had it been a party of men that burst upon them so suddenly our friends would surely have opened fire upon them, but as they were women, they were at a loss what course to pursue.

As soon as the band of Amazons had completely surrounded the little party they came to a halt, and did not offer to lay hands upon them.

„Have your weapons ready, and the moment they attempt to harm us we will have to begin shooting, even if they are women," said Van.

„Right you are," returned Jack Howard, „but they are a too good-looking set by far, to do us any harm."

„Suppose I try and talk to them?" observed Prof. Drearland.

„Go ahead!" exclaimed Van.

Clearing his throat, the learned man began addressing the women in all the foreign tongues he could command.

But he was evidently not understood, as a rather musical chattering was the only answer he received.

„S'pose you try 'em in the United States language," ventured Lank Edwards. „If they can't understand that they ain't worth botherin' with."

Taking the cue, the professor at once addressed the assemblage in English.

To the astonishment of all hands one of the elder women promptly stepped forward and answered him in the same tongue.

„I can speak your language," said she. „It was taught our people by one of your own race several years ago. We mean you no harm, and if you will come with us to our village in a peaceful manner all will be well."

„Yes, but what race do you belong to?"

And the professor promptly drew his notebook and pencil.

„Wait until to-morrow and I will give you all the information you may desire,“ was the reply. „Come, we will go to our village now.“

Thinking it good policy not to make any objections, our friends signified their willingness, and accordingly the band set out over the path through the forest.

After a journey of perhaps a mile a rich farming land was reached.

In the center of a vast clearing was a number of neatly thatched huts, and into one of these our six friends were placed.

„You will stay here till morning,“ said the woman who acted as speaker for the Amazons. „Don't attempt to get away, for you will only run into far more danger than you are in now.“

All hands were completely tired out, and without any further ado they flung themselves upon the clean beds of dried grass the hut contained, and were soon fast asleep.

The sun was at least four hours high when they awoke the next morning, feeling much refreshed.

Van and Jack made their way out of the hut to take a look at their surroundings.

They saw that they were in a beautiful country. As far as the eye could reach well-cultivated lands could be seen, while here and there herds of cattle and horses could be seen grazing in rich pasture fields.

On the left was a range of mountains, and Van knew that they must have come under these in order to be where they now were.

At their right hand beyond the farming lands naught but a dense forest could be seen, and so it was both before and behind them.

Almost the first person they saw after coming out of the hut was the woman with whom they had conversed the night before.

She walked up to them as soon as she observed them, and, as she did so, Van and Jack took a good look at her.

She was of white blood beyond a question of doubt, but her manner and dress betokened that she had never seen civilization.

Like the rest of the women she wore a gown of some light texture with gaudy trimmings.

Shoes or hat she had none.

„Well,“ said she, when she reached the spot where Van and Jack were standing, „I suppose you are hungry. Call your companions and you shall all breakfast with me, and while we eat I will tell you something about myself and people.“

Van quickly called the rest of the party from the hut, and then all hands followed the Amazon to the center of the group of huts.

She conducted them inside the largest of these, and bade them be seated upon piles of skins, of which there were nearly a dozen lying about.

Then she struck a sharp blow with a stick upon a round, metallic substance, and almost immediately two little girls appeared, carrying bark trays, upon which was an abundance of food, consisting of meat, vegetables and fruit.

Van and Jack were each given one of the trays, and then the girls brought in more until each one of the party was served.

„Now,“ said their strange hostess, „eat, and while you do, I will tell you a little story.“

All were very hungry, and, as the food looked tempting, they needed no second invitation.

„To begin with,“ said the woman, „my name is Kanka. I am the recognized head of all the women and girls in this valley.

„No men live here at all, and the way our race is kept up is this: About twenty miles to the south of this valley there is a very fine country which is inhabited by people of my own race.

„Adjoining this country there is another that is peopled by a race of warlike blacks.

„Ever since time began my people have been at war with them, and thousands of our men are killed every year.

„About ten years ago the king of our nation caused a count to be made to see how many more women there were than men. The result showed that there were fifty females to every male in his kingdom.

„He at once issued an edict that a certain portion of the females should be placed in this valley to till the soil, so they might earn their own living and at the same time produce food for his warriors.

„Since that time a fresh supply of women and girls are brought here annually, and here they must stay till they die, simply because there is not enough men in the kingdom to wed and take care of them.“

„That is truly wonderful!“ exclaimed the professor, when he had finished writing down the remarkable story.

„Yes,“ added Van; „but you failed to tell us how you learned to speak our tongue.“

„That is so,“ returned Kanka. „But I can tell you in a few words. About a year after I had been here in charge of the valley a man, who was one of your race, arrived here in much the same manner as you did.

„He was sick with fever and I nursed him back to health and strength, and as a reward for my services he became my husband.

„I had to hide him every year when the men brought the new recruits in and took away the produce and ivory we had accumulated for them. If I had not they would surely have killed him.

„Well, he died less than a year ago, and since then I have been very unhappy.

„It was he who taught me your language, and I have in turn taught it to many more. Now I guess I have told you about everything.“

„Well,“ remarked Lank Edwards, clearing his throat and rising to his feet, „if you are all through, I'd like ter ask ther lady a question.“

„What is it?“ questioned Kanka.

„It are jist this: What are you a-goin' ter do with us fellers?“

„I am going to see that you all get wives this very day!“

„He, he, he!“ giggled Prof. Drearland, as though he thought the idea a good one.

But he was the only one in the party who laughed.

The others grew decidedly uncomfortable, and Joe blushed to the roots of his hair.

„You may go out and take a walk about our little village,“ said Kanka, not noticing the looks our friends were exchanging. „In the meantime, I will assemble all the women of the place in a double line, and you can walk through them and select as many as you want for your wives.“

Without making a reply all hands walked outside.

Just as they emerged from the hut they heard a confusion some yards distant.

Turning their gaze in the direction it came from, they beheld a number of the women marching in with two male prisoners in their midst.

Van gave a start.

The prisoners were Doc Clancy and his companion!

Chapter IX

Escape from the Amazons.

„I am glad they caught those two scoundrels,“ observed Jack Howard, turning to our hero. „But I am sorry they caught us. This marrying business is not going to work very well, I am afraid. The moment we object to it there will be trouble.“

„If it comes to the worst we will have to fight for it,“ replied Van. „I think we can put it off for a couple of days, and we ought to be able to make our escape before that time. But there’s Doc Clancy! I can’t go away and leave him here; for I have sworn that if the villain lives long enough, I will take him back to the United States to stand trial for the murder of my uncle.“

„He’ll never live long enough for you ter do that,“ spoke up Lank Edwards; „I’ll kill him myself afore that happens.“

The party now remained silent for a while, and watched the prisoners who had just been brought in to see what would be done with them.

They saw Kanka go up to them, and after she had held a rather lengthy conversation with the pair they were released, much to the astonishment of our friends.

Doc Clancy and the other man walked about with expressions of satisfaction on their faces.

The idea of getting married to as many wives as they wanted, and living a life of idleness, evidently pleased them.

A few minutes after their release they saw Van and his companions for the first time.

Their looks of satisfaction suddenly changed, and they showed signs of uneasiness.

Van made up his mind to keep a strict watch upon Doc Clancy, for fear the villain might get an opportunity to murder him.

Meanwhile Kanka had issued orders for all the inhabitants of the valley to assemble in a large field, for the purpose of allowing the eight male strangers to pick out wives.

It took a couple of hours to get them all together, and when the lines had finally been formed, Kanka summoned Van and his companions to her side.

„See here,“ said Jack Howard, turning his eyes upon the leader of the Amazons, „isn’t this a rather queer way of doing business?“

„Why so?“ demanded Kanka.

„Don’t you think you had better find out if we all want wives before you go any further?“

The woman looked at him in mute astonishment as he uttered the words.

„Why, surely you are all willing to marry,“ she gasped.

„I am not, for one,“ returned Jack.

„And I would rather die first!“ exclaimed Joe, with flashing eyes.

„You kin count me out, too,“ chimed in Lank Edwards.

„Same here,“ echoed Dr. Pestle.

„I wouldn't think of such a thing,“ observed our hero.

„Well, I suppose I will have to do as my friends do,“ said Prof. Drearland; „although I don't think it a half bad idea to marry.“

„You shut up, professor,“ Jack exclaimed. „You have got a wife in England, you know you have.“

„I shan't say any more,“ returned the professor meekly.

For the space of five minutes Kanka gazed at our friends with a mingled look of rage and surprise on her face.

Presently she spoke.

„Do you know what will happen if you don't marry?“ she said.

„Yes,“ returned Jack, growing the least bit reckless.

„What?“

„Well, if we don't marry, we certainly won't have any wives!“

„More than that will happen. You will all be thrown into the burning pit under the mountain.“

The face of the woman now grew as black as a thundercloud.

Placing her hand at her belt, she seized a small whistle.

She was about to place it to her lips when Jack Howard suddenly drew his revolver and leveled it at her heart.

„Blow that whistle and you are a dead woman!“ he exclaimed.

Evidently the woman was acquainted with the nature of firearms, for her face turned deadly pale and the whistle dropped from her hands.

„What would you do?“ she demanded, hoarsely.

„I would kill you, as sure as fate,“ was the reply. „Now, then, we are going to leave this valley. We will take a trip to the land of your people and see what sort they are. Don't attempt to oppose us, for if you do you will be the first one to die.“

Jack's words had their effect upon the woman. She was completely cowed, and did not utter a word of protest.

„Draw your revolvers,“ said the young Englishman, turning to his companions. „We will leave at once. There are six of us, and if these women attempt to bar our way, shoot them down as though they were so many savages.“

The next instant twelve revolvers flashed in the sunlight from as many hands.

It was at this state of affairs that a wild howl went up from a crowd of women about a hundred yards distant.

Glancing in the direction it came from, our friends beheld the forms of Doc Clancy and his pal seated astride a pair of horses, and galloping swiftly over the level country in the direction of the forest.

The two villains, thinking that Van and his friends were going to stop a while in the valley, deemed it advisable to get out.

They watched their opportunity, and, catching a couple of horses, mounted them and made off.

The Amazons were in a great state of excitement over this, and the majority of the assembled crowd promptly started in pursuit.

Kanka at once rushed away, leaving our friends standing alone where they were.

„This is our opportunity!“ exclaimed Van. „There are some horses grazing over there; let’s catch enough for our use and follow Doc Clancy.“

„That is just what we will do,“ returned Jack Howard. „Come on, all of you!“

The next moment they were hurrying toward the horses.

The animals were very tame, and they managed to catch what they wanted before any of the Amazons reached them.

Each horse had a tough vine about its neck, and, placing this between their teeth, they managed to form a rude bridle and bit.

A minute more and they had mounted, and were riding away with the speed of the wind.

The Amazons mounted, too, and started in pursuit; but they were poor riders, and our little party of explorers soon outdistanced them.

In less than half an hour they reached a heavily timbered forest, and the strange horde of women were soon lost to sight.

The trail made by Doc Clancy and his companion was a very plain one; Van led the way, following it in every turn.

About noon they came to a halt near a stream of running water to give the horses a rest.

Van and Jack shot some game, while the rest of the party busied themselves in constructing better bridles for their horses.

Two hours later they started out again, following the trail as before.

Just before nightfall they arrived at the bank of a river, which was fully half a mile in width.

As they looked about them the country showed signs of being inhabited, as fastened to the bank were a number of rafts formed by felled trees tied together by tough vines.

„I wonder if we haven’t struck the country the Amazons told us about,“ remarked Van.

„I shouldn’t be surprised,“ returned the professor. „I shall make a note of this, for it is truly wonderful to find rafts of timber in the heart of this wild country.“

While the professor was jotting down his notes the rest of the party were carefully scrutinizing the river.

Presently they were startled to see one of the timber rafts drifting swiftly down the center of the stream.

Upon it were two men and a pair of horses.

A single glance sufficed to show that the men were Doc Clancy and his villainous companion.

At that instant a puff of smoke came from the raft, followed instantly by the report of a rifle; Van clapped his hand to the side of his head and tumbled headlong from the back of his horse.

Chapter X

Down the River.

As Van Vincent fell from his horse his companions immediately dismounted and rushed to his side.

But before they reached him he was upon his feet, though he appeared to be somewhat dazed.

It was Doc Clancy who fired the shot, but, instead of killing our hero, the bullet merely grazed the side of his head, momentarily stunning him.

As soon as he saw that Van was not killed, Lank Edwards leveled his rifle at the raft and pulled the trigger.

But the bullet flew wide of the mark, owing to the fact of his being a poor marksman, and the distance being rather great.

The current must have been running pretty strong, for the raft was fast leaving them, and as the two villains had sought seclusion behind a huge log, it was impossible to get another shot at them.

„We must follow them,“ exclaimed our hero, who had now recovered the full use of his senses.

„How are we a-goin' ter, I'd like ter know?“ returned the mate.

„There are similar rafts of logs here, are there not?“

„That's so,“ spoke up Jack Howard. „We'll board this big one right here, and then push her off and go shooting down the river after those fellows.“

The raft he indicated was about eighty feet long by thirty in width, and it was lashed together so firmly that they saw their horses could be taken upon it with the greatest of safety.

With our friends it was no sooner said than done.

The next moment they were leading their horses upon the logs, and Van and Jack got ready to sever the vines that held the raft to the shore.

There were several long poles, as well as some short pieces of timber, lying upon it, and seizing a couple of the poles, they pushed off toward the center of the stream.

Ten minutes later they were drifting rapidly along with the current in the wake of Doc Clancy, who was now over half a mile ahead of them.

Van and Jack proceeded to steer the huge craft, while their companions undertook the task of rolling the loose logs into a pile on either side, to serve as a cover against the possible attack from any persons on either shore.

They knew there must be human beings in the vicinity, or they would never have found the rafts as they were.

„I wonder what river this is?“ remarked Jack Howard. „With the exception of ourselves and the two ahead of us, I believe we are the only civilized people who have ever floated upon its waters.“

„I am perfectly satisfied on that point,“ returned Prof. Drearland. „Suppose we name it after you, Jack?“

„That's it,“ echoed Van. „Call it Howard River.“

The rest of the party agreed to this, so the stream was named, as far as our friends were concerned.

Rifles in hand, the floating party kept a good watch on either shore.

As they reached a bend, round which the other raft had disappeared, they were suddenly startled by hearing a loud trumpeting noise.

At first they thought it was a company of soldiers they were approaching, but a moment's study told them that such a thing was utterly out of the question.

„I know what caused that noise,“ said Joe, who had been listening attentively. „It was made by a herd of elephants; I have heard them before.“

„Gracious! you don't say so!“ exclaimed the professor, with a look of alarm on his face. „You don't think there is any danger of their swimming out and attacking us, do you?“

„You can't tell what might happen, old man,“ spoke up Jack Howard, in a serious tone. „You'd better have your rifle ready.“

As if to verify his words, a violent crashing was heard in the underbrush that lined the shore at that point, and the next moment a herd of eight elephants suddenly appeared and entered the water.

„If we don't want them to bother us, the best thing for us to do is to remain perfectly quiet,“ said Van.

„That is it,“ returned Joe.

The huge animals had evidently come to the river for the purpose of taking a bath, for they merely waded off a few feet and then proceeded to enjoy themselves after their own fashion.

They did not appear to notice the raft at all, and soon they were lost to sight as our friends drifted around a bend.

Prof. Drearland drew a long breath of relief. He evidently was very much afraid of the elephants.

When the raft had drifted perhaps five miles down the river the sight of cultivated fields met the eyes of our friends.

While they were speculating as to what would be the next thing to turn up they were startled to hear the reports of firearms down the river.

„That is Doc Clancy, I'll wager!“ exclaimed Van. „Some of the natives have attacked the raft.“

„You are right,“ returned Jack. „Now we must look out for squalls.“

The further they drifted the narrower the stream became, while the current kept on increasing in force.

The mass of timber was now floating along at the rate of at least ten miles an hour.

Presently the explorers came in sight of a large village of log houses, situated near the river bank.

Hundreds of white people could be seen about the vicinity, and our friends at once concluded that this was the nation to whom the Amazons belonged.

Van caused their horses to lie down on the logs, and then all hands dropped from sight behind the timbers that had been piled up for that purpose.

A crowd of the natives were already at the edge of the water, and by their actions they seemed to be in a great state of excitement.

As our friends rapidly neared them, a shout went up from the crowd, and they proceeded to push off a number of canoes.

The next minute fully a dozen were making for the raft.

The natives were armed with spears and ugly-looking knives, so our friends thought it best not to allow them to land upon the raft.

As the foremost canoe neared them, Jack Howard fired a shot from his rifle, taking a lock of hair from the head of one of the men.

In an instant a wild howl went up from the occupants of the canoes and those on the shore.

The rifle shot was evidently too much for them to understand, since they were unable to see our friends.

The canoes put back for shore with all possible speed.

„I guess they won't trouble us much,“ remarked our hero. „But I believe we are drifting into danger, for all that.“

„Why so?“ asked Dr. Pestle.

„Because the way this current runs leads me to believe that there must be a falls close by.“

„Then we'd better get ashore,“ remarked Lank Edwards.

„If we do that we will get into trouble. See! both sides of the river are lined with the white savages.“

„Well,“ said Van, after a pause, „I think we had better stick to the raft as long as it holds together under us.“

Our hero's words seemed to satisfy all hands, so they settled down and watched the shore, which was flitting by them so rapidly.

In half an hour the country no longer looked as though it was inhabited.

The scene was now one of wild grandeur—sublime and picturesque.

The stream had narrowed down to twice the width of the raft, and our friends knew that it was only a question of a short time before it would strike the shore and be split asunder.

Yet they dared not leave it. To trust themselves in the boiling, surging waters which were now running with the speed of a race horse, meant nothing but death itself.

With pale faces the little party waited.

Fifteen minutes later they saw that their journey upon the raft of logs was about ended.

About two hundred yards ahead of them the stream was so narrow that the raft would not be able to get through in its present shape.

„Mount your horses and make for the stern!“ exclaimed Van. „We must take to the water now, and we will stand more show with the animals than without them.“

Chapter XI

The Dwarfs.

As Van Vincent spoke he seized the bridle rein of his horse and started for the rear end of the raft.

His companions quickly followed his example, and in an exceedingly short space of time all had sprung upon the backs of their horses.

By the time they had done so the foremost part of the raft was within a few feet of striking a rocky point of land.

There was not a moment to be lost.

Splash, splash, splash, splash, splash, splash!

One after another the horses leaped into the foaming water.

As Van rose to the surface on the back of his steed, he at once urged the animal toward the nearest shore, which was not over twenty yards distant.

He had scarcely done so when he heard a grinding crash, followed immediately by a roar that was deafening.

The timber raft was bent and twisted in a hundred different shapes, and then for a moment became wedged in the narrow gut through which the turbulent water flowed.

This one thing saved the lives of our friends.

The tangled mass of logs stayed the current for an instant, and the water became almost still.

With mighty efforts the horses swam for the shore, reaching it just as the improvised dam gave way with a loud crash.

With a feeling of mute thankfulness, Van and his companions fell upon the necks of their faithful animals.

Their escape from a certain death seemed nothing short of a miracle.

For several minutes they stood upon the river bank, gazing at the roaring flood before them.

As it was near nightfall, Van suggested that they find a suitable spot to pitch their camp for the night, and start a fire to dry their wet clothing.

Following the course of the turbulent stream, they started forward at a quick trot.

In a few minutes they reached the crest of a monster waterfall, which went dashing fully three hundred feet to a bleak-looking valley below.

In the center of the valley was a smooth sheet of water, which was now filled with the logs that had formed their raft a short time before.

„I guess there is no use of following Doc Clancy any further,“ observed Jack Howard. „If he went over that falls it was the last of him.“

„Maybe he didn't go over,“ returned Van. „We didn't, you know.“

„I don't think he did, unless he bears a charmed life,“ exclaimed Joe. „Look down there!“

The boy pointed to the valley below.

All hands instantly turned their gaze in the direction indicated.

They beheld Doc Clancy and his companion coolly riding through the valley, with their horses on a slow walk, as though nothing had happened.

„Well, that beats me!“ said Lank Edwards. „What'll we do now?“

„Why, go down there, of course,“ returned our hero, promptly. „Here is a footpath, and—by Jove! here are the hoof prints of the two villains' horses. Come on.“

As Van seemed to be the recognized leader of the party, his friends promptly followed him.

The path they started to descend was a rather steep one, but by good management they succeeded in getting to the level country below in safety.

By the time they arrived at the foot of the falls, the two men they were following had disappeared around a projection of land.

But the trail was as plain as the nose on a person's face, and, urging their horses into a brisk canter, our friends started in pursuit.

The noise of the falling water was so great that the thud of the horse's hoofs could not be heard; and they expected to overtake Clancy in very short order.

The sun had now disappeared below the horizon, and it was growing dark rapidly, but they could still see the trail very plainly.

However, in less than five minutes, it was lost altogether, owing to the fact that the pathway was now of solid rock.

But, weapons in hand, the six bold adventurers kept on, expecting every minute to find soft earth once more.

Suddenly a wild, unearthly noise rang out, which sounded like the barking of a thousand dogs.

Joe's horse shied and collided with the animal ridden by Jack Howard. The consequence was that both riders were thrown to the ground in a confused heap.

Before the rest of the party could comprehend what had happened, a veritable swarm of dwarfish figures burst from the cover of the adjacent rocks and rushed upon them.

Jack Howard and Joe were instantly seized by the curious beings, and then, as if by magic, the whole crowd disappeared.

Meanwhile, Van and the rest of his companions had been carried several yards from the spot by their frightened horses.

So suddenly had the whole thing occurred that they were not aware of the fact that Jack and Joe were missing until they beheld their two riderless steeds galloping madly from the spot.

„What in thunderation has happened, anyhow?“ gasped Lank Edwards, gazing about him in dumfounded amazement.

„The Lord only knows!“ returned Prof. Drearland, who was thoroughly frightened.

It was now so dark they were unable to distinguish objects at a distance greater than a dozen yards, and the four remaining ones in the party were at a complete loss as to what course to pursue.

„Well,“ remarked Van, at length, when they came to a halt about a hundred yards from the spot where the dwarfs had sprung upon them, „we must make an effort to find Jack and Joe. There must certainly be some opening around here somewhere, where those little savages went in.“

„That is certainly so,“ spoke up Dr. Pestle.

Our hero now dismounted and began searching about the place where the dwarfs had disappeared.

Almost immediately he discovered a long, narrow rift which extended into the side of a hill that formed one of the boundaries of the valley.

„Here is where they went!“ he exclaimed, in an excited manner. „Come on, now; we must rescue Jack and Joe!“

„What are we going to do with the horses?“ asked the professor.

„Hobble them so they can't stray far away,“ was the reply. „Hurry up, now.“

In less than two minutes this was done, and all four were ready to enter the opening.

With Van at their head they pushed inside.

It was as dark as the grave itself, and they felt the need of a torch to light them on their way through the unknown place.

Dr. Pestle had enough oil left in a bottle to saturate a piece of his coat, and when this was twisted into a compact mass it was lighted.

The doctor walked by the side of Van, with his improvised torch, which served its purpose well enough.

When they had traversed a distance of probably two hundred yards, they found they did not need any light.

Before them they beheld a vast cavern of a circular shape.

In many places upon the ground small fires were burning, and these furnished enough light for them to see where they were going. Around the fires

could be seen groups of the dwarfs, who were, by the way, the strangest people any of our friends had ever seen.

They wore short skirts, which seemed to be made of some sort of leather, the rest of their bodies being bare.

The tallest of them could not have been over three feet six inches in height, but they seemed to be very powerful, for all that.

Bows and arrows and clubs were the only weapons they possessed, and as Van and his three companions gazed upon them from their point of observation, they reckoned that they could clean out the place if they tried very hard.

But they were doomed to be badly mistaken in their idea.

The dwarfs, who were a race of cave dwellers, supposed by the world at large to be extinct, were about as bloodthirsty and determined as any savage who ever drew the breath of life.

Van had just suggested that they move forward to try and find their two missing friends, when they were startled to hear the sound of footsteps approaching from the way they entered the place.

They had scarcely turned around when they beheld Doc Clancy and his partner running toward them with all their might, a perfect horde of the dwarfs at their heels.

Chapter XII

A Horrible Fate.

We must now turn our attention to Jack Howard and the boy, Joe, and see what became of them.

The pair were half stunned from the fall from their horses, and before they could collect their scattered senses they had a vague idea of being picked up and carried away.

Jack was the first to recover the full use of his faculties, and when he did so he found himself in Stygian darkness.

A dozen pairs of arms were clasped about his body, it seemed, and he was being whisked swiftly along in a direction that was unknown to him.

Neither he nor Joe had as yet seen what sort of looking fellows their captors were, so, of course, they had not the remotest idea as to who were carrying them off.

Jack heard a series of doglike noises all around him, and he came to the conclusion that it must be a gang of some mysterious animals who were carrying him to their den.

The brave young Englishman determined to make a desperate effort to escape from them.

Exerting all his strength, he strove to free himself.

But he soon found it to be utterly useless. The more he struggled, the tighter the clutch became about his body.

And Joe! The delicate, little fellow was so badly frightened at his mysterious capture that he fainted.

In a very few minutes Jack beheld a light ahead of him, and in a short space of time he was able to see about him fairly well.

When he found that his captors were such little fellows, he again made a wild effort to free himself.

But, as before, it was of no avail.

Jack concluded not to waste his strength any further, but to wait for a more fitting opportunity.

About ten minutes after he reached this conclusion, the dwarfs came to a halt, and he was deposited upon the ground.

But before he was allowed to rise to his feet his hands were securely tied behind him.

Joe, who had not yet recovered from his faint, was also securely bound.

Jack found that he was in a small cave, which appeared to be situated in a vast cavern.

In front of its opening a fire was burning, and around this those who had brought him there were seated.

The young man soon saw that the cave was reserved solely for the use of Joe and himself, for the dwarfs all remained outside near the fire.

Knowing it was useless to attempt to escape, Jack sat down near the mouth of the cave and watched his captors to see what they were doing.

In a few minutes Joe came to himself, and crept to the side of his friend.

Jack explained their situation as best he could, and then said:

„There is one thing in our favor, and that is they haven't taken our weapons from us. I want you to crawl behind me, Joe, and see if you can't gnaw loose the bonds that hold my hands together. If you can do it I will set you free then; and we will then open fire on these little savages and run for it.“

„All right,“ replied the boy, „I'll do my best.“

He crept behind Jack and began the task allotted to him, which he found would be a difficult one, as the thongs which bound them were of leather.

Meanwhile the dwarfs, who had evidently been holding a consultation in regard to their prisoners, suddenly arose to their feet and began singing a weird chant in their queer language.

The moment they began it others came hurrying to the spot, and in five minutes' time it seemed as though there must be fully five hundred congregated about.

The noise they made was not so very loud, but it was mournful, and reminded Jack of the howling of a dog.

„What do you suppose they are making that awful noise for?!“ whispered Joe, resting from his gnawing task for a moment.

„I don't know,“ returned Jack, in his restless way, „unless they are singing our funeral hymn.“

Joe made no reply, but again tackled the leather thongs with his sharp teeth.

He must have made an extraordinary effort, for in less than a minute Jack felt that his hands were free.

„Good!“ he exclaimed. „Now, turn your back toward me, and I'll set you free in short order.“

Carefully drawing his knife from his belt, he was as good as his word, and the next minute the two captives were standing upright in the cave with a revolver in either hand.

But the dwarfs paid no attention to them whatever. They still kept up their weird chant, and had now formed themselves into a procession and were marching about in every conceivable shape.

When the bulk of the crowd had moved a few yards from the mouth of the cave, Jack concluded it was time for them to step out.

„Come, Joe,“ said he, coolly; „we’ll have to be going now. Our friends won’t know what to make of our long absence.“

Joe looked at his companion with a glance of admiration in his large eyes, and then followed him from the cave.

This seemed to be just exactly what the dwarfs wanted them to do, for the moment they stepped from the cave a double line on either side rushed up and completely surrounded them.

Both captives were too much surprised at the unexpected turn of affairs, and before they were scarcely aware of it they were tightly hemmed in like a wedge in a block.

Their arms were forced to their sides, though both still clutched their revolvers.

Jack had been in many a crowd in various cities throughout the world, but never had he been subjected to such a tight squeeze as the dwarfs forced him to undergo.

Joe, who was delicate, anyhow, was nearly crushed.

Presently the crowd began to move, and Jack and Joe were carried along without making a single effort.

Slowly they proceeded, and at length entered a dark passage.

„I say!“ exclaimed Jack, „where are you taking us to, I’d like to know?“

The only reply he got was a fresh burst of the chant they had been singing, which sounded worse than ever in the narrow passage.

The two were forced along for perhaps a hundred feet in the same slow manner, and then a wild rush suddenly took place.

Pell-mell went the crowd of dwarfs, and, of course, Jack and Joe had to go with them.

The next thing Jack knew he felt himself going downward, and then he fetched up sprawling on a smooth, rocky floor.

The young Englishman was so badly dazed that it was a minute or two before he could arise to his feet.

He was in total darkness, and could not hear a sound beyond the beating of his heart, which was now throbbing away like a triphammer.

„Joe!“ he called. „I say, Joe, where are you?“

But there was no response.

Jack now became very uneasy.

He was more frightened than he had ever been in his whole life before.

There was something so weird and mysterious about his situation that he was completely unnerved.

Suddenly it occurred to him to light a match.

With trembling hands he did so.

The first objects to meet his gaze were his revolvers lying at his feet.

He promptly picked them up and placed them in his belt.

„I wonder what has become of Joe?“ he muttered. „Poor boy! I don’t want to see any harm come to him, and I shan’t, either, if I can help it. But this is enough to scare the life out of a little fellow like him. I wonder...“

At that instant a shrill scream rang out, and Jack started as though he had been shot.

Turning quickly, he held the still burning match in front of him, and beheld a startling, not to say horrible, sight.

Crawling over the ground, a few feet from him, was a monstrous creature resembling a crab!

But that was not the worst of it. Joe was gripped firmly in its huge claws.

Chapter XIII

Searching for Jack and Joe.

„Hide!“ exclaimed Van, when he saw Doc Clancy and his confederate running toward them with the dwarfs at their heels.

He darted around a point of rock as he spoke, and his companions quickly followed him.

Luckily for them, they were not seen by the dwarfs, and half a minute later the whole gang rushed by them.

The two fugitives had scarcely entered the vast cavern when they were overtaken by their pursuers.

Both villains at once threw up their hands and howled for mercy.

But the dwarfs did not understand them, and if they could have done so it is not likely that it would have made any difference.

Doc Clancy was thrown upon the ground in the twinkling of an eye, and his companion was flung almost on top of him.

It was just at this moment that our friends saw large numbers of the dwarfs leave their fires and rush to a point at the furthest end of the huge cavern.

But as it was beyond the range of their vision, they could not see what it was that called the little cave dwellers to that certain spot.

Meanwhile the dwarfs picked up their two prisoners and started across the cavern.

They were bent upon joining their companions, by the manner in which they hurried, and in spite of the pleadings of Doc Clancy and his friend, they were hustled away in a fashion that was decidedly unceremonious.

„See here,“ said Van, suddenly; „there is a great deal of hubbub over there; let’s walk out a little ways and see what is going on.“

„That’s it,“ returned Lank Edwards. „Them fellers can’t see us as long as we don’t carry a light.“

The doctor and the professor being willing, Van led the way out into the open cavern.

He had scarcely done so when he gave a startled cry.

„What is the matter?“ asked his three friends in a breath.

„I see Jack and Joe!“ our hero exclaimed. „See! there they go. The dwarfs have cut them off from escape and surrounded them.“

„We must get there as soon as possible,“ said Dr. Pestle, in a plucky tone of voice.

„Sure!“ echoed Lank Edwards, at the same time tightening his belt in order to be ready for the fight that was sure to come.

The dwarfs who were conveying Clancy and his companion along were now running in the direction of the crowd where Van had seen Jack and Joe a moment before.

But before they reached them our friends saw the whole crowd enter a passage, similar to the one through which they had reached the place.

Though they were unable to catch a glimpse of them, they knew that Jack and Joe were among the crowd.

The four were now hurrying swiftly along in the wake of the dwarfs who had Doc Clancy and the other fellow.

Van conjectured that they would most likely lead the way into the same passage Jack and Joe had been taken.

In this he was right, for by the time he and his three friends had made half the distance across the open space the last dwarf had entered the passage.

The four now started forward on a run, and a couple of minutes later they were at the spot where the mysterious underground dwellers had disappeared with their prisoners.

But they had scarcely entered the passage when they heard the dwarfs coming back, as though in a combined rush.

There was a niche close at hand, and, noticing this, Van quickly motioned his companions to follow him into it.

They had scarcely sought seclusion in the niche when the foremost of the dwarfs went rushing by.

In the semilight that prevailed in that part of the cavern our hero noticed that Doc Clancy and his ally were in their midst, still being carried along as prisoners.

He watched the curious crowd as they filed past, expecting every moment to see Jack and Joe being brought back.

But no such sight greeted his eyes, and at length the entire crowd of dwarfs who had entered the passage a few minutes before had left it and returned to the burning fires in the cavern.

„They have left Jack and Joe somewhere back here in this passage,“ said Van, in a tone of deep concern, when the dwarfs were out of hearing.

„They have, sure, if they took ‘em in here,“ observed Lank Edwards.

„I know they took them in here,“ returned our hero. „I saw them; and as they are still here, and not far away, I should judge, I propose we look for them.“

„I agree with you!“ exclaimed Dr. Pestle, warmly. „Come on; there is enough left of the torch I manufactured to light us on our way.“

„Suppose the little fiends have killed our two companions,“ spoke up the professor, in a faltering tone; „what then?“

„If such a thing has happened, they’ll be dead,“ replied Lank Edwards. „But, come on; I’ll wager a plug of terbacky that we’ll find ‘em.“

Dr. Pestle struck a match and lighted the rudely constructed torch, and the four started along the passage.

It was slimy and damp in the place, and lizards could be seen crawling about in all shapes.

„Ugh!“ grunted the professor; „a nasty place, this.“

„For that reason we should be more anxious to get Jack and Joe out of it,“ said Van.

He had scarcely spoken when the smothered report of a revolver was heard from a point directly ahead of them.

Feeling that they had come upon their two friends, they made a rush forward.

But the next instant they were checked by a huge boulder.

They came to a halt, completely nonplused.

„Why, here is the way,“ said the doctor, suddenly, holding his torch to the left as he spoke.

Sure enough, a continuance of the passage was disclosed!

„Well,“ observed our hero, „I'll fire off my revolver to let them know we are coming, and then we will go on.“

Pointing the weapon in the air, he pulled the trigger.

A hundred echoes followed the report, and then an answering shot was heard.

The next instant all four darted into the passage.

They had hardly taken a dozen steps when their heels flew from beneath them, and they went shooting down a slippery decline with the speed of the wind.

But in a very few seconds they brought up in a confused heap on a rocky floor.

„Thunder!“ ejaculated Lank Edwards. „What has happened now?“

He scrambled to his feet, followed by his companions.

Dr. Pestle's torch had become extinguished, and he hastened to light it again.

As the feeble flame flared up, they found that they were in what appeared to be a tomb.

All around them they beheld piles of bones and grinning skulls.

The professor's teeth began to chatter.

„Let us get out of here!“ he exclaimed.

„You forget,“ said Van. „We came down here in search of Jack and Joe.“

As he finished speaking, he fired off his revolver, and began shouting „Jack!“ as loud as he could.

To the joy of all hands, an answering cry was heard close at hand.

„This way!“ a voice shouted. „Hurry, for I have got more than I can attend to here!“

„That is Jack,“ said our hero. „Come on; he is in some sort of trouble!“

Chapter XIV

In a Perilous Position.

As Jack Howard beheld the hideous, crablike monster dragging Joe across the floor of the cave, an exclamation of horror left his lips.

The poor boy, who was placed in such a perilous position, must have fainted, for beyond the single shriek he had uttered he remained perfectly silent.

Of all the horrible-looking creatures Jack had ever heard of, this one was the worst.

In shape it was as near like a crab as anything it could be compared to, while in size it was fully as large as a mammoth sea turtle.

Its claws were something awful to look upon, and Jack shuddered when he saw that one of them clasped Joe firmly by the shoulder.

Just then the match went out, and the sight was lost to his gaze.

This served to bring Jack to his senses.

Quick as a flash he had lighted another and drawn his revolver.

The monster was making very slow progress with its intended victim, and, regardless of himself being seized by it, Jack rushed up and leveled his weapon at one of its glittering eyes.

Crack!

As the report rang out Jack seized Joe and pulled him away.

A cry of joy escaped his lips.

The unconscious boy was free from the monster.

But at the same time the report of the revolver had extinguished the match, and Jack did not know whether he had killed the creature or not.

A furious thrashing on the ground told him he had not, although he judged that it was in the throes of death.

Lighting another match, he started forward to find a place of safety.

A few steps and he discovered a huge rock, which was flat on top.

Exerting all his strength, he lifted Joe upon it and then clambered up himself.

It was no easy task for him to do so, as the top of the rock was over six feet high.

But fear lent him strength, and he succeeded in getting up in a hurry.

Before he arose to his feet, after reaching the top of the rock, Jack struck another match.

He found that he was safe for the present, for it was not at all likely that the monster could get up there.

He concluded to endeavor to bring Joe to consciousness.

He threw the match down at his feet, and then started to stoop over the boy.

But before he could reach him, a bright flame shot up from the spot where the match had fallen.

„Great Scott!“ exclaimed the young Englishman, „I have set the rock on fire.“

Leaving Joe for an instant, he proceeded to see what it was that had become ignited. The flame, which was still burning with a steady light, made it easy for him to see.

The spot where the match had fallen was near the center of the rock, which appeared to be filled with a mixture of coal dust and pitch, as Jack afterward put it.

The pithy substance seemed to extend clear through the rock, and as soon as Jack saw what it was that was burning, he concluded to let it go, as it furnished him a very good light to see what was going on around him. He now could hear a sharp, clicking noise all around the rock, and a glance showed the place to be alive with monsters like the one which had started to carry off Joe.

Their huge claws, opening and shutting, caused the noise.

Just as Jack was about to turn to Joe again, the boy opened his eyes.

„Where am I?“ he gasped, struggling to a sitting posture.

„You are all right now, old fellow,“ returned Jack, in a voice that was meant to be cheerful, though it hardly expressed it.

„Oh, I remember“—and a shudder passed over the boy's frame—„some horrible creature was dragging me away, and I—I fainted.“

„That is what you did, Joe. Why is it you faint away so often? You put me in mind of a girl sometimes.“

„Do I?“—and the face of Joe turned a deep crimson. „I suppose it is my weak nature that makes me swoon every time something awful frightens me; but I won't do it any more, for it might be the means of us both losing our lives.“

„Well, never mind, Joe,“ said Jack, in a kindly tone. „You are a brave little fellow in times of danger, and I can't blame you for fainting when such a thing as those down there gets a hold of you.“

„Are there any more of them around, then?“

And the boy shifted his position so as to get a view of the hideous creatures that surrounded the rock.

„Well,“ said he, after a pause, „I am not afraid of them now. If we each had a good club, we could jump down there and kill the whole lot of them in a very few minutes. They are nothing but land crabs, though much larger than any I have ever seen before. A sharp blow will crush the shell upon them, and then they are helpless.“

„Is that so?“ asked Jack, becoming interested. „But they are dangerous, all the same, are they not?“

„Oh, yes; I suppose they could tear you all to pieces with their big claws.“

„Suppose we begin shooting at them?“

„All right.“

The next minute the two were blazing away at the crablike creatures.

Jack noticed that every time a bullet hit one of their claws it would immediately drop from the creature's body. The fire, which was still steadily burning, made sufficient light for them to see within the radius of a dozen yards.

When the two had either killed or disabled all the land crabs they could see, they turned their gaze about to see if there was any avenue open for them to leave the place.

Presently they observed a narrow passage to the left of them, which seemed to run through a solid wall of black rock.

Jack was just going to suggest that they get down from their perch and investigate, when an animal as large as a half-grown ox suddenly emerged from the passage.

It looks it resembled a rhinoceros, though both Jack and Joe could see that its back was covered with a shell.

A sharp horn projected from its mouth, and its gleaming eyes flashed like balls of fire.

With an ugly snort the queer creature started for the rock upon which the pair stood.

„I guess I had better shoot him,“ said Jack. „He might be able to jump up here.“

Leveling his rifle at one of the animal's eyes, he pulled the trigger.

The bullet was true to its mark, and the next instant the beast was rolling upon the ground in the throes of death.

„That was a good shot,“ observed Joe, in an admiring tone. „But, look! there comes another!“

Sure enough, another of the beasts emerged from the passage; but that was not all. Another, and still another followed.

It was at this state of affairs that the two heard the muttered sound of a pistol shot.

„Our friends are coming to our rescue,“ exclaimed Jack. „Now, then, we have got to kill off these things at once, so they will not be attacked by them before they reach us.“

They began firing, and in a few minutes the three beasts had met the same fate as the first one.

But now a new danger threatened them. The smell of blood from the slain animals was drawing a multitude of land crabs to the spot.

As the two looked upon the ground, they saw that it was literally covered with the monsters, many of them had already seized upon the carcasses and were tearing them to pieces.

Again a pistol shot rang out, this time close at hand.

Then a voice called out Jack's name.

Jack quickly answered, as was recorded at the conclusion of the last chapter, and half a minute later Van Vincent and his companions emerged from the passage and appeared on the scene.

Chapter XV

The Band of Horsemen.

The moment Jack Howard saw his friends emerge from the passage, he shouted to them to look out for the crabs.

The four needed no second warning. The next moment they were shooting into the crawling monsters right and left.

„Clear a path to the rock!“ shouted Joe, who was doing his part of the shooting.

His advice was promptly acted upon, and half a minute later Jack and Joe dropped from their perch and rushed to the side of their friends.

Leaving the fire still burning brightly on the top of the rock, all hands rushed through the passage and soon reached the cave where the skulls and bones lay in such numbers.

Strange to say, none of the huge land crabs followed them, nor did any more of the strange animals appear.

In a very short time Van led the way to the incline, where he and his three companions had slid down in such an unexpected manner.

By dint of the greatest exertion, they managed to crawl up the slippery place.

„Now, then,“ observed Lank Edwards, „we are all right till we strike the dwarfs.“

„I think we can get the best of them if we keep our eyes open,“ returned Jack. „Lead on, Van.“

With their weapons ready for instant use, they proceeded along the passage.

Without mishap they reached the end, and beheld the lighted fires of the dwarfs before them.

But they saw something else, too. Coming toward them, was a band of the little cave dwellers, with Doc Clancy and his ally in their midst.

„They think the crabs have finished Joe and I by this time, and now they are going to put them two scoundrels in the horrible cave,“ said Jack.

„I hope they won't have as much luck as you fellows did,“ returned Lank Edwards. „The quicker the crabs make a meal of 'em, the better it will be for us.“

The mate had scarcely finished speaking when a wild shout went up from the approaching dwarfs, and they beheld Doc Clancy and his man fleeing from them with all their might.

Almost at the same instant our friends saw this, a deafening explosion rang out, causing them to be nearly thrown from their feet.

„The fire on the rock caused that, I'll bet!“ exclaimed Jack, as soon as he had recovered himself.

His friends took it for granted that he was right, as the noise came from that direction.

But the explosion proved of great value to our friends, as well as to the villainous couple, who had broken away from their captors.

The terrific report frightened the dwarfs so badly that everyone in the cavern fell prone to the ground, and remained lying upon their faces.

Heartily glad to leave the place, Van and his companions followed Doc Clancy and his pal, who were making for the outlet of the cavern as fast as they could go.

Nothing interfered with them, and fifteen minutes later they were in the open air once more.

The moon had risen, and by aid of its light they beheld not only the horses they had left hobbled in the vicinity, but the two Jack and Joe had been thrown from, as well.

The animals were quite tame now, and seemed glad to meet their masters.

All hands deemed it advisable to mount, and leave the dangerous valley at once.

Accordingly, they did so, and half an hour later they were ascending a steep hill at its other side.

Once at the top of the hill, the country was level, and covered with vegetation.

The howling of wild beasts could be heard on all sides of them, and so fierce were the noises that it became necessary for the party to come to a halt and start a fire before they had traveled five miles.

Selecting a good spot, the required dry wood was collected, and a rousing fire started.

The horses were kept together in a bunch near this, and then, dividing themselves into watches they prepared to pass the remainder of the night.

But so thrilling had their adventures been since they had boarded the raft up the river, that none in the party could sleep till near morning.

When morning arrived a hearty breakfast was made from a doe shot by Jack, and then a consultation was held as to what course to pursue.

„There is one thing certain,“ said Prof. Drearland, „we would never be able to reach the coast if we started back the way we came. My advice is to keep on until we strike some civilized people.“

„Here are hoof prints!“ Van exclaimed, suddenly. „That proves that Doc Clancy made good his escape. Where he can go, we surely can, so we will follow the trail.“

Sure enough, there was the trail made by two horses, leading on through the wild forest.

The sun was not over an hour high when the party set out once more.

„How far do you think we have traveled since we left the coast?“ said Jack, addressing the professor.

„About eight hundred miles,“ was the reply.

„That are what I call somethin' great,“ spoke up Lank Edwards. „Just think of it! Eight hundred miles through ther wildest country on ther face of ther earth, an' only lost one man! An' look what we have passed through, too. It is enough ter fill a book, I reckon.“

„You are right,“ returned Van, „and ever since we have started we have been chasing a murderer.“

„I think I'll be the means of stoppin' this chase of yours, Van,“ said the mate. „I'll give it ter ye plain, right now, that I am goin' ter shoot Doc Clancy ther first time I git ther chance. I can't help it, whether you like it or not; he's earned his fate a dozen times since I've known him, an' it's got ter be done.“

Our hero said nothing to this. He saw that the speaker meant what he said, and so he concluded to let things take their own course.

When he came to think over the matter, he concluded that Lank Edwards was about right. If Doc Clancy was killed, the murder of his uncle would be avenged, and that would settle it.

The party rode on in silence for the best part of an hour, scarcely exchanging a word until the edge of the forest was reached.

They beheld a long, level plain before them, which was dotted here and there by small groups of trees.

The trail of the two villains was before them, but although they looked carefully over the plain, they could not see a moving object.

As the sun was scorching hot, they concluded to rest until toward evening. A long ride under the rays of the blazing sun might prove fatal to them, the doctor said.

Selecting a cool, shady spot by the side of a small rivulet, the horses were turned upon the luxuriant grass, and the party prepared to take the rest they were so much in need of.

Thus far all hands had enjoyed remarkably good health, but it was owing to the medicines carried by Dr. Pestle.

It was probably four o'clock in the afternoon when they got ready to start over the plain.

Just as they were mounting they saw a number of horses coming swiftly over the plain toward them.

„Wild horses, I guess,“ observed the professor.

„No, they ain't, either,“ returned Lank Edwards, who had been gazing intently at the approaching animals. „They ain't wild horses, nohow, 'cause wild horses ain't likely to have men on their backs, an' these fellers have.“

„What!“ gasped our hero. „A party of mounted men?“

„That's just what it are,“ was the reply.

„Let's get under the cover of these trees and wait till they get a little nearer,“ suggested Jack.

They at once did so.

Ten minutes more and all were satisfied that the horses were mounted.

There were about fifty of them, and at the head of the column were two men in civilized dress.

It did not take our hero long to see that these two were Doc Clancy and the villain who had joined his forces with him.

He knew then that the scoundrels were bent on wiping them out. In some manner they must have come across the horsemen and made friends with them, and then got them to assist in their vile purpose.

„What do you propose to do?“ our hero asked, turning to his friends.

„I'll tell yer what I'm a-goin' ter do," said Lank Edwards. „I'm a-goin' ter wait till they git near enough, an' then I'm a-goin' ter shoot Doc Clancy, an' ther other feller, too, if I kin. If them fellers on ther horses behind 'em can't fight any better than they kin ride, I think we kin clean out ther whole business easy enough.“

Nearer and nearer approached the horsemen, and our friends could see that the mate was right when he said they were not good riders.

For the most part, they appeared more like drunken men than anything else, by the manner in which they wobbled about.

When the approaching band was within five hundred yards of our friends, Lank Edwards' rifle suddenly flew to his shoulder and two reports rang out in rapid succession.

Both Doc Clancy and his companion threw up their hands and fell to the ground.

Chapter XVI

A Remarkable Discovery.

The two villains had no sooner tumbled from their steeds than the rest of the horses scattered in every direction, their riders flopping about upon them like a set of scarecrows.

„By thunder!“ ejaculated Lank Edwards. „If them ain't dummies on them horses I'm a living sinner!“

„You are right," returned Van. „Come! we will go out and see if Doc Clancy and his partner are really dead.“

The words scarcely left our hero's lips when Doc Clancy suddenly sprang to his feet, and, mounting his horse, sped away with the speed of the wind.

It all happened so quickly that our friends were unable to make a move to stop him.

Lank Edwards again raised his rifle to his shoulder, and was about to shoot at the fleeing villain, when Van detained him.

„Don't!“ said he. „I want to capture him alive, if possible.“

„But he'll git away," persisted the mate.

„Well, let him; we will catch him again.“

„he horses with the dummies upon their backs now started at a sharp gallop after the one rode by Doc Clancy“

Van led the way to the spot where the other scoundrel lay, and found him breathing heavily, with a wound in his right breast.

A single glance told all hands that the man was dying.

„Give me some whisky," he murmured, faintly.

Jack Howard quickly placed his flask to the dying man's lips.

After taking a couple of huge swallows, the fellow breathed a sigh of relief.

„I suppose you want to know where we got the horses and rigged ‘em up,“ said he. „Well, I’ll tell you. We found ‘em in the woods t’other side of the plain. They belong to a nation of people who seem to be civilized, from what we seen of ‘em, and were rigged with the dummies when we came across ‘em. They followed us the minute we turned tail to the place, and Doc, he says it would be a good idea to ride back and get the best of you fellows. Where is Doc?“ and he endeavored to raise himself upon his elbow to look around.

„He has escaped,“ replied Van.

„Well, he’ll have to go it alone now. I’m about done for, I guess. Whoever fired that shot meant me; but I’m satisfied. I’ve been a bad man, and shan’t kick now because I’ve been done up by the ones I’ve been trying to injure so long. Give—me—a—a—little—more—whisk——“

Before the sentence was finished the man gave a gasp and fell back, dead.

„It is a wonder that he lived as long as he did,“ said Dr. Pestle, examining the wound. „Let us give the wretch a decent burial and then be off. He spoke about civilized people; we must look them up.“

There being no objections, a grave was scooped in the soft earth and the body buried.

Then our friends mounted their horses and started over the plain in the direction taken by Doc Clancy and the herd of horses.

Darkness overtook them before they reached the timber belt at the other side, but as it was moonlight, they kept right on.

A couple of hours later they reached the timber and followed a level roadway through it.

The belt was less than a mile wide, and ten minutes later the party halted, for the simple reason that they could go no further in that direction.

A huge stone wall, not unlike the great wall of China, was before them.

An iron gate of massive proportions stretched across the roadway, which showed that our friends had arrived at the entrance of some undiscovered city.

„Well, well!“ exclaimed Prof. Dreerland, in a tone of delight. „We have made the greatest discovery of the age. Who would have believed that such a thing as a thick wall of masonry and a huge gate of iron was in the very heart of Africa, where it is supposed that naught but wild beasts and savages live? This is something grand, my friends. We must get that gate open and see what lies beyond.“

All hands agreed with the professor, and then Van dismounted, and, striking a match, held it close to the ground.

He could see the fresh prints of horses’ hoofs very plainly, and this told him that Doc Clancy and the troop of horses must have gone through the gateway.

„We must open the gate,“ he said, rising to his feet. „Come! we will see if it is possible to do so.“

Van had scarcely spoken when the huge, iron structure swung noiselessly open, as if by magic.

In an instant our hero was upon the back of his horse.

„Come!“ said he. „We may be going into a trap, but I am ready to take the risk. Will you follow me?“

„We will!“ came the reply from all hands.

The next moment the boy urged his horse through the gateway, and his companions boldly followed him.

As soon as the last one was through, the gate swung back to its former place, making no noise whatever.

„I don't like this business,“ observed Lank Edwards, with a shake of his head. „It looks as though the old boy has got somethin' ter do with this place. Howsumever, I'll stick to the crowd.“

„We may as well go on,“ said Jack Howard. „We are in for it now, anyway. Here is a fine, level road before us, and we may as well follow it.“

„Of course,“ rejoined Van. „Doc Clancy has gone this way, and so must we.“

Leaving the gate behind them, they started along the road at a brisk canter.

The moon, which had been shining brightly a short time before, was now covered with clouds, and the sky showed signs of rain.

Therefore, it behooved our friends to reach a sheltered spot as soon as possible.

Presently it became so dark that they could no longer see their way ten feet ahead of them.

They came to a halt.

They had scarcely done so when they became aware of the fact that they were very close to a building of some sort.

They could see its front not ten feet from them.

Van dismounted and approached the building.

As luck would have it, he struck the door of the place at the first attempt.

Pressing his knee against it, he gave a gentle shove.

Contrary to his expectations, it opened readily enough.

Just then huge drops of rain began falling.

„We are in luck!“ exclaimed Van, turning to his friends. „Here is a stone building, which I don't believe is occupied. The door is open, so we may as well go in and stay till morning.“

The doorway was a large one, and was on a level with the ground, and, noticing this, Jack suggested that they bring their horses in, as well.

There were no objections, so in the whole party filed, all on horseback save Van, who led his steed.

As soon as they got inside, Dr. Pestle struck a match.

By the light it made they saw they were in a broad hallway, which looked as though it had not been used for a generation or more.

A broad staircase led upward from the hall, and as soon as they saw this they decided to leave their horses where they were, and use the next story of the building for themselves.

This move was no sooner decided upon than our hero was leading the way upstairs.

His companions followed slowly behind him.

When they reached the landing Jack struck a match.

The floor was in one vast room, which looked so ancient and strange that a feeling of awe came over them.

„I say, Van, what do you think of this?“ remarked Jack, turning around.

But there was no answer to his question.

Much mystified Jack glanced at his companions.

They were all there but Van.

„Van—Van!“ he shouted. „Where are you?“

But there was no reply. Our hero had vanished as mysteriously as though he had been swallowed by an unseen goblin.

Chapter XVII

What Befell Doc Clancy.

It will now be the proper thing for us to follow Doc Clancy and see how the villain fared after his escape from our friends.

The bullet from the rifle of Lank Edwards had not touched him, but, seeing his companion fall, he concluded to do likewise, for fear he might be fired upon again.

When he sprang upon his horse again and dashed away, he did not turn his head to see whether his friend had been killed or not, but galloped away from the spot with all the speed his horse could command.

What the dead man had told our friends about the herd of horses with his dying breath was true.

The two scoundrels had followed the roadway to the massive iron gate, and here discovered the queerly mounted animals waiting to get inside the wall.

They thought it best to leave, and when the herd followed them, Doc Clancy was in high glee.

He thought he would surely best Van and his party now. But the reader knows how well he succeeded.

When the fleeing scoundrel had placed a quarter of a mile between himself and our friends, he turned in the saddle and saw them digging a hole in the ground.

„The poor devil must be dead,“ he muttered. „Well, I’ll have to go it alone now. I suppose I had better make direct for that gate and try and get inside it and make friends with the people who live there. If I can do that, I may be able to set them against that young upstart, Van Vincent, and the rest of his gang. Well, I’ll try it, anyhow. Here goes.“

Clancy did not halt until he reached the gate, and he was just wondering how he was going to get through, when it opened.

Without any hesitation, the villain rode through, the herd of horses following him.

It was now dark, but he determined to let the horses take him to where they belonged. He had not proceeded very far before he noticed a number of ruined stone buildings, but as the animals did not appear to want to stop at any of these, he kept on.

When he had covered perhaps three miles over the hard, level road, he beheld a city before him—such as he had never beheld before.

We say a city, for though it did not contain over two hundred buildings, yet it was a city as far as its general appearance went. All its buildings were tall and beautiful, and built of stone, while the streets were broad and well paved.

The moment Doc Clancy entered it with the herd of horses at his back, a number of men rushed out to meet him and proceeded to catch the horses.

As the moon was now covered with heavy clouds for the first time that night, Clancy was not observed at all, and his horse was led away with those who had the dummies on their backs.

They were all placed in a large, comfortable stable, and then the men proceeded to remove the figures from their backs.

Doc Clancy now began to grow very uneasy.

He began to think of what would happen when they discovered that one of the animals had a real man on its back.

But the villain was desperate, and determined not to be killed or captured.

Watching his opportunity, he slid from his horse's back, and then quickly removed the rude bridle from its head.

„Now,“ thought he, „I'll lay low till these fellows go out. Then I'll sneak outside myself and see what sort of a place this is.“

This was a successful move, the men not noticing the deception at all.

Fifteen minutes later they left the stable. It was now raining, but Doc Clancy determined to go out, just the same.

Pushing his way between the horses, who were now munching their evening meal in a contented manner, he at length reached the door.

„This is a pretty tough night to go out, when you have nice, dry quarters like this to stay in; but I must see what sort of a place I am in, and work a way to make myself welcome,“ muttered Clancy, as he buttoned his coat about his neck.

The next moment he stepped outside in the storm.

The lights from houses on all sides of him could be seen, and he concluded to approach one of them and look in the window.

Selecting the nearest house for his purpose, he began crawling stealthily toward it.

In less than two minutes he was at the window.

A muffled cry of astonishment escaped the villain's lips as he peered in.

He was gazing into an oblong room, furnished something after the Oriental fashion.

The walls and ceiling seemed to be a glittering mass of gold and silver, and the light from a score of candles, thrust in candlesticks of the same metal, made the scene a dazzling one, to say the least.

Reclining on a divan was a woman, or, rather, a girl, for she could not have been over sixteen years of age.

She, too, looked like one of the dazzling beauties of the Orient, and was robed like the women of Egypt.

As Doc Clancy gazed at the ravishingly beautiful creature, his eyes sparkled.

„By Jove!“ he muttered; „if I could only make friends with the people of this place, and then marry that girl, I think I should be as happy as a king. If I only dared, I would open the window. My! what a beautiful creature! I'll do it, anyhow.“

Seizing the sash, he thrust it aside, and then sprang into the room with a single bound.

Foolish man! That was the very worst thing he could have done, and if he had only stopped to think he would never have done it.

As Clancy landed upon the floor the girl sprang from the divan and uttered a wild scream of terror.

„Keep still, my girl; I'm not going to harm you,“ Clancy hastened to exclaim.

But that one scream did the business.

The next instant a curtain was thrown aside and half a dozen men rushed in.

Before Doc Clancy could make a move, he was seized and thrown upon his back on the floor.

A silken cord was wound tightly about his arms and legs, and then in a twinkling of an eye he was whisked from the room.

His captors did not stop until they had descended a flight of stone steps, and Doc Clancy, who was now thoroughly frightened, felt a draught of chilly air blowing upon him.

Along a damp passage he was conducted, the men carrying lighted candles to show them their way.

Suddenly they came to a halt in a large, cellar-like chamber, and deposited their prisoner on the ground.

„I say,“ pleaded Clancy, „let me go, won't you? I'll get out of your country right away, if you will.“

„Silence! you dog of an Englishman,“ exclaimed one of the men. „You must die! You sealed your death warrant when you dared to enter the private apartment of one of our chiefs' daughters.“

„Oh, I know you will save me,“ whined the wretch. „You can speak my language, and surely you will not see me killed just because I came to your city a stranger and made a mistake.“

„It matters not whether I speak your language or not. To-morrow you must be thrown in the lion's den; you must beg him to spare you, not us.“

As if to doubly seal Doc Clancy's death sentence, a terrible roar rang out close at hand.

The villain had journeyed far enough through the African wilds to know what caused it.

It was the roar of a hungry lion.

„That is the fellow you will have to meet in the morning,“ said the man who had before addressed him. „We will place you in this pit next to him. Sleep well!“

Without any further ceremony, a door was opened and Doc Clancy, still bound hand and foot, was tumbled into a pit about twenty feet square.

Chapter XVIII

The African Utopia.

But what became of Van Vincent? the reader might ask.

By the time his companions started to ascend the stairs, he had reached the landing above.

Regardless of the fact that it was pitch dark, and that he was in a strange place, he started to walk straight for the head of the staircase.

He did not take over ten steps before he brought up against a partition with a jar, which immediately gave way.

Van heard the noise made by his friends ascending the stairs, and then he went shooting downward with the velocity of a cannon ball.

He had a recollection of rolling over and over in some damp, foul-smelling place, and then he lost consciousness.

When he came to again he found himself in an elegantly furnished apartment with a man bending over him.

„Where am I?“ gasped the boy, gazing wildly about him.

„You are all right now,“ was the reply. „You had quite a fall, but I have examined you and find no bones broken. Here, drink this, and you will feel first rate.“

Van placed his lips to the shining metal mug that was proffered him, and drank its contents almost at a single gulp.

It tasted like wine, only more delicious than any he had ever drunk before.

As the strange man said it would, it made him feel better, and he arose to a sitting posture.

Van glanced long and earnestly at the man before he uttered a word.

He saw that he was a Caucasian, attired in Oriental costume, and that was all there was of it.

„Who are you?“ asked the boy; „and what place am I in?“

„You are in the African Utopia, which is situated in the wildest part of the Dark Continent,“ was the reply. „Now, let me ask you a question: How did you get here?“

„I traveled from the mouth of the Congo River,“ returned Van.

„What purpose had you in risking your life to make such a dangerous journey?“

„I came here partly because I am following a man who murdered my uncle, and whom I have sworn to take back to the United States, if he is not killed before I am able to do it.“

„You said *partly*; you must have another reason for coming here, then?“

„Yes; I fell in with some Englishmen, who were starting on an exploring trip, and joined their party.“

„Where are they now?“ asked the man.

„In the house where you found me—or, at least, they were the last I saw of them.“

„You say in the house where I found you. How do you know but that you are in the same house yet?“

„I might be, but I don't believe it. That building was an old, tumble-down affair, and, judging from the appearance of this room, this is not.“

„You are right, boy. You are two miles from the place where you had the fall. I had been out setting a trap to catch a lion, and on my way back stopped in the cellar of the old building. Almost the first thing I stumbled upon was your body, and, finding that you were one of my own nationality, apparently, I threw you upon my horse's back and brought you here.“

„Well,“ said Van, after a pause, „I should like to go and look up my friends.“

„You remain just where you are. I'll send out a couple of men to hunt up your friends. You lie down and go to sleep, and you will surely see them in the morning.“

„I guess I'll do as you say,“ returned our hero. „To tell the truth I am so sleepy I can scarcely keep my eyes open.“

Whether it was the drink that caused it, or whether it was because he was completely tired out, we cannot say, but, anyhow, five minutes later Van Vincent was sleeping soundly upon the soft divan.

The sun was shining brightly when he awoke, which informed him that another day had arrived, and also that the storm had cleared.

He was in the same room he had fallen asleep in, and, rising from the divan, Van went to the window.

As he looked out and saw that he was in a little city, a cry of surprise came from his lips.

„So this is the African Utopia,“ he mused. „Well, it looks like a place where naught but enjoyment could be found. I never saw such a beautiful spot in my life.“

Our hero's meditations were cut rather short, for at that moment a door opened and a number of people entered.

To his great joy, he beheld his friends standing before him.

Yes, they were there in reality—Jack, Lank Edwards, Joe, and the professor and doctor.

Van did not utter a word till he had shook the hand of each.

„Where did you stay all night?“ he then asked.

„In this house,“ replied Jack.

„You did?“

„Sure!“ exclaimed Lank Edwards. „After we got tired lookin' for you in ther old building, we went downstairs by ther horses. About half an hour after that along comes two men, who said as how you sent for us. When we got here ther boss of ther house explained things to us, an' said as how you were asleep, so we concluded to wait till morning afore we seed you.“

„That's about all there is of it,“ said Jack, with a laugh. „But come! our host is waiting for us to come to breakfast. A deuced fine place we have struck, I can tell you!“

Van followed his companions from the room, and then all hands entered an elegant dining room, where the man he had met the night before was awaiting them.

A few minutes later they were seated at a table, enjoying a sumptuous repast.

During the meal our friends learned considerable about the little city they were in.

Three hundred years before, a band of Egyptians had discovered it almost the same as it now was, only that it was deserted.

The race who had built it had in some way become extinct, but their handiwork still remained, and glad enough were the little band to take it as their future home.

One hundred years after the band of Egyptians—numbering less than fifty—took possession of the city within the wonderful wall, it had over five hundred inhabitants, and with the growth of its people many improvements were made.

During the last century more than one exploring party—or what was left of the original party—had reached it and found it a veritable haven of rest and contentment.

As yet, no man who had ever reached the city had made the attempt to leave it, and thus it was that its inhabitants numbered over two thousand, nearly all modern languages being spoken by them.

Such a thing as money was not used in African Utopia. All hands worked, and the results of their different labors were freely exchanged, thus making everything of value equal to money.

When a man became too lazy to work for his living, he was thrown to a hungry lion as a warning to any who might chance to follow in his footsteps.

The people governed the beautiful place by electing a set of officers every year, and everything went on like clockwork.

The finest of silks and morocco were produced here, and the architects and builders were equal to any in the world.

Of course, our friends were much astonished when they learned all this, but they were forced to believe it when they looked at their surroundings.

They were at the breakfast table nearly two hours, and when they at length arose their host, who gave his name as Poppet, told them to follow him and they would see something worth looking at.

They were all glad to get outside, and when they did so they could no longer wonder why it was that none who came to the place ever left.

The air was balmy and soft, and as our friends breathed it they felt exhilarated and refreshed.

„By Jove!“ exclaimed Dr. Pestle, „I'll bet that such a thing as lung troubles are unknown here. Never in my life before have I breathed such pure air.“

After ten minutes' walk their host halted before a pit, which had a strong iron railing around it.

„Look down there!“ said he.

Chapter XIX

Doc Clancy's Confession.

When Van saw that it was Doc Clancy who had been thrown in to the lion, he could scarcely believe his senses.

Like his companions, he was spellbound for a moment.

As the wretched man cowered close to the side of the pit, the lion halted in front of him, as if to gloat over his victim's misery and terror.

„By Jove!“ exclaimed our hero. „Doc Clancy shall not die that way. When he leaves this world, he shall die with a rope about his neck.“

Quick as a flash he leveled his rifle at the lion and pulled the trigger.

Crack! As the report rang out on the still, morning air, the king of beasts rolled over upon the ground in the throes of death.

The bullet from Vincent's rifle struck the creature just behind the left fore-shoulder, entering the heart.

It all happened so quickly that none of the inhabitants of the wonderful city could make a move to stop the boy from killing the lion; and as soon as they saw what he had done, a hoarse cry of anger went up from their lips.

„You've played ther part of a fool, Van!“ exclaimed Lank Edwards, with a look of disgust. „By saving the life of the murderer of your uncle, you have placed yer own in great danger.“

„You are right,“ put in Poppet, who heard the words. „Young fellow, though you are my guest, I cannot be answerable for your safety.“

„It matters not,“ returned Van. „That man murdered my uncle, and I have chased him too far to see him die before I have a written confession from him. And then, again, when he dies I want to see him do so with a rope around his neck.“

It was wonderful to note the change that came over the face of Poppet when he heard the boy's words.

Turning to the excited crowd about the pit, he addressed them in the language of the city, telling them exactly what our hero had said.

This seemed to satisfy them, and the next moment the entire crowd were gazing at the plucky American boy with admiring eyes.

„Well,“ observed Poppet, at length, turning to our friends, „I am the master of all executions that take place, and overseer of prisoners as well. For the present I will have this man locked up, and to-night the city officers will decide upon what is to be done with him. It may be that they will approve of what you say; and if so, the confession you desire will be forced from him, after which he will be executed after the fashion of your country.“

„What did he do that caused him to be thrown to the lion?“ asked Joe, turning his large, dark eyes upon Poppet.

„He insulted the daughter of one of the best men in Utopia last night, and when a man does that here the penalty is that he shall be thrown into the lion's pit,“ was the reply.

Our friends were now conducted back to the house of their host, and here it was that they learned two things which had hitherto seemed rather queer to them.

The first was how it was that Doc Clancy had discovered the horses rigged up in such a curious fashion; and this was explained by Poppet as being a ruse practiced by his people to frighten their enemies who dwelt outside the wall. In this case the man who led the mounted dummies had been killed in some manner, and thus it was that Clancy and his associate had discovered the horses, who had returned to the gate in the huge wall.

The other thing which became plain to them was that of the iron gate opening and shutting without apparent cause, and we will explain it in Poppet's own words.

„Whenever the gate is opened it must be done by a person in the center of our little city,“ said he. „There are wires laid underground to the gate, and when admission is sought the person in charge of them becomes aware of it immediately, as a bell will ring twice in quick succession. A knob is touched and open comes the gate, and when the person or persons are through it shuts.“

„It must be done by electricity,“ remarked our hero, in great surprise.

„That is exactly what it is done by,“ was the reply. „All the power used in the city is furnished by it.“

Our friends were too much astonished to speak after they heard this.

But the city they had struck was indeed a wonderful one, and beyond this we will not say much of it, as we have not the space at our command, and, besides, it would be deviating from our story too much.

Shortly after noon, Poppet asked Van to take a trip with him to see the prisoner.

Of course, our hero was only too glad to avail himself of the opportunity, and the pair at once set out.

The distance to the place where Doc Clancy was confined was not great, and they soon arrived there.

It was the same place where the villain had been taken by those who captured him on his entrance to the house where the girl was.

The cowardly villain was seated upon the floor of the cell he was confined in, the picture of abject misery.

„How are you, Doc Clancy?“ said Van, placing his face close to the bars in the heavy, iron door.

A hopeful expression came over Clancy's face, and he at once rose to his feet.

„Have you come to take me out of here?“ he demanded, in an eager tone. „Who was it that shot the lion and saved my life?“

„In answer to your last question, I will say that it was I who killed the lion,“ was our hero's reply.

An expression of amazement came over Doc Clancy's face.

„You saved my life! You!—when I have tried to kill you so many times!“

„Yes, it was I, and I nearly got into serious trouble by doing it. Now, Doc Clancy, I want to ask you to do something for me.“

„What is it? I will do anything you ask.“

„I want a written confession from you that you murdered my uncle.“

For a moment the wretched man made no reply. Then he looked up slowly until his eyes were on a level with those of our hero.

„I will give it to you,“ he said, at length. „Write as I dictate, and when you have finished I will sign it.“

In a moment Van produced his notebook and pencil from his pocket.

The next fifteen minutes was spent in writing the man's words, and then, with a trembling hand, the wretch signed it, Poppet being a witness.

The confession implicated the lawyer who had charge of all the affairs of Van's murdered uncle, and the boy vowed inwardly that he should suffer for the part he had played in the crime if he ever got back to his home.

„There, now!“ exclaimed Doc Clancy, when he had signed the paper and handed it to Van, „I suppose you will get me out of here now, and let me go about my business.“

„He has nothing to say about a matter of that kind,“ said Poppet, coldly. „You have a serious charge against you for insulting the daughter of one of our prominent citizens and you must suffer the penalty of your rash act. Also, it is the law of the African Utopia that a man who is proven a murderer—whether the crime was committed here or in any other part of the world—must die. Your confession proves that you are a vile murderer, and therefore, you must die!“

„What!“ screamed Doc Clancy, in a frantic voice. „Van, you will not allow this, will you?“

„Come away!“ exclaimed Poppet, taking our hero by the arm. „Bandy no more words with the scoundrel.“

As they turned away from the cell, Doc Clancy uttered a yell of terror and fell to the floor in a fit.

Chapter XX

Our Hero Finds a Father.

Shortly after Van and Poppet arrived at the latter's house, a messenger came in, stating that the president of the city board would like an audience with the visiting strangers.

„We will get ready and go at once,“ said Poppet. „The president, who is a cripple, is an American, and no doubt he would be glad to see some of his own countrymen.“

„We are not all Americans,“ spoke up Jack Howard; „three of us are English, you know.“

„Four,“ added Joe. „My parents were born in England.“

„Well, two of us are natives of the United States,“ said Van; „and so we will be very glad to see the president.“

„So will we,“ exclaimed Jack. „I think just as much of America as any other nation on the face of the globe.“

„I think enough of her to give all I am worth if I was only back there now,“ observed Lank Edwards. „I’ve got a wife an’ three children waitin’ for me in ther land of ther free, an’ I am wery anxious ter git home again, I kin tell you!“

A far-away look came into the eyes of the honest-hearted mate, which caused his companions to change the subject.

In a few minutes they were ready to go to the president of the African Utopia, and with Poppet at their head, they set out.

As the city was very small, as was before stated, it did not take them long to reach the president's office, which was situated in the most pretentious building in the city.

Without any preliminaries whatever, our friends were ushered in.

They beheld a pleasant-faced man of middle age seated in a huge armchair, and when he arose to greet them they saw he was minus a leg.

Poppet introduced them as the six visiting strangers, but when the president had shaken them by the hand, he requested them to write their names in the book of new arrivals, so he might know their names.

Each one complied with the reasonable request, and then the man looked over the names.

When he came to our hero’s signature he started as though he had received an electric shock.

„Which one of you is Van Vincent?“ he asked, in a strange, unnatural voice.

„I am,“ replied Van, stepping forward.

The president gazed at the boy for fully five minutes before he again spoke, and it was plain to be seen that he was undergoing a great deal of excitement.

„I would speak to you alone,“ he at length said. „Your friends will please excuse us for a short time.“

„While you are engaged I will show our friends through the city building,“ spoke up Poppet.

„Very well, if all are satisfied.“

The next minute Van Vincent and the president of the strange city were alone in the room.

„So your name is Van Vincent,“ said the crippled man, gazing at our hero in a curious manner.

„It is,“ was the reply.

„Where were you born?“

Van quickly told him.

„Your mother is dead, is she not?“

„Yes,“ replied the boy, gazing at him in surprise. „My father is, too. He died somewhere in Africa, I believe.“

„No, he did not!“

„What!“ exclaimed Van. „Did you know him?“

„I did, and do now.“

„Where is he, then? Won't you take me to him?“

„He stands before you, my boy. I am your father!“

Had a bombshell exploded, Van could not have been more astounded.

Was it possible that he had found his father in the heart of the Dark Continent?

It seemed scarcely probable, and yet, as he gazed at the man before him, he felt that it was certainly true.

With a coolness that was remarkable under the circumstances, the president drew a time-worn pocketbook from his pocket.

Opening it, he drew forth three small photographs.

„There,“ said he, handing them to Van, „is the likeness of myself, and also those of my family, when I had been two years married.“

As Van gazed at the pictures a mist came before his eyes, and he was forced to catch the back of a chair for support.

The photos were those of a young man and woman, and an infant of probably a year old.

But this was not what caused Van to act so strangely. He carried duplicates of those very pictures in his pockets.

The man and woman were his father and mother, and the infant was himself.

That settled the whole business.

Father and son were united after years of separation.

„But, father,“ said Van, after both had somewhat recovered from their excitement, „how was it that you never came home?“

„It was impossible for me to make the attempt, my boy. Through the treachery of one of my own party, I lost my left leg just before I reached the gate of this wonderful city.

„I was picked up by the Utopians, and nursed back to health and strength, and then, knowing the terrible dangers I had passed through in order to reach this place, I agreed to live with them always, since it would be naught but suicide for me to start for the coast alone, crippled as I was.

„Your mother was dead, and you were in the care of my brother, whom I knew would take proper care of you, and so I tried to content myself here, and have succeeded very well, though many is the time I have thought of home and found the hot tears streaming down my face.“

„You say you lost your leg through the treachery of one of your own party,“ said Van. „Tell me how it happened, won't you?“

„I will do that in a few words, my son. It was this way: The party I was leading on my tour of discovery had dwindled down to eleven men—six whites and five blacks.

„All, save one besides myself, had often declared that they would travel no further, but, under our persuasion, they would again start out.

„I began to notice that the fellow who took sides with me had more control over the men than I did, but thought nothing of it until one day, when I gave orders to resume our march, after eating dinner.

„It was then that the man I trusted deliberately drew his rifle to his shoulder and shot me; and then without a word they started over the back trail, leaving me lying bleeding upon the ground.

„The man who did that was a cousin of yours, Van. His name was John Moreland.“

„What!“ gasped Van. „Why, the scoundrel is in the city this very moment. He is the prisoner who is confined in the cell.“

Then it was the elder Vincent's turn to be surprised.

Van now proceeded to relate all that had happened since his uncle's murder, and his father was deeply interested in the recital of the story.

„Well, my son,“ said he, after a rather long interval of silence, „John Moreland, or Doc Clancy, as you call him, will surely be executed, and after that happens I shall endeavor to work things so I shall be able to leave this beautiful country and go back with you to the land of our birth. And now you had better return to your friends and tell them that you have found a father. I will arrange things in my house this afternoon, and you and your companions will be my guests as long as you remain in the city.“

Van now left his father and started to hunt up Jack Howard and the rest.

He soon learned that they had gone to take a look about the ancient though beautiful city, and taking the direction they had gone, he started to find them.

The boy was so elated and full of joy at the miraculous finding of his father, that he hardly noticed anything as he walked along.

Just as he was passing a fine-looking edifice, he was startled by the shrill scream of a female in distress.

In a moment Van's chivalric nature was aroused, and he turned his eyes in the direction the cry came from.

By the side of the building he beheld a beautiful girl struggling in the arms of a powerful-looking man.

Quick as a flash, Van leaped over the low fence in front of the house and rushed to the spot.

The girl was doing her best to get away from the man, who now held his hand tightly over her mouth to prevent her from screaming.

The next instant our hero's fist shot out and the brute staggered and fell to the ground.

Chapter XXI

Diverse Matters.

The blow Van had given the Utopian was such a heavy one that the fellow was dazed for a few seconds, and staggered about blindly after he had risen to his feet.

The girl had promptly flown to Van for protection, saying in fair English as he did so:

„Save me from that man! He is a villain, and I hate him.“

„All right, miss,“ replied our hero. „I'll guarantee he shan't harm you while I am around.“

Meanwhile the man, who was a big, burly fellow, had recovered himself and now stood glaring at Van like an enraged lion.

He drew a long knife from beneath the coatlike garment he wore, and made a move toward the boy.

Crack! It was our hero's revolver that spoke, and the knife dropped to the ground with a ring, leaving the fellow's arm hanging limp at his side.

The report of the revolver could but attract a crowd, and the next minute over a score of people were on the spot, among them being Poppet and Van's companions.

The cowardly villain watched his opportunity to sneak off, his wounded arm dangling at his side.

„Tell these people what has happened,“ said Van, addressing the girl.

She obeyed him promptly enough, and when she had concluded a cheer went up from the crowd.

„Thank you,“ said she, turning to her champion and shaking him warmly by the hand. „Call and see me this evening; my papa will be home then. Don't fail!“

The next moment she left the crowd and entered the house.

„By Jove! Van, you are a dandy, and no mistake!“ exclaimed Jack Howard. „Here I have been all over this city, and haven't had an opportunity of being of service to an old woman, let alone a pretty girl like that. You are a lucky fellow, anyhow.“

„Why,“ observed Joe, turning his large eyes upon those of the young Englishman, „do you like pretty girls so much?“

„I like all girls, whether pretty or not,“ replied Jack, „but in all my travels I never met but one girl whom I liked enough to take for a wife; and I was not with her long enough to learn much about her.“

„Where was it you met her, may I ask?“

„Oh, it was here in this beastly African country. It was just after we started on our trip—some days before we came across you. She had a very pretty name, too. Masie Langford, I believe it was.“

All at once Joe began to act very strange. He reeled about like a drunken man, and would have fallen to the ground had not Jack caught him.

„Why, what's the matter, my boy?“ asked he, in surprise.

„Nothing—nothing. I had a faintness come over me, that's all. You know I am subject to fainting.“

„That's so, little fellow. Well, never mind, we'll get back to the house and you can lay down. Here, take my arm, I'll help you walk along.“

All hands now left the spot and started with Poppet for his house.

On the way Poppet explained to Van that the girl he had championed was the prettiest in the entire city and that she had suitors by the score.

She was the daughter of one of the city officers, and the same girl who had been insulted by Doc Clancy.

The fellow Van had knocked down was also a city officer, and Poppet was afraid there might be trouble on account of what had happened.

„In such a place as this there should never be any trouble,“ said Van.

„There has been very little heretofore,“ was the reply, „but ere long a great trouble will overtake the good people of the African Utopia. I have felt it in the air for months past.“

„What is the matter? Is there a sort of split between the people?“

„That's just it exactly. Our good president leads what I consider a loyal faction, and the man you knocked down a few minutes ago is the leader of the opposite side.“

„You think there will be a fight, then?“

„It is liable to happen at any time.“

„Well, let it happen. We will take a hand in it. I guess we have enough cartridges left to kill off a hundred or two.“

„I suppose you favor the president,“ said Poppet.

„I should say so. He is my father.“

„What!“ gasped the astonished Utopian. „Your father?“

„Yes, sir, he is.“

„Come off, Van. What do you mean?“ spoke up Jack Howard, who was listening to the conversation.

Van then related the result of his interview with the president.

Of course all hands were more than astonished. Their whole trip had been a regular romance, but Van finding his father topped it off completely.

But they had arrived at the house by this time, and nothing more was said on the subject.

That evening Van was more than particular in making his toilet.

He was going to call upon the pretty girl as he had promised.

He learned that her name was Metha Arundel before he set out.

He intended to make his call but a short one, as he had promised his father to be at the council meeting which was called to determine the manner of death Doc Clancy was to die.

Van had scarcely rapped upon the door of the house where the fair one lived when it was opened.

A servant ushered him into a brilliantly lighted room, where the girl and her father were awaiting him.

Both had learned by this time that Van was the son of the president, and they greeted him accordingly.

The old gentleman could converse very well in English, and when half an hour had been pleasantly spent he arose and took his departure for the council meeting, stating that he was going to make a charge against the man who had insulted his daughter.

Van soon forgot all about the fact that he intended to go to the council meeting.

Metha's company was so charming that it was quite late when he arose to go.

Though the couple had but met that day, both were badly smitten.

Now that Van had chased Doc Clancy to his doom, and found his father in such an unexpected manner, he felt that he could turn a little of his attention to love.

From the little he knew of Metha she just suited him; and vice versa.

It was too late to go to the council meeting when he left the girl, so he went direct to his father's house.

He found his friends all there with very ample accommodations assigned to them.

From them he learned that Doc Clancy was to be hanged the next morning at sunrise.

Chapter XXII

The Execution and what Followed.

Our friends were up and on hand before sunrise the next morning.

A vast crowd had already assembled about the spot where the execution of Doc Clancy was to take place.

Van and his companions took up a position in the rear of the crowd.

Though none of them were desirous of seeing the execution, they could not resist the temptation to be present.

It was now generally known throughout the city that Van was the son of the president of the board of officers, and many were the looks that were cast upon the boy by the city's inhabitants.

Just as the sun arose, Doc Clancy was led to the rudely constructed gallows that had been erected solely for his execution.

Before he stepped upon the drop, Van's father came forward and faced him.

When the villain saw the man he had abandoned in the African wilds to die, a look of terror came over his face.

„Wha-a-t!“ he gasped. „Are you alive?“

„I guess I am, John Moreland. So you were not satisfied when you thought you had left me to die; you made up your mind to find your way back home, after a number of years of your villainy, and murder my brother! But a Nemesis got upon your track, John Moreland! My son, Van, had pluck enough to chase you clear to this spot, which is entirely unknown to the outside world. Now, you vile hound! you have but a few minutes to live! Have you got anything to say?“

During the recital of the president's words the face of Doc Clancy turned the color of ashes, and when he had finished, the wretch uttered a horror-stricken groan and fell to the ground in a faint.

Van's father then spoke a few words to the executioner, and then walked to the spot where our friends were standing.

„Come,“ said he. „When I let my handkerchief fall the drop will go down. I have no desire to see the execution.“

Together the party walked slowly from the place.

A few yards from the crowd the handkerchief was dropped.

The next instant a dull thud was heard, followed by a howl from the excited crowd.

Van glanced back for an instant, and saw the form of Doc Clancy dangling in the air.

The career of the villain who had been chased to the heart of the Dark Continent was ended.

A sigh of relief escaped the lips of our hero.

„Now, if it is possible for us to get back home again, and take father along with us, I will consider my journey to Central Africa the most important event of my whole life,“ he thought.

As his father was compelled to use a crutch on account of his missing leg, the walk to their headquarters was a slow one.

On the way Van met Metha Arundel, who invited him to call again that evening.

He promised to do so, and a joyous look came into the beautiful girl's eyes.

As soon as the house of the president was reached our hero's father called him in his private office.

„My son,“ said he, „there is going to be trouble in this hitherto peaceful city before many hours.“

„What do you mean, father?“ asked Van in surprise.

„I mean just this: the man you struck yesterday for interfering with that girl—who, by the way, has fallen in love with you—has a vast influence among the people of this place. It was for that reason that the council did not indict him last night. I understand by good authority that he has sworn to kill you and all your friends. Now, I want to ask you what you think is the best thing to do.“

„As soon as we see it is getting too hot for us we had better leave,“ was Van’s reply.

„That’s it exactly. Since you came here I have had a very strong desire to get back to our own country once more. I have long known a way to go, but could not go alone. You and your friends will just make the party large enough, and I think we had better start this very day.“

„Let us wait till to-morrow, father. I have an appointment to-night, you know.“

„Do you care anything for the pretty Metha Arundel, Van?“

„Why?“

„Well, if you don’t I wouldn’t get up any foolish flirtation with her, if I were you. Her father told me this morning that she had resolved to have no other man for a husband but you, and when a girl once says a thing like that in this country you may rest assured that she means it.“

„I think I will ask her to go along with us,“ said Van, after a moment’s thought.

Contrary to his expectations, his father seemed pleased.

„I know her father would go,“ said he, quickly. „Her mother is dead, and they two comprise the entire family.“

„Very well,“ returned our hero. „You might as well speak to her father.“

The elder Vincent now produced a roughly drawn chart of the African Utopia.

He showed Van a river which flowed near the eastern wall of the city and thence in a southerly direction until it emptied into Lake Tanganyika.

„This map was drawn by a man who came to this place by that route,“ said he. „If we once reach that lake we will be all right.“

„We ought to have a large flat-bottomed boat,“ replied our hero, in a thoughtful manner. „We could then take our horses with us.“

„We have the boat already,“ Mr. Vincent hastened to reply. „It is a large one, and is used to transport blocks of stone from the quarry about ten miles above the city.“

„That settles it, then,“ said our hero, in a matter-of-fact way.

The interview now being at an end, Van sought his companions and told them of the plan for leaving the place and the African wilds forever.

All seemed much elated over it save Joe. The boy only shook his head in a wistful manner and said:

„I am glad you are going to leave and hope you will have the best of luck, and finally reach your own country. As for me, I am satisfied that I will never leave Africa.“

„What, Joe? Aren’t you going with us?“ asked Jack Howard, in surprise.

„Oh, yes—that is, I will make the start with you. To tell the truth, I feel as—as though I am not going to live long.“

„Nonsense!“ cried all hands in a breath.

„I have a presentiment that way, and I know it will come true,“ persisted the boy.

Joe's words were spoken in such an earnest manner that a grave feeling came over all hands in spite of themselves.

During the day they walked about the city a good deal, and toward evening Joe was as happy as any of them.

Van noticed that a large number of the population had congregated to the western portion of the walled-in place.

Presently he saw the man whom he had knocked down among them, and he began to grow suspicious.

„They are getting ready to start a riot,“ he thought. „I must see my father and get him to start the first thing in the morning.“

Our friends were on their way back to the house of the president when Van caught a glimpse of this man.

The villain—for such he was—cast a look of intense hate at the boy, and then, before his intention could be designed, he sprang forward and flung his knife full at our hero's breast.

Van made a nimble dodge and escaped the blade, but a cry of anguish behind him told him that it had struck some one else.

Turning quickly, he beheld Joe reeling backward with the knife sticking in his breast.

Jack Howard caught the wounded boy in his arms, and then, quick as a flash, Van turned and leveled his rifle at the cowardly murderer.

Crack! As the report rang out, the man threw up his arms and fell dead to the ground.

Chapter XXIII

Utopia is Left Behind.

As soon as Van saw that his shot had not been wasted he hurried to the side of Joe, who was now lying on the ground, with his head resting on Jack Howard's arm.

The wounded boy was breathing heavily, and a single glance told our hero that he had but a few minutes to live.

„Loosen his shirt collar and give him some air,“ said Dr. Pestle. „The knife has touched a vital spot, and it is only a question of a very few minutes before the little fellow will die.“

Jack at once unbuttoned Joe's shirt.

As he did so he turned as pale as death and a strange cry came from his lips.

„What is the matter?“ exclaimed the doctor, springing to his side.

„Joe is a girl!“ came from Jack's pallid lips.

His startling words seemed to bring the wounded one to consciousness, for at that moment the large eyes opened.

„Yes, I am a girl,“ came from the feeble lips, which were fast turning blue. „Mr. Howard, promise me that you will not hate me for following you in this guise when you think of me in after life! I followed you because I was left alone in the world, and because I—I—I loved you!“

„Great God!“ exclaimed Jack. „Surely you are not Masie Langford, the girl we met almost at the commencement of our trip?“

„I am, Mr. Howard. I—I—“

Jack Howard's companions were forced to turn their heads.

The emotion the young Englishman displayed was something awful.

He had frequently spoken of Masie Langford as the only girl he had ever met who would suit him for a wife, and now she lay, dying in his arms.

What Howard whispered to the dying girl will never be known, but whatever it was it caused her face to light up with a heavenly smile, then the lips of the two met, and Masie Langford, alias Joe, fell back dead.

The discharge of Van's rifle had caused a large crowd to gather, and when the city officer's friends saw him lying dead upon the ground murmurs of rage went up from their lips.

But as no assault was made upon them, our friends did not notice them much.

Poppet, who had been with the party since they started out to examine the city, and who was an eye-witness of all that had taken place in the past few minutes, dispatched a couple of men for a litter.

The necessary article was procured in a very few minutes, and the body of the slain girl being placed on it, the party set out for the president's house.

But few words were exchanged on the way, and when they reached the house, a gloom seemed to have settled upon all hands.

As soon as Van's father learned of what had taken place, he was for leaving the city at once.

„There is yet an hour before darkness,“ said he, „and I will have it announced that the friends of the murdered girl—or rather boy, as they think—desire the body to be buried outside the wall. Then those who are going to leave can take to the boat and leave the city behind them forever.“

„That is true,“ returned Van; „but I have not seen Metha Arundel yet.“

„I have, if you have not. Her father says they are ready to go at ten minutes' notice.“

„Very well, then. I will go after them at once.“

The distance to the house of the Arundels was not great, and Van soon reached it, finding what his father had said to be true.

Arundel was an Englishman, and as he was a sworn friend of Vincent's, he was ready to stick to him in anything he undertook.

His daughter had really fallen in love with Van, and, of course, she was only too glad to go.

The father and daughter mounted their horses, taking what few things they could carry, and then Van led them to the door of his father's house, where the funeral procession had already formed.

When the elder Vincent saw that all were on hand he gave the order to start.

About fifty of the Utopians accompanied them to witness the burial.

There was a gate at the eastern wall similar to the other one, and when our friends passed through this they saw a broad river in front of them.

A large, flat-bottomed boat was moored to the shore not over a hundred yards away.

A number of the Utopians promptly set to work to dig a grave in the spot selected by Jack Howard.

When it was ready Prof. Drearland repeated a short prayer, and the body of the brave girl, who had shared the dangers and hardships of the explorers, was tenderly laid to rest.

Jack was the last to leave the grave, and, when he did so, he noticed that his friends had already gathered upon the boat.

The Utopians who came with them to witness and assist in the burial of the girl, were standing at the gate waiting for them, thinking that the strangers were merely examining the boat.

It was fast growing dark, and casting a last look at the grave of Masie Langford, Jack Howard led his horse down to the water's edge and boarded the scowl-like craft.

He had scarcely done so when he felt the boat moving.

There was ample cause for this, since all hands had seized poles and were pushing with all their might.

Five minutes later the boat was in the middle of the stream, while the Utopians, who had been left standing at the gate, were running up and down the river bank in a state of wild excitement.

But darkness and the swift current of the river soon lost them to view.

Van's father, though his left leg was missing from the knee down, was quite spry, and he insisted that he should have charge of the boat during the night.

He was allowed to have his own way, and when the sun arose the next morning they were nearly a hundred miles from the African Utopia.

The current of the river was swift and steady, and when two days had slipped by the boat entered a large body of water, which the elder Vincent said was Lake Tanganyika.

We will not dwell on the voyage down the lake, but suffice it to say that it was really the body of water they supposed it to be, and in due time they arrived at the town of Ujiji, which was the nearest to anything like civilization they had seen since they started on their journey, barring the African Utopia, of course.

They were lucky enough to meet a party of Englishmen at this place, who were just about to start for Zanzibar.

One of them happened to be an acquaintance of Jack Howard's, and that made things satisfactory between the two parties, so they formed into one and set out for the coast.

Chapter XXIV

Conclusion.

It was nearly two months after our friends left the hidden city of Utopia before they arrived at Zanzibar, on the east coast of Africa.

At the request of Prof. Drearland they had kept all their wonderful discoveries to themselves.

Long before they reached the seacoast, Van and Metha Arundel had come to an understanding, and it was known to all their friends that they were engaged to be married when they reached a suitable age.

After a week's stay in Zanzibar—which, by the way, is not the nicest place in the world in which to sojourn—they embarked aboard a ship bound for London.

At the end of a rather tedious voyage they stepped on the docks of the famous British city.

It was here that the party became split.

Jack Howard, Dr. Pestle and Prof. Drearland had reached their home, and here they concluded to remain for the present.

A couple of weeks later Van Vincent, his father, Lank Edwards and Arundel and his daughter, Metha, embarked for New York.

They did not tarry long in this city after their arrival, but at once set out for the homestead of the Vincents in the quiet little country village.

Almost everybody in the village knew our hero, and when he stepped from the train with the handsome Metha by his side, the simple country folk were much mystified.

Before he had walked a hundred yards from the depot Van learned from one of his old friends that the house he had lived in so long was in the hands of the lawyer who had always done his uncle's business.

Our hero led the way to the best hotel in the village, and here the party put up.

Through the agency of his former employer Van got a good lawyer to take his case, and in his hands he placed the confession of Doc Clancy.

About a week later the village was agog with excitement over the arrest of Lawyer—who was one of the richest and most influential men in the county.

But when it became known that he was implicated in the murder that had caused so much excitement several months before, the excitement reached a fever heat.

Well, the next thing to take place was a trial, which was a long and tedious one, as such trials usually are.

When it did finally come to an end, it resulted in complete victory for Van Vincent.

The rascally lawyer received a sentence of twenty years in the State prison for the part he had played in the murder and fraud.

He is now serving out the sentence; but the last we heard of him he was not likely to live until it expired, as his health was very poor.

A few of the old villagers recognized Van's father, and he was given a royal welcome back to his native place.

Arundel, who was an Englishman by birth, concluded to remain in America the rest of his life.

Four years later Jack Howard, Dr. Pestle and Prof. Drearland made a trip to America.

They not only came to see the best country on the face of the globe, but to attend a wedding as well.

The reader will of course guess the happy couple.

They were our hero, Van Vincent, and the pretty Metha Arundel, who had been born and reared in the African Utopia.

Van asked the professor about his book, but the learned man claimed that he had not yet finished it to his taste.

However, he gave him a copy of the title page, which read as follows:

„Across the Dark Continent. Being the remarkable adventures and discoveries of an exploring party of six, with biographical sketches and portraits. By Prof. Drearland, the Greatest of Modern Explorers.“

If this book ever gets in print I would advise the reader to peruse it carefully, as it contains many details and minor discoveries that we have been compelled to leave out of this story.

We have just learned at this point of our writing that Jack Howard is making preparations to lead a party to the wonderful African Utopia.

Since the death of Masie Langford, Jack has never been exactly himself, and the poor fellow, no doubt, wants to get back to the balmy African clime and visit the grave of the girl who loved him, and who, for the sake of being at his side, traveled in the guise of a boy until she met her death at the hands of a cruel assassin.

And now we have reached the end of our story, which would never have been written had it not been for Van Vincent's vow.

