

The Man-Eater

or, Ben, King of Beasts

by Edgar Rice Burroughs, 1875-1950

Published: 1915
in »The New York Evening World«

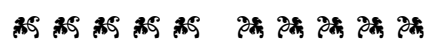


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Prologue

A NATIVE woman working in the little cultivated patch just outside the palisade which surrounded the mission was the first to see them. Her scream penetrated to the living room of the little thatched bungalow where the Reverend Sangamon Morton sat before a table, an open tin box before him and a sheaf of preferred stock certificates in his hands.

The Reverend Morton had heard such screams before. Sometimes they meant nothing. Again they might mean the presence of an inquisitive and savage jungle visitor of the order of carnivora. But the one thing always uppermost in his mind—the one great, abiding terror of their lives there in the midst of the savage jungle—was now, as always, the first and natural explanation of the woman's screams to leap to his mind. The Wakandas had come at last!

The missionary leaped to his feet, thrust the papers into a long manila envelope, placed them in the tin box and closed the cover as he hastened across the room to the wide fireplace. Here he kneeled and removed a flag stone from the hearth, slipped the box quickly into the aperture revealed beneath, rose, snatched a rifle from its hook over the mantle and rushed out into the compound. The whole thing had taken but a fraction of the time required to tell it.

In another room of the bungalow Mary Morton, the missionary's wife, and Ruth, his daughter, had heard the scream, and they, too, ran out into the compound. The Reverend Sangamon Morton found them there when he arrived, and calling to them to return to the bungalow, sped on toward the palisade gate, through which were now streaming the score of women and children who had been working in the garden.

Some native men were also hastening toward the gate from their various duties about the mission, converted heathen armed with ancient Enfields. The women who had first screamed and whose shrill cry of terror had aroused the peaceful little community now fell to her knees before the Reverend Morton.

"Oh, sabe me, massa!" she cried. "Sabe me from de Wakandas! De Wakandas hab came!"

Morton brushed past her and hurried to the gate. He would have a look at the enemy first. The Reverend Morton was not a man to be easily stampeded. He had answered to false alarms in the past, and though he never permitted the cry of "Wolf!" to find him unready for the inevitable time when it should prove a true cry he was prone to scepticism until he should have the substantiating testimony of his own eyes.

Now, as he passed through the gate, his first glance at the approaching "enemy" brought a sigh of relief to his lips. Coming out of the jungle were strange black men, it was true—warriors armed with spears, and even guns—but with them marched two white men, and at the sight of the pith helmets and the smoke from two briar pipes a broad smile touched the lips of the Reverend Sangamon Morton.

The smile expanded into a good-natured laugh as he advanced to welcome the strangers and explain to them the panic into which their unheralded appearance had thrown his little community.

And so came Jefferson Scott, Jr., and his boon companion, Robert Gordon, to the little American Methodist mission in the heart of the African jungle. And there one of them, young Scott, found a wife in the missionary's daughter, Ruth. Robert Gordon remained for a month after the missionary had performed the simple ceremony that made his daughter Mrs. Jefferson Scott, Jr. Gordon was best man at the wedding, and with Mrs. Morton witnessed the marriage certificate.

The two young Americans had come to Africa to hunt big game. Jefferson Scott, Jr., remained to cast his lot with his wife's people in their unselfish work among the natives. Gordon bade them goodbye at last to return to his home in New York, and the evening before his departure the Reverend Mr. Morton called him into the living room, removed the flagstone from the hearth, and, reaching in, opened the tin box and withdrew a large manila envelope.

"I wish, Mr. Gordon," he said, "that you would deliver this into the keeping of Jefferson's father. It contains practically the entire fortune which I inherited from my father and for which I have no use here, but which, in the event of anything befalling me, would be of inestimable value to Mrs. Morton and Ruth. It is not safe here. The Wakandas, if rumor is to be credited, are preparing to revolt against the Belgian authorities, and if they do we shall have to leave here and cross nearly half the continent of Africa to safety.

"Under such circumstances these valuable papers would but add to my anxiety and worries, and so I ask you to take them to Mr. Scott for safety until my mission here is fulfilled and we all return to America."

And so Robert Gordon bade them farewell and started upon his journey to America, the manila envelope safe in his inside pocket.

A year later a little girl was born to Ruth Morton Scott—a little girl whom they christened Virginia, after the commonwealth of which her father was a native son.

When Virginia was a year old it came—the hideous thing that was often uppermost in the minds of all that little band isolated in the heart of the savage jungle. The Wakandas revolted.

Lieutenant De Boes heard the challenge of a sentry at the gate. Languidly he looked in the direction of the sounds and inwardly anathematized whatever fool might be moving about in such insufferable heat. Presently he saw one of his noncommissioned officers approaching with a naked savage. The stranger was sweat-streaked and panting, his eyes were wide in terror. The corporal brought him before the officer, saluting. Lieutenant De Boes noted excitement in his soldier's expression.

"What now?" he asked, returning the salute.

“The Wakandas are upon the warpath,” reported the subordinate. “This fellow says that they killed nearly all within the village and then started for the mission where the Americans are.”

Lieutenant De Boes sat up quickly and, leaning forward toward the news-bringer, fired question after question at him. When he had satisfied himself that the man did not lie he leaped to his feet. All thoughts of heat or lassitude were gone. He gave a quiet sharp order to the corporal, and as that soldier ran across the parade ground to the beehive barracks De Boes ran indoors and donned his marching togs and his side arms.

Thirty minutes later a little company of fifty blacks in command of a single Belgian lieutenant filed through the factory gate and took up their march against a warlike tribe which numbered perhaps a thousand spears.

Once again came the terrified shriek of a native to the ears of the dwellers within the mission. Once again the men within ran toward the gates—ready but doubting. Jefferson Scott, Jr. was first among them, for he was younger and could run faster than his father-in-law. And this time the wolf had come.

The Wakandas were at the gates by the time the two white men had reached them. The Reverend Sangamon Morton fell, pierced through the breast by a heavy war spear before ever he could fire a shot in defense of his loved ones.

Scott, reinforced by the handful of men converts who lived within the mission enclosure, repelled the first charge, his heavy express rifle and deadly accuracy sending the blacks back toward the jungle, where they leaped and shouted until they worked themselves into a sufficient hysteria to warrant another assault. Time and again the ebon horde swooped down upon the gates. Time and again the handful of defenders drove them back. Yet it was without hope that Jefferson Scott, Jr. fought. He knew what must be the inevitable outcome. Already his own ammunition was exhausted and there was but little more good powder available for the Enfields.

They might hold out another day, but what good would that accomplish? It would be but to defer the final frightful moment. If they could but get word to the Belgian officer and his little command over on the Uluki. Scott questioned his companions as to the feasibility of getting a runner through to the factory. It was impossible, they said, as the whole country between the mission and the Belgians would be over-run by Wakandas by this time. Not one would volunteer to attempt the journey. They had fought bravely at his side, but none dared venture among the Wakandas, the very mention of whose name filled them with unreasonable terror.

But it was the only hope that Scott had. He must get word to the factory. If his blacks were afraid to bear it he must do so himself. His only hesitancy in the matter was the thought of leaving his young wife and baby daughter to the sole protection of the native converts. During a lull in the fighting he returned to the bungalow and placed the matter squarely before his wife and her mother.

“You must go, Jefferson,” said the older woman. “I can take your place at the gates. The men love me, I know, and will fight for me and Ruth as bravely as though you remained. I will remain beside them and give them the moral support they need, and if there is a spare musket I can use that, too.”

And so it was that as soon as night had fallen Jefferson Scott, Jr. slipped into the jungle upon his useless mission—useless, because a native had already carried the warning to De Boes.

Scott never reached the factory, nor did he ever return to the mission. Only the Wakandas know what his fate was.

De Boes and his soldiers arrived at the mission early in the morning after an all-night march. They came upon the rear of the Wakandas just as the savages made their last and successful charge. A score or more of the howling demons had scaled the gates and were among the defenders as the rifles of the Belgian's black soldiers volleyed into their rear. The Wakandas, taken wholly by surprise, broke and fled.

Inside the mission defenses De Boes found a dozen dead, and among them the body of courageous Mary Morton, lying just within the gates. In the bungalow Ruth Scott stood with a rifle in her hands, before the cradle of her little daughter—bereft in a single day of father, mother, and husband. The kindly and courteous Belgian helped her bury her dead, and sent out parties into the jungle in search of Scott, keeping them out until fear that he had been killed became a certainty. Then he conducted the mother and child back to the factory and from there arranged for their conveyance to the coast. Two months later Ruth Scott and little Virginia arrived at the Virginia homestead of the widowed and now childless Jefferson Scott—the father of her dead husband.

When, a year before, Jefferson Scott had learned of his son's marriage, he had not been displeased, though the idea of the boy remaining in Africa was not altogether to his liking. Then had come Robert Gordon with enthusiastic descriptions of the new daughter-in-law and her parents, and Jefferson Scott began to long for the return of his son and the coming of his son's wife to brighten the sombre life of the old mansion.

Gordon had delivered a long manila envelope into the elder Scott's keeping. "Mr. Morton felt that it would be safer here than in Africa," he explained. "It contains a considerable fortune in stocks, if I understood him correctly."

Then, after a long year, had come the news of the Wakanda uprising and the death of his son and the Mortons. Immediately Jefferson Scott cabled funds to his daughter-in-law, together with instructions that she come at once to him. That same night he took the long manila envelope from his safe to examine the contents, that he might have the necessary legal steps taken to insure the proper transfer of the certificates to Ruth Scott's name.

The manila of the wrapper was of unusual thickness, giving an appearance of bulk to the package that was deceptive, for when he opened it Jefferson Scott discovered but a single paper within. As he withdrew this and examined it a puzzled smile touched his lips. For a moment he sat regarding the document in his hand, then he shook his head and returned it to the envelope.

He did not place it again in the safe, but carrying it upstairs opened an old fashioned wall cupboard, withdrew a tin box from it, placed the envelope in the tin box, and returned it to the cupboard.

Two months later he welcomed Ruth Morton to his fireside, and from that moment until his death she was as an own daughter to him, sharing his love with her little Virginia, whom Jefferson Scott idolized.

And in the nineteen years that intervened it is doubtful if the manila envelope or its contents ever again entered the mind of the grandfather.

Chapter I

THE closed door of the bedroom opened. A bent and white-haired old negro walked slowly out, his face buried in a red bandanna and his shrunken shoulders heaving to the sobs he could not control. Down at the negroes' quarters the banjos and the old melodeon were stilled. Even the little piccaninies sat with hushed voices and tearful mien. In the big front bedroom of the mansion two women knelt beside a bed, their faces buried in the coverlet, weeping. There were tears, too, in the eyes of the old doctor, and even stern old Judge Sperry blew his great beak of a nose with unnecessary vigor as he walked to the window and looked out across the broad acres of his lifetime friend. Jefferson Scott was dead.

That night Scott Taylor, the son of Jefferson Scott's dead sister, arrived from New York. Virginia Scott had met him several times in the past, when a child, he had visited his uncle. She knew but little of his past life, other than that Jefferson Scott had paid on two occasions to keep him out of jail and that of recent years the old man had refused to have any intercourse whatever with his nephew.

Taylor was a couple of years her senior, a rather good looking man, notwithstanding the marks of dissipation that marred his features. He was college bred, suave and distinctly at ease in any company. Had she known less of him Virginia Scott might easily have esteemed him highly, but, knowing what she did, she felt only disgust for him. His coming at this time she looked upon as little less than brazen effrontery, for he had been forbidden the house by Jefferson Scott several years before, nor since then had he once communicated with his uncle. That he had returned now in hope of legacy she knew as well as though he had candidly announced the fact, and it was with difficulty that she accorded him even the scantest courtesy in her greeting.

Judge Sperry, who was searching among Jefferson Scott's papers in the library when Taylor arrived, took one look at him over the tops of his glasses, a look that passed slowly from his face down to his boots, ignoring his proffered hand and returned to his search without a further acknowledgement of the younger man's existence.

Taylor flushed, shrugged his shoulders and turned back to Virginia, but Virginia had left the room. He fidgeted about, his ease of manner a trifle jarred, for a moment or two, and then recovering his poise, addressed Judge Sperry.

"Did my uncle leave a will?" he asked.

"He made a will, sir," snapped the Judge, "about a year ago, sir, in which you were not mentioned, sir. He has made no other, that I know of. If I were you, sir, I should return to New York. There is nothing here for you."

Taylor half smiled.

"I take it you are looking for the will," he said. "Well, I'll just stick around until you find it. If you don't find it I inherit half the property—whether you want me to or not."

Judge Sperry vouchsafed no reply, and presently Taylor left the room, wandered out across the grounds and down the road toward the little village, where, if there were no acquaintances, there was at least something to drink.

Later in the evening, fortified by several Kentucky bourbons, he returned, nor could Virginia's mother bring herself to refuse him the ordinary hospitalities of that old Virginian home, and so he remained, following the body of his uncle to the grave with the other members of the family, the friends and the servants.

And after the funeral he stayed on, watching with as eager eyes as the rest the further search for the last will and testament of Jefferson Scott, but with homes diametrically at variance with theirs. Naturally he saw much of Virginia, though not as much as he should have liked to see.

He found that the little girl he had known years before had grown into a beautiful young woman—and while it angered him to realize the contempt in which she held him, he was not so wanting in egotism but that he believed he might win his way eventually into her good graces. For this reason he never reverted to the subject of the will. He did his best to impress upon Virginia and her mother that his one object in remaining thus away from his business was in the hope that he might prove of some service to them now that he upon whom they both had leaned for advice and protection had been taken away from them.

Mrs. Scott was beginning to tolerate him and Virginia to feel sorry for him, yet both could not but look forward with feelings of relief to the meeting of the administrators which was to be held in the library of the Scott house the following morning. They felt that the action then taken would decide their status legally and render the further presence of Scott Taylor unnecessary. That it had been Jefferson Scott's intention that Virginia should inherit his entire estate they both knew, and were equally positive that the administrators would adopt every legal means to carry out the grandfather's expressed wish. Judge Sperry had explained Taylor's legal rights in the event that no will should be discovered, nor was Virginia at all desirous of attempting to reduce the amount that might be legally his.

It was the evening before the meeting. Taylor had gone to town in the afternoon. Mrs. Scott had already retired and Virginia sat reading in the library when Scott Taylor entered. As the girl greeted him civilly her eyes took in his flushed face and unsteady carriage and she saw that he had been drinking more than usually.

Then she let her eyes fall again to her book.

Taylor crossed the room and stood where he could watch her profile. For several moments he did not speak, then he came closer and took a chair directly in front of her.

The effect of her beauty upon his drink-excited passions caused him to throw diplomacy and caution to the winds.

"Look here, Virginia," he said, leaning forward toward her unsteadily.

The girl looked up in polite questioning, but there was a warning light in her eye that a more sober man than Scott Taylor would have discerned and heeded.

"Yes?" The rising inflection was accompanied by a raising of the arched brows.

“Why not be friends, Virginia?”

Taylor continued. “We’re both of us due for a share of the old man’s property. It amounts to a big bunch of coin, but it’s mostly in farm lands. It ought not to be cut up. We ought to keep it intact. I got a scheme.” He edged his chair closer until their knees all but touched. “We’re about the same age. I’m not such a bad sort when you know me, and you’re a peach. I always knew it, and this time I’ve discovered something else—I love you.” He was leaning so far forward now that his face was close to hers.

The girl’s eyes were wide in astonishment and disgust. She rose slowly and drew herself up to her full height.

“I would not, for the world,” she said, “intentionally wound any man who came to me with an avowal of honest love; but I do not believe that you love me, and, further, the manner of your coming to me is all insult.”

Taylor had risen and was facing her. If possible she was even more beautiful in anger than in repose. His self-control vanished before the scorn in her eyes and in her voice.

“You can learn to love me,” he muttered, and seized her in his arms. Virginia struggled, but he crushed her closer to him until his lips were above hers. With all effort almost superhuman the girl succeeded in covering Taylor’s face with her open palm and pushing him from her. Unsteady from drink, the man staggered back against the chair he had left, toppled over it and fell in a heap upon the floor.

When, after an effort, he managed to crawl to his feet, Virginia had disappeared. Taylor sank to the edge of a chair, his face contorted with rage and humiliation. He was not so intoxicated but that he now realized the fool he had made of himself and the ridiculous figure he must have cut reeling drunkenly over the chair. His rage, instead of being directed against himself as it should have been, was all for Virginia. He would make her pay! He would have his revenge. She should be left penniless, if there was any way, straight or crooked, to accomplish it.

And in this pleasant mood Scott Taylor made his unsteady way to bed. It was late when Taylor awoke the following morning. Already the administrators had gathered with Mrs. Scott and Virginia in the library.

It was several minutes before the man could recall to memory the events of the previous evening. As they filtered slowly through his befogged brain a slow flush of anger crept over his face. Then he recalled the meeting that had been scheduled for today. He glanced at his watch. It was already past time. Springing up he dressed hastily, and left his room.

Half way down the stairs he heard voices coming from the library below. He paused to listen. Judge Sperry was speaking.

“Jefferson Scott never intended that that young scalawag should have one cent’s worth of his property,” he was saying. “He told me upon several occasions that he would not have his money dissipated in riotous living, and by gad, gentlemen, if I have anything to say about it Jefferson Scott’s wishes shall be observed,” and he pounded the black walnut table with a heavy fist.

“I think,” spoke up another voice, “that when the simple proofs necessary to establish legally Miss Virginia’s relationship to General Scott have been produced it will be a comparatively simple matter to arrange the thing as he would have wished it.”

“Simple proofs necessary to establish legally Miss Virginia’s relationship to General Scott!” The words ran through Scott Taylor’s brain almost meaninglessly at first, and then slowly a great light broke upon him, his eyes went wide and his lip curled in an ironical smile.

A moment later he entered the library. His manner was easy and confident. He sneered just a little as Virginia deliberately turned her shoulder toward him. A vast silence fell upon the company as he joined them. He was the first to break it.

“I am glad,” he said, “that we can now straighten out a few matters that have been causing several of you not a little annoyance.” He glanced defiantly at Judge Sperry. “Jefferson Scott, my uncle, died intestate. Under the circumstances, and the law, I inherit—I am the sole heir.”

Mrs. Scott and the administrators looked at the young man in surprise—Virginia kept her back toward him. For several seconds there was unbroken silence—the bald effrontery of Taylor’s statement had taken even Judge Sperry’s breath away—but not for long.

“Sole heir?” shouted the old man presently. “Sole heir? Sole nothing! You don’t deserve a penny of your uncle’s estate, and you don’t get a penny of it, if I can prevent it.”

“But you can’t prevent it, my friend,” Taylor assured him coolly.

“You can’t prevent it because, as I just said, I am the sole heir.”

“I presume,” bellowed the Judge, “that you have more rights here than General Scott’s granddaughter?”

“He had no legitimate granddaughter,” replied Taylor, the sneering laugh on his lips speaking more truly the purport of his insinuation than even the plain words he had used.

“What? You young scoundrel!” cried Judge Sperry, springing to his feet and taking a step toward Taylor.

“Don’t get excited,” said Taylor. “Of course it’s unfortunate that it became necessary to touch upon this matter, but I gave Miss Virginia an opportunity to compromise last night, which she refused, and so there is nothing else for me to do but insist upon my rights. It’s a very simple matter to rectify if I am not mistaken. All that Mrs. Scott need do is produce her marriage certificate, or the records of the local authorities where her wedding took place. And now, until she can establish the right of her daughter to make any legal claim whatsoever upon the estate of my uncle, I shall have to ask you all to vacate the premises and leave me in possession of what is mine and no one else’s.”

The administrators turned toward Mrs. Scott. She shook her head sadly.

“You all know, of course, as well as he does, that his charges are as false as they are infamous,” she said. “I was married in the heart of Central Africa. Whatever records there were of the ceremony have long since been destroyed, I fear; and I fear also that it may be a difficult thing to legally prove my marriage. Robert Gordon of New York was one of the witnesses. If he still lives I presume an affidavit from him would be sufficient?” She glanced at Judge Sperry.

“It would,” he assured her, “and in the mean time I intend to kick this miserable little puppy into the road.” And he advanced upon Taylor.

It was Mrs. Scott who stepped in front of the Judge.

"No, my dear friend," she said, "we must not do that. He had, possibly, legal if not moral right upon his side, for until I can prove the legality of my marriage he is in the eyes of the law the sole heir. And in the meantime Virginia and I shall make our preparations and leave here as quickly as possible."

"You will do nothing of the sort," exploded the Judge. "You will stay right here. If you leave it will be a tacit admission of the truth of a lie. I won't hear of your leaving, not for a moment. If any one leaves, this rascally blackleg will be the one to go."

"No," spoke up Virginia. "I shall not leave. The Judge is right."

"As you will," said Taylor. "I can't kick a couple women out of my home if they insist on remaining."

"You'd better not," growled the Judge.

It was not until afternoon that Mrs. Scott found an opportunity to pen a note to Robert Gordon. She had not seen her husband's old friend since that day twenty-one years before that she had waved him farewell from the veranda of the bungalow within the palisade of her mission home. He had stopped in London on his way to America, met and married an English girl, and thereafter for long years had spent much time in England or in travel. It had not been until after the death of his wife that he had returned to New York permanently.

As Mrs. Scott finished the letter an automobile whirled up the driveway and came to a stop before the mansion. Women's voices floated in to her and to Virginia to whom she had been reading the completed letter. The latter walked over to the open doors, where she glanced out, and then, turning to her mother with an "Oh, it's Mrs. Clayton and Charlotte!" ran out to greet visitors.

Mrs. Scott, as thoroughly imbued with Southern hospitality as a native daughter, dropped her letter upon the desk and followed Virginia to the porch, where she found her friends insisting that she and Virginia accompany them on a drive to the village. As it was too warm for wraps neither mother nor daughter returned to the house, and only too glad of an interruption to the sorrows and worries that had recently overwhelmed them, entered the machine of the Clayton's and a moment later were whirling down the road in a cloud of dust.

Scott Taylor, who had been strolling about the plantation, returned to the house shortly after they had left and entering through the French windows of the library, chanced to note the open letter lying on the desk. It required no subjugation of ethical scruples upon his part to pick the letter up and read it.

The letter ran:

My Dear Mr. Gordon:

My husband's father, Jefferson Scott, has just passed away, and as certain legal requirements necessitate a proof of my marriage to Jefferson I am writing to ask that you mail an affidavit to Judge Sperry, of this village, to the effect that you witnessed the ceremony.

My marriage certificate is, I imagine, still in the tin box beneath the hearth of the mission bungalow where father always kept his valuables, but as even it may have been destroyed during the second uprising of the Wakandas I imagine that we shall have to depend entirely upon your affidavit. I understand that the savages left no stone standing upon another, and that every stick or

timber was burned. That was eighteen years ago—a year after the massacre in which Jefferson, father and mother were slain, and so it is rather doubtful if anything remains of the certificate.

I am particularly anxious to legally establish the authenticity of my marriage, not so much because of the property which my daughter Virginia will inherit thereby, as from the fact that another heir has questioned my daughter's legitimacy.

I write thus plainly to you because of the love I know that you and Jefferson felt for one another, as well as to impress upon you my urgent need of this affidavit, which you alone can furnish.

Very sincerely,

Ruth Morton Scott

Scottsville, Va.

July 10, 19__.

“H’m,” commented Mr. Scott Taylor, with a laugh. “Well, I can let this letter go forward with perfect safety, as I happen to know that Robert Gordon, Esq., died two years ago.”

Chapter II

MR. DICK GORDON of New York, rich, indolent and bored, tossed his morning paper aside, yawned, rose from the breakfast table and strolled wearily into the living room of his bachelor apartments. His man, who was busying himself about the room, looked up at his master questioningly.

“I am wondering, Murphy,” announced that young man, “what the devil we are going to do to assassinate time today.”

“Well, sir,” replied Murphy, “you know you sort o’ promised Mr. Jones as how you’d make up a four-flush at the Country Club this morning, sir.”

“Foursome, Murphy, foursome!” laughed Gordon, and then, shooting a sharp glance at his servant; “I believe you were handing me one that time, you old fraud.”

But the solemn-visaged Murphy shook his head in humble and horrified denial.

“All right, Murphy; get my things out. I suppose I might as well do that as anything,” resignedly.

Languidly, Mr. Dick Gordon donned his golf togs and stood at last correctly clothed and with the faithful Murphy at his heels bearing his caddie bag. He crossed the living room toward the door of the apartment, halted half way and turned upon his servant.

“Golf’s an awful bore, Murphy,” he said. “Let’s not play today.”

“But Mr. Jones, sir!” exclaimed Murphy.

“Oh, Jones’s foursomes always start at the nineteenth hole and never make the first. They’ll not miss me.” his eyes fell upon a tennis racket, and lighted with a new interest.

“Say, Murphy, we haven’t played tennis in a coon’s age,” he exclaimed. “Go put those clubs away. I’m going to play tennis.”

“With yourself, sir?” questioned Murphy. “I never saw no one playing tennis at the club, sir, of a morning.”

“I guess you’re right, Murphy, and anyway I don’t want to play tennis. Tiresome game, tennis.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ha! I have it! Great morning for a ride. Hustle, you old snail, and fetch my things. Telephone Billy and tell him to bring Redcoat around. Get a move on!”

By the time Murphy had attended to the various duties assigned him and returned from the telephone he found his young master sitting on the edge of a chair with one boot on and the other half so, staring hard at the floor, a weary expression on his face.

“Can I help you, sir?” asked Murphy.

“Yes, you can help me take off this boot. It’s too hot to ride, and besides I don’t want to ride anyway. What the devil did you suggest riding for, eh?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I wish that you would say no, sir, for a change, Murphy. You’re getting to be a terrific bore in your old age. Go and tell Billy to never mind Redcoat.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Murphy, but he did not go.

“You’d better hurry, Murphy, and catch him before he leaves the stables,” suggested Gordon after a moment, in which he had divested himself of his riding breeches and started to pull on the trousers of a street suit.

“It won’t be necessary, sir,” said Murphy. “I didn’t telephone for Redcoat in the first place, sir. I knew as how you would change your mind, sir, and thought it wouldn’t be worth while calling up, sir.”

Gordon cocked his head on one side and surveyed his servant from head to foot for a long moment. “Yes, sir,” he said, at last.

Clothed again he wandered back into the living room, wishing that there was something in the world to hold his interest for a moment. The photograph of a handsome woman caught his eye. He picked it up and looked at it for several seconds.

“She photographs well,” he murmured, “and that is about all one can say for her. I’ll bet an X-ray of her brain wouldn’t show three convolutions.”

Then he passed to another, the picture of a young debutante at whose feet were half the eligible males of New York Society—and all the ineligible. He tossed the photographs aside in disgust. One by one he examined others. All wearied him. Everything wearied him.

“I wish,” he remarked, turning toward Murphy, “that there was something or some one on earth that could raise my temperature over half a degree.”

“Yes, sir,” said Murphy. “That must be the mail man, sir,” as an electric bell rang in the rear of the apartment and Murphy turned toward the door.

A moment later he re-entered with a bundle of letters in his hand, laying them on Gordon’s desk. The young man picked up the top envelope and opened it.

“Mrs. R___ requests the pleasure—” he read, half aloud, and dropped the invitation listlessly upon the desk to pick up and open the next. “The Blank Club

announces—The Blank Club is always announcing tiresome things,” he sighed, and dropped the communication into the waste basket.

“Mrs. F. Benton J___ and Miss J___ will be at home ___ which is a dang sight more than Mr. F. Benton J___ can ever say,” commented Mr. Gordon, gathering up the next, which proved to be another invitation. One after another the young man opened the envelopes, nor did any succeed in erasing the bored expression from his countenance.

The last he glanced at with a faint tinge of curiosity before opening. The feminine hand writing was unfamiliar, which was nothing unusual, but the postmark it was that drew his interest—Scottsville, Virginia.

“Now, who the devil do I know in Scottsville, Virginia?” he asked himself as he drew his paper knife through the flap of the envelope. “Oh, it’s addressed to Dad!” he exclaimed, suddenly noting his father’s name upon the envelope. “Dear old Dad,” sighed the young man; “I never lacked bully good company when you were alive, and I didn’t know then what it meant to be bored. I wonder if you know how I miss you.”

He turned first to the signature at the close of the letter. “Ruth Morton Scott,” he read. “H’m I’ve heard Dad speak of you, and Jefferson Scott, Jr., your husband, and the tragedy at the mission. Lord, what an awful place that must have been for a young girl! It was bad enough three years ago when Dad and I camped among its ruins; but twenty years ago the country must have been awful for white women.”

As Dick Gordon read the letter through slowly his face reflected for the first time in days a real interest. Toward the close he muttered something that sounded like “Damned cad,” and then he carefully re-read the letter. After the second reading he sat upon the edge of his desk, the letter still in the hand that had dropped to his knee, and stared fixedly and unseeingly at the barbaric patterns of the Navajo rug at his feet.

For ten minutes he sat thus; then he sprang up, animation reflected upon his face and determination in his every movement. Weariness and lassitude had been swept away as by magic. Seating himself at the desk he drew writing materials from a drawer and for ten minutes more was busily engaged in framing a letter. This done he rang for Murphy.

“Skip out and post this, you old tortoise,” he shouted, “and then go and book passage for the two of us on the first boat that sails direct or makes good connections for Mombasa—do you know where it is?”

“Yes, sir; Africa, sir,” replied the imperturbable Murphy, in as matter of fact a tone as though White Plains was to have been their destination.

Mr. Dick Gordon always had been an impulsive young man, his saving characteristic being an innate fineness of character that directed his impulses into good channels, if not always wisely chosen ones. His letter to Mrs. Scott had been written upon the impulse of the moment—an impulse to serve his father’s friend coupled with a longing for adventure and action—for a change from the monotony of his useless existence.

The following day, as Scott Taylor, mounted upon General Scott’s favorite saddle horse, rode leisurely about “my plantation,” as he now described the Scott estate, he chanced to meet the little wagon of the Rural Free Delivery carrier coming from town.

“Anything for The Oaks?” he asked, reining in.

The man handed him a packet of letters and papers, clucked to his bony old horse and drove on. Taylor ran through the letters. There was one that interested him—it bore the name and address of Richard Gordon on the flap. This he thrust into his inside pocket. Then he rode up the driveway, turned his horse over to a negro, and entered the library. It was empty, and laying the balance of the mail upon the table he made his way to his own room. Here he quickly opened and read Gordon’s letter to Mrs. Scott. His eyes narrowed and his brows contracted with the reading of the last paragraph::

“Father has been dead two years; but I know all about the location of the mission, as I visited it three years ago while lion hunting with him. As I am just about to leave for Africa again I shall make it a point to recover the papers you wish.”

Taylor crumpled the letter angrily in his hand. “The fool!” he muttered, “what does he want to butt in for?”

Then came a knock upon the door and Taylor hastily crammed the letter into the pocket of his coat.

“Come in!” he snapped, and an old negress entered with fresh towels and bed linen. As she moved in her slow and deliberate way about her duties Taylor sat with puckered brows and narrowed lids gazing through the window. It was not until the woman had left the room that he arose. Now he seemed to have reached a decision that demanded rapid action. He snatched off his coat, throwing it across the bed, where it dropped over the side to the floor beyond. His trousers he flung on the floor; his shirt, collar and tie upon the center table, and in fifteen minutes he was dressed in fresh linen and another suit and cramming his belongings into his bag.

Running downstairs and out to the stables, he shouted to a hostler to harness the team and take him to the station. Mrs. Scott and Virginia had the car out, so he was forced to content himself with the slower method of transportation. Forty-five minutes later he boarded a northbound train for New York, and late that night rang the bell of an apartment in West One Hundred and Forty-Fifth Street.

A bleached blonde in a green kimono opened the door in response to his ring.

“Why, hello, kid!” she cried when the dim light in the hallway revealed his features to her. “You’re just in time for a snifter. Where you been keepin’ yourself? Jim and me were talkin’ about you not five minutes ago. Come on in; the gang’s all here,” and she grasped him by the lapel of his coat, drew him into the hall and slammed the door.

“I’ve been doing the rural,” replied Taylor with a laugh; “and, take it for me, it’s mighty good to be back again where there are some live ones.”

He preceded the girl into the dining room of the little apartment, where two men, seated at the dining table with a deck of cards, a bottle of Scotch, a syphon and three glasses rose as he entered and greeted him with a noisy welcome.

“Well, well! Little ol’ kid back again!” cried one.

“Hello, Jim! Hello, Bill!” cried Taylor, grasping their outstretched hands. “You sure look good to me.”

“Get another glass, Blanche,”

Jim called to the girl. “Sit in, kid, and we’ll have a little round o’ roodle—dollar limit—whatd’yu say?”

“Piker game,” sneered Taylor, with a grin. “I’m dealing in millions, just now. Throw your cards in the goboon and listen to me, if you want to make a hundred thou apiece.” He paused to note the effect of his remark.

“Quick, Blanche!” cried Jim.

“Get the poor devil a drink. Can’t you see he’s dying of thirst and gone bug?”

Taylor grinned. “I’m sure dying of thirst alright,” he admitted, “but I’m not bug. Now listen—here’s how, thanks!—you guys are broke. You always have been and always will be till you stop piking. Once in a while you pull down a couple of simoleons and then sweat blood for a week or so for fear you’ll be pinched and get a couple of years on the Island. I’ve got a real proposition here; but it’s a man’s job, though there isn’t any chance of a comeback because we’ll pull it off where there’s no lamp posts and no law.”

He paused and eyed his companions.

“Spiel!” said Bill.

Taylor narrated the events that had taken place during the past week.

“And now,” he concluded, “if this Buttinsky Gordon brings back that marriage certificate I can kiss all my chances goodbye, for there isn’t a court in that neck of the woods that would give me a look in with that Scott chicken if she had a ghost of a case.”

“And you want us to?” Jim paused.

“You guessed it the first time,” said Taylor. “I want you to help me follow Gordon, take that paper away from him—croak him.”

For a moment the four sat in silence.

“Why do you have to croak him?” asked the girl.

“So he can’t come back and swear that he seen the certificate,” said Bill. “That would be just as good as the certificate itself in any court, against the kid.”

“There isn’t the least chance of our getting in wrong either,” explained Taylor, “because we can lay it all onto the natives or to an accident and there won’t be anybody to disprove it—if we are suspected; but the chances are that we can pull it off without anyone being the wiser.”

“And what did you say we got out of it?” asked Bill.

“A hundred thou apiece the day I get the property in my hands,” replied Taylor. “If you could get hold of the certificate first it would be fine and dandy, but we’ve got to follow Gordon to Central Africa to find where it is, and by that time he’ll have it. So the only chance we have is to pass him the K. O. and take it away from him. I’ll sure breathe easier after I’ve seen that piece of paper go up in smoke.”

James Kelley and William Gootch were, colloquially, short sports. They had rolled many a souse and separated more than a single rube from his bank roll by such archaic means as wire tapping and fixed mills, but so far they never had risen to the heights of murder. The idea found them tremulous but receptive. Their doubts were based more upon the material than the ethical. Could they get away with it without danger of detection. Ah, that was the question—the only question.

“Well?” said Taylor, after a long pause, during which the other two had drained their glasses while the girl sat revolving hers upon the table cloth between her fingers.

“I’m game,” announced Kelley, dodging the girl’s eyes and looking sideways at Gootch.

“So’m I!” declared the latter.

And so it happened that when Mr. Dick Gordon walked up the gang plank of the liner that was to bear him as far as Liverpool in his journey to Africa, three men, leaning over a rail on an upper deck, watched him with interested eyes.

“That’s him,” said Taylor, “the tall one, just in front of the solemn looking party that resembles a Methodist minister crossed in love—only he ain’t. He’s Gordon’s man.”

As neither Gordon nor Murphy were acquainted even by sight or repute with any of the precious three, the latter made no attempt to avoid them during the trip. It was Taylor’s intention to scrape an acquaintance with Gordon after they had changed ships at Liverpool, when he would then know for certain Gordon’s destination, and could casually announce that he and his companions were bound for that very point on a hunting expedition.

All went well with his plans until after they had sailed from Liverpool for Mombasa, when the depravity which was inherent in Kelley and Gootch resulted in an unpleasantness which immediately terminated all friendly relations between Gordon and the three. Taylor had succeeded in drawing Gordon into conversation soon after sailing from Liverpool, when he casually remarked that he and his friends were bound for the country about Victoria Nyanza in search of lions.

“Is that so?” exclaimed Gordon. “I am going into the neighborhood of Albert Edward Nyanza myself, and shall take the route from Mabido around the north end of Victoria Nyanza.” And a common interest established, the two became better acquainted.

Then Taylor introduced his two friends and later on Kelley suggested cards. Taylor tried to find all opportunity to warn his accomplices against the crookedness which he knew was second nature with them.

He would have preferred to let Gordon win, but the estimable Messieurs Kelley and Gootch, considering a bird in the hand worth two in the jungle, swooped down upon the opportunity thus afforded them to fleece their prey. The result was that after half all hour of play Gordon rose from the table, a rather unpleasant light in his eyes, cashed in his remaining checks and quit the game.

“Why, what’s the matter, old man?” queried Taylor, inwardly cursing Gootch and Kelley.

“I wouldn’t force an explanation if I were you,” replied Gordon coldly.

“The captain might overhear.”

Taylor flushed and Gordon walked away, which was the end of the acquaintance upon which Taylor had based such excellent plans.

“You boobs are wonders,” sneered Taylor. “You must have made all of fifty dollars apiece out of it—and ruined every chance we had to travel right to the mission in Gordon’s company,” and he turned disgustedly away and sought his cabin.

Chapter III

SOPHRONIA was blithely humming Dixie as she went about her work on the second floor of the Scott house. Occasionally she broke the monotony by engaging in heated discussions with herself.

"Yassem," she said, shaking her head, "Ah never done laik dat Mistah Scott Taylor. He may be po' Miss Do'thy's boy; but he's po' white trash, jes' de same. Yass'm. An' look yere," as she pushed the bed out from the wall to ply her broom beneath.

"Jes' look yere! Dere he's gone and lef' his coat. Shif' less, das what he is—a throwin' his coat around laik dat," and she seized the garment with a vigorous shake.

Throwing the coat across her arm, the negress carried it down to the library, where Mrs. Scott and Virginia were sitting.

"Heah dat Mistah Scott Taylor's coat," she announced, laying it on the table. "What Ah done goin' do wif it—give it to dat good-fer-nothin' nigger Samu-el?"

"No, Sophronia," said Mrs. Scott, "we'll have to send it to him," and she picked up the garment to wrap it for mailing. As she folded it a crumpled sheet of note paper fell from a side pocket. Virginia picked it up to replace it in the coat, when, by chance, she saw her mother's name upon the top of the sheet.

"Why," she exclaimed, "this is yours, mother," and she spread the note out, smoothing it upon the table top. "It's a letter to you. How in the world did it happen to be in Scott's coat?"

Mrs. Scott took the note and read it; then she handed it to her daughter. When Virginia had completed it she looked up at her mother, her face clouded and angry.

"Why, the scoundrel!" she exclaimed. "He actually has been intercepting your mail." Then she glanced again at the date line and her eyes opened wide. "Mother!" she ejaculated. "This letter must have come the very day Scott left in such a hurry. It must have been because of this letter that he did leave. What can it mean?"

Mrs. Scott shook her head.

"I know," announced Virginia.

"He has gone to prevent Mr. Gordon from recovering the certificate or else to follow him and obtain possession of it himself. There could be no other explanation of his hurried departure, immediately after the receipt of this letter."

"It does look that way, Virginia; but what can we do?"

"We can wire Mr. Gordon at once."

"What can we say that will not appear silly in a telegram, unless we actually accuse Scott of criminal designs," argued Mrs. Scott, "and we cannot do that, for we have only conjecture to base a charge upon."

"I can go to New York and talk with Mr. Gordon," said Virginia, "and that is just what I shall do."

"But, my dear—" Mrs. Scott started to expostulate.

"But I am," said Virginia determinedly, and she did.

To her dismay she found Mr. Richard Gordon's apartment locked and apparently untenanted, for there was no response to her repeated ring of the bell. Then she inquired at another apartment across the hall. Here a house man informed her that Mr. Gordon's man had told him that he and Mr. Gordon were leaving for Africa—he even recalled the name of the liner upon which they had sailed for Liverpool.

What was she to do? Well, the first thing was to assure herself as to whether Scott Taylor had also sailed for Africa, and if not to arrange to have him watched until she could get word to Mr. Richard Gordon. The taxi that had brought her to Gordon's apartment was waiting at the curb.

Descending to it, she gave the driver instructions to take her to the office of a certain steamship company—she would examine the passenger list and thus discover whether Taylor had sailed on the same boat with Gordon; but after examining the list and finding Taylor's name not among those of the passengers it suddenly occurred to her that the man would doubtless have assumed a name if his intentions were ulterior. Now she was in as bad a plight as formerly.

She racked her brain for a solution to her problem. It would do no good to wire Gordon, for he would not know Taylor if he saw him, and anyway it was possible that Taylor had not followed him and that she would only be making herself appear silly by sending Gordon a melodramatic wireless.

"I only wish," she muttered to herself, "that I knew whether or not Scott Taylor has followed him to Africa. How can I find out?"

And then came a natural solution of her problem—to search for Scott Taylor himself in New York. Her first thought was of a city directory, and here she found a Scott Taylor with an address on West 145th Street, and a moment later her taxi was whirling her uptown in that direction.

It was with considerable trepidation that Virginia Scott mounted the steps and rang the bell beneath the speaking tube. She feared Taylor and knew that she was doing a risky thing in thus placing herself even temporarily in his power; but loyalty and gratitude toward Richard Gordon, a stranger who had put his life, maybe, in jeopardy to serve her and her mother, insisted that she accept the risk, and so when the latch of the front door clicked and a voice, ignoring the speaking tube, called down from above for her to come up, she bravely entered the dark stairway and marched upward, to what she had no idea. She had been glad to note that the voice from above had been that of a woman. It made her feel more at her ease; but when she reached the topmost step and found a slovenly young woman with bleached hair and a green kimono awaiting her, her heart sank.

"Does Mr. Scott Taylor live here?" she asked.

"Yes, but he ain't at home. What do you want—anything I can do for you?"

"Has he left the city?" asked Virginia.

The girl's eyes narrowed, and Virginia noted it, but she thought, too, that she saw a trace of fear in them. She was convinced that this woman could tell her all she wished to know, but how was she to get the information from her?

"May I come in a moment and rest?" she asked. "It's rather a long climb up here from the street," and she smiled—one of those delightful smiles that even a woman admires in another woman.

"Sure!" said the girl. "Come right in. Don't mind how things look. I'm here alone now and takin' it easy. You have to keep things straightened around here when the men folks are home, or they're always growlin'."

So the men folks were away!

"What a cute little place you have here," said Virginia. "You are Mrs. Taylor?"

The girl flushed just a trifle.

"No," she replied. "My man's name is Kelley. Mr. Taylor boards with us when he's in town."

And afterward when she addressed her as Mrs. Kelley, Virginia could not but note an odd expression around the corners of the girl's mouth.

"Is Mr. Taylor out of town now?" asked Virginia.

The girl looked her straight in the eyes for a moment before she replied.

"Say, look here," she demanded at last. "What's your game? Who are you, anyhow and what's your idea in doin' all this rubberin' after Kid Taylor?"

For a moment Virginia did not know what answer to make, and then, impulsively, she decided to tell this girl a part of her conjectures at least, in the hope that either sympathy for Gordon or fear of the consequences upon Taylor would enlist her services in Virginia's behalf.

There was that in the girl's face which convinced Virginia that beneath the soiled green kimono and evidences of dissipation in the old-young face there lay a kind heart and a generous disposition. And so she told her.

Her story was not all news to Blanche. She had heard most of it from Taylor's lips. When Virginia had finished the girl sat glowering sullenly at the floor for several seconds. At last she looked up.

"I don't know," she said, "what strings Kid Taylor has on me. He ain't never done nothing except to egg Jim on first to one job and then to another that Taylor didn't have the nerve to pull off himself. Jim's been to the Island once already for a job that Taylor worked up an' then sat right here drinkin' high-balls an' tryin' to flozzie up to me while Jim and Bill were out gettin' pinched.

"An' now—" she paused, a startled look coming into her eyes. "An' now he's framed up a murder for them, 'cause he ain't got the nerve to do it himself."

"You mean," cried Virginia, "that they have really followed Mr. Gordon to Africa to murder him?" Blanche nodded, affirmatively. Then she leaned forward toward her caller.

"I've told you," she said, "because I thought you might find a way to stop them before they did it. I don't want Jim sent to the chair. He's always been good to me. But for Gawd's sake don't let them know I told you. Bill 'ud kill me, an' Jim 'ud quit me, I'd care more about that than the other. You won't tell, will you?"

"No," said Virginia, "I won't. Now, tell me, they sailed on the same boat as Mr. Gordon?"

"Yes, Jim and Bill and Taylor, an' they were goin' to follow Gordon until he got the paper, then croak him an' take it away an' say it was an accident or something."

Virginia Scott rose from the chair upon which she had been sitting. Outwardly she was calm and collected, but inwardly her thoughts were in a confused and hysterical jumble in which horror predominated. What was she to do?

How helpless she was to avert the grim tragedy. She thought of cabling Gordon, but when she suggested the plan to Blanche the girl pointed out that it was too late—Gordon must already have left the end of the railroad and be well upon his way into the interior.

For a moment Virginia stood in silence. Then she held out her hand to the young woman.

“I thank you,” she said. “You have done right to tell me all that you have. Goodbye?”

“What are you going to do?” asked Blanche.

“I don’t know yet,” replied Virginia. “I want to think—maybe a solution will come.”

And as she was driving back to her hotel the solution did come—in the crystallization of a determination to take the saving of Richard Gordon into her own hands. It was for her that he was risking his life. She would be a coward to do one whit less than her plain duty. There was no one upon whom she could call to do this thing for her, since she realized that whoever attempted it must risk his life in pitting himself against Taylor and his confederates—desperate men who already had planned upon one murder in the furtherance of their dishonorable purpose.

She thought of writing her mother first; but deliberation assured her that her parent would do everything in her power to prevent the carrying out of a scheme which Virginia herself knew to be little short of madness—and yet she could think of no other way. No, she would wait until it was too late to recall her before she let her mother know her purpose.

So instead of returning at once to her hotel, Virginia drove to the offices of a transatlantic steamship company, where she made inquiries as to sailings and connections for Mombasa, Africa. To her delight she discovered that by sailing the following morning, she could make direct connections at Liverpool. Once committed to her plan she permitted no doubts to weaken her determination, but booked her passage immediately and returned uptown to make purchases and obtain currency and a letter of credit through a banker friend of her grandfather.

The morning that she sailed she posted a long letter to her mother in which she explained her plans fully, and frankly stated that she had intentionally left her mother in ignorance of them until now for fear she would find the means to prevent their consummation.

“I know that, to say the least,” she wrote, “the thing that I am going to do is most unconventional and I realize also that it is not unfraught with dangers; but I cannot see a total stranger sacrifice his life in our service without a willingness to make an equal sacrifice, if necessary, in his.”

And when her mother read the letter, though her heart was heavy with fear and sorrow, she felt that her daughter had done no more than the honor of the Scotts demanded.

To Virginia the long journey seemed an eternity, but at last it came to an end and she found herself negotiating with an agent at Mabido for native porters and guards and the considerable outfit necessary to African travel. From this man she learned that Gordon had left for the interior a month before, but he had not heard of a man by the name of Taylor, though there had been, he said, another party of three Americans who had followed Gordon by about a week. These had been

bound for Victoria Nyanza to hunt, and the agent smiled as he recalled their evident unfamiliarity with all things pertaining to their avocation.

Virginia asked him to describe these men, and in the description of one she recognized Taylor, and rightly guessed that the others were Kelley and Gootch. So three men, one of them an unprincipled scoundrel, had gone out into the savage, lawless wilds on the trail of Richard Gordon!

Virginia went cold as the fear swept her that she was too late. Further questioning of the agent revealed the fact that while Gordon and the other three had arrived simultaneously they had had no intercourse, and that Gordon had obtained considerable start on the others because of his familiarity with customs of African travel and the utter ignorance of the others of the first essentials of their requirements.

This hope sustained her; that Gordon with his superior knowledge and experience had been able to outdistance the others, and that she, by traveling light and carefully selecting her path, might overtake them before they overtook Gordon or met him upon his return.

With this idea in mind Virginia hastened her preparations, and once on the march urged her safari on to utmost speed. Almost from the start she discovered that her head man, while apparently loyal to her, had but meagre control of the men of the safari, who were inclined to be insubordinate and quarrelsome. The result was that to her other burdens was added constant apprehension from this source, since it not only threatened her own welfare but the success of her mission as well.

It was upon the tenth day that the first really flagrant breach of discipline occurred—one which the headman could not handle or the girl permit to pass unnoticed. The men had long been grumbling at the forced marching which had fallen to their lot since the very beginning, notwithstanding the fact that they had been employed with the distinct understanding that such was to be the nature of their duty. Today, after the mid-day rest, the porters were unusually slow in shouldering their packs, and there was much muttering and grumbling as the headman went among them trying to enforce his commands by means of all manner of terrible threats. Some of the men had risen sullenly and adjusted their burdens, others still sat upon the ground eyeing the headman, but making no move to obey him. Virginia was at a little distance waiting for the safari to set out. She was a witness to all which transpired. She saw a hulking black Hercules slowly raise his pack in laggard response to the commands of the excited headman.

Just what words passed between them she could not know, but suddenly the porter hurled his load to the ground, shouting to the others who had already assumed their burdens. One by one these followed his example, at the same time shouting taunts and insults at the frantic, dancing, futile headman.

The armed members of the party—the native escort—leaned on their rifles and grinned at the discomfiture of the headman.

Virginia's heart sank as she witnessed this open break. It was mutiny, pure and simple, and her headman was quite evidently wholly incapable of coping with it. That it would quickly spread to the armed guard she was sure, for their attitude

proclaimed that their sympathies were with the porters. Something must be done, and done at once, nor was there another than herself to do it.

The headman and the large porter were wrangling in high pitched voices. The other porters had closed in about the two, for it was evident that they would soon come to blows. The attitude of all the bearers was angry and sullen. The members of the safari stilled grinned—this was the only reassuring symptom of the whole dangerous affair. They had not yet openly espoused the cause of the mutineers.

Virginia came to a decision quietly. She crossed the space between herself and the porters at a rapid walk, shouldering her way between the watchers until she stood between the headman and the bellicose porter. At sight of her they stopped their wrangling for a moment. Virginia turned to the headman.

“Tell this boy,” she said, “that I say he must pick up his pack at once.”

The headman interpreted her order to the mutineer. The latter only laughed derisively, making no move to obey. Very deliberately Virginia drew her revolver from its holster at her hip. She levelled it at the pit of the porter’s stomach, and with a finger of her left hand pointed at the pack on the ground. She said nothing. She knew that she had committed herself to a policy which might necessitate the fulfillment of the threat which the leveled weapon implied, and she was ready to adhere to the policy to the bitter end.

The fate of her expedition hung upon the outcome of this clash between her porters and her representative, the headman; and upon the fate of the expedition hung, possibly, the very life of a stranger who had placed himself in jeopardy to serve her. There was no alternative—she must, she would compel subordination.

The porter made no move to assume his burden, but he ceased to laugh. Instead, his little eyes narrowed, his heavy lower jaw and pendulous lower lip drooped sullenly.

He reminded the girl suddenly of a huge brute about to spring upon its prey, and she tightened the pressure of her finger upon the trigger of her revolver.

“Tell him,” she instructed the headman, “that punishment for mutiny is death. That if he does not pick up his pack at once I shall shoot him, just as I would shoot a hyena that menaced my safety.”

The headman did as he was bid. The porter looked at the encircling faces of his friends for encouragement. He thought that he found it there and then an evil spirit whispered to him that the white woman would not dare shoot and he took a step toward her threateningly.

It was his last step, for the instant that he took it Virginia fired, not at his stomach, but at his heart—and he crumpled forward to tumble at her feet. Without a second glance at him she wheeled upon the other porters.

“Pick up your packs and march!” she commanded, and those who could not understand her words at least did not misinterpret the menace of her leveled weapon. One by one, and with greater alacrity than they had evinced since the first day out, they shouldered their burdens, and a moment later were filing along the trail. The safari still grinned, for which Virginia was devoutly thankful.

From then on she became her own headman, using that dignitary principally as an interpreter, nor for many days was there again the slightest show of insubordination—that came later, with results so disastrous that—but why anticipate disaster?

Chapter IV

FAR to the west Richard Gordon had penetrated the jungle to the site of the ruined mission. He had scraped around the woods which overgrew the razed walls of the bungalow, and at last he had come upon the flagging of the old hearth.

Stone after stone he pried from its place until beneath one he at last came upon a tiny vault, and a moment later his groping fingers touched a rusted tin box that crumpled beneath them. Feeling carefully amid the debris, Gordon finally withdrew a long manila envelope which had withstood the ravages of time. It was still sealed, nor did he break it open, for it was all the box contained other than a few loose pieces of jewelry and therefore must contain the paper he sought.

Dick Gordon was elated by the success of his adventure. He had feared that even the old hearth might have disappeared and the paper with it, for he had no means of knowing how complete had been the Wakandas' demolition of the mission, as upon his former visit he had seen no sign of the old chimney and fireplace.

Early the following morning he set out upon the return journey toward the coast, confident that no further obstacles other than those ordinary to African travel lay between him and the delivery of the packet safely into the hands of Mrs. Scott.

How could he guess that to the east of him three American crooks, bent upon nothing less than his death, barred his way to the coast. That they were making short marches and slow ones was of little moment to the three. They soon had tired of the hardships of African travel, and finally gave up the hope of overtaking Gordon before he reached the mission. To waylay him upon his return would answer their purpose quite as well, and so when they came at last to a village through which Gordon must pass upon his return to the coast it required little discussion of the question to decide them to await him there.

In view of generous gifts the native chief welcomed them to his hospitality. He set aside a commodious hut for the three whites. They unstopped numerous bottles of Irish whiskey and the blacks brewed their native beer. The visit was a long-drawn Bacchanalian revel which the whites found more to their tastes than long, tiresome marches and the vicissitudes of ever changing camps.

But one day the peace of the community was rudely startled. A lion seized upon an unwary woman working in a little patch of cultivated ground outside the village. Her screams brought out the warriors and the whites; but the lion dragged his prey into the jungle, her screaming ceased, nor was she ever seen again.

The natives were terrified. They besought the whites to help them—to go forth with their guns and slay the man-eater; but though they hunted for two days no trace of the marauder could they find. Then the blacks dug a pit and baited it with a live goat, and lest the lion escape even this they set a watch upon the pit that the whites might be called when the lion approached.

Nor did they have long to wait. Scarce had they secreted themselves when a huge lion stepped majestically from the brush. Raising his massive head he sniffed the air. His lower jaw rose and fell. The slaver drivelled from his jowls. Deep in his throat rumbled a low thunder, and presently at his side appeared a sleek lioness.

For a moment they stood thus, their yellow eyes sometimes boring straight ahead as though to pierce the thickets behind which the trembling natives crouched, or again moving slowly up and down the trail.

Presently the lion's head went up in a quick movement of arrested attention. Instantly he froze to rigid immobility. His sensitive nostrils dilated and contracted, the tip of his tail moved. Aside from these he might have been chiselled from living gold, so magnificent he was.

Up wind, in a little clearing, two antelope browsed. Now and again the graceful male raised his horned head to sniff the air; his great wondering eyes scanning the surrounding jungle. Then he would lower his muzzle again and resume his feeding, yet ears and nose were always upon the alert.

The Judas breeze, kissing the soft coats of the antelope as it passed, bore down to the nostrils of the lions the evidence of the near presence of flesh—of tender, juicy, succulent, red flesh. The king turned his royal head once toward his consort. A sound that was half sigh breathed from his great throat. Was it a message—a command? Who may say? The lioness settled herself into a comfortable position in the long grass and her lord moved silently away, up wind toward the unconscious antelope.

A moment later an excited native detached himself from the watchers and sped away toward the village to notify the whites that the lions had come. Taylor, Kelley and Gootch caught up their rifles and followed the guide back toward the pit. At their heels was half the male population of the village, armed with short, heavy spears; but the chief, who had hunted lions with white men many times before, sent them all back with the exception of three who carried the whites' extra guns. There had been enough before to have frightened all the lions out of the country.

Even so, the white men themselves, clumsy in this unaccustomed work, made noise enough to bring the lioness to her feet as they crawled into the bushes besides the watchers. When finally they saw her she was standing head on gazing nervously toward their hiding place. It was evident that she was uneasy, and the old chief knew that in an instant she would bolt.

What had held her so long in the face of the noise of the awkward white men he could not guess.

"Shoot!" he whispered. "Quick!"

Already the lioness was wheeling to depart when the three rifles spoke. Only one bullet struck the target, but that one was enough to transform the timid jungle creature into a mad engine of rage and destruction. Turning like a cat and growling horribly, the lioness charged without an instant's warning straight down upon the cover that hid her foes.

It was the first time in their lives that any one of the white men had seen a charging lioness, and it was too much for the dope shattered nerves of Kelley and Gootch. Flinging away their rifles, they turned and ran like scared rabbits, their gun bearers and watchers near them surprised into panic at the unwonted sight of terror-struck white men emulating their example.

Only Taylor, his gun bearer and the chief held their ground. Taylor was frightened—few men are not in the face of a charging lion, especially if it be their first; but the blood of the Scotts flowed in his veins, and whatever else he might be, he was not a physical coward.

In the moment that ensued he took careful aim and fired again, and this time the lioness stopped—dead.

Taylor drew a deep sigh of relief.

Great beads of perspiration stood upon his forehead. He wiped them away, and as he attempted to arise he noticed that his knees were weak and trembling. It wouldn't do for the chief to see that, so he sat down again and rolled a cigarette.

By the time the frightened ones had been recalled he was able to control his muscles. Gootch and Kelley came with their tails between their legs, like whipped curs.

“You guys missed your call,” laughed Taylor. “You ought to have been lion tamers.”

The twain grinned sheepishly.

“I'll see that hell-cat face in my dreams for the rest of my natural life,” said Kelley.

Gootch shrugged with a shudder.

“Me for Broadway and the Tammany tiger—it doesn't make such awful faces,” he said.

“Well, let's go back to the village and have a drink on my first lion,” suggested Taylor, and the three departed, leaving the natives to rig a sling and carry the body of the lioness in.

When the lion left his mate he made his way stealthily in the direction of his quarry. Now and again he stopped to raise his head and sniff the air, or with up-pricked ears to listen.

Ahead of him, the buck, uneasy, though he had as yet located no enemy, moved slowly off, followed by his doe. Craftily the lion trailed them by scent. Presently he came within sight of them but they were on the move, and the ground was not such as to favor a charge. So he stalked them—cautiously, warily, silently—the personification of majesty, of power, of stealth. He stalked them for a long time, until they halted again to browse upon the edge of a little plain, and then his majesty, wearied and impatient, ventured a charge from too great a distance.

Like a bolt he broke from the concealing jungle. With a speed that is only a lion's when it charges he sped toward them—and still all unconscious they fed on. It was the doe who first looked up, and then two streaks of bay brown fled before the tawny, yellow flash. It was soon over.

A dozen or more bounds convinced the great cat that he had lost, and with an angry roar he halted to glare for a moment after his disappearing feast, and then to turn, still rumbling, back into the forest toward his mate.

He came, shortly, to the spot where he had left his mate, but she was not there. He called to her, but she did not answer. Then he sniffed about. The scent of man was still heavy in the air, and the acrid odor of powder clung to the grasses and the branches, and—what was that, blood? The smell of blood? The lion crossed and recrossed the trail. He walked about sniffing, and at last he came upon the spot where his mate had died. A great roar broke from his mighty lungs. He

smelled about the trampled grasses. Blacks! And what is this, the scent spoor of whites? The blacks were familiar denizens of the jungle. He thought little of them one way or another. Sometimes he ate them for they were stupid creatures easily overcome: but the whites! He had had experience of them before—of them and their acrid smoke and their painful bullets. His forearm had been creased by one and the scar still plainly showed.

The whites! How he hated them! Down went his nose to the trail. Which way had they gone? He would follow and avenge. Straight along the crooked jungle pathway led the spoor. Rumbling in his throat the lion followed, all engrossed in hate and rage, so that he did not see the trap until it was too late. Suddenly there was a giving of the trail beneath his feet. A snapping of small branches.

He clawed and tried to leap to safety, but in vain. The earth sank from beneath him, and snarling and beating with his armed feet he dropped into the blackness of the pit that had been dug for him. Nor, for all his great strength and cunning could he escape.

It was mid-afternoon, following a long march, that Virginia and her safari came upon a village where the headman had told her they would be well received and could doubtless trade for fowl and goats and vegetables. The prospect was alluring, for during the past week her hunters had been vouchsafed the poorest luck. Goat and chicken would taste good. Virginia's mouth watered. The mouths of her boys watered too; but not so much for goat and chickens as for the native beer for which this village was justly famous.

The chief was away when the visitors arrived, but his wife and son did honors in his stead. They, as well as the balance of the villagers, evinced the greatest curiosity. But few of them had ever seen a white woman before, and they clustered about her, feeling her flesh and garments, laughing uproariously at each new discovery, but according her every mark of friendship. At last, with difficulty, Virginia succeeded in arranging through her headman for a hut to which she might retire; but even here the women and children followed her, squatting about watching her every move. The interior of the hut was filthy, and the girl had been in it but a short time when she decided to summon her headman and have her tent and camp pitched outside the village.

When she went to find him, for she could not make any of the women understand her wants, she discovered him, with others of her safari, indulging freely in beer. Already they had consumed large quantities, and, with an unlimited supply in view, were loath to leave the immediate vicinity of the brew for the sake of pitching camps for her or for anyone else.

As she stood arguing with them through the headman she was suddenly aware of the approach of newcomers from the jungle. A little party of men were entering the village gates, and her heart gave a great leap of joy as she saw a white man among them. She had started forward impulsively toward him, half believing that it might be Richard Gordon, when she saw two other whites behind him, and recognized one of them immediately as Taylor. Her heart sank as she realized the predicament in which she had unwittingly placed herself. Taylor, seeing her here, would not need to be told to know what had brought her, and now, just when she most needed the loyalty of her boys, they were on the high road to inebriation.

She turned toward them quickly, however, placing herself behind them, out of sight of the advancing whites.

“Quick!” she whispered to the headman. “You must get the boys together at once. We will continue the march. Those men who have just entered the village are my enemies. Tell the boys of the safari to get their guns—we may need them; but I must get out of this village at once.”

The headman transmitted her commands to the porters and the safari, but they elicited only grumbling murmurs at first, and, when she urged her authority upon them, they openly refused to move from where they were. They said that they had marched far that day—they could go no further—they would not go further, and one who had consumed more beer than his fellows announced that he would take no more orders from a woman. And just then Scott Taylor came abreast the party and when his eyes fell upon Virginia Scott they went wide in incredulity and wonder.

“Virginia!” he exclaimed.

“Where did you come from? What on earth are you doing here?” And then as though he had guessed the answer his eyes narrowed and a lowering scowl clouded his face. “You’ve been following me, have you? Spying on me, eh? You think you can put one over on me, do you? Well, you’ve got another think coming, young lady.”

Virginia Scott looked coldly at the speaker, utter contempt in the curve of her lip and the expression of her level eyes.

“Yes, I followed you, Scott,” she replied. “I know you all too well, you see, not to have guessed something of the ulterior motive which prompted you to come to Africa immediately upon the heels of Mr. Gordon. We found his letter to mother, you see, in your coat pocket, the coat that you accidentally dropped behind your bed before you left. If you will take my advice, Scott, you will take yourself and your precious friends here back to the coast and out of Africa as fast as you can go.”

Taylor had been thinking rapidly as the girl spoke, yet he was at a loss what step to take next. If she knew that he had followed Gordon to Africa then her mother knew it too, and whatever harm might befall Gordon here would be laid at his door even though he found the means to quiet Virginia. The means to quiet Virginia! The thought kept running through his head over and over again. The means to quiet Virginia!

He gave his head a little shake as he let his eyes rest on the girl’s face again. She was very beautiful—even more beautiful in her khaki and tan than she had been in the soft summer dresses and clear white complexion of the Virginia days.

“Will you take that chance and go?” she asked presently. “I promise that I will say no word of this that will harm you. Each of us is half Scott—I would not willingly harm my own blood, nor will I see you penniless when the estate comes into my hands.”

The mention of the estate brought Taylor up with a start. It also brought a gleam into the eyes of Kelley and Gootch, who had been interested listeners to the conversation. Kelley leaned toward Taylor.

“If you go back, Kid,” he asked, “who’s goin’ to pay me an’ Bill the hundred thou apiece?”

"I'm not going back, you fool," snapped Taylor. "I've come too damned far to go back now."

"What are you going to do, Scott?" Virginia asked the question in an even voice. She well knew the moment was fraught with hideous possibilities for her.

"The first thing I'm going to do," growled Taylor, "is to put you where you can be watched, and where you won't get another chance to go and blab all you know or think to Mr. Buttinski Gordon."

He stepped quickly to the girl's side as he spoke, and, though she reached for her revolver his hand was too quick for her and the weapon was wrenched from her grasp before she could use it, as use it, she most certainly should, had she the opportunity. Taylor seized her wrist and he stood there holding her, scowling down into her face. Virginia returned the scowl, and spoke a single word, loud enough for the other whites to hear.

"Coward!" That single word was filled with loathing and contempt supreme. It stung the man as would no torrent of invective. It stung and roused all the brute within him.

With an oath he jerked the girl roughly after him as he turned and crossed the village street. Straight toward the hut occupied by himself and his two associates he dragged her, and at his heels came Kelley and Gootch.

"Get a rope," snapped Taylor when they were inside. "We'll truss this vixen until we can plan what's best for her. And anyway we haven't had that drink yet on my first lion."

Gootch found a rope and together the three men bound the girl securely. Then they went out of the hut, taking a bottle of whiskey with them.

After they had left Virginia exerted every effort to free herself of her bonds; but strain as she would she could not slip them an inch. The afternoon wore on. She could hear loud talk and laughter of the drinking whites and blacks, and she trembled as she thought what the return of those three, flushed with drink, might mean to her.

And night fell and still she lay a prey to grim terror and the physical tortures of her bonds and the unclean mats upon which they had thrown her.

Chapter V

SWINGING along at the head of his safari, Dick Gordon puffed upon his blackened briar and hummed a gay tune of the roof gardens. The black boys at his heels laughed and chattered and sang. They were a merry party, for Gordon had a way with him that kept men singing at their work until they forgot that it was work. He could get more miles out of a safari than many a hardened and hard, old explorer, for he treated his boys like children, humoring or punishing as seemed best, but never permitting an injustice, never nursing an irritation, and never letting them forget that he was master. From headman to meanest porter they loved him, respected him, each thought that he would wade through blood for the

big, singing bwana; but they were soon to find that it was easier to think than to wade when the chances were even that the blood might be their own.

They were nearing a native village where beer flowed like water, and Gordon, having had one previous experience of that place and the effects that it had upon his men for two consecutive marches, had decided to camp short of the village and pass it on the fly next morning.

They had come almost to the spot he had selected for their camp, when the roar of a lion, almost at his feet brought Gordon to a sudden stop at the verge of a pit cunningly hid in the trail. A hole a few paces further on showed where the lion had disappeared and why he was roaring thus up out of the bowels of the earth.

Gordon approached and peered into the excavation. There below him crouched a huge, black maned lion. At Gordon's elbow was his gun bearer. To turn and grasp the ready rifle was the work of but a moment, but when he had raised the weapon to his shoulder and levelled it upon the beast below him something brought him to a sudden stop. His men were gathered about the pit now throwing taunts and insults at the beast.

"Poor devil," thought Gordon. "It's a shame to pot you like this without a chance for your life—" He paused and then—"I'm damned if I'll do it."

Young Mr. Gordon was, as you may have guessed, a creature of impulse. He was wont to act first and think later, which is a mighty fine way to do the right thing if one is inherently right at heart, and doesn't chance to be laboring under the insidious toxin of anger. Then, too, Dick Gordon loved animals, and particularly he loved the great fierce cats of the jungle. To him there was no more inspiring sight than that of a mighty lion, and as he looked at the one below him, even in the dim light of the pit, he realized that never before had his eyes rested upon so magnificent a creature as this great, black-maned prisoner. He lowered his rifle and turned toward his headman.

"Let's have a little fun," he said.

"It's not sport to shoot a lion in a pit. I never have, and I never shall. We'll let this old boy out where he'll have a run for his money and then I can take a little pride in his skin when I get it home."

The headman grinned. He was something of a sport himself, but not when it came to lions.

"How you get him out, bwana?" he asked.

Gordon examined the pit. Its roof was constructed of several stout saplings crossed with lesser branches and brush. To drag a couple of the larger logs until their ends dropped into the pit would be the work of but a moment, then the lion could clamber out if he were not injured, and there was nothing in his appearance or manner to indicate that he was not entirely whole.

Gordon explained his plan to the headman and gave his orders for the porters to lay aside their loads and drag the poles far enough to let their ends drop into the pit. The men grinned and shrugged, and looked for handy trees, for they knew that a maddened lion is lightning unchained. Gingerly they laid hold of the saplings and commenced to haul upon them, but when the ends had come to the pit's verge and were about to drop down and liberate the lion they paused, still grinning, though sheepishly, and begged to be excused, as it were. The headman explained to Gordon that the lion would be sure to get one of the men at least and

he thought that it would be a useless waste of life when they already had the lion safely imprisoned and nothing gained by liberating him.

Gordon shrugged good-naturedly. "You Li'le A'thas can take to the trees," he said, "and hurry up about it. I'm going to let loose this man-eating son of Belial," and he grasped the end of one of the logs and proceeded to pull.

The blacks, seeing his act, tarried not for even a free translation of his words, but scampered to right and left, clambering to the safety of the lower branches with the agility of monkeys. Only Gordon's gun bearer remained at his post. The young man, seeing him, directed the boy to place his rifle a few paces to his right where he could take it up and fire should it be necessary.

"Lean it against that tree over there," he directed. "After I drop the logs down I can reach it before the lion can climb out, if he is inclined to be nasty instead of grateful."

The boy, glad enough to be relieved of his duty, though he would have remained at his post in the face of a dozen lions had Gordon not dismissed him, did as he was bid, himself taking refuge in the tree at the base of which he leaned the rifle, cocked and ready to his master's hand.

Gordon measured the distance between the pit and the tree with his eyes, and calculated that even though the lion charged after climbing from his prison it would take him a moment or two to reach level ground and with that advantage Gordon could easily reach his rifle and bring the beast down before it was upon him.

The element of risk in the adventure appealed to the young New Yorker. He would be pitting his own skill and prowess against the skill and prowess of the lion. The animal would have an almost even break with him, for if Gordon failed to stop him with his first shot the victory would be to the great cat. This was sport! Gordon felt a thrill of excitement tingling along his nerves as he drew slowly upon the end of one of the logs.

Below him the lion stood motionless glaring up into his face, and uttering occasional low growls. As he worked Gordon glanced often at the great beast, admiring his splendid stature, his great mane and his massive head. The lion was wondering if this creature was one of those who had slain his mate. What was he doing? Why was he pulling the cover from his prison? Why had the loud noise and the acrid odor that accompanied these white skinned humans not yet assailed his ears and nostrils? The lion was puzzled. He cocked his head upon one side, watching intently—so intently that he forgot to growl.

Gordon dragged the end of one of the logs until it just hung upon the rim of the pit, then he drew its fellow to the same position. A single, quick, heavy pull upon the two together should precipitate the ends into the bottom of the trap.

Dick Gordon glanced behind him once more that he might finally fix in his mind the exact location of his rifle, then he surged back with a firm grip upon the logs, the dirt at the opposite end of the pit crumbled from the edge and the two logs dropped their further extremities side by side to the bottom.

At the same instant Gordon turned and ran for his rifle. The lion leaped nimbly to one side to avoid the falling logs, instantly grasped their significance to him and with an agile leap was upon them and at the edge of the pit by the time Gordon had covered half the distance to the tree where his gun leaned, ready to his hand.

Seeing the man fleeing the lion gave a single terrific roar and burst into the full speed of the charge. The natives in the trees screamed loudly to Gordon, the man turned his head, thinking the lion must be already upon him, and in the little instant that his eyes were taken from his path, his foot caught in the protruding root of a creeper and he was down.

But for this he might have reached his weapon and put in one good shot. Even now he had to scramble to his feet and race on; but even as he half rose a great body struck him from behind and hurled him back to earth—a great, tawny, hairy body that towered above him grim and terrible.

A thousand thoughts raced through Dick Gordon's mind in the brief instant the lion stood over him. He thought of his revolver and his knife in their holsters at his side—as a last resort he would use them. He had heard of men being in positions similar to his own and escaping unharmed—of the lions leaving them for some unaccountable reason without inflicting even a scratch upon them. Gordon determined to wait until the lion took the offensive. He lay very quietly, just as he had fallen, half upon his side.

One great forepaw was opposite his face, for the lion straddled him. Gordon even noted the ugly, jagged scar upon the inside of the forearm. The boys in the trees were shouting and hurling branches at the huge beast. The animal paid no more attention to them than as though they had been so many little monkeys. He lowered his mighty head and sniffed the body of his prey.

Gordon could feel the muzzle touching his back lightly, and the hot breath upon his neck and cheek. The lion puzzled. This was not one of those whom he sought. For several minutes that seemed an eternity to Gordon the beast stood above him.

What was he thinking? Could it be that he was searching through his savage brain for an explanation of the man's act in releasing him from captivity? Who may say? But this we do know, that with one great paw he turned Gordon over on his back, sniffed him from head to foot, looked straight into his face for a full minute and then turned and stalked majestically down the trail, leaving unharmed the puny creature whose career one closing of those mighty jaws would have terminated forever.

Scarce believing that he could credit his own senses, Gordon rose slowly to his feet and gazed after the lion. Behind him his boy slid from the tree, and, seizing Gordon's rifle, ran forward and thrust it into the man's hand. Thus awakened from the stupor of the shock he had received, Gordon mechanically threw the weapon to the hollow of his shoulder. Quickly the sights covered a spot in the middle of the beast's back just behind the shoulders, the trigger finger pressed slowly back. The blacks all silent now, awaiting in breathless expectancy the shot that was never fired.

For a moment Gordon stood thus like a statue. Then, with an impatient shake of his head he lowered the weapon.

"I can't do it," he muttered. "The beast could have killed me but didn't. If I killed him now I'd be less than a beast. I wonder why he left us? Could it have been gratitude? Shucks. Gratitude nothing! He wasn't hungry, or else the boys frightened him away," and at the latter thought Gordon could not repress a grin as he recalled the great carnivore's apparent utter contempt for the yelling natives.

And as he stood watching the leisurely departure of the king until he was hidden by a turn in the trail the belief that it might have been gratitude insisted upon intruding itself upon his thoughts.

“Anyway,” he said half aloud, “it’ll make a pretty story, even if it’s not the true explanation.”

His boys had all descended from their trees by this time and were grouped about him, chattering to one another, and loudly expatiating upon the wondrous feats of bravery they would have performed—“if—” Gordon broke in upon their afterclap.

“Come!” he said. “Take up your packs. We ought to be near the stream that passes beside the beer village—we’ll make camp as soon as we strike it.”

A half hour later they found a suitable spot for their camp, and Gordon, protected by a mosquito net, stretched himself in his hammock to enjoy the luxuries of a pipe and a book before the evening meal should be prepared.

Exhausted from her struggles to free herself from her bonds, Virginia lay in dumb misery listening to the sounds of revel without. The blacks were dancing now. Their hideous yells reverberated through the forest. The dancing light from the great fire they had built to illuminate the scene of their orgy rose and fell fitfully across the open entrance of the hut in which the girl lay.

Her own men would be joining in the mad revel, she well knew. No use to appeal to them. Already they had shown the calibre of their loyalty. Only the headman had remained at all staunch in his fealty to her and he was a weak vessel even when sober.

Now that he was drunk, as he doubtless was, she could not appeal to him with any hope of a response.

Now and again she heard the voices of the white men, maudlin from drink. She shuddered as she contemplated their return to the hut. Again she struggled vainly with her bonds. Hope was well nigh extinguished, for what hope could there be for her among these wild savages, and cruel, relentless whites?

As the blacks danced and the whites drank with them, another creature than Virginia Scott heard the Bacchanalian noises of their drunken revel. A great, black-maned lion, grim and silent, prowled about the palisade, sniffing and listening.

Now and again he would halt, with his head cocked upon one side and his ears up-pricked. Then he would resume his tireless pacing. Round and round the outside of the enclosure he paced his stealthy beat.

Occasionally a low, a very low moan, escaped his lips—a weird, blood-freezing moan that, happily for the peace of mind of the revelers, was drowned by their own hideous noises. What were his intentions? That he seemed searching for something or someone was evident. Once or twice he paused and lifting his head measured the distance to the top of the palisade. To the very gates had he followed the spool of the white men who had slain his mate. For them he had come. Were they within? He could not catch their scent; but though he had circled the palisaded village several times his sensitive nostrils had discovered no spoor fresher than that which ended at the village gates. His brute sense told him that they must be within. Why did he hesitate? He was no coward; but neither was he any fool. He knew the powers and the purpose of guns and spears, and he knew

too that once within the palisade with the man-people, while all were awake, he might be killed before he had accomplished the revenge upon which he was bent, and so he bided his time—a fierce and terrible thing, padding noiselessly through the black night just beyond the palisade.

The night wore slowly on. Less and less became the sounds of revelry as one by one the blacks succumbed to the influence of their native beer and the white man's whiskey. Presently Taylor rose unsteadily and made his way toward his hut, staggering little, for it was his boast that he could carry his load like a gentleman.

Virginia, wide eyed and sleepless, saw him approaching. In the extremity of her fear she rolled to the far side of the hut to lie there silent and motionless in the hope that he had forgotten her presence and would not notice her. Taylor sober might be appealed to in the morning.

There must be a fibre of chivalry somewhere in the soul of any man in whose veins flowed the honored blood of the Scotts; but Taylor drunk would be adamant to any influence of his passions.

From the darkness of her corner Virginia saw how slightly he staggered and her hope renewed. He might not be so badly intoxicated as she had feared; but as he lurched through the low doorway her heart sank, for he called her name aloud in a thick voice that belied the steadiness of his carriage.

"She did not reply, and he crossed the hut, stooping and feeling for her with his hands. Presently he touched her, and an "ah!" of satisfaction broke from his lips.

"Lo, sweetie," he mumbled. Virginia did not answer, feigning sleep instead. He grasped her by the shoulder and shook her.

"Wake up, kid!" he shouted. "I'll show you I'm not shush a bad sort. 'S crooks out there wanted me to croak you; but I'm a gelmun; I won't croak you; if you treat me right."

He dragged her to a sitting posture and put his arms about her.

She could not push him away or fight him off, for her arms were pinioned behind her.

"Scott!" she cried. "Think what you are doing! I'm your own cousin."

"Firsh cousin once removed," he corrected.

"Please, Scott!" she pleaded.

"Please leave me alone." For reply he kissed her.

"You beast!" she cried.

"No beast," he assured her. "To show what a good fellow I am I'm goin' to take these ropes off you," and he commenced to fumble with the knots.

Virginia saw a ray of hope now in his drunkenness. Sober, his reason would have warned him against releasing her; but drunk he had all the foolish assurance of drunkenness. The knots baffling him, he drew his hunting knife and cut the cords.

"Now," he said, "you can show me how mush you love me," and again he seized her and strained her to him. At his hip swung a revolver.

Virginia had coveted it from the first. Now it was the work of but a moment to snatch it from its holster and press it against the man's stomach.

"Take your hands off me," she said, "or I'll pull the trigger," and she poked the muzzle against his ribs.

Taylor knew in an instant what she had accomplished and it sobered him. Slowly his hand crept down to seize hers where it held the weapon close against him.

“Put up your hands,” she warned him, “and put them up quickly. I shall take no chances, Scott, and I give you my word that I’d breathe freer if you were dead.”

The man raised his hands above his head and Virginia sprang to her feet.

“Now stay where you are,” she commanded. “Don’t come out of this hut before morning. If you do, or make any attempt to stay or recapture me, I shall certainly make it my sole point in life to kill you before I am retaken.”

Slowly she backed across the floor toward the doorway. She would arouse her men and at the point of Scott’s revolver force them to accompany her from the village. She was desperate, for she knew that worse than death was the best that she could hope for from Scott Taylor.

It was with a sigh of relief that she passed the low portal and found herself in the pure air of the moon-bathed tropical night. A prayer of thanksgiving was on her lips; but it was never breathed, for scarce had she emerged from the interior of the hut than she was roughly seized from behind and the revolver wrenched from her grasp.

Chapter VI

AS Virginia turned to struggle with her captors she saw that they were Taylor’s two accomplices, and now Taylor, released from the menace of the revolver, rushed from the hut to the assistance of his fellows. It required the combined strength of the three to subdue the girl, who was fighting with the strength of desperation for life, and more than life.

But at last they overcame her and dragged her back into the hut. Here they shoved her to the far side, and, panting from their exertions, stood glowering at her. Taylor was wiping blood from his hand. Virginia Scott, in the extremity of her need, had been transformed in the moment of battle to a primordial she-thing, and as her first human ancestor might have done, had fought with tooth and nails against her assailants. Kelley, too, had felt her strong, white teeth sink into his flesh and Gootch bore a long scratch from temple to chin.

“The — —,” exclaimed the latter. “We’d order of croaked her in the first place.”

Taylor was eyeing the girl through narrowed lids. All the beast that was in him shone from his evil eyes. He turned and whispered quickly to Kelley and Gootch.

“Are we in on it?” asked the former.

Taylor nodded. “I don’t care,” he said.

“And then we give her the k. o. and put her away behin’ the hut,” supplemented Gootch. “The groun’ ’s soft an’ the diggin’ll be easy.”

“I told you that’s wot you’d order of done in the first place,” grumbled Kelley. “It’ll leave you the only heir an’ there won’t be nobody to squeal about Gordon w’en he don’t show up no more.”

“Go to it,” growled Taylor; “there can’t be any cat bite me up without paying for it.”

The two crooks advanced toward the girl and seized her. Taylor waited to one side. Slowly they forced her to the floor of the hut and held her there, though she fought with all the strength remaining to her.

And outside the palisade the black maned prowler sniffed and listened. Now a little, vagrant breeze eddied through the stagnant night. It swirled across the village compound, and it bore upon its wings to the nostrils of the carnivore the fresh scent of the white men. With a low growl the great beast crouched and sprang. Lightly as a feather he topped the palisade and dropped noiselessly within.

For a moment he stood motionless, peering about. There was no one in sight. With long, easy strides, his supple muscles rolling in the moonlight beneath his smooth hide, the destroyer crossed to the nearest hut and sniffed at the chinks in the thatched wall. Then he moved to another and another, searching for the prey he wanted. And all unconscious of this grisly presence the blacks within slept on in blissful ignorance of the hideous menace roaming at will through their village.

In the white man’s hut the three brutes struggled with the battling girl. Their victory was not to be the easy thing they had bargained on, and as they fought to subdue her their positions changed from time to time. Once she caught Gootch’s thumb between her teeth, nor released her hold until she had almost severed it from his hand.

Cursing and moaning, the crook withdrew from the battle for a moment to sit with his back toward the door nursing his hurt. Kelley and Taylor were still endeavoring to overpower their quarry without killing her. Their faces were toward the door. Suddenly Virginia felt their grasps relax and saw their eyes, wide in horror, directed across her shoulder.

She turned to discover what had so quickly diverted their attention from her, and she gasped at the sight that met her eyes. Framed in the doorway was the massive head of a huge lion. Gootch had not seen the beast. He was rolling to and fro drunkenly, holding on to his injured thumb.

Without a word Taylor and Kelley turned and commenced clawing frantically at the frail thatching of the hut’s rear wall. In a moment they had torn an opening large enough to permit their bodies to pass through, and were gone into the night beyond. At the same instant the lion gave voice to a terrific roar, and Virginia dodged through the rent that Taylor and Kelley had made and sprawled to the ground outside. She saw the two scoundrels fleeing toward the right, and instinctively she turned toward the left. She had taken but a few steps when there fell upon her ears the most bloodcurdling scream of mortal agony and terror that ever had smote upon them in her life. She had not imagined that the human voice could compass such freezing fear as that which shrieked out its high pitched wail upon the silent jungle night.

The cry compelled her to turn her head back in the direction of the hut she had quitted, and there, in the full light of the equatorial moon, she witnessed that which will be seared upon her memory to her dying day.

She saw Gootch, half through the opening that had given escape to Kelley, Taylor and herself, clutching frantically at the turf at the sides of the torn hut wall. His features were distorted by agony and horror supreme.

He shrieked aloud to the friends who had deserted him and to the God that he long since had deserted, and ever, slowly and horribly, he was being drawn back into the interior of the hut by an unseen power. All too well Virginia guessed the giant force, the hideous bestial force, that was dragging the terrified man backward to his doom within the dark interior of the hut; yet, fascinated, she could but stand and watch the grim and terrible tragedy.

Slowly the body disappeared, and then the shoulders. Only the head was left and the hands, the latter still clutching futilely for a hold upon the frail wall. The face white and distorted by fear and suffering.

And then the head was drawn back out of sight, the hands gave up the last hold; there was a frightful wail from within the gloomy interior, a wail which mingled with a savage, thunderous roar—and then silence.

The cries of Gootch aroused the natives. Warriors were pouring from every hut—the whole village was aroused. Virginia turned and resumed her flight. Straight toward the gates she ran. To unbar them was the work of but a moment. Beyond was the terrible jungle; the grim, cruel, mysterious jungle; but behind was a fate more terrible than any the jungle could offer. Without another backward glance the girl pushed the portals wide and scurried into the darkness of the forbidding forest.

The blacks, attracted to the hut occupied by the white men by Gootch's screams, waited a few paces from the entrance and shouted to their guests to ascertain the cause of the commotion. The lion within, warned by their voices, turned from his prey and stuck his great head out through the doorway. At sight of him the blacks howled in mingled terror and defiance. They waved their spears and shouted, hoping to frighten the beast from his hiding place.

Annoyed and rendered nervous by their din, the carnivore roared back his challenge, and amid a shower of hurtling spears dashed from the hut. For a moment he stood bewildered while the blacks retreated, and then he turned and trotted toward the palisade. Seeing him retreat the natives gathered courage and pursued. He skirted close in the shadow of the wall for a short distance, coming presently upon the gates which Virginia had left open.

There he paused for an instant to turn a snarling face toward his pursuers, a face which brought them to a sudden halt, and then, wheeling, darted through the gateway and was gone.

Stumbling through the jungle night, Virginia Scott was occupied by but a single thought—to place as much distance between herself and Scott Taylor as she could. In what direction she was going, to what nameless fate she did not consider. For the first half hour hers was the flight of panic—unreasoning, mad, hysterical. And surely she had been through enough that day to shake steadier nerves and more experienced heads than hers.

Thorns and underbrush clutched at her short skirt and khaki jacket, tearing them; scratched her hands, her arms and face; tangled themselves between her feet and tripped her. Again and again she fell, only to scramble to her feet once more and plunge on deeper and deeper into the unknown. The myriad jungle noises fell for a time on deaf ears—the movement of padded feet, the brush of bodies against vine and bush, the fluttering of weird wings registered not at all upon her fear-numbed brain.

And then, above all other sounds, broke one that blasted its way to her perceptive faculties. Thunderous, ominous, earth-shaking, terrible, it shattered her preoccupation and awoke her to a sense of the nearness of other dangers than that from which she was fleeing.

It was the roar of a lion. To her tense nerves it sounded close behind her. The girl paused, stark and rigid, listening. She stood with her clenched hands tight against her bosom. Her breath came in little gasps. She could feel her heart beating against her ribs—she could hear it; above all the noises of the jungle it sounded like a traitorous tattoo, beating out a call to the prowlers of the night, guiding them to their prey.

For a moment she stood thus, until out of the blackness from which she had come she thought she heard the stealthy pad of great feet. With a shudder and a little gasp she turned to flee from this new menace. On she stumbled, bruised, bleeding, hopeless. For how long she could not know. Time had ceased to exist in the meanwhile, and man made units of seconds, minutes, or hours—each heart beat measured an eternity. She had been fleeing thus through the blackness of tortured terror since time began—she would continue thus to flee, hopeless, until the last trump, and then the thing behind her would spring, frightful talons would fasten themselves in her soft flesh, giant fangs would sink deep in neck or shoulder. It would be the end. The end! The thought brought her to a sudden stop. The end! It was inevitable. Why flee the inevitable?

She leaned against the bole of a tree, panting like a winded doe that, after a brave battle for liberty, finds itself spent and awaits resignedly the coming of the hounds.

She waited, listening for sounds of the coming of the beast of prey she felt sure was upon her trail. She listened, but she heard no sound to indicate that the beast was close at hand. However, she did not attempt to delude herself into a feeling of false security. She well knew the uncanny soundlessness of the passing of the giant cats when they chose silence.

But what was that? A body, black against the blackness of the jungle, had moved among the trees to her right. She strained her eyes in the direction of the shadowy form. Yes!

There it was, and another and another. Suddenly two spots of fire glowed dimly from the point upon which her gaze was concentrated. Close beside them appeared two other spots.

Virginia shrank back against the tree, horrified. A little prayer rose from her silent lips. God! They were coming closer. Stealthily, noiselessly, they were creeping upon her. The rough bark of the tree behind her gave to the frenzied force of her clutching fingers. A piece broke off, coming away in her hand. Such a little thing may sometimes prove the most momentous of a lifetime. To Virginia it brought a lightning train of thoughts that opened an avenue of hope in her hopeless breast. The tree!

Why had she not thought of it before? They were coming closer now—would there be time? She turned and measured the girth of the bole with her arms. It was not a large tree—in that lay still greater hope. A sudden snarling broke from the things creeping upon her, and at the same instant she leaped as high as she could, embraced the stem of the tree and scrambled rapidly aloft.

There was a rush below her, a chorus of angry growls, and something brushed her foot. She heard the click of jaws snapping together below her, and then she drew herself to the comparative safety of a lower limb.

With reaction came a faintness and a giddy dizziness that threatened to plunge her from her sanctuary, but she clung desperately, and after a moment gained control of herself. Then, painfully and wearily, she crawled a little higher among the branches until she found a spot where she could recline in greater safety and comfort.

Here she lay sleepless through the balance of the night—a few hours which seemed endless to her—while the jungle surged back and forth below, around, and above her, and the jungle noises, fearsome and uncanny, rose and fell, a devil's discord jangling on raw nerves.

Through those long hours Virginia sought, by planning, some ray of hope for the future, but each essay in this direction brought her to a dead stop against the black wall of fact. She was alone, unarmed, and lost in the jungle. She was surrounded by savage beasts and savage men by any one of which she would be considered natural prey.

To retrace the long journey from the coast, even though she knew the trail, would be impossible, and equally impossible would be the task of going ahead in search of Richard Gordon, whom she knew to be somewhere to the west of her. The more she weighed her chances for existence against the forces of destruction pitted against her, the more hopeless appeared her situation. Even the coming dawn, ordinarily a time of renewing hope, brought no added buoyancy to her jaded spirits—only a dogged determination to fight on to the inevitable end, and then to die bravely with a consciousness of having fought a good fight, as became a granddaughter of Jefferson Scott.

As daylight dispelled the darkness about her and objects that had assumed grotesque and menacing proportions by night receded and shrank to the common places of day Virginia's eyes sought the ground below for a glimpse of the creatures whose menace had driven her to the safety of branches before; but, search as she would, she could discover no sign of dangerous beast, and at last, realizing that she could not remain in the tree forever, she dropped to the ground and resumed her flight. Noting the direction of the sun she turned her face toward the west, deciding at least that her only hope of salvation lay in Richard Gordon and influenced equally, too, by the obligation she felt strong upon her to find and warn him of the menace which lay in wait upon his homeward trail.

That she would find him she had little hope; but at least she would have the poor satisfaction of clinging to duty to the last, however futile her attempt to fulfill that duty.

She had not gone a great distance when she became aware of the uncanny sensation that she was being followed. Turning, she looked back into the jungle behind her; but saw nothing. Yet again, the moment she had resumed her way, she could have sworn that she heard something moving through the vegetation at her heels. How long this continued she could not have told; but at length it so preyed upon her nerves that she was once more reduced to a state of panicky terror equal to that which had claimed her the preceding night.

If she could have seen the thing that dogged her footsteps, even to know that it was some fierce and terrible creature of destruction, her nervous suffering would have been less; but to feel its eyes upon her and yet not to see it, to hear its padded footsteps and to see twigs disturbed was horrible.

A dozen times she was on the point of clambering into a tree; but hunger and thirst which had already assailed her told her in no uncertain terms that there must be no tarrying except in the last extreme of danger.

While she had strength she must go on and on, for if she did not find food and drink she soon would have no strength to go.

Twenty times she must have turned to search out the prowler that stalked her, yet she had had no slightest glimpse of him, when she broke, quite unexpectedly, into a small clearing. Straight across this she made her way, and toward the center turned again to cast a nervous glance rearward, and then she saw the thing upon her track—a mangy, hideous hyena.

Virginia knew that men looked down upon this repulsive beast, calling him a harmless coward; but she knew too many a man had fallen prey to the enormous strength and ferocity of these same creatures. She knew their cunning and their cruelty, and that, like all other hunted beasts they were as perfectly aware when man was unarmed as was man himself.

She had heard tales of their courage too; of their attacking lions and dragging his kill from beneath the very nose of the king of beasts. And so she did not deceive herself, as have others to their sorrow, as to the cowardice or the harmlessness of this, nature's most loathsome creature. Fifty yards ahead was a low tree growing solitary in the clearing. She quickened her pace, and turning her head, saw, to her horror, that the hyena had broken into a trot and was coming straight for her. Even so, she could reach the tree; she was quite near it now. The hyena was not charging, just trotting slowly toward her. Evidently he was too sure of his prey to feel any necessity for exerting himself.

Virginia reached the tree in ample time to climb to safety, and it was with a little prayer of relief that she looked up for a hand hold upon a lower branch—a prayer that froze upon her lips and turned to a scream of horror, startled from overwrought nerves, as she saw a great snake coiled in the branches above her head.

Chapter VII

WHEN daylight broke upon the village from which Virginia had escaped it found Taylor and Kelley, shaken but sobered, preparing to set out in search of Virginia. In the jungle outside the palisade they had buried the torn remnants of what had once been Gootch, and then they gathered their men together and set forth upon the trail of the girl.

Spreading out in a great circle, two or three together, they beat the jungle in all directions. Chance led the two whites with a handful of men toward the west, and a shred of torn khaki clinging to a thorn bush put one of the natives upon her

trail. After that it was easy and the party made rapid progress in the wake of the fleeing girl.

And to the west another camp was astir. Breakfast was served and disposed of, and Dick Gordon, humming "It's nice to get up in the morning," shouldered a light sporting rifle, and with his gun bearer at his heels with his express set out along the coastal trail of his safari.

The day was beautiful, Gordon was happy. Broadway held more pitfalls than the jungle. His was but a happy care free jaunt to the coast. He was already commencing to feel sorry that his quest was over and his outing past its zenith. Back to the humdrum of civilization! He shrugged disgustedly. Not an untoward occurrence upon the entire trip. The monotony of New York had followed him into the wilds of Africa. He had been born, evidently, to the commonplace. Adventure shunned him.

And then, directly ahead and so close that it sounded shrill upon his ears, rose the scream of a terrified woman. Gordon leaped forward at a rapid run. In a dozen paces he broke from the jungle into a small clearing to a sight which surprised him no less than would the presence of a Numidian lion loose upon Fifth Avenue.

He saw first a dishevelled white girl clothed in torn khaki, her hair loosened and fallen about her shoulders. In her hand was a broken branch and snarling about her was a huge hyena, closing in ready to charge.

Before either the girl or the beast realized that a new factor had been precipitated into their encounter, Gordon had thrown his rifle to his shoulder and fired just as the hyena charged. With a yelp of agony the hideous creature tumbled over and over almost to the girl's feet, and as it came to rest two more bullets pinged into its carcass, finishing it forever.

Gordon had run forward, stopping only momentarily to fire, and an instant after his last shot he stood before the girl looking down at her with astonishment and incredulity written large upon his countenance. She looked up at him in equal astonishment. He saw her reel, and dropping his rifle, steadied her with his arm.

"In the name of all that is holy," he said, "who are you, and what are you doing here alone in the jungle?"

"You are Mr. Gordon?"

He nodded. "Yes, my name is Gordon; but how the—how in the world did you know that and who are you?"

"I am Virginia Scott," she replied. She was still trembling and unstrung. It was with difficulty that she composed herself sufficiently to answer him coherently.

Gordon's eyes went wide at the disclosure of her identity.

"Miss Scott!" he exclaimed.

"What brought you here? Didn't your mother get my letter telling her that I would bring her the papers from the old mission?"

"Yes," she explained, "but another saw your letter first—Scott Taylor, my mother's cousin, and he set out after you to—to—oh, it is terrible, Mr. Gordon—he has followed you to kill you."

"He was the other heir?" Virginia nodded.

"And you have taken these frightful chances to warn me?" he asked.

"There was no other way," she replied.

He questioned her further, and bit by bit wrung from her the whole terrible story of the ordeals through which she had passed.

“And she has done all this for the sake of a stranger,” he thought. “What a girl!”

He had been watching her closely as she talked, and he found it difficult to take his eyes from her face. It was a very beautiful face.

Even the grime and the dirt and the scratches could not conceal that fact.

“You have done a very wonderful thing, Miss Scott,” he said. “A very brave, and wonderful, and foolish thing. I thank God that I found you in time. I shudder to think what your fate would have been had chance not led us together at the right moment.”

As they talked another party came to the edge of the clearing upon its eastern verge—came and halted at the sight disclosed before their eyes. It was Taylor, Kelley and their blacks. They had heard the shot and hurried forward, but cautiously; as they were sure that Virginia was not armed.

When Taylor saw the girl and Gordon together he saw the end of all his plans—unless—. His eyes narrowed as the suggestion forced itself upon him. Here were these two who stood alone between him and fortune. Two shots would put them from his path forever. Should either ever reach civilization again Scott Taylor would become an outcast. The story of his villainy would make him a marked man in the haunts he best loved. Never again could he return to Broadway.

Gordon’s back was toward him. The girl’s eyes were hidden from him by the man’s broad shoulders. Taylor stepped from behind the tree that had concealed him. He took careful aim at his first victim—the man.

And at that moment Gordon shifted his position, and Virginia’s horrified eyes took in the menace at his back.

It was too late to warn him.

There was but a single chance to save him. There was no sign in her expression that she had discovered Taylor. He was readjusting his aim to the changed position of his target, and he was taking his time about it, too, for he could not afford to bungle or miss.

At Gordon’s belt swung his revolver. Virginia was so close she could touch him by crooking an elbow. She did not have to take a step closer, and it was the work of but a second to whip the revolver from its holster, swing it up on Scott Taylor and pull the trigger. At the report Gordon wheeled in surprise toward the direction the girl had fired. He saw a white man drop a rifle and stagger out of sight behind a tree, and then the girl grasped him by the arm and drew him behind the tree beneath the branches of which they had met.

“It was Taylor,” she whispered.

“He had levelled his rifle at you. He would have shot you in the back, the cur.”

“I thought,” said Dick Gordon in a wondering voice, “that I owed you about all that a man could owe to a fellow-being; but now you have still further added to my debt.”

“You owe me nothing; the obligation is still all upon the side of my mother and myself,” replied Virginia. “But if you want to add a thousand-fold to that obligation I call tell you how you can do it.”

“How,” asked Gordon eagerly.

“By getting me and yourself out of this hideous country and back to America as quickly as it can be done.”

“Good,” cried Gordon. “We’ll start in just a minute, but first I’m going after that human mephitis and put him where he won’t shoot any more at a man’s back or bother women,” and calling to his men, who were now coming up, he started across the clearing in pursuit of Taylor.

That worthy, however, eluded them. Wounded in the forearm, he had scurried into the jungle, half supported, half dragged by Kelley, who, while feeling no loyalty toward his leader, shrank with terror from the thought of being left alone to the mercies of the blacks in the center of Africa. The reward he had about given up with the sight of Gordon and the girl together, for with Gootch dead and Taylor wounded, it seemed practically hopeless to expect to prevent Gordon and Virginia returning to America. Kelley knew that he couldn’t do it alone, nor would he try. He could knife a man in the back with ease, but a look at Gordon had assured him that it would not be profitable employment to attempt to get near enough to that athletic and competent looking young man to reach him with a knife. No, Kelley was through, in so far as further attempts at crime in his present surroundings were concerned.

“Get ‘em back in the good ol’ U.S.,” he urged Taylor, “an’ I’ll agree to help you; but Africa—never again!” and he raised his right hand solemnly above his head.

Taylor smiled ironically. “Yes! Get ‘em back in the good old U.S.,” he mimicked. “They’ll go back of themselves fast enough, you boob, without any help from us, and they’ll make little old U.S. so damned hot that it won’t hold us. If that cat hadn’t pinked me I’d stop ‘em before ever they reached the coast, but,” and he winced with pain, “I’m all in for a while; but by God, I’ll follow them to the States and get them there; there can’t anybody put anything over on me like this. They can’t rob me of what’s mine by right even if it isn’t mine by law, and I’ll show ‘em.”

Virginia was for giving the native village of her adventures a wide berth, but Gordon assured her that they must pass it on the trail to the coast, and that he was rather anxious to do so and interview the chief. The tone of voice in which he stated his determination filled Virginia with alarm and also made him promise that he would do nothing to arouse the wrath of the village.

But pass the village they did, and much to their surprise the first people they saw emerging from the gates to meet them were several white men. They proved to be a party of wild animal collectors coming down from an excursion toward the north.

In sturdy cages they bore several young lions, a few leopards, hyenas and other specimens of the fauna of the district through which they had passed. Now they were on their way to the coast, but the stories they had heard of the wonderful black maned lion that had terrorized the village and killed a white man there the night before had determined them to stop long enough to attempt to capture the splendid beast.

Gordon and Virginia tarried with them but a few minutes, then continued their way to the coast, which they reached without incident after what was, to Gordon at least, the pleasantest journey of his life.

Had it not been for the anxiety which he knew the girl's mother must be suffering on account of her mad escapade he would have found means to prolong the journey many days.

Chapter VIII

AT the coast they found that they would have to wait a week for a steamer, and having cabled Mrs. Scott that Virginia was safe under his care, Gordon felt at liberty to rejoice that they had made reasonably good connections. It might have been worse—chance might have brought them to the coast only a day ahead of a steamer.

Gordon, unspoiled by wealth and attentions and scheming manias, lacked sufficient egotism to think that Virginia Scott might be attracted to him as he was to her. There had been other girls who he had known desired him, but these he had not cared for. Very soon after he had met Virginia he had realized that here at last, in the wilds of Africa, he had found the one girl, the only girl, and straight-away he had set her upon a pedestal and worshipped silently from afar.

To think that this deity might stoop to love a mortal did not occur to him, and, strange to say, he was content to love her without declaring his love—but that was while he had her alone and all to himself. How it would be when she returned to the haunts of eligible men did not occur to him.

Very adroitly—at least he thought it was adroitly accomplished—he discovered from her own lips that she was not engaged, and thereafter his bliss knew no bounds. It had been difficult for Virginia to repress a smile during the ponderous strategy with which he maneuvered the information from her, and also it had been her first intimation that Richard Gordon might care for her. It troubled her, too, not a little, for Virginia Scott was not a young lady to throw her heart lightly into the keeping of the first good looking man who coveted it. That she liked Gordon immensely she would have readily admitted; but she had given no thought to a deeper interest nor but for the suggestion the young man blunderingly put into her head might such a thought have occurred to her—at least not so soon.

But the idea, implanted, became food for considerable speculation, with the result that she now often discovered herself appraising Gordon in a most critical manner. "As though," she mused, "he were a six cylinder limousine, and I wanted to be sure that I like the upholstery—which I do but there's something wrong with his sparking device," and Virginia laughed softly to herself.

"What's the joke?" asked Gordon, sitting beside her on the hotel veranda.

"Oh, nothing—just thinking," replied Virginia, evasively; but she turned her face away to hide a guilty flush, and as she did so her eyes alighted upon the head of a long column marching into town.

"Oh, look!" she exclaimed, glad of any pretext to change the line of thought. "Who do you suppose it can be?"

Gordon looked in the direction she indicated, rose and walked to the end of the veranda, and then called back over his shoulder.

“They’re the collectors. I wonder if they got their man-eater?”

Virginia was at his side now, and at her suggestion the two walked down the street to meet the incoming caravan. The collectors were delighted to see them again, and in response to Gordon’s inquiry pointed to a stout cage in the middle of the long line.

“There he is,” said one of them, “and he’s a devil.”

Gordon and the girl dropped back to have a look at the latest capture, finding a huge, black-maned lion crouching in the narrow confines of his prison. His yellow eyes glared balefully out upon them, his tail moved restlessly in angry jerks, and his bristling muzzle was wrinkled into a perpetual snarl that bared long, ugly looking fangs.

“He does look like a devil, doesn’t he?” remarked Gordon.

A crowd was gathering about the cage now, and as one approached more closely than his majesty thought proper he leaped to his feet and dashed madly against the bars. Roaring loudly and clawing viciously in an attempt to reach the presumptuous mortal—who shrank back in terror, much to the amusement of the other onlookers.

“What a beauty!” exclaimed Virginia.

Gordon was looking very closely at the lion, and instead of replying moved forward nearer the cage. The lion growled savagely, hurling himself against the bars, and then Gordon stepped quite close to him. The beast stopped suddenly and eyed the man in silence. A look, almost of human recognition, changed the expression of his face.

He growled, but no longer angrily—a growl of friendly greeting Gordon could have sworn.

“I thought as much,” said the man, turning toward Virginia and one of the collectors at his back. “See that jagged scar on the inside of the forearm there?” he asked.

The collector nodded.

“This is the fellow I liberated from the pit,” continued Gordon, “and he remembers me.”

“Well, I shouldn’t bank too strongly on his gratitude if I were you,” warned the collector.

“No, I don’t intend to,” laughed Gordon.

Two days later Virginia Scott and Richard Gordon took passage upon a northbound steamer, and among the other passengers and cargo were the collectors and their wild beasts.

For several days after receiving his wound Taylor was down with fever; but the moment he could travel he and Kelley set off on their return to the coast, the former bent now upon carrying his felonious designs to a successful conclusion even if he had to rob and murder Gordon in the heart of New York. The man was desperate. His expedition had cost him all the money that he could beg, borrow or steal. He owed Kelley not alone the promised reward but several hundred dollars in cash that the latter had advanced toward the financing of the work. He must have money—he must have a lot of it—and he was determined to get it.

Never in his life had Scott Taylor been so dangerous an enemy; and in this state of mind he and Kelley caught the steamer following that upon which Virginia and Gordon had sailed.

Gordon whiled away the hours of the voyage, when he could not be in Virginia's company, before the cage of the great lion. No one else could approach the beast, with the possible exception of Virginia Scott, whom the animal seemed to tolerate so long as Gordon was near. Toward all others the tawny man-eater evinced the most frightful rage; but when Gordon approached he became docile as a kitten, permitting the American to reach inside the bars and scratch his massive, wrinkled face.

At Liverpool Gordon bade farewell to his savage, jungle friend, for he and Virginia were to take a fast liner for New York, the collector following upon a slower vessel.

"Goodbye, old man," said Gordon in parting, stroking the mighty muzzle. "The chances are we'll never see each other again; but I'll never forget you—especially as I most vividly recall you as you stood over me there in the jungle debating the question of your savage jungle ethics, while gratitude and appetite battled within your breast—and see that you don't forget me; though you will, of course, within a month."

The lion rumbled in his throat and rubbed his head luxuriously against the bars as close to the man as he could get, and thus Gordon left him.

Within a few days the huge beast was sold to a traveling American circus, where he was presently exhibited to wondering crowds, "Ben, King of Beasts, the Man-Eating Lion from the Wilds of Central Africa." He roared and ramped and struggled for liberty for days, but at last he seemed to realize the futility of his efforts, and subsided into a sullen quiet which rendered his keepers even more apprehensive than had his open rebellion.

"He's a ugly one," commented the big Irishman, whose special charge Ben was; "an' deep, too. He'll get some 'un yet. Yeh can't never trust these forest critters; they're all alike, only Ben he's worse."

Chapter IX

MRS. SCOTT had met Virginia and Gordon at the dock, where, in the excitement and rejoicing of the reunion of the mother and daughter, the manila envelope and its contents were forgotten until long after Gordon had seen the two safely aboard their train for home.

Before parting with him both had urged that he visit them at an early date, and gladly indeed had Gordon promised to do so. It was not until their train had pulled out of the station that Virginia recalled the paper for which Gordon had made the long journey and risked his life.

"He must have forgotten it, too," she said; "but he'll probably discover it and mail it to you today."

Mr. Richard Gordon did not, however, discover the manila envelope for many days thereafter. It had crossed the Atlantic in one of his bags in the special care of the loyal Murphy, and that gentleman had removed it, with other papers, as was his custom, to a certain drawer in Gordon's desk where "unfinished business" reposed, awaiting the leisurely pleasure of Mr. Gordon.

But that young gentleman found upon his arrival in New York a matter of far greater interest than unanswered letters and unpaid bills.

It was an urgent demand from an old school friend that he accompany the former a-motoring into Canada on a fishing expedition.

He had met this friend in the grill of one of his clubs the day he landed in New York, and fifteen minutes later had promised to leave with him early the following morning.

Mrs. Scott and Virginia waited a reasonable time, and then, hearing nothing from Gordon, the girl wrote him, and as fate would have it her letter reached New York the very day that witnessed the return of Taylor and Kelley, and the latter, sent to ascertain the whereabouts of Gordon, preceded the postman into the apartment building where Gordon's bachelor home was located by a few paces.

Turning to see who was behind him, Kelley had an inspiration born of former practice and long years of taking anything that he could get his hands on, provided it belonged to another.

"If there's anything for my friend Gordon," he said to the mail carrier, "I'll save you a trip up as I'm going up to see him now."

Unsuspecting, the carrier shuffled off a half dozen pieces of mail matter and handed them to Kelley, who resumed his way to the elevator, stuffed the letters in his pocket and a moment later rang the bell of Gordon's door. Murphy answered the summons and, thanks to a slight disguise, failed to recognize the card sharp of the trip out.

"No, sir, Mr. Gordon is not in," he replied to Kelley's inquiry. "He has gone out of town for a couple of weeks. What name, sir?"

"Oh, he doesn't know me," replied Kelley. "I'll call again after he comes home. It's just a little business matter," and he turned and departed.

Back in the flat on West One Hundred and Forty-fifth Street, Kelley handed the mail to Taylor. One by one the envelopes were steamed open and the contents read. Only the letter from Virginia was of interest or value to the conspirators.

"He's still for the paper," announced Taylor when he had finished reading Virginia's note, "and he'll go down there with it. That's the place to get him and the paper at the same time. I know the lay of the land there. We'll duck for Scottsville and lay for Mr. Buttinski Gordon. Seal up those letters, Kelley, and put 'em into Gordon's mail box."

Two weeks later Dick Gordon sat once more before his desk in his apartment and attacked the accumulated correspondence in the "unfinished business" drawer at his right hand.

"Well, I'll be—what do you know about that?" he exclaimed, as he read Virginia's letter, and then he rummaged through the mass of envelopes before him, drawing a great sigh of relief as his search finally uncovered the long manila envelope.

"Hey, Murphy!" he called. "Ring up and find out when the first train through Scottsville, Virginia, leaves."

The following day he alighted at the station of the sleepy little town, engaged a negro to drive him to The Oaks, and was presently making his dusty way in the direction of the stately Scott household.

Two minutes after he had driven off Kelley rushed breathlessly into the ballroom of the tavern where Taylor was engaged in a game of cards with a marooned traveling man.

Leaning close to Taylor's ear Kelley whispered; "He's come!"

"Where is he?" asked Taylor.

"Driven off toward The Oaks," replied Kelley.

"All right—he'll keep 'til tonight," and Taylor resumed the pleasurable task of separating the traveling man from his expense money.

At The Oaks Gordon discovered that Mrs. Scott and Virginia were visiting friends at a nearby town.

"Dey'll be back to-morrer, Mistah Gordon," said the old colored butler, "an' Ah knows dey'll be mighty prolashus to see you-all. Dey's been expectin' you for a right smaht. Yo come right along of me, an' I'll show you yore room—you mos' suttiny gotter stay till Miss Ruth an' Miss 'Ginia returns."

"It's might good of you," said Gordon, "and I'll do it. Let me see, you are Washington, are you not? I've heard Miss Virginia speak of you.

"Yassah, I'm Washington Scott, sah," replied the old fellow, beaming with pride and pleasure to learn that he had been the subject of 'Quality's conversation'. "Yassha, Marssa Jefferson Scott's great gran' daddy bought my great gran' daddy 'bout fouah hundred yeahs ago and we been in de fambly eber since. Ah been de Gen'l's body servant evah since Ah ben a li'le shaver."

"Your people have sure been with the Scotts for some time, Washington," commented Gordon, with a smile, as he followed the old man up the grand staircase to the second floor.

Gordon's room lay at the far end of a long hall, overlooking the roof of the veranda, and a pleasant, wooded lawn at the side of the house.

The young man passed the balance of the day wandering about the grounds, chatting with the negroes, and longing for the coming of the morrow that would bring Virginia Scott. In the evening he sat upon a settee beneath a tree on the front lawn, smoking and listening to the banjos and the singing of the negroes in their quarters down the road.

Bordering the fence grew thick shrubbery which hid the road, as it also hid from his eyes the two silent figures that crept stealthily in its shadow.

As they watched him Gordon arose, tossed his cigar aside and turned toward the house. From across the bottom lands two miles away came faintly the rumble of a train. Suddenly a shrill whistle from all engine screamed through the quiet night, almost immediately afterward followed by a dull, booming sound that seemed to shake the earth.

Gordon paused and listened. "If that wasn't a wreck," he mused, "it at least sounded mightily like it, but it probably wasn't at that. Noises always seem exaggerated at night."

For a moment Gordon stood listening, then he turned toward the house again, entered it and ascended to his room. The two figures in the shrubbery circled the

grounds until they reached a point where they could see his windows. There they waited until a light appearing proclaimed that Gordon had gone to his room.

“We’ll loaf around until he’s asleep,” whispered one of the prowlers.

Fifteen minutes later the light in Gordon’s chamber was extinguished.

“He’s turned in,” whispered the other prowler.

“We’ll stick for a quarter of an hour longer,” said the first, “an’ give him a chance to get to sleep.”

For a while both were silent.

The quiet of the soft summer night was broken only by the cicadas, the subdued croaking of frog’s in the bottoms, and strains of Southern melody from the negro quarters.

“Don’t them coons never go to bed,” growled Kelley querulously.

Taylor made no response. He was fidgeting uneasily. He wished the job well over. Time and again he fingered the automatic in the side pocket of his coat. Once he drew the weapon out and for the dozenth time that day removed the cartridge clip and counted the shells. “Nine of ‘em and one in the chamber,” he commented. “That’s ten—oh!” The clip had slipped from his nervous fingers and fallen to the ground.

Hastily he snatched it up and slipped it back in the grip of the weapon.

“Come on!” he whispered to Kelley. “We’ll sneak in up to his door and listen there—this waitin’ gets my goat.”

“Mine, too,” said Kelley, and the two slunk from tree to tree until they were well in the shadows of the house. Then they circled to the veranda steps, mounted and paused beside the French doors opening into the library. Taylor was in advance. He was about to enter when a telephone bell broke the silence of the interior with a brazen clanging, bursting upon their startled ears with all the terrific volume of a pounding fire gong. The two men drew back hurriedly, slinking into the deeper shadows at the end of the porch and crouching behind a swinging porch seat.

Presently a light shone in the library—waveringly at first, and then brighter and steadier as the old butler entered with a lamp and set it upon the table. The telephone bell was still ringing intermittently. Taylor and Kelley strained their ears to catch his words, but could not.

He was talking to Virginia Scott. “We decided to come tonight instead of tomorrow,” she said. “There was a wreck about half a mile from the station which delayed us—we had to walk in from where the accident occurred. Send Jackson to town with the machine for us at once.”

“Yes, Miss ‘Ginia, Ah send him punctiliously,” replied the old man.

A moment later he was routing Jackson out of bed and posting him off to the village. Taylor and Kelley remained in hiding, for the old butler waited out upon the veranda until he had seen the car turn into the pike and disappear in the direction of Scottsville. Then he turned slowly and entered the house, plodding upward to his room that he might dress to properly receive his returning mistress. He took the lamp with him, leaving the library lighted only by the moon which now streamed a silver shaft through the doors and windows.

When they were sure that he had gone Taylor and Kelley crept from their hiding place and entered the library, leaving the French doors wide open. At the foot of the stairs they paused, listening. Some one was moving about on the floor above.

It was the butler. Fearing that he was returning to the first floor the conspirators dodged into the music room, the doorway of which was close to the bottom of the stairs.

Ben, King of Beasts, objected strenuously to being loaded upon a flat car. Although the process consisted merely of rolling his wheeled cage up an incline onto the car, he objected to every change of location which necessitated the closer proximity of hated man, and the disturbing of his royal reveries.

But loaded he was, and then came the hateful jolting and pounding of the rumbling train, the screech of whistles, the grinding of brakes, and all the other noises of a switching circus train in a railroad yard. It seemed an eternity before the long train pulled out of the village and the nerve racking discords gave place to the rhythmic rumble of the open right of way, which finally lulled the irritable beast to slumber—a slumber that was rudely awakened by a piercing shriek of the engine's whistle, followed almost immediately by a terrific crash, and the pounding of the derailed flat over the ties for a hundred yards until at last it toppled into the ditch, hurling its cargo of terrified beasts through a barbed wire fence into a field beyond.

Ben's cage rolled over and over, one end of the top snapping a telegraph pole off short a few feet above the ground. After it had come to rest beyond the tangled wire of the demolished fence the lion lay half dazed for several minutes. Then he rose gingerly, as though expecting to discover that all his bones had been broken. He shook his giant head and rumbled out a low roar. His cage was lying on its side. What was that? Ben cocked his head upon one side and gazed incredulously at a gaping rent in front of him. The roof had been torn away by impact with the telegraph pole—there was a great hole, barless, through which two lions might have walked abreast.

Ben approached the opening and looked out. Before him stretched an open meadowland. He raised his nose and sniffed. A little tremor of joy ran through his great frame.

For an instant he stood there, listening. He heard the shouts of approaching men mingled with the screams and roars of terrified beasts about him. Lightly he sprang through the opening in the broken cage. He was free! Men were running toward him from the rear of the train. They had not seen him yet. For an instant he hesitated as though minded to remain and wreak vengeance on the human race; then a glimpse of distant woods and the lure of the open was too much for him. In long, easy bounds he loped away across the meadowland. A shallow swale running upland from the railroad appealed to his primeval instinct for cover. It hid him effectually from the sight of the men now crowding about the derailed flat.

Dropping into a swinging stride, he moved straight upwind. All about him was the scent of cattle. He licked his chops and whined. A barbed wire fence presently barred his way. This was something new! He sniffed inquiringly at it; then he curled his lips disdainfully at the puny strands that the foolish man-creatures had thought to imprison him with, for he believed that this was a new sort of cage constructed especially to hold him.

He raised a mighty forepaw and smote it. The sharp barbs pierced his flesh, eliciting an angry growl. He raised his eyes to measure the height of the barrier. It was low, pitifully low.

Still growling, Ben bounded over it. The wind now brought down to his nostrils the strong scent of sheep and cows and swine, filling him with lust for the hot blood, the dripping flesh of the warm, new kill.

Further on a Virginia rail fence loomed before him. He took it without a pause and an instant later stood in the dust of a white turnpike. Across the road was a hedge and from beyond the hedge came the mingled odors of man and herbivora. The lion lowered his head and walked through the hedge. He found himself upon a well kept lawn, dotted here and there with shrubs and trees. At the far side of the lawn rose a large white structure, gleaming in the moonlight.

Majestically the imperial beast moved across the close cropped sward—a golden lion on a velvet rug of green. A settee lay in his path. It was something new, and all new things were to be investigated. He sniffed at it, and on the instant his whole manner changed. A nervous tremor of excitement ran through his supple body. His tail twitched and trembled. His eyes glowed brighter. A low whine broke from his savage lips.

Down went his nose to the grass. The spoor was fresh and plain—it was the spoor of his one man-friend.

Ben followed it across the lawn to the foot of the veranda steps. Here he paused, looking dubiously up at the man-made structure. It might be another trap built for his capture; but no, the man-friend was there, and it must be safe.

The lion mounted the steps, still sniffing with lowered nose. Upon the veranda a new spoor lay fresher over that of the other—a spoor that set his tail to lashing angrily and put a hideous light into his yellow eyes—wicked and implacable now. The scent led through open doors into the interior. The beast thrust his head within and surveyed the room. He saw no one, but plainly he caught the scent of those whose scent he first had learned where it mingled with the blood of his slain mate.

Treading softly, he entered the room, the thick rug beneath padded feet giving forth no sound. In the center of the library he halted. A flood of moonlight pouring through the open doorway fell full upon him, revealing him in all his majesty of savage strength and alertness.

For all he moved now he might have been a mounted specimen standing there upon the Oriental rug beneath his feet, for he was listening.

A slight sound had come to those sensitive ears from out of the darkness of the music room. His yellow eyes bored straight ahead through the open doorway before him.

Taylor, hearing no further sounds from above, whispered to Kelley to follow him. Cautiously he moved toward the doorway leading into the library at the foot of the stairs. As he peered out his eyes suddenly went wide, his lower jaw fell, his knees trembled, for, standing motionless in the center of the library, he saw a huge lion.

For an instant the man was paralyzed with terror; and then the lion, giving voice to a single quick, short growl, charged. Taylor dodged back into the music room, too terrified to scream. Directly behind him was Kelley. In his mad panic of fear Taylor hurled his accomplice backward to the floor. Then he scrambled beneath a grand piano just as the lion leaped into the room.

The first object that the beast's eyes encountered was the prostrate form of Kelley. For an instant the beast's attention was occupied, and Taylor took the

slender advantage that was his to scurry from the room and race madly up the staircase to the second floor.

He ran straight for the closed door at the far end of the hall, the door leading into Richard Gordon's room. He scarce reached it when the lion, abandoning the grisly thing upon the music room floor, bounded from the room and up the stairway in pursuit.

Chapter X

WASHINGTON SCOTT, in the act of dressing for the return of his mistress, heard strange sounds that filtered upward from the first floor to his room upon the third. Seizing his lamp he made his way slowly downward upon his old and shaky legs. He was in the act of turning the knob of the door at the foot of the stairway that opened into the second floor balcony when he heard footsteps rushing frantically past.

Cautiously he opened the door and peered out in time to see a man dodge into Gordon's room and close the door. So quickly had the figure disappeared that the old butler had not recognized the intruder, but he was sure that it was not Mr. Gordon.

He would investigate. Stumping laboriously into the hall, he turned in the direction of Gordon's room. He was just opposite the old fashioned wardrobe built into the wall near Gordon's door when the rush of strange footfalls ascending the stairway caused him to turn his eyes in that direction.

"Gord a-mighty," shrieked the old man, as his eyes fell upon the hideous visage of the wide-jawed carnivore.

It was too late to retreat to the stairway down which he had just come. He had heard the lock turn in Gordon's door. There was only the old-fashioned cupboard in the wall beside him. Not in fifty years had Washington Scott moved with such celerity as he evinced in the next quarter second. With a wrench he tore the door open—like a youthful hurdler he vaulted into the dark closet, slamming the door to after him. Within was a crash of broken flooring and then silence.

The lion rushed past the old man's hiding place without even pausing to investigate. He was after bigger game than a decrepit old darky.

As Taylor dashed into his room, Gordon, awakened by the noise, sprang from his bed. Taylor, knowing that the time for stealth was past and that the whole house would be aroused in an instant, drew his revolver from the side pocket of his coat and fired point blank at Gordon as the latter rose in his bed. The bullet passed through Gordon's pajama coat and pinged into the wall behind him.

Then Taylor, with a mental "nine more," pulled the trigger again.

There was no responding report and Gordon was upon him. Frantically Taylor pressed the weapon to his victim's body and pulled the trigger—futilely. In returning the clip to the automatic when it had fallen to the ground from his nervous fingers earlier in the evening he had reversed it, so that the cartridges

were pointed to the rear, jamming the mechanism after the first shot had exploded the cartridge already in the chamber.

Once in Gordon's grasp, Taylor realized how hopelessly he was outclassed. The clean life of his antagonist found Taylor helpless in the other's power. Yet the man fought on desperately, for he knew that a long prison term awaited him should he be made captive now.

Around and around the room the two men struggled. Taylor beat madly at Gordon's face, but the latter sought the other's throat, striking only occasionally, and then only when a blow could be well delivered and effective.

In the hall beyond the lion had halted before the door to sniff and listen. From within came the sounds of combat and the scent of friend and foe. The great beast opened his wide jaws and roared out a thunderous challenge—a challenge that sent Washington Scott cowering in terror to the furthest recesses of the little closet and brought Gordon to a momentary pause of wonder in the battle he was waging for his life in the guest chamber of the Scott mansion.

But Richard Gordon had not time to give then to all investigation of the terrifying roar just without his room. He wondered, but he fought on, slowly but surely overcoming the weakening Taylor.

The lion pushed against the door with his forepaw. It did not open. He clawed at the panels, madly, thunderously. No frail wood could long withstand that mighty force. Splinters were torn away. The two men within the room heard, and one was terrified and the other wondering.

Gordon was pushing Taylor back against a table, further and further, when the latter, in a sudden and momentary burst of energy, struggled up and fought his conqueror back a step or two.

Beneath their feet lay a rug, rumpled and twisted as they had passed back and forth across it. Gordon's feet caught in it as Taylor surged against him, and he fell heavily backward, striking his head against the edge of a chair.

Taylor could scarce credit the good fortune that had saved him at the eleventh hour. Gordon lay unconscious beneath him. The lion was battering the door to pieces just beyond. Behind him was all open window leading onto the roof of the veranda. Taylor half started to make a break for escape from the lion when the object of his mission rushed to his mind.

He had risked too much to abandon all now when success, such as it was, lay in his grasp. Hastily he sprang to his feet and ran to the chair where Gordon's clothes lay. As he snatched up a garment and began to run hastily through it a panel crashed in beneath the lion's powerful blows and Taylor saw the gleaming, yellow eyes glaring at him through the aperture.

With a gasp of terror the man ran his hand inside the coat, his fingers came in contact with a long manila envelope, and he knew that he had won. Stuffing the prize into his own pocket, he turned and scrambled through the window to the roof of the veranda, ran to the edge and lying upon his stomach lowered himself quickly until he hung by his hands. Then he let go and dropped to a soft landing in a clump of bushes beneath.

Almost simultaneously the last of the door fell in beneath Ben's battering, and the lion sprang into the room. For just an instant he lowered his muzzle to the

face of the prostrate Gordon, sniffed, whined, and then caught Taylor's spoor and followed it through the window onto the roof.

Gordon, but momentarily stunned, sat up just in time to see the hind quarters of the lion disappearing through the window. Leaping to his feet he followed and looked out. He saw the great beast approach the spot where Taylor had dropped to the ground. For a moment the lion stood there measuring the distance—it was too great a leap for so heavy a beast except as a last resort.

Turning quickly away, the animal trotted to the far end of the roof. Below this there was a low shed and a moment later the carnivore was slinking through the shrubbery of the Scott grounds hot upon the trail of the fleeing Taylor.

Gordon, convinced that the lion had followed Taylor, though filled with wonder not only that a savage, jungle beast should be roaming at large in peaceful Virginia, but as well that the brute should have passed him by without harming him, ran from his room, calling the servants.

The old butler, hearing his voice, answered him in trembling tones from his hiding place.

"Mistah Go'don!" he cried.

"Where is he? Am he went?"

Gordon paused. The voice came apparently from the closet beside him.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Ah's heah—in dese heah clos'es hamper. Ah's stuck fast. If he am went please come an' hep me outen heah."

"He's 'went' all right," replied Gordon, opening the door of the closet, to find that Washington had broken through the bottom and was so tightly wedged that it required the combined efforts of them both to liberate him. Other house servants were timorously creeping down the stairs by this time, but when they found that a wild beast was prowling somewhere about, most of them promptly retreated to their rooms, where they fell to praying. A few remained to follow Gordon back to his room. A sudden fear had crept over the young man.

Taylor could have followed him for but one purpose. Had he been successful, after all, in his quest?

Gordon found his coat lying on the floor, and a hasty examination revealed the fact that the precious document had been removed from it. Snatching an old fashioned muzzle loader from one of the servants, Gordon hastened down the stairs and out onto the lawn. A sullen roar down in the direction of the negroes' quarters guided him in the direction the lion had taken, and which was, Gordon felt sure, the same as that in which Taylor had fled.

The moment that Taylor had extricated himself from the bushes he ran around to the front of the house and down past the negroes' shacks, passing out onto the turnpike below them and following that in the direction of Scottsville. He did not know that the lion had followed him, imagining that the beast had remained to maul and possibly to devour Gordon. The thought, while it induced a shudder, was far from unwelcome, since it compassed the elimination of Gordon, and so, as far as Taylor knew, the only witness to his presence in the Scott home.

Behind him a silent shadow moved along his trail. In long, undulating strides the great cat stalked its prey. Taylor had passed behind the cabins of the negroes, for several of the blacks were still sitting before their doorsteps strumming on their

instruments or gossiping among themselves; but the lion had caught a glimpse of the quarry, and so no longer must follow a scent. He had seen Taylor vault the fence into the turnpike, and without increasing his gait he moved straight toward him. His way led past the darkies. They had been discussing the strange sounds that had come from the big house.

Broken and muffled from having issued from the interior of the house, Ben's single roar had come down to them, half drowned by the nearer noise of their banjos. One had thought that it might have been the wail of a sick cow, another had attributed it to "Marse Jefferson Scott's ghos'."

"It soun' to me like one a dem lines Ah done seen at de cucus las' fall," ventured a tall, lanky black.

"Wow!" exclaimed a woman.

"Don' you talk no lines aroun' heah or Ah cain't sleep a wink tonight for thinkin' 'bout 'em."

"Sho, honey," exclaimed the first speaker. "Yo don' need worry none 'bout no lines whiles Ah'm 'roun'. Ah eats 'em alive, Ah does. Dey ain' nuffing to be afear'd of. Why, Ah seen a white man go right in a cage wif ten of 'em, an' he takes a big whip an' he lashes dem lines jes same 's if dey was mules. Jes laik dis," and the darkey seized his banjo by the neck and struck out ferociously at imaginary lions.

Swinging around to chastise one directly behind him, his eyes fell upon the huge head and glittering eyes of Ben, just protruding from about the corner of the cabin a few paces away. For one brief, horrified, instant the black man stood petrified with terror. His mouth flew agape, his eyes started from his head, and then, with a blood curdling shriek, he dove head foremost for the doorway of the cabin.

The sudden cessation of his valiant lion taming had attracted the attention of the others to the direction his eyes had taken. They, too, saw Ben but an instant after their fellow had discovered him.

Their screams mingled with his, as did their arms and legs and bodies, as the half dozen negroes launched themselves simultaneously for the same small doorway.

Scrambling, clawing, screaming, fighting, they battled for the safety of the interior until they became so tightly wedged in the narrow aperture that they could make no further progress.

Ben, surprised into a sudden stop at the first sight of them, now approached majestically, for his way led by their threshold. He paused a moment to sniff at the wildly kicking legs of the tangled mass. The discord of their fear-laden voices must have grated upon his nerves, for, with his mouth close to them, he gave vent to a single, mighty roar, and then passed on.

The blacks, paralysed by terror, became rigid and silent as death; nor did they move again until long after the great beast had passed out of sight.

Along the road from Scottsville purred the big Scott car, bearing Mrs. Scott and Virginia from the station to The Oaks. A quarter of a mile below the negroes' quarters the car came to a stop.

"What's the matter, Jackson?" asked Virginia.

"Ah dunno, Miss," replied the chauffeur, getting down from his seat and raising one side of the bonnet.

For a moment he fussed about between the engine and the control board, trying first the starter and then the horn.

“Ah guess we-all blowed a fuse,” he announced presently.

“Have you others, or must we walk the rest of the way?” inquired Mrs. Scott.

“Oh, yasam, Ah got some right yere,” and he raised the cushion from the driver’s seat and thrust his hand into the box beneath. For a moment he fumbled about in search of an extra fuse plug.

“Who’s that coming down the road?” asked Virginia.

Mrs. Scott and the chauffeur both looked up. They saw a man, running now, directly in the middle of the road and coming in the direction of the machine. An instant later, another figure bounded into sight behind the man. Mechanically the chauffeur, while he watched the approaching man, had clipped the new fuse into place—the car was ready to run again, but at sight of the lion the black lost his head completely, uttered a wild yell of dismay, and bolted for the opposite side of the road, vaulted the fence and disappeared.

Mrs. Scott and her daughter sat as though turned to stone as they watched the frantic efforts of the man to outdistance the grim beast now rapidly closing up to him.

Directly in the full glare of the headlights, not a dozen paces from the car, the lion overtook his prey. With a savage roar and a mighty leap he sprang full upon Taylor’s back, hurling him to the ground.

Virginia Scott gasped in dismay. In the man’s hand was a revolver, and as he fell he rolled upon his back and, placing the muzzle against the lion’s breast, pulled the trigger; but again the jammed weapon failed to work, which was as well, for it would have but inflamed the rage of the maddened beast without incapacitating him.

For an instant the lion stood over his fallen enemy. He raised his head, glaring straight into the brilliant lights of the automobile. Fascinated with the horror of it, the two women watched. They saw Taylor struggling futilely now beneath the huge paw that rested upon his breast. The man’s nerve was gone, he whimpered and screamed like a terrified puppy.

“God!” whispered Virginia. “It’s Scott!”

Her mother but shuddered and drew closer to her.

Aggravated by the struggles and the noise of his prey, Ben lowered his head. His distended jaws were close to Taylor’s face, his yellow eyes glared into the fear-mad orbs of the man, from his deep chest there rumbled a thunderous roar, then his jaws closed like a huge steel trap, and Scott Taylor ceased to be.

Mrs. Scott gave a short, involuntary scream and buried her face in her hands. Attracted by the sound, the lion raised his dripping jaws and again eyed the glaring light. Beyond them he could see nothing; but from beyond them had come the sound of a human cry.

Virginia watched the beast intently. Should she and her mother leave the machine and attempt to escape, or were they safer where they were? The lion could easily track them should he care to do so after they had left the car. On the other hand, the strange and unusual vehicle might be sufficient safeguard in itself to keep off a nervous jungle beast.

While she was pondering these questions Ben continued to gaze steadily toward them. Finally he lowered his head to his prey once more, sniffed at it a moment, then seized the body by the shoulder and dragged it a few paces to one side of the road. Here the lion was out of the direct glare of the headlights. Again he looked toward the car. Now he could see it. He cocked his head upon one side and rumbled in his throat. He did not like the looks of this strange thing. What was it? He would investigate.

Abandoning Taylor's body, he paced slowly forward toward the car. Mrs. Scott shrank closer to Virginia, too terrified by this time to scream. The girl kept her wits, but still was at a loss as to what move to make or as to whether she could make any that would be better than remaining rigidly quiet under the lion's investigation.

The beast was beside the car now. Leisurely, he placed a forepaw on the running board and raised himself until his giant head topped the side of the tonneau. Slowly he intruded his wrinkled muzzle until his nose brushed Virginia's skirt.

Mrs. Scott could bear the strain no longer. With a low moan she fainted. Now there was no escape for Virginia. The girl steeled herself to meet the end bravely.

The great cat was sniffing at her skirt and growling hideously.

Chapter XI

WITH the old musket in his hands Richard Gordon ran rapidly toward the negroes' quarters, from whence he had heard the lion's roar. Here he found the terrified blacks still fast in the doorway, making no move to extricate themselves. He shouted to them, asking which way the lion had gone. Hearing a white man's voice, the pile disentangled itself and presently one was sufficiently recovered from his terror to inform Gordon that they did not know which way the lion had gone, for the simple reason that, all having their eyes shut, they had not known that he had departed at all until they had heard Gordon's voice.

But from the window of an adjoining cabin, a frightened, nightcapped head was thrust timorously, and a trembling voice issuing from shaking lips vouchsafed the information that their owner had seen the lion leap the fence into the turnpike and disappear in the direction of town.

Without waiting to listen to the harrowing details which now broke from a half dozen pairs of lips, Gordon ran to the fence, vaulted it and started down the road at a rapid trot. He had gone but a short distance when the lion's roar again sounded, this time straight ahead and at no great distance.

The man, bent solely on overtaking Taylor and wresting the manila envelope from him, went warily now that he might avoid the lion, for he was too experienced a big game hunter to place any reliance on the archaic weapon he carried. It would do to bring Taylor to a stand, but for the lion it was scarce adequate, though in the day of its prime men had hunted the king of beasts with its counterpart—and some of them had returned to narrate their exploits.

A turn in the road revealed the headlights of an automobile and set Gordon to wondering. A little closer and he saw a crumpled something lying at the side of the road. Gordon crept to the shadow of the bushes that lined the fence. The moon was bright, the shadows dense. He moved cautiously forward. The thing by the roadside was the body of a man. It must be Taylor's. But where was the lion?

Then he saw him, standing with his forefeet upon the running board of the machine and his head thrust inside the car. A sudden whimpering from the other side of the bushes where he crouched attracted Gordon's attention. It sounded like a man crying.

"Who is that?" whispered the young New Yorker.

"Oh, Lawd!" exclaimed a voice from beyond the foliage. "Is dat you, Mistah Go'don? Has de line aten 'em all up?"

"Eaten whom?" cried Gordon, half recognizing the voice of the Scott chauffeur.

"Mis' Scott and Miss Virginia—deyse in de car, an' he's eaten one of 'em up."

With a cry that was half curse and half moan Dick Gordon sprang to his feet and without further attempt at stealth, bounded toward the automobile. As he ran he shouted aloud to attract the lion's attention. The beast withdrew his head from the tonneau and eyed the intruder.

Gordon halted a dozen paces from him, still calling aloud in the hope of inducing the beast to leave the machine and come toward him.

With dignity the king of beasts lowered his forepaws to the ground and turned about to face the man.

"Are you there, Virginia," cried Gordon. "Are you unhurt?"

"I'm here," she replied. "He has not touched us yet; but you! Oh, Dick, be careful or he'll get you as he did Scott."

"Dick!" She had never used his first name before, and even now in the midst of danger—in the face of death—his heart leaped in glad response to the love and solicitude in her dear voice.

"Can you drive?" he cried.

"Yes, I can drive," she replied.

"Then climb over and drive," he commanded. "Drive anywhere, as fast as you can, but, for the love of heaven, get out of here."

"But you?"

"Never mind me, I'm armed," and he raised the futile old relic of Revolutionary days to his shoulder.

The girl, realizing that her mother's safety lay in her hands and that neither could help Gordon, clambered over into the driver's seat and started the engine. With the whir of the starter Ben wheeled about with a low snarl, but in the instant the girl drew the speed lever back into low, pressed down on the accelerator, let in the clutch, and the car shot forward.

Still the lion seemed in doubt. He took a few steps toward the car, which he could easily reach in a single bound. He paid no attention now to Gordon, and the latter, fearing that the beast might spring upon the passing car, burned his bridges behind him and did the one thing that occurred to him to divert the brute's attention.

In the few moments that he had watched the animal he had become half convinced that the lion was his former friend of the jungle and the steamer. He

could not be sure, but the magnificent proportions and the massive head were the same.

Even so he could scarce hope that the savage beast, maddened by the taste of human blood and rendered nervous by all through which it had passed during the brief interval since it had entered the Scott home, would recall him or its former friendliness toward him.

But this was all apart from the main issue—the saving of Virginia and her mother from those rending fangs. The man had held his musket leveled for a moment on the lion's shoulder, and then, with an exclamation of disgust, had tossed it aside. He would pit all against the chance that the lion was Ben, and so, shouting loudly, he ran straight for the grim beast.

Glancing behind him the lion saw the man approaching rapidly. He paused, and the car, shooting into second and high, sped beyond his reach. Then the lion turned to face Gordon, and Gordon, seeing that the occupants of the car were beyond harm, halted in his tracks.

For seconds that seemed hours to the man the two stood facing each other. It was the lion who moved first. He advanced slowly and deliberately.

The moonlight flooded him. Gordon's eyes dropped to the great forearm, searching for the jagged scar that might at least give him some faint hope. Nor did he look in vain, for there, plain in the moonlight was the serrated mark that told him that the beast was Ben.

Almost simultaneously with his discovery came a loud hail from the field below the road. The lion halted at the sound and both he and Gordon turned their eyes in the direction of the voice. They saw three men, armed with rifles. They were the circus owner and the two keepers. "Stand where you are," shouted the owner. "That beast is a devil. Don't move and we can get him before he charges."

At the same instant the three raised their guns and took aim at the splendid statue standing rigid in the moonlight.

It has been said that Mr. Richard Gordon was a creature of impulse, nor did his next act belie his reputation. Twice, Ben, King of Beasts, had spared his life. Tonight he had captured and punished the scoundrel, who would have killed Gordon but for the timely appearance of the lion. The man's debt to the beast was one that Richard Gordon could not, in honor, ignore.

With a cry of "Don't shoot!" he leaped toward the lion, placing himself between the animal and the rifles. He was so close that he could touch the tawny shoulder. Ben lowered his head and sniffed Gordon's clothing. A little whine escaped the savage lips. Gordon put forth his hand and laid it on the shaggy mane and the lion pressed close against the side, rubbing his head along the man's leg.

The astonished owner and keepers lowered their rifles and approached a trifle nearer, though still keeping a safe distance.

"For the love o' Mike," exclaimed one of them. "Whadya know about that!"

"Who in the name of Phineas T. Barnum are you, anyway?" asked the owner.

"I'm a friend of Ben's," Gordon laughed back, and then, briefly, he told them of his past acquaintance with the animal.

"Want to sell him?" he asked finally.

"He's a very valuable animal," commented the owner, shrewdly, sensing a profitable deal, but Gordon interrupted him.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll just let him go and you can come and get your valuable animal.”

The owner laughed. “You got me, I guess,” he said. “What’ll you give me for him?”

“Just what you paid for him, plus transportation charges to the New York Zoo—I’m going to present him to the city.”

“It’s a go,” said the owner. “We couldn’t never take him alive without your help.”

“Throw me your ropes,” commanded Gordon. “I’ll put them on him and then we’ll lead him up the road to the house of a friend of mine until you can get his cage over here.”

Without difficulty he adjusted two ropes about Ben’s neck, tossed an end of each to a keeper, patted the lion on the head, and turned his attention to the body of Taylor beside the road. His first thought was of the manila envelope and this he quickly found and transferred to his own pocket. Then he sought for signs of life, but a careful examination revealed the fact that Taylor was dead.

“Come along,” he said, and taking his place at Ben’s shoulder he led the way up the road to the Scott lawn.

At sight of the lion entering the grounds the servants who were gathered about the veranda steps fled to the interior of the house, leaving Mrs. Scott and Virginia alone. The girl saw with relief that Gordon was unharmed and that the lion had been secured, and running down the steps she hastened forward to meet the young man.

Taking both hands in hers as he stepped forward from the lion, she tried to thank him, but her voice choked and the words would not come. He pressed her hands tightly in his and led her onto the veranda, where Mrs. Scott awaited them.

“At last,” he said, and handed her the manila envelope. She took it in nervous fingers as she thanked him for all that he had risked and done for her and here she mechanically tore the wrapper open. In the brilliant moonlight even fine print might easily have been read, and as she withdrew the contents of the envelope she gave a little exclamation of surprise as her eyes fell upon the sheaf of papers within.

“Why, what are these?” she exclaimed, running quickly through them.

Gordon and Virginia stepped to her side.

“Let us go into the library,” said Mrs. Scott. “I do not find the marriage certificate here.”

Together the three stepped into the house. Outside the keepers, each having taken a turn about a tree with his rope, waited for the return of the owner, who had gone back to the wreck for a team of horses and a wheeled cage for Ben. The lion, nervous now that Gordon had left him, growled continuously.

Inside, Virginia, Mrs. Scott and Gordon leaned over the long library table, upon which were spread the contents of the manila envelope, under the strong light of a reading lamp. Carefully Gordon examined each paper.

“Why these are stock certificates of considerable value,” he said. “There is no marriage certificate here. But our quest was not entirely in vain. These certificates, probably of no great value when they were purchased years ago, now represent a fortune. There are several industrials alone that are worth today more than a

hundred times what they must have sold for when these were issued. They are in your father's name, Mrs. Scott."

"Yes, but the marriage certificate," responded the older woman. "What can become of it? I so wanted it, after the unjust accusation of Scott Taylor."

Gordon shook his head.

"It is a mystery," he said. "I brought every article that remained in the strong box beneath the hearth. There was no evidence that another had been there before us—had there he would have removed these also, and the few pieces of jewelry that were hidden there."

"Well," said Mrs. Scott, with a sigh, "of course now it is just a sentiment, I suppose, for whether Virginia is allowed the property of her grandfather or not she will be independently wealthy in possession of these stocks alone."

Just then a startled cry resounded through the house. It came from the music room behind them, and as they turned in that direction they beheld Washington Scott, ashy blue from fright, rush trembling into the library from the music room.

"Oh, Lordy, Miss Ruth!" he cried. "Dere's a daid man in de music room—wif his face all chawed off'n him. Oh, Lordy!"

Gordon stepped quickly to the door of the music room, and there on the floor revealed by the light from the library lamp that filtered into the room, lay a sight that caused him to turn and warn back Virginia, who was following close upon his heels.

"Ben has been here ahead of us," he explained. "This must be one of Taylor's companions—Kelley probably, though his face is not recognizable now. Washington," he continued, turning to the shaking black, "bring me a sheet—I'll cover this—and then you might telephone to town for the Coroner and an undertaker."

When Washington had fulfilled his missions he clung closely about the family, evidently terrified at the thought of going to other parts of the house for fear he might stumble upon others of Ben's victims.

"Let's go upstairs and see where he broke down the door of your room, Dick," suggested Virginia, and together, Washington bringing up the rear, they all filed up the stairway.

The splintered door filled the two women with amazement, so complete had been its destruction, and then Washington, wishing to share some of the glory of the adventure, called their attention to his hiding place.

"Ah done broke through de bottom," he giggled nervously. Virginia, taking a lamp from the old servant's hand, peered into the cupboard.

"Why, there's quite an opening beneath this," she remarked, and reflecting the lamp's rays downward with her palm she looked into the black hole beneath the splintered flooring. A moment later she had thrust her hand and arm deep into the aperture, and when she withdrew them she held a shiny, black box.

"What do you suppose this is doing here?" she asked.

"It must have been a secret hiding place of your grandfather's for valuables," suggested her mother.

"Let's have a look at the contents then," cried the girl, but the box would not open to her efforts.

She handed it to Gordon.

"See if you can open it," she said.

Gordon examined it for a moment.

"It's locked—we'll have to pry it open," he said. "Get a screw driver, please, Washington, and we'll go down to the library again and investigate Miss Virginia's find."

By the time Washington had located a screw driver the others had gathered once more about the library table, the little black box the center of attraction. With the tool Gordon quickly pried the lid open, disclosing a number of papers within. These he handed immediately to Mrs. Scott, who ran through them quickly. "Why, here's your grandfather's missing will, Virginia," she cried, handing a legal appearing document to the girl.

"Sure enough," exclaimed the latter, glancing through it. "And it is just as Judge Sperry said, he has left everything to me, with the exception of the income from certain property which is to be yours, mother, during the balance of your life."

"What is in that manila envelope?" asked Gordon. "It bears a startling resemblance to one that I carried from Central Africa to Central Virginia."

Virginia picked up the envelope in question and opened it. Her voice rounded into a little "Oh!" of delighted surprise.

"Why, mother!" she cried. "Here it is right here. Here it has been all the time, right under our noses, and we never knew it and sent Dick almost to his death looking for it in Africa," and she handed the much sought for and elusive marriage certificate to her mother.

A hand long dead had placed it in that envelope, and in the hurry of Robert Gordon's departure from the mission had mistaken the manila envelope containing it for another identically like it which held the valuable stock certificates that Reverend Sangamon Morton had wished to send to his son-in-law's father for safe-keeping.

"My mission was not entirely fruitless, however," remarked Gordon, gazing smilingly into Virginia's eyes.

"Indeed it was not," cried Mrs. Scott, not catching the double meaning of his words. "Had it not been for you Ben would have died in the pit the natives dug for him. Washington would not have had to clamber into the cupboard to escape him, and the secret of the false bottom and the little box might have gone undiscovered for generations. In reality it is to you we owe the finding of the stock certificates—and, candidly I am most interested in the marriage certificate; but then I am a sentimental old woman," and she laughed gently.

"I too am interested in a marriage certificate," remarked Gordon, and again he looked into Virginia's eyes, and again she looked away.

A few minutes later the young people strolled out onto the lawn together to have a look at Ben. The great lion whined a delighted welcome as he caught sight of Gordon. The girl he permitted to approach him, too. On either side of the massive head the two stood, their fingers twined in the black mane. Across the savage head their eyes met, and held.

"I love you," said Mr. Richard Gordon, for the keepers were drowsing at their posts.

Virginia cast a quick glance in their direction. Neither was looking. She leaned forward toward the man, and their lips met above the fierce and loyal head of Ben, King of Beasts.

And if you do not believe their story, just go to the Zoo the next time you are in New York, and look for a great, black maned lion with a scar upon one of his mighty forearms.
