

THE MYSTERIOUS ARAB

A
HAL KEEN
Mystery
Story

HUGH LLOYD

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THE MYSTERIOUS ARAB



THE BUFFALO'S HEAD-ON COLLISION THREW
HAL OUT OF THE CAR.

A HAL KEEN MYSTERY STORY

THE MYSTERIOUS ARAB

By
HUGH LLOYD

Author of
“The Copperhead Trail Mystery,”
“The Hermit of Gordon’s Creek,”
“Kidnapped in the Jungle,”
“The Smugglers’ Secret,” Etc.

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CONTENTS

- I [PINEY](#)
- II [A PROWLER](#)
- III [A SUSPICION](#)
- IV [NAIROBI AND DUDLEY](#)
- V [A LITTLE ROPE](#)
- VI [INTO THE BLUE](#)
- VII [ON THE TRAIL](#)
- VIII [KASSEM](#)
- IX [A QUEER WELCOME](#)
- X [POOR AFRICA](#)
- XI [BRIGGS](#)
- XII [HAL IS HAL](#)
- XIII [SPYING](#)
- XIV [A GAME OF CHANCE](#)
- XV [GATHERING CLOUDS](#)
- XVI [DR. HOLMAN](#)
- XVII [MATCHING WITS](#)
- XVIII [AN EXPLANATION](#)
- XIX [PERSONAL BUSINESS](#)
- XX [ON THE VELDT](#)
- XXI [A MIDNIGHT CHARGE](#)
- XXII [AT NUNNALLY'S](#)
- XXIII [TALK](#)
- XXIV [DEFIANT](#)
- XXV [IN THE DARKNESS](#)
- XXVI [WAITING](#)
- XXVII [A FORTUNATE DISCOVERY](#)

CONTENTS

XXVIII	<u>A HUMAN BEING</u>
XXIX	<u>VIGIL</u>
XXX	<u>THE DOCTOR LOSES</u>
XXXI	<u>PUHLI</u>
XXXII	<u>RECOLLECTIONS</u>
XXXIII	<u>ON ACHMED'S TRAIL</u>
XXXIV	<u>TWO FATES</u>
XXXV	<u>HOPES</u>

THE MYSTERIOUS ARAB

CHAPTER I

PINEY

A sharp cry issued from the black's throat and he looked into the train compartment appealingly. The effect this had on the native policeman was but to make him the more determined for he lost no time in dragging his prisoner back along the platform and out of sight. The train was pulling slowly out of the station and Hal's curiosity got the better of him.

He glanced at the broad sunburnt features of his fellow passenger. The man looked inscrutable except for the ghost of a smile which hovered about his small, mild blue eyes. He seemed to be continually glancing backward at something, glancing back mentally, for not once did he turn his small, squat head to look at quaint Mombasa but rather did he tilt his wide chin northwest in which direction they were soon speedily traveling.

Hal stared at the man until he forced him to meet his eyes. Then he smiled winningly. "I—I," he began, "gosh, I don't mean to be nosey or anything like that, but I was wondering about that black fellow. Did he—what did the poor devil do?"

The man moved in his seat, raising a slight film of orange dust which had been accumulated in passing through the red clay country. "You didn't see the little scene then, eh?" he said almost tonelessly. Then: "That's right; you came along just when the cop was nabbing him." He chuckled mirthlessly. "There was nothing much to it—the poor devil,

as you call him, was just trying to sell me a diamond cheap. Cop had an eye on him I guess.”

“Did he steal it?” Hal asked.

“Sure,” the man answered indifferently. “How else would a nigger get it? Prob’bly escaped from the mines.”

“Not Kimberly?”

“Sure—I guess so. Cops watch for ’em coming up the coast. Most always they get ’em.”

Hal looked out upon the veldt through which they were passing. The scrubby plain gave him a strange sense of desolation that he could not account for. He was thrilled to the fingertips on this, his first trip into Africa! Certainly that had been his first reaction a few hours ago when he was wandering about Mombasa waiting for train time. He had been overjoyed—there was no mistake about that! And now?

He ran his long slim fingers through his red wavy hair. A frown obscured the dazzling blue of his eyes as it always did when he was puzzled. To Hal, being puzzled meant being annoyed, for he had to know the reason for everything. And in this instance he disliked being annoyed when at heart he felt carefree and happy. Suddenly he felt the presence of his fellow passenger and turned away from a hasty perusal of a native fruit and cigarette stand to find that the man was eyeing him curiously.

Hal grinned. “Funny place, Africa,” he said pleasantly. “Much different than what I thought it would be. Most places are, huh? It’s great, though—what I’ve seen of it.” Then: “I get off at Nairobi.”

The man smiled. “So do I. Staying there?”

“Nope,” Hal answered, encouraged. “Going north to Medille—know where it is? Hundreds of miles from

nowhere, I understand. Anyway someone's going to meet me at Nairobi—Dudley Holman, a fellow about my age. His father's a naturalist and a friend of my uncle's. Unk's in England and he's going to come on in four weeks or so." He laughed. "Now I've told you everything except my name—that's Hal Keen."

"You'll have to go some if you're going to live up to that name in Africa," observed the man with a dry laugh, then added: "Especially in the Medille district. I happen to be going there myself—to Holman's place."

"By gosh!" Hal exclaimed, pleased. "What a coincidence! They expect you, of course?"

"No," said the man, "they don't. That is—they expect somebody sooner or later I guess, but I'd hardly say they expected me. You see I'm going there for a job—I saw an ad of Dr. Holman's in yesterday's paper for a man to make himself generally useful in the laboratory, experience not required particularly. So here I am!"

Hal settled himself in the orange-hued dust of his seat and grinned contentedly. Things always came out all right in the talking. Nothing was as perplexing as it seemed. What could be more natural than this man about to apply for a position! Suddenly, however, he bethought himself of something and leaned forward confidentially.

"Just as a little tip, Mr. . . ."

"Pine—Piney, I'm called," said the man smiling.

"That's fine—Mr. Piney," Hal chuckled. "But as I was saying, you most likely don't know what kind of a—a man you're going to work for—I mean Dr. Holman?" he added with not a little embarrassment.

"I don't quite get you."

Hal flushed. "It's kind of difficult for me to be telling tales out of school, huh? Still it isn't exactly that either, because my uncle wrote and told my mother and me that Dr. Holman was known to be peculiar all the way from Mombasa to the Nile. You see, it isn't as if I was betraying a confidence."

"Hardly," Mr. Pine laughed mirthlessly. "Just how is he peculiar? You say he's a friend of your uncle?"

"They went to college together. Dr. Holman is about four years older than Unk. Anyway, he used to be just crabby in those days, I understand. Afterwards he married and when Dudley was born he got worse. His wife died, that's the reason. Then he and Dud came here eighteen years ago—poor kid was only two years old, can you imagine? Dr. Holman brought him up, *and how!* Dud hasn't had much peace in his young life so far, you can bank on that. Nothing pleases his father, *nothing!* He's full of prejudices. Won't have a native step inside his door—says he can't stand the smell of 'em. He lets 'em clean up outside but that's absolutely all."

"Hmph," said Piney thoughtfully, "so that accounts for him wanting a white man to help around the laboratory. Well, I guess I can stand for the doc being peculiar. After all, I ain't contemplating a long stay."

Hal shook his head ruefully. "I guess you won't want to. From what Unk's told us, Dr. Holman hasn't kept anybody very long. Nobody ever stayed except a chap named Briggs who is his assistant. That poor guy came all the way from the States and he hasn't any people so I suppose he figures that it's better to stand for Dr. Holman's bad disposition than to go back and be alone, huh? Whatever the reason, he stays, and he's the only one that has."

Piney contemplated the scrubby country through which they were passing. Then he turned to Hal. "What's the idea of you coming here if the old man's such a crab?"

"Dudley," Hal answered simply. "He wrote to Unk when he found out that he was in England and he begged him to stop over in Africa just as a Christian act and see if he couldn't make his father a little more human. You see Unk is about the only friend that Dr. Holman has and I guess that's easily explained. They've seen each other twice in the eighteen years and corresponded the rest of the time."

"And most anybody can get along by mail, eh?" said Mr. Piney facetiously.

"Sure. Dud told Unk that his father's lately taken to beating people. If he gets mad at an employee, or anyone else for that matter I guess, he forgets that he was born a gentleman. To tell you the truth, it sounds as if he's nothing short of a maniac on the loose."

"Well," said Mr. Piney with a puckered brow, "old Dr. Holman better not let loose on me, 'cause I ain't the kind to take it. I'm not coming up here because I like it, believe me, and I won't take any nonsense from that old crab or anyone else!"

Hal was a little startled to see the flashing fire in his companion's eyes at this declaration. What was more, the man revealed a sort of grim purpose in his speech, a revelation that betokened a nature guided by this same purpose in times past. Piney, Hal was convinced, would stop at nothing.

He blinked his eyes as if he had been dreaming. "I didn't tell you how I came to be in Africa, Mr. Piney," he said almost apologetically.

“Oh yes,” Piney said indifferently, “I’d forgotten.” He laughed. “That’s me all over. Go on, Keen, I want to hear all of it. Something tells me that the Holman place is going to be full of action.”

Hal felt not so cheerful again, but he smiled. “Something tells *me* I’m not terribly crazy about seeing Dr. Holman either. But I was crazy to come to Africa, naturally. Besides, I want to sort of lend my moral support in the cause—it’s Unk’s idea. He got me to come on first and spend a little time before he comes. It’s to kind of let the idea of Dud coming to college in the States, seep into the doctor’s crabby old mind.”

“Some idea. I guess the boy wants to go all right, eh?”

“And how! Gosh, I’m praying right along it works out all right. I’ve never seen Dud, but boy, I’m going to like him just on account of the trouble he’s had all his life, never seeing anything, never going anywhere! Just with his father all the time. He’s never seen a city bigger than Nairobi.”

He was so enthusiastic in his recital of Dudley Holman’s pathetic life that he was not aware they had come into a station. It was Piney’s sudden abstraction that brought him to the realization. The man anxiously scanned the handful of people on the platform; a few whites and the rest, natives clad in dusty looking khaki. There was the usual hustle and bustle about the place and the stir of departure, but that was all. It was difficult to understand just what was Mr. Piney’s obvious interest in the little wayside station.

Hal glanced from his companion to the neat entrance of a restaurant opposite and watched with casual interest some passengers hurrying out of its doors. Then he became aware of someone standing just outside their compartment; a huge, swarthy half-caste with beadlike eyes.

Piney stiffened in his seat and with a swift, cat-like gesture his upraised arm went down to his side. The half-caste's eyes glittered ever so slightly and a second later there came the cry of "All aboard!" In a flash the great creature had disappeared and before Hal had time to speak, the train was moving on.

"Not much rain around here, buddy," said Piney a few moments later. His voice fell harsh and grating on Hal's ears.

"Who was that fellow, Piney?" Hal asked, looking the other straight in the eyes. "You—well, I couldn't help but see your hand go down to your pocket that time."

If Mr. Piney was disconcerted there was no way of knowing it for his face was bland and smiling. "A gun is indispensable in Africa, Keen," he said quietly.

"But I've always understood that in Africa a black man seldom attacks a white man even on provocation. He . . ."

"Half-caste is not black, buddy. That fellow was half-caste. There's quite a difference."

"Then you knew him, huh?" Hal asked bluntly. "You had some reason to . . ."

"I never saw the man before—never!"

Hal looked out into the gathering night. He felt certain that Piney was a liar.

CHAPTER II

A PROWLER

At Mr. Pine's request Hal had taken the lower berth instead of an upper and he found himself lying awake a long time. He much preferred an upper berth but, being nothing if not generous, he tossed about uncomplainingly, annoyed by the never-ceasing rumble of the trucks as the train roared its way across the veldt.

Long after midnight he lay with burning, heavy eyelids listening, with not a little envy, to Mr. Piney's soft snores. To be sure, his restlessness was due in part to his high strung temperament. The contemplated visit to Holmans', the vastness of Africa, had contributed greatly to his mental activity. He could not relax.

Many thoughts and divers plans roamed through his active mind, particularly a plan he had to go on safari with Dudley and his father. It seemed more than anything else to hold great promise, for he knew that Dr. Holman made an annual trip for the purpose of gathering data about the myriad animal life which roamed the illimitable veldt of British East Africa.

A little later his mind went back to Piney and the talk they had had just before retiring. The more he thought of it, the more he realized that there was something evasive, something secretive, about the man. Despite the long hours they had spent in talking what had the fellow really told about himself? Nothing, absolutely nothing except his name and his age, which he said was about thirty, and the not very

enlightening statement that he had spent some time in Canada. He seemed to have no intention of revealing what he had been doing in Africa nor what he intended doing after his probably short stay at Dr. Holman's was over.

Hal shrugged his broad shoulders, sat up in his berth and proceeded to beat his pillow. He turned it over on the cooler side and lay down with an audible sigh. The heat was pretty bad inside his narrow cell and he determined that he would get up if he did not go to sleep within a very short time.

It was this spirit of resignation that soon helped him to relax and a few moments later he was in that pleasant state of drowsiness where he did not care about Piney's secretiveness nor anything else. Slumber shut him off from every thought and as the train slowly gained altitude and a cooling breeze blew into the compartment, he snuggled comfortably down under the clean, warm covers.

The train stopped for water but Hal was sleeping blissfully on. Piney, too, from his upper berth was still emitting a series of snores, each one ending in a weird, protracted whistle. From the distance came the chilling roar of a lion which was presently taken up by a mighty chorus of other nocturnal prowlers. Then all became still—ominously still.

Hal's even breathing did not change a fraction when the door of the compartment softly opened and softly closed. Neither did the powerful bulk of him stir when the stealthy intruder stepped up to his berth and stopped, listening. There was something rhythmical, something fascinating, in the sounds issuing from the sleeper.

He felt the presence of the listening intruder, however, even before he opened his eyes. Instinctively he feigned a snore and turned over on his left side and breathed evenly

again. The man did not move an inch but stood like a tall, dark statue, listening, listening. . . .

After what seemed an interminable time, Hal saw him lean forward and reach toward his clothes which he had hung from the rack at the end of the berth. With furtive haste he made a move to wrest them from their position when Hal leaped up with the agility of a cat and wound his long, muscular arms about him, bedclothes and all.

The man grunted and writhed furiously and in a second had slipped out of the slippery sheet that held him and dodged away to the door. Hal was on his feet and got a flashing glimpse of a dark face, but that was all.

The door had closed and by the time he got to it, the train was moving.

Angry, he turned and hobbled back toward his berth only to hear Piney's voice, ominous and threatening, a Piney's voice that was different and strange.

"Stand where you are!" he was saying. *"Don't move!"*

Hal looked up to see the gleaming barrel of a gun pointed directly at him.

CHAPTER III

A SUSPICION

“Say, what’s the idea, Piney?”

Piney’s gasp was audible. “*Jove—you, Keen?*”

“Sure,” Hal answered. “Who did you think it was?”

Piney hesitated and coughed nervously. “Er—I don’t know,” he stammered and let the gun slip back into the darkness at his side. “I couldn’t see who it was . . . I . . . my eyes were all foggy sort of. I didn’t know—I knew it was someone, but not *you*. Never expected you were even awake.” He switched on his berth light.

“I wasn’t anything else but!” Hal laughed. “Man alive, what a jolt! That fellow was trying to steal something, you know it? He reached for my clothes and then I went into action. If it hadn’t been for that sheet, I’d have had him too. It slipped between us. Why do you suppose he came in *here* to rob?”

Piney’s face was calm as he leaned over the edge of his berth. “Don’t know—haven’t the least idea,” he said.

“Probably some poor beggar taking a desperate chance.”

Hal looked up. “Listen, Piney,” he said. “That poor beggar was the half-caste that gave you such a villainous look back in the station at Mombasa.”

“My dear fellow, how could you see in the dark?” asked Piney, a trifle quizzically.

“I couldn’t,” Hal answered promptly. “I didn’t see him till he got to the door and then I just got a flashing glimpse from the light in the station. It was no more than that because it

seemed the train began moving by the time I got to the door, but I'm certain it was he, Piney—I'm pretty certain."

"Well," said Piney, smiling sardonically, "one could never hang a man by being pretty certain. You've got to be certain sure!"

Hal looked dejected for a moment and sat down on the edge of his berth. Presently, however, he looked up smiling. "You're right about that," he acknowledged, "but there are other things that would help a lot. Questions that I'd like to ask."

Piney frowned slightly, but he said, "Ask away. I'd like to help you if you're puzzled, but I don't know who it was any more than you do. I didn't even see the fellow as much as you did."

"I know," Hal said scratching his head slowly, "but it sticks in my head that I'm not mistaken about it being that same fellow. Just suppose it was, Piney, I don't think he had any intention of robbing me."

"You said just now that he leaned over toward your clothes. . . ."

"Sure I did, and I meant it. I think he had every intention of rifling those clothes. What's more, I believe he'd have fought me back and how, if he hadn't got a glimpse of my face. I can't tell you why, but I just sensed that he was surprised when he saw me. He could see me better than than I could see him and, boy, that's when he slid away from the sheet."

"You're talking in riddles, Keen. What are you trying to tell me?"

"I'm trying to tell you that I think the fellow came in here with the intention of robbing *you* and not me."

“You’re crazy!” Piney said smiling.

Hal grinned good-naturedly. “All right, but that’s my story and I’m going to stick to it. That’s me all over, Piney, you may as well know right now. When I get an idea I don’t lose it. What’s more, I’ve got another idea that may or may not surprise you a little.”

“What’s that?” Mr. Piney was half smiling, half frowning.

“Well, it’s this—I’ve a hunch that that half-caste is following you and that he’s somewhere on this train.”

“You’re twice crazy!” exclaimed Piney with a shrill guffaw.

Hal smiled thoughtfully and made a little grimace with his mouth that seemed to say he was not to be squelched about that idea either.

Piney leaned over and gave his heavy shock of hair a playful tug. “Your imagination sure runs riot, kid,” he said, “and that’s a bad thing for anyone traveling in Africa. If this nigger you have on your mind is on this train, it don’t prove that he’s following me. Let’s forget about it and get back to sleep.”

Hal surveyed him earnestly. “Just one more question, then,” he said. “I’d feel better about this whole thing if I knew for certain. Not that I want to know any of your business or be inquisitive, but have you any enemies that you know of?”

“Why should I have?” Piney countered evasively.

Hal smiled and jumped into his berth. “That’s that,” he said decisively. “I’ll not ask you again. The whole thing’s settled as far as I’m concerned.”

He got into a comfortable position and spent some little time before he again fell asleep wondering just how much he

meant what he said. Somehow he felt that at heart he had not meant it at all and that things weren't settled by any means. In point of fact, he knew that it was just the beginning, the beginning of something dark and inexplicable.

And Hal never succeeded in shaking off the conviction that it was none other than Mr. Piney whose sunburned hands were pulling the curtain of mystery across that vast stage, Africa.

CHAPTER IV

NAIROBI AND DUDLEY

A red sun was streaming into Hal's berth when he awakened. He rubbed his sleepy eyes and sat in silent wonder for five minutes contemplating the vast plain which rolled on and on to distant hills bathed in a violet light. Here and there a thorn bush or acacia stood like a silent sentinel watching over the numerous herds of game that roamed the plains on either side of the tracks.

He picked out some long-necked giraffe from the swarming company, also a few ostriches and gasped audibly at the sight of a group of zebra whose striped coats gleamed in the sunlight. Then the train puffed into a station where a few natives lolled about clad in skins and "mother hubbards." Their happy, grinning faces belied the belligerent aspect which the spears and shields depending from their black, glistening hands gave them.

Hal got to his feet. "So this is Africa!" he exclaimed with a happy sigh.

"And it's no joke, believe me, Keen," Piney said in a gentle chiding tone as he leaned over his berth and peered down at the boy. "It gets on a fellow's nerves sometimes—maybe you'll understand why Doc Holman's taken to beating up people. Just wait till you're here a little while."

Hal was at a loss for an answer and as Piney set about dressing immediately he was saved from the necessity of making a commonplace remark and said nothing more

concerning the dark continent during the rest of the journey into Nairobi.

Dudley Holman was waiting in a dusty car at the station, with a smile. “A sad looking little guy,” was what Hal wrote home to his mother, “with gray eyes that make him look as if he’s always crying when he isn’t.” He had a quaver in his voice when he greeted Piney after explanations had been made. Apologetically, he said he hoped that Mr. Piney would like working for his father.

Hal laughed. “Don’t worry about that, Dud,” said he fraternally, “I’ve told Mr. Piney that your father isn’t any Gabriel. That was all right, wasn’t it?”

Dudley Holman seemed to take a complete measurement of Hal as he smiled. “I guess anything’s all right that you say or do,” he said with a happy little chuckle. “Your Uncle Denis (I’ve always called him that too, ever since I was a kid) said I could always depend on you—that you hardly ever forgot anything.”

“Gosh!” Hal exclaimed modestly. “Unk must have been thinking of the things I’m supposed to forget and don’t, huh? But never mind, Dud, you’ll see me as Unk’s never seen me. Piney says Africa gets on a feller’s nerves sometimes, so look out! Maybe I’ll run amuck. It never affected you that way, did it?”

Dudley shook his head ruefully, “One in the family is enough and sometimes too much, believe me.” He looked about for a moment: “Where’s your baggage?”

“That’s what I was just wondering,” said Hal, peering easily over the heads of the noisy throng swarming back and forth from the train. “I told the porter to bring our bags here and he said he would. Mm, there seems to be some delay,” he

added, shading his eyes from the sun with a strong, tanned hand. "There's a little crowd collected about one of the cars and the porters and conductors all seem to be talking at once. A couple of your nice black cops too."

"He'll never need a ladder to find out what's going on in a crowd," said Mr. Piney facetiously. "Can you see what they say, Keen?"

"No, but I'm going over and find out," Hal answered determinedly and strolled over toward the crowd with a long, swinging stride.

He was gone but a moment and came back with a frown of perplexity on his bright face.

"What's up?" asked Dudley.

"You've got me. They won't let anybody near that one car—it's the one that was next to ours. Our porter was standing there talking to one of the policemen and I tried to get his attention, but I couldn't. Then a conductor asked me what I wanted and I told him about our bags. He said he'd see that we get them in a few minutes but do you think he'd tell me what the rumpus was about? Not on your life!"

"You were too anxious!" said Piney with a short laugh.

Hal shook his head with annoyance and continued to keep his eyes over the throng. Dudley made small talk in that quavering voice of his and was unmistakably happy. There was not the slightest doubt that he looked upon his tall, red-haired visitor as a sort of demi-god.

"I never had a fellow my own age to loaf around with," he said in a burst of confidence to Piney. "It's going to be great!"

Piney asked, "How about your father?"

“Dad’s got a respect and liking for Uncle Denis that he’s never had for any other man,” answered Dudley proudly. “He’ll feel that same way toward Hal—I know it!”

A ghost of a smile lingered about the corners of Piney’s mouth but he said nothing. Hal caught sight of the shining ebony face of the porter coming through the crowd laden with luggage. He opened his mouth in a smile displaying two rows of gleaming teeth.

Hal hurried forward and, giving him a playful nudge, relieved him of a few bags. “What’s the matter, big boy—something up?” he asked with an engaging grin.

“Yassuh, yassuh!” said the black man excitedly. “Dey is lots up. Conduc’ah says Bwana in next car found dead when we come in station. Big man in compar’ment gone, yassuh!”

Hal ran his fingers through his hair. “It wasn’t a half-caste, was it?” he asked and seeing the porter’s perplexity, added: “I mean it wasn’t a sort of Arab fellow—big and kind of dark, that got away.”

“Yassuh, yassuh,” grinned the porter. “He Bwana’s frien’. He kill I guess.”

Hal reimbursed the man and after watching him walk away turned to his friends. Dudley was watching him closely.

“You seem to have known this half-caste, Hal,” he said with a little smile.

“I could have known him better,” Hal grinned and turning to Piney, asked: “Couldn’t I have, bub?”

Piney was visibly agitated and white and his smile was obviously an effort. “You ought to know, Keen,” he murmured faintly. “You ought to know.”

Hal frowned and at Dudley’s request got into the car.

CHAPTER V

A LITTLE ROPE

“There’s lots of things I have to do,” said Dudley as he drove them along Nairobi’s principal street. “Some licenses and a dozen and one other errands that Dad’s got me to do. How about you fellows checking in at the hotel and resting while I’m running about? You both must be feeling fagged.”

“How long before you get out of here, Holman?” asked Piney from his seat in the back of the car.

Dudley turned his head a little. “You mean out of Nairobi? Oh! I hadn’t given it much thought, except that it would be sometime tomorrow morning. Why?”

“Just that I’d like to get out and get started on my job with your father,” Piney said smiling.

“But I’d planned on showing Hal around the town,” Dudley protested lightly.

“Sure, that’s all right,” said Piney. “Go ahead. I’d have had to get somebody to pilot me out there anyway if I hadn’t met Keen and you. I can do it just as well now. You two take your time. I can go ahead and get on the job.”

“But that will cost you quite something,” said Dudley. “My father’s place in the Medille district is two hundred and fifty miles from here—have you any idea how much that will set you back? More than Dad is going to pay you for a month’s wages.”

Piney shrugged his shoulders. “Then it’ll take me just that much longer to make my job with your father pay, eh? Well, that’s better than no job at all.”

Hal glanced at Dudley beside whom he was sitting, and gave him a covert wink. “Don’t be worrying about showing me the town, Dud,” he said lightly. “I can see that on my way home again. If Mr. Piney’s anxious to get started on his job, why, we can postpone our sightseeing trip around here, huh? After all, a man’s job is worth more than a few hour’s pleasure to us, isn’t it?”

“Certainly,” said Dudley, “but Mr. Piney’s job can wait twenty-four hours. He’s the only one after it. There isn’t a man in Nairobi, black, mongrel or white, that’s going after it—I can assure you of that, Mr. Piney! Hal’s warned you and now I’m warning you, even if it is my own father I’m warning you about! I guess he’s the most difficult man in the world to meet half-way. But if you still insist on taking the chance I wouldn’t worry about getting there. You’ll have no competitors as I told you. Why not wait till tomorrow morning then?”

“Because I’ve an idea that your father might be in a better temper if his new employee puts in an appearance early,” Piney laughed. “If I’m to have this job at all, I’d rather have it by trying to win the doctor’s good graces if it can be done. Someone’s probably been bearing the brunt since the last man of all work left and that wouldn’t make the doctor easier in his mind for surely some of the work then falls on him. No, to wait might be worse for me.”

Dudley nodded. “By gosh, Mr. Piney, you hit the nail on the head about the work part of it. That falls on poor Briggs, Dad’s assistant, and I’ll admit it doesn’t help Dad’s temper any. Perhaps it *would* help things for us to hurry you there. Besides, it’ll make Hal’s visit pleasanter to have the farm routine running smoothly.”

“Of course,” said Piney.

They left him at the Norfolk where they intended to have lunch. He expressed a desire to wash up and do some shopping of his own while Hal accompanied Dudley about on his various errands and they agreed to meet an hour later in the spacious lobby of the famous hotel.

“And while it’s fresh in my mind,” said Hal as they drove off down the street, “I’m going to give you a little warning about this fellow, Piney. He’s slick, Dud, and I’ll tell you why I think so.”

He gave a detailed account of his meeting and talk with the man from the time they left Mombasa until they came into Nairobi’s modern station. Dudley listened attentively guiding his rather dilapidated touring car in and out of a half-dozen streets where he made perhaps four stops.

These pauses did not detract from Hal’s enthusiastic narration. He would take up the thread each time with more fervor than before for he had a conviction about Piney that a few mere interruptions could not shake off. Dudley noted this smilingly as they started back to the hotel for lunch.

“You’re warning me that Piney seems to be a bit of a suspicious character,” said he, “yet at the same time you imply that you’ll be rather disappointed if I refuse to take him home because of what you’ve just told me.”

“Exactly,” Hal grinned. “I don’t want it on my conscience, Dud, if he should do anything crooked. I’m warning you that he’s not exactly the kind of fellow to take the kind of job that your father’ll want him to fill. That is, I don’t think he is. Of course you’ve got to take all this merely on my imagination. I can’t really prove anything against him except his darned queer way of slipping around a question. And you can’t deny

that he's lying about wanting to get on the job for your father. It's plain that he simply doesn't want to stay in Nairobi over night. He wants to get away as quick as he can! That's the way I figure it. Remember that half-caste is afoot in this town and I have a hunch that that's the reason for Mr. Piney's hurry."

Dud glanced at him admiringly. "You have a way of stating your case convincingly," he said. "You've convinced me that there's something shady about the chap. Yet Dad's not going to get another applicant for that job this season. I know it. Shady or not, I'm going to take this fellow just to keep peace, if that can be done. At least he'll help some. That's the only reason I'm going to take him along. But tell me, why would it please you to see him come?"

Hal chuckled softly. "Because," he said, "I'd like the chance to give him a little rope and be around where I could watch him hang himself."

Dudley laughed. "You're the original cross-word puzzle, Hal. Darned if you're not. Anyway, I hope you get what you're after."

"I will," said Hal confidently, "if Piney comes."

"He will," Dudley said reassuringly, "there's no help for it."

CHAPTER VI

INTO THE BLUE

They left Nairobi at mid-afternoon making their way through the brilliantly sunlit streets slowly. A native clad in a one-piece skin proceeding on a bicycle directly in their path suddenly swerved from his leisurely pace into an intersecting street so that they narrowly missed running down a huge black whose raiment consisted of a G-string.

“Say,” said Piney with ill-concealed annoyance, “hadn’t you two better stop talking and watch where you’re going? First thing you know you’ll smash somebody up and then we’ll *have* to stay in this burg tonight!”

Hal turned about slowly in his seat and looked inquiringly at Piney until the man flushed and averted his face, taking a sudden and forced interest in two black girls in skin clothing who were gazing in the windows of a department store. No word was spoken, however, until Dudley cordially greeted a native traffic policeman and they passed out of the business section.

“You seem to know most of the brass buttons,” said Piney with a short laugh.

Dudley nodded. “They know me better than I know them,” he said wistfully. “That’s the way it is in this country.”

Hal felt a twinge of pity for Dudley, realizing as he did what little comradeship, if any, that young man had had in his life. A tyrant for a father and a lonely existence in the blue of British East Africa! The matter of Piney paled into

insignificance beside the immediate need to give Dudley his whole-hearted companionship.

He decided first to draw him out. “Unk said you’ve never been to school,” said he.

“That’s right,” said Dudley. “Dad was prejudiced. He taught me right at the farm and a very stern teacher he was too. He’s taught me a lot though.”

They were passing out of the town now. Hal glanced at the few straggling houses on the outskirts, one fine Tudor with a vast garden of roses fenced in, and a few huts, some of mud and grass and a few of hammered-out petrol tins. They seemed like lonely sentinels of civilization for ahead stretched the illimitable plains country with the violet hills seeming to rise out of the fleecy white horizon.

He began to understand how difficult it was for Dudley to feel much loyalty toward his tyrannical parent. It must take a courageous soul to put up with the loneliness even under happier circumstances, he thought. East Africa had evidently not yielded to the boy an inch and he showed it despite his brave attempts to appear loyal and gay about his father.

He seemed to half divine Hal’s thoughts. “It’s going to seem thrilling and simply great here to you,” he said. “And it ought to, considering the distance you’ve come to see it! I guess I’m a bit fed up on a lifetime of primitive landscape, huh? Nairobi’s the nearest I’ve got to civilization and that’s never been any pleasure. I always come back with the car loaded down with supplies. You see how it is—Mr. Piney’s just been able to crawl in back there with leg room and that’s all. No, I want to go somewhere where I don’t have to think about supplies for the farm. Dad never leaves the place, so the job seems to be mine. But I’m going back to the States

with you, Hal—I mean it! Nothing’s going to stop me, not even Dad!” he added vehemently.

Hal stole a glance at him and smilingly noted that some of his wistfulness of a few hours past had given place to a new determination. It did not occur to him that a few hours of his own dynamic comradeship had perhaps wrought this change in the lonely young man, buoying him up and fortifying him against the future tyranny of an erratic and unreasonable parent.

Whatever the reason, Dudley expanded for the entire trip homeward and became an ideal comrade, cheerful and gay and continually planning the surprises which he knew his guest would welcome. Hal fell into the spirit of it immediately, his voice sounding loud and clear above the noise of the motor after they had left the last of the straggling traffic behind on the highway.

They bumped a little along a narrow dust-choking road, but Hal did not mind—it seemed more “Africanese,” he explained, and more in keeping with his ideas of the dark continent. A modern highway such as they had just left did not fit into the mental pictures he had created of the veldt. It was too civilized.

“What did you expect here?” Dudley asked laughing. “Head hunters, impenetrable jungle and all that sort of thing?”

Hal grinned. “No, Unk shattered all those illusions for me long ago—the last time he was here to visit your father, I guess it was. He said there were plenty of hunters that lost their heads but not to cannibals. And as for the jungle he said it wasn’t impenetrable to you or your father or anyone else that’s lived here so many years.”

Dudley nodded. “He’s right about that. A fellow gets so he knows the jungle from A to Z besides knowing everything and everybody in it. It’s a good thing too because the darn place is full of danger when you don’t know it. I guess I’ve learned it more thoroughly than Dad for the natives have shown me ever since I toddled off the farm one day in rompers and got lost in the jungle. A Ndorobo hunter found me and he told me a thing or two that I’ll never forget as long as I live. Dad wouldn’t have anything to do with the natives ever, but I have and I’ve liked them. They’ve certainly shown me what to do and what not to do and I wouldn’t trade that experience for anything. They’ve taught me not to miss the most indistinct mark of the trail. Keep your eyes on the ground and the rest will be taken care of—that’s their slogan.”

Hal had good reason to remember all that not so many hours later when dusk had overtaken them. They stopped the car and had a snack on the banks of an icy-cold stream and by the time they had finished darkness enveloped them. Dudley strolled over to his car and tested his headlights, turning them on and off. He kicked the ground with his heels then drew himself up into the forward seat.

“I’m pretty tired, fellows,” he said pleasantly, “and I’ve got a suggestion—for Piney. To begin with, it’ll take us until tomorrow night quite late before we get to the farm. We can’t ride all that time without rest and the nearest hotel can’t be reached before around six o’clock tomorrow morning. That’s at a sort of crossroads and a pretty punk hotel it is—nothing but a series of thatched huts all strung together. Still it’s better than nothing and if you two say so we’ll go right on. But I was thinking we could all take an hour’s sleep right

here in the car, one of us on guard, of course, and turn about. There's hardly any danger from prowlers just this little distance from Nairobi and barring a stray lion we ought to all get in forty winks. Then tomorrow morning sometime we can shove into a shady grove and snatch a couple of hours the same way. How about it?"

"Fine," said Hal enthusiastically.

Said Piney, "It suits me because I ain't sleepy anyway. I slept like a log last night and it'll do me till we shove into that grove you spoke about. I can go without sleep like a camel goes without water!" He laughed. "Don't mind me—you two guys crawl under the stuff in the back there and I'll sit front on guard against that stray lion."

"All right," said Dudley shaking his head dubiously, "you ought to know how you feel." He turned to Hal apologetically. "This isn't any way to be treating a guest certainly, but you insisted on giving in to Mr. Piney and getting out of Nairobi tonight. Otherwise we'd have started out tomorrow and slept at the crossroads hotel I was telling you about. At least, I'd feel better about it for I'd hate to hear what your mother will say. . . ."

Hal took a few strides to the car and reaching forward tousled Dudley's hair. "Forget about it," he chuckled. "Mother won't know about it for one thing and if she did, I'd tell her to forget about it too, because I'm in Africa! Come on, let's get back and sleep and leave Piney to the company of that stray lion."

Piney grinned, giving no indication that such company would be distasteful to him.

CHAPTER VII ON THE TRAIL

No moon shone down upon them but it was not less a perfect night for all that. The stars seemed like blazing jewels set in a black velvet canopy and a cool, soothing wind blew across the plains, unhurried and whispering.

Hal snuggled down under the robe, happy and content notwithstanding the physical discomfort of having to double his lanky legs up under him. A profusion of boxes and packages prohibited any straightening out and even if these had not obstructed the floor space it is doubtful if there would have been room to accommodate the whole of Hal at one time.

“I don’t believe there’s a manufacturer alive that gives a thought about a chap needing as much space in a car as you do,” Dudley chuckled from his half-reclining position on the back seat. His head rested on a two hundred pound bag of sugar and his short legs hung over the edge of the seat under the robe which he was sharing with Hal.

They made small talk for a while until Dudley’s prolonged silence indicated that he was asleep. Hal twisted about until he found a fairly soft package upon which to pillow his head and from under half-closed lids he contemplated Piney for a few minutes.

The fellow sat at ease in the front seat smoking, and Hal realized that he no longer felt restive and uncertain about him, not since they had left Nairobi behind. He felt that Piney had put all danger away from him by insisting on

leaving the town as quickly as he could. What that danger was, Hal did not care any longer for Dudley had insisted that the man was a necessary evil and that settled the matter.

The red glow of Piney's cigarette burned lower and lower and Hal watched it until he could no longer hold open his eyelids. In drowsy bliss he caught the scent of the burning tobacco as it was wafted past his nostrils on the elfin breeze. Piney was like that, he told himself, sleepily; always floating around one's mind, yet never staying there for any definite length of time. An elusive sort of chap if there ever was, but he didn't really give a hoot except that it was one nail he couldn't hit and that in itself was exasperating. . . .

He was awakened three-quarters of an hour later by Dudley who was tugging and pulling at his sleeve. "Wake up, fellow," he was saying excitedly. "I heard a shot and Piney's nowhere around!"

Hal was wide awake in an instant. He sat up rubbing his eyes and staring about. A young moon was rising leisurely and its feeble light shone down upon a grove of saplings to the left of the road. Dudley was pointing toward it, a distance of a hundred yards.

"I'm sure I saw something moving around there when I woke up, but now I don't see it," he said with real concern.

"I hear a motor car in the distance, I know that," said Hal.

"You're absolutely right," Dudley agreed, his voice rising. "The guns—they're somewhere in that bag under you."

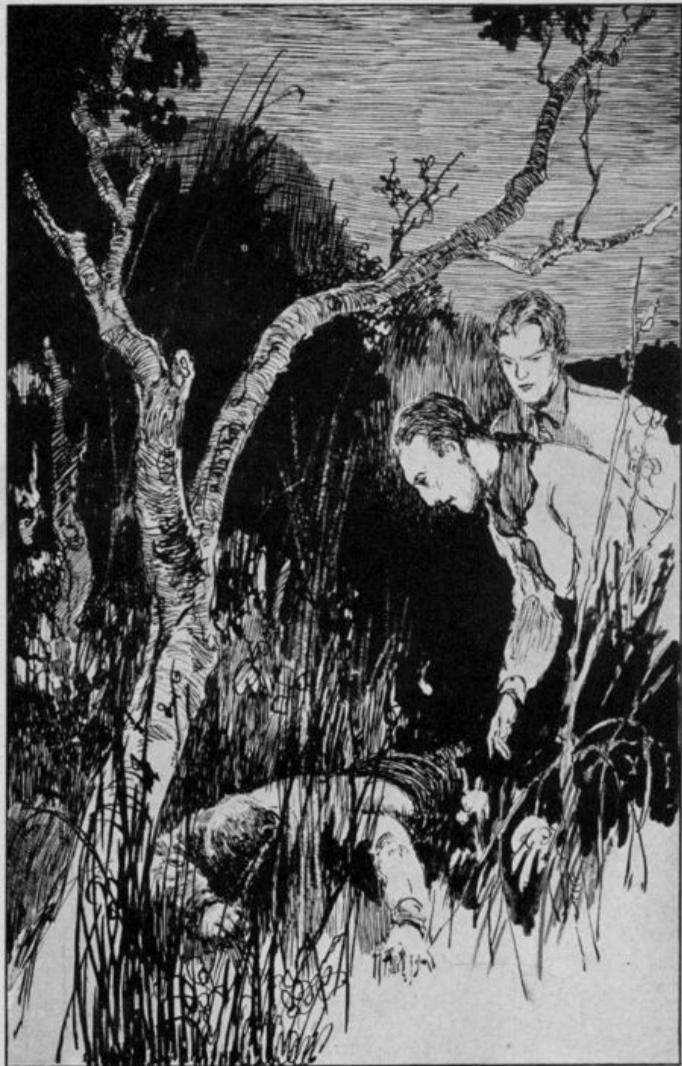
Hal moved quickly. "Let's get at 'em and take a look—we've got to find him!"

But even as they secured the guns they heard Piney's voice coming from the grove. Looking up they saw him

hurrying toward them, blinking his eyes at the glare of the car's headlights. He was waving his gun as he hurried along.

"Don't get excited, boys!" he was saying, and flung aside a bat that had brushed him in its endless circling before the powerful headlights. When he stopped at the running board he was breathless and white.

"What's the matter?" asked Hal.



“Buffalo!” he answered in a shaking voice. “A half-dozen of them, I bet. I was scared to death that they’d charge so I switched the headlights on full and they took it on the run towards the grove. When I got there they’d beat it.”

“Buffalo?” Dudley repeated. “Are you certain, Piney?”

“Sure!” Piney said convincingly and sat down on the edge of the running board while he mopped his brow with his handkerchief. “Phew, that gave me a start!”

“It’s so queer that you should see buffalo in this district,” said Dudley obviously puzzled. “I’ve never seen or heard of *one* coming this far toward the towns, much less six. Just the same, you must know what you’re talking about. It was you fired that shot then, huh?”

Piney looked up quickly. “Yes, sure,” he mumbled. “I—I tried to shoo ’em off.”

Hal gave Dudley a nudge in the ribs. “I thought I heard a car, didn’t you?” he asked his friend significantly.

Dudley nodded with slow comprehension. “Yes, to tell the truth I did too. You sure about the buffalo, huh Piney? Gee, that’s got me puzzled all right—I’d just like to take a look around the edge of that grove, darned if I wouldn’t! You see in the dark you might have mistaken them for buffalo when they were really wildebeest. No? Well, you ought to know but I’m going to trot up there and make sure because I’ll have to send word into Nairobi about it. Buffalo is a dangerous customer so near civilization as this.”

Piney protested. “Say, do you want to be gored? It’s bad enough that I was such a fool as to go up there!”

Dudley smiled. “Don’t worry about me doing anything rash, Piney,” he said. “I never take chances—I know this country too well. I’m just going to take a cautious hike up as far as the grove and look over the ground on the way. The tracks will tell me quickly enough.”

“I’ll go with you,” Hal said, and laughingly added, “I may as well learn Africa from the bottom up.”

“Then keep your eyes on the ground,” Dudley laughed.

They hurried off leaving Piney silent and unprotesting by that time. Neither did he offer to go back to the grove with them, but sat on the running board, listless and shaken, as he watched the two young men start up the road.

Within five yards of the grove, Hal said, “I don’t see any tracks, do you?”

“No.”

“How’s that?”

“Because there aren’t any.” Dudley scratched his head and made a little throaty noise. “Let me tell you, Hal, if a buffalo is around, much less six, I could see it right away. Their tracks are the easiest thing in the world to see for their hoofs cut in as sharp as knives and simply kill the grass.”

“Then that means you think there weren’t any buffalo here at all?” Hal asked thoughtfully.

“Just that, unless it was a phantom herd that Piney’s been seeing. They say one sees strange things in Africa at night when one is doing guard duty on safari; but I’ve never seen anything that wasn’t real, I know that.”

“And neither has Piney,” said Hal in a low, thoughtful voice. “Listen, Dud, I think he was lying! What about that motor . . .”

“Look here,” Dudley interposed pointing to some trampled and bruised grass at the edge of the grove. “Let’s just take a peek.”

He advanced a few feet among the saplings and suddenly whirled about. “Here’s the cause of our friend’s lie, I guess,” he said in a hushed voice and pointed to the still, lifeless form of a man lying in the high grass.

Before Hal had stepped near enough to be really certain, instinct and the very bulk of the man told him that it was the half-caste.

CHAPTER VIII

KASSEM

“Shot?” Dudley asked as Hal stepped away from the lifeless man.

“Yes,” Hal answered quietly. “I guess Piney didn’t really think we’d come up here to investigate his buffalo story, huh? Well, we came near not doing it.” He stopped thoughtfully, then took Dudley’s arm and walked on. “He’s worse than I thought.”

“Much worse than *I* thought,” Dudley observed dolefully. “You’ve no idea what this means in Africa.”

“It’s bad enough anywhere.” Hal looked up and saw Piney standing by the car awaiting them. “Look! He knows we found the man!”

Dudley coughed as they approached. “Mr. Piney,” he said, “this certainly is terrible!”

“What was the idea of the buffalo story, huh?” Hal demanded.

Piney took a cigarette out of his pocket with trembling fingers. “A man ain’t going to pin himself down unnecessarily, is he?” he countered. Then: “I told you boys that story so’s we could get out of here and so’s I could forget about a bad experience but it seems it ain’t to be, eh?”

Hal laughed sardonically. “How could you forget that you shot a man down in cold blood?”

“I didn’t shoot him down in cold blood,” Piney answered and looked straight at his accusers. “*I didn’t even shoot him!*”

“More lies!” exclaimed Dudley disgustedly. “Please, Mr. Piney, don’t make things any worse by lying!”

“I’m not lying,” Piney protested. He handed over his gun to them. “Look at it and see for yourselves!”

Hal took it eagerly while Dudley stood on tiptoe at his elbow. They looked into an undisturbed chamber with nothing short of wonder upon their faces. Not a bullet had discharged.

“Well,” said Hal with a low whistle; “admitting we owe you an apology is one thing. . . .”

“And I can explain about the other,” Piney interposed, quite calm now. “Come on, let’s sit in the car. Naturally, I’m a bit shaken.”

“You ought to be,” Hal could not resist saying.

Piney took no notice of the remark but climbed in the back of the car, wearily. When the boys were seated in front, he nodded. “I was sitting in that front seat watching as I said I’d do,” he explained, “when I heard a car coming up the road. I didn’t think anything of that because we were pulled over far enough to let her pass. Anyway, before it got up to us I could tell it was some old rattletrap thing by the way the tin was shaking on it as she came along. All of a sudden she shot right on past us and I could see there were two guys sitting in the front seat. That’s all I saw of them and if they saw me at all they thought I was asleep because I was kind of sitting that way on purpose.”

“Why didn’t you lean out and hail them?” Hal asked.

“Because I’m a cautious guy, I am. Do you think I wanted to be nailed unawares? How did I know who they were? Anyway, they went a little way up by the grove before they stopped and by that time I crept slow and easy out of this car

and started to crawl in through the grass at the side of the road. All of a sudden I sneezed and it sort of made me trip because I lost my balance and stumbled out where they could see me. At the same time the half-caste had got out of that car I guess (I didn't know who it was then), and I was just picking myself up when the big boy began slipping across the road right in front of our headlights. Then there was a shot and he fell and the car skipped right on the dot."

"You mean it was the other man in the car that fired the shot?" Hal inquired.

"Who else?" Piney returned. "Anyway, I ran up and saw it was the half-caste and like I told you both before, why should I pin that on myself if I could forget about it? So I dragged the poor guy into the grove and thought maybe I could give you two that buffalo story. But it didn't work and so what're we going to do about it?"

"Why should that fellow want to kill the half-caste when they had evidently been companions?" Hal demanded eagerly.

"That guy never aimed at the half-caste, Keen. He aimed at me, but the half-caste got in his way. That's the way I've figured it—that's all I can tell you."

The boys sat silent for a little while, thinking. The cool night breeze whispered about as if nothing at all had happened. Some poignant, though unintelligible echoes could be heard in the distance and the wings of the bats flapped noisily as they circled before the headlights. Dudley switched them off and they sat on for a few moments more almost in darkness except for the feeble light of the moon.

Suddenly Hal swung about in his seat. "Piney, you're a liar about one thing and you can't deny it—you've known

who that half-caste was right along!”

“I know it,” said Piney, almost humble. “As long as he’s dead, I might as well tell you. His name was Kassem and he *was* my enemy—you had that hunch in the train, didn’t you? Sure, I knew you did. Nobody’s fooling you much, eh? Well, Kassem isn’t my enemy any longer.”

“And Kassem killed a white man on the train,” Hal reminded him. “You must have known him too then, huh Piney?”

Piney seemed inclined by that time to dismiss the whole subject, but he could not under Hal’s scorching questions. “If you must know,” he said with some hesitation, “Kassem was employed by that white man. His name was Duncan and that won’t mean a thing to you. They were both following me . . . a sort of revenge—see? But don’t ask me why Kassem did for Duncan—I don’t know any more than you do.”

“How about the chap in the car with Kassem just before?” Hal persisted.

“On my life, I don’t think I could have known him,” Piney answered convincingly. “I figured that Kassem must have hired him in Nairobi and got him to trail us up here. You see Kassem wouldn’t have had a very hard job doing that because he trailed me all around that blooming town. When we were leaving I happened to see him standing just inside the door of a department store where those two native girls were looking in the window. Then Holman waved to that black cop and after we passed I saw him march straight over to the brass buttons and start talking. For a shilling or two he’s got that cop to tell where this car was headed for—savvy?”

“I do, I’m sorry to say,” said Dudley. Suddenly he waved his hand at Piney, excitedly. “Is there anybody likely to inquire for this Kassem?”

“Nobody but the police,” Piney answered smiling. “I don’t know where his people come from—he was sort of a hobo. Anyway, no one around here is likely to ask for him. I happen to know it’s the first time he ever stepped a foot into East Africa.”

Dudley clasped his hands tightly together and rubbed his nose with his knuckles. “Then we’re not going to report it to the police,” he said decisively.

“What?” cried Hal.

“For our own good,” Dudley explained wearily, “and to save my father a fit of rage. You’ve no idea what time and trouble this would cost us if it gets to the police that we’ve had any knowledge of the case. Kassem was undoubtedly a rogue and would have died with his boots on in any case. If the police got him they could do nothing but put him in an unmarked grave. We can do it too and save ourselves and my father a lot of unnecessary trouble. The spot will probably remain undisturbed for many years. Few people ever come this way.”

“I’ll put Kassem under cover, Holman,” said Piney, jumping up and out of the car lightly. “I ain’t got much of a stomach for that sort of thing, but right is right and anyway he was human, half-caste or not. I’d never have killed him even if he was my enemy. Nobody can pin me down as bein’ handy with the gun, I can tell you that straight. Well, you two boys sit here and wait—I won’t be long!”

He strolled off with a queer plodding movement and suddenly, Hal noticed, the moon came out quite bravely,

sending odd little patches of silver light over the tops of the young saplings. At once, the grove became a spectral place with the willowy trees standing like eerie sentinels on guard and the wind making queer ghostly noises among the leaves. Hal felt a little icy shiver run down his spine.

“Dud, this whole thing doesn’t seem right,” he said in an outraged whisper. “It seems sort of as if we were acting in cahoots with that blamed rascal, Piney. I don’t like it at all! Man alive, we’d call it aiding and abetting a criminal at home!”

“So would we here, Hal,” said Dudley gently. “But you said you believed that Piney’s story was straight?”

“I do—I don’t believe he killed Kassem, that isn’t it! What I’m objecting to is the fellow himself. He’s a rogue if there ever was one and just as slick as he’s been right along. If you notice, he wasn’t telling us just what was the trouble between that Duncan and Kassem and himself. A scamp, that’s what he is!”

“So are lots of chaps in Africa. Lots of them are running away from past deeds and trying to turn over a new leaf. That’s what I think Piney’s doing. Duncan and Kassem were probably following him to see that he didn’t. That’s done by Duncans and Kassems all over the world. One thing, Piney’s just fortunate in having got rid of his bad company without having their blood on his hands. And since we’ve got nothing to do with that and since Dad won’t have another man apply for that laboratory job in years, we’ve *got* to take Piney along! You’ll realize how necessary that is when once you hear Dad storming and raging around about the work he has to do alone. As I told you before, there’s really no help for it.”

“No, I suppose not. But a fellow who must certainly have a criminal record——”

“Yes, I know. But Piney won’t stay long, don’t worry. Meantime it will sort of placate Dad and that’s getting to be all that counts with me lately. I live in daily terror, Hal. Even a criminal will do if it makes things easier around the farm. So as friend to friend, let’s forget that Piney even told us about this tragic incident, huh? Dad mustn’t know, *ever!* A policeman at our farm would be like waving a red flag. Dad would rage about it the rest of his life.”

Hal agreed but looked toward the grove with a baffled feeling. Strange, significant sounds issued from it, sounds that seemed to linger mockingly on the night breeze. The moon sailed under some clouds and stayed there leaving them swathed in darkness. Dudley seemed unwilling to switch on his headlights and his hands lay idle in his lap.

Suddenly Hal caught the gleam of a flashlight moving in among the trees. So Piney had even equipped himself that much! Another shiver went down the young man’s spine and he fumbled about in his pocket for his pipe. The shrill cry of a distant prowler sounded like a clarion in the silence. The light went out in the grove and presently they heard plodding footsteps coming along the road. They straightened up instinctively. Piney coughed nervously.

Kassem was under cover at last.

CHAPTER IX

A QUEER WELCOME

They had tire trouble twice the next day and succeeded in pushing straight ahead uninterrupted only toward late afternoon. The snow-clad peak of Mt. Kenya they had now turned their backs upon and passed mile after mile of wild, fertile country through which roamed innumerable herds of game. Giraffe, antelope, oryx, thousands of them, grazed contentedly without as much as a glance at the passing motorists. Game birds swarmed over their heads and here and there a flock of vultures circled high in the heavens above some prospective meal.

Just before dusk they sighted some tribesmen bringing their herds of native goats and cattle across the wide plain. Even after they had passed out of sight, the bleating and squealing of the animals could be heard when Dudley slowed down to change gear.

For a few hours more they climbed up rocky trails and coasted down precipitous slopes and in the last of the daylight they looked down upon a band of brilliantly-striped zebra drinking at a swiftly coursing stream. Green ledges cast forth shadows and all about them plunged waterfalls, some roaring as they flung themselves from a dizzy height, some merely bubbling with a frothy, tinkling sound as they slipped in lacy patterns down a short descent over the glistening rocks.

Hal held his breath at times, so overcome was he with the beauty of it all. It was difficult, in those moments, for him to

understand why Dudley should want to leave it all for the dirt, noise and restless life in the States. Yet when darkness gripped them he realized the utter loneliness, the hopelessness that one would be likely to feel after eighteen years of it.

More than ever was this borne in upon him when they glided down a hill and saw in the distance the twinkling of lights.

“That’s the farm,” Dudley said with a grim note. Then with a more wistful tone, he added: “Just as gay and brilliantly lighted as I imagine Forty-Second Street and Broadway to be.”

“You’d get tired of Broadway and Forty-Second Street too,” Hal assured him kindly. “Honest, Dud, you’ve no idea what the noise is like! Thousands of people all milling about, pushing you out in the gutter, some scrambling for taxis, some elbowing to get into the subway entrances, stepping on your toes without so much as an apology—why, it’s terrible!”

“No, fascinating,” Dudley persisted, his quiet smile penetrating the darkness. “I’d not tire of noise, not ever! It must be splendid to see so many people at one time, Hal, to hear them and feel them! It’s the contact of one’s own fellow beings that I want—humanity. I’m sick to death of wild beasts! Ugh!”

Hal held his peace, until Dudley’s rebellious outburst was over.

“Natives, half-castes, mongrels—I’m fed up on them all,” he continued spiritedly. “You’ve no idea what your companionship will mean to me. I’ve never had the company of a white fellow my own age. That’s why I can’t bear to

think of you going back to the States without me—I want to talk and mix with white people the rest of my life!”

Hal glanced at his flushed face and his soul was filled with pity. “Come now, Dud,” he said consolingly. “Why start hanging the crepe already? Man alive, I won’t be going back to the States for an age yet and by that time Unk says that maybe between the two of us we can get him to. . . .”

“Say no,” Dudley interposed dismally. “And that isn’t crepe hanging either, Hal. You see, I know my father. Oh, well,” he added with a sigh of resignation, “You’ll be here long enough for me to shake off the blues I’ve got and doggone, we’re going to have some fun!”

“That’s the spirit!” Hal applauded. “That’s what I like. Never say die, Dud—it’s a great help!”

And that advice Dudley took to heart for he waved gaily ahead at the lights gleaming more brilliantly through the trees. Hal caught a glimpse of several manyettas or corrals of upright palings and the bomas of thorn bush where the outlines of tamed game could be seen moving in and out of the shadows. The house lights shone out upon the banks of a swift river that seemed to dip out of sight beyond the next hill.

Hal always remembered with what a queer, gripping sensation he approached this lonely outpost, flanked on every side by miles of African forest. The headlights revealed tree after tree festooned with pendant mosses and from the lower branches of one they saw the squinting, curious little eyes of several baboons.

Suddenly they swerved to the right and Dudley brought the car to a stop. Hal looked up and blinked and saw that they were before a fifteen foot stockade which completely

barricaded the farm. The only entrance was a great gate of heavy palings which presently swung open for them as if by magic. As it closed they beheld a bowing and chanting native to whom Dudley spoke in soft Swahili.*

The yellow thatched huts encircling the farm yard, Dudley explained, were the homes of the natives who tended the farm and livestock and kept things ship-shape outdoors. Beyond the main house which was a low building of stone and logs, was the electric plant. Dr. Holman, it was easy to see, liked his farm blazing with light.

They drew up alongside of the house and after Dudley had turned his car over to the chattering native, he led them up the flower-bordered path which led to the little low veranda. Suddenly the sound of a man's cavernous voice boomed from inside the house and simultaneously the heavy log door swung open with a terrific sweep.

"Dad!" whispered Dudley to his companions.

Piney murmured, *"Phew!"*

"Hush!" warned Dudley.

A veritable sea of light flooded the veranda and directly in its path stood a man who seemed at first sight to be enormous. Hal realized after a moment that he was not really more than up to his own shoulder, yet his broad shoulders and wide forehead had at once suggested an enormousness that was almost staggering. He ran his big, thick fingers through a mass of bushy black hair and his beetled brows seemed to contract as his eyes became focused on the three young men.

"That you, Dudley?" he bellowed.

"Yes, Dad, and. . . ."

“Good thing you come back so soon,” he interposed with ear-splitting shouts. “I lost my glasses half hour ago and that fool Briggs can’t seem to find ’em for me. Don’t stand there like a dunce—come in and find ’em for me!”

“Yes, Dad,” Dudley responded in that little quavering voice of his. “I—I met Hal all right and there’s a man for the lab. . . .”

“We’ll talk about it later! Get in and find my glasses!”

Hal gulped with amazement.

Piney chuckled at his ear. “So this is Dr. Holman!” he whispered. “Well, now that I’m here I might as well put up with it. I suppose we’re supposed to go in the house too, eh?”

“Yes,” Hal answered mechanically, “I guess so.”

* Conglomeration of native dialects.

CHAPTER X

POOR AFRICA

“Father can’t see a thing without his glasses,” Dudley explained apologetically. “He can’t even see to find them.”

Dudley had found the missing glasses and the doctor was now adjusting them, grumbling to himself as he gave them a final push over the bridge of his large nose. Then he looked up for the first time at his waiting guest and prospective employee, scrutinizing them rudely from behind the thick lenses. Hal felt that the man’s piercing black eyes missed nothing.

“So you’re Denis Keen’s nephew, eh?” he bellowed as he continued to stare at Hal. “Well, Dudley’ll have some excuse to loaf now. But he’s got to help me some on safari—I’ve got to look up some specimens. We might as well start tomorrow now that you’re here. Maybe you can take down some notes for me too.”

“I’d be glad to, Dr. Holman,” Hal said eagerly. “I’ll do anything I can. . . .”

Dr. Holman’s frown seemed suddenly to freeze out the momentary warmth that Hal had felt. “People usually do what I *want* them to do on safari,” he said gruffly. “There’s got to be order especially when the niggers are around and that’s one time they’ve got to be around!” He turned his back abruptly and faced Piney, scrutinizing him in the same manner that he had Hal.

“I saw your ad in the paper, sir,” said Piney softly, his mild eyes falling a bit under that penetrating gaze. “I haven’t

any experience in laboratory work, but I think I can learn.”

“I’ll do the thinking!” the doctor sneered. “Your quarters will be with Briggs, my fool assistant. They’re in back of the laboratory. I’ll see you there in a few minutes and find out what you do think you can learn! Achmed, the cook, will show you the way.” He turned ponderously and clapped his big hands together.

Dudley started. “Ach . . .” he began.

Dr. Holman wheeled about on his son with flushed face.

“Shut up, you ignorant runt!” he bellowed with biting sarcasm. “I’ll tend to my own affairs.”

Dudley cringed visibly and his tanned face reddened. “Yes, father,” he murmured humbly and trotted like some contrite little puppy to where Hal had seated himself on a bench before the fireplace.

“Poor little guy,” was what Hal thought as Dudley sat down beside him. And he was seized with a sort of a big brother desire to spread out his powerful arms and gather the embarrassed young man under his protection. For the moment he actually hated Dr. Holman, but speedily forgot him as Achmed, the cook, glided noiselessly into the room from his kitchen.

“Mongrel,” Dudley whispered into his ear, “but mostly Arab. You can tell by those long, thin fingers of his and that straight, black hair.”

Achmed was bowing obsequiously before the doctor and smiling. Then he stood at respectful attention while his employer bellowed instructions about Mr. Pine. He looked neither to the right nor to the left but stood like a smiling statue until he was dismissed, then seemed to slink

noiselessly out of the room with Mr. Pine following at his heels.

“That’s what I like in a servant,” the doctor observed with a hollow smile. “Doesn’t talk if it isn’t necessary. You ought to learn something from him, Dudley. But you couldn’t be like an Arab and choose your words.”

“Surely, Dad,” said Dudley, quavering, “you’re not comparing me with that mongrel, are you?”

The doctor laughed blatantly. “I’d compare you with him, yes, if you had as much sense and knew enough to keep your mouth shut and be satisfied to stay in Africa. Don’t you think I’ve guessed that you wrote to Denis Keen to have Hal come here so you could eventually wriggle the permission out of me for you to go to the States? Well, I’m no fool and if this plagued hole is good enough for me to spend my life in, it’s good enough for you! You’ll go over my dead body, that’s when you’ll go!”

“Yes, Dad, that’s when I’ll go,” said Dudley with a suggestion of resentment.

The doctor glared at his son, then turned on his heel and swaggered out of the room. Hal chuckled softly and spreading out his arm gave Dudley a friendly pat on the shoulder.

“Cheer up, old top,” he said with a ring of feeling in his voice. “We’ll try and sneak off on our own a lot while I’m here. Nothing’s as bad as it seems. Why, if anyone had told me that I’d feel at home with such a host as your father is, I’d have said they were crazy.”

“You can see he’s a pretty hard nut to crack, can’t you?” Dudley asked sadly.

“He’s pretty bad. In fact, such a crank that he interests me and that’s worth something, Dud. To tell you the truth, I think he’d like to get away from Africa himself.”

“Just what I’ve thought, Hal. But his life work seems to be here. He’s got long term agreements with several museums, and so forth, to get data on the wild life and to capture the finer specimens for exhibition purposes. He’s discontented with the whole thing, I know, but he doesn’t know anything else to do. He won’t let me go because he can’t go himself and I don’t mean any disrespect when I say that it isn’t parental devotion that makes him refuse to let me go. I can honestly say that I think my father doesn’t feel affection for a living soul—not even himself.”

Hal had not the slightest doubt that Dudley had told the whole truth. No one could have heard the doctor speaking to his son in the slurring way he did, and doubt it for a moment. The man was a born tyrant and his life in the blue of East Africa seemed to have stripped him of even common courtesy to a guest.

“The darn loneliness and danger, that’s what it’s been,” said Dudley apologetically. “Of course, it’s a case of every man for himself and the devil for us all in this country, but it’s not so good when one carries out that attitude in daily life.”

Hal smiled. “Now don’t get worrying about how I’m going to take things, Dud. Leave it to me—I take people as I find them. I mean that we shall have a good time somehow and I usually do what I mean to do. Maybe things will improve when Unk gets here and talks things over with your father. Unk is pretty forceful.”

“So are you,” said Dudley admiringly. “I noticed that Dad stopped at just the tongue-lashing before you. He usually doesn’t care who’s around when he gets mad. . . .”

“You mean—you don’t mean. . . .”

Dudley smiled wistfully. “It’s just blind temper, even Briggs says so. Briggs said Dad never forgot he was a gentleman before he came here.”

“Then the blame is on Africa, huh?” Hal smiled trying to appear gay.

Dudley nodded and smiled wistfully. “I’ve got to blame it on something, so it might as well be poor Africa. She’s blamed for a lot, so why not Dad? But that’s the last I’ll say, Hal. When we start out on safari tomorrow we’ll start out in a happier way and because you said you take people as you find them, I’m taking you at your word. Come on, now. To bed for you. We’ve got a guest room—it’s next to mine. Dad’s is next, in case you want to find your way around in the night or need anything.” And after a moment’s silence, he added: “You’ll see Briggs in the morning. He always turns in early.”

“Oh, yes,” said Hal rising and following Dudley out of the room, “I shan’t rest until I come face to face with Briggs.”

And, strange to say, Hal did not rest that night until he had seen Briggs.

CHAPTER XI

BRIGGS

The room was a simple one, simply furnished. A plain iron bedstead and a clothes-chest were fitted into one corner of the room under the two windows. In another corner stood a washstand and a chair. Hal walked back and forth between these studying them abstractedly. His mind, however, was centered on some significant noises that had been going on in the front part of the house for the past ten minutes. He imagined that the heated conversation was emanating from the living room.

Dudley had said goodnight and had been gone from the room about ten minutes when Hal first heard it. The muffled roar of the doctor's voice had reached his ears and brought him out of the warm bed with a jump.

He shuffled back and forth in his bare feet, pressing his toes nervously into the leopard skin that was spread across the center of the room. Dudley's quavering voice reached him and he knew then that the doctor must again be in a rage. Impulsively he opened the door and stepped out into the small, narrow hall that separated the three bedrooms from the front of the house.

He had stood there listening for a moment when he heard a sort of thud, followed by a soft groan. There was an interval of silence and then a thin squeaking sort of voice issued into the hall. Instinct told him that it must be Briggs. Suddenly the door opened out of the living room flooding the hall with light.

Hal retreated a little way into his room, not caring to be caught in the rôle of eavesdropper. After all, he thought, it really wasn't any of his business, yet he somehow couldn't resist lingering near the doorway as footsteps came along the hall. Suddenly he heard a muffled sort of sob and it struck him as coming from Dudley, but two doors slammed simultaneously and the hallway was in darkness before he could verify his suspicion.

It seemed an eternity before he heard a door open and close again. This time he boldly stepped into the hall narrowly escaping a collision with a wizened little man who was sneaking along on tiptoe. He gasped with fright as Hal put out a detaining hand.

“*Briggs?*” he whispered.

“Yes, sir?”

“Come in my room a sec. I want to talk to you.”

Hal closed the door softly and they tiptoed over to his bed like two conspirators. Poor Briggs was trembling and his voice shook as he spoke.

“Don't light a light, sir,” he said. “The doctor'll be coming to his room directly. It would make things worse (if that could possibly be) and we've had about enough for tonight.”

“Briggs, do you know who I am?”

“Yes, sir. Young Mr. Hal, Mr. Denis Keen's nephew. We were expecting you and if I may be so bold as to say it, you're a giant red head just like your uncle.”

Hal grinned. “And I'm just like my uncle when it comes to injustice, Briggs. I'm awfully sorry for poor Dud—tell me, did anything happen in the living room just now.”

Briggs hesitated, then leaned close to Hal's ear. "Something's always happening in the living room. It—can't go on, sir. The boy will be injured if it keeps up, his father's such a powerful. . . ."

"You don't mean to tell me that he's such a brute as that?" Hal asked shocked.

"I'm ashamed to say so, sir, but it's the absolute truth. The poor boy dares not cross him. None of us do. Tonight it was just something Dudley said about the cook, and that was enough. I could hear the racket from my room. It's in the lab, next to Mr. Pine's room. I couldn't stand it and so I went in and interfered. The doctor's furious with me now. He never stands for anyone crossing him but that's what I did tonight—I told him what a brute and a savage he was. More uncivilized than the poor niggers he hates and cuffs around. Well, I expect I'm in for it now—he'll never forgive me. That's the way he is."

Hal's eyes had become used to the darkness by this time. He could see the little man more plainly and there was certainly nothing in his make-up to excite anger or vindictiveness in the most savage breast. In point of fact, the wizened face and watery, kindly eyes should have inspired pity for there was a helplessness about him as he stood nervously ruffling his thin hair with his old, wrinkled fingers.

Hal's fighting spirit against the doctor rose to the surface. "Where is Dud now—in his room?" he whispered.

"In bed, sir," answered Briggs timidly. "But in order to have a peaceful night, Mr. Hal, I'd advise you to forget about it. Dudley would tell you the same thing now. He wasn't hurt—just his pride, which is bad enough I suppose. Er—he fell against the wall if that's what's on your mind. I heard it too,

that's what roused me, sir. Of course it might have been worse." Briggs made a movement to go.

Hal detained him. "Why don't you beat it from here, Briggs? Wouldn't you like to go home?"

Briggs' answer held a world of pathos. "Everybody o' mine is dead, Mr. Hal. Still, I'd love to see the States again just the same. But I've got a kind of notion about going out in the world after all these years. The doctor's bad enough but that seems worse to me and yet I suppose I'd go if I had the chance. But there's something about this country that chains a man down, you want to leave and yet you can't. Er—well, I'll say goodnight, sir. Just forget about what's happened tonight. Things will be better on safari."

Hal held out his hand and grasped the old man's trembling shoulder. "Things *will* be better!" he repeated brightly. "Rest easy, Briggs. I'm going to try and do some boy scout stuff and see if I can't make Dr. Holman the human being and gentleman that you once knew him to be."

Briggs looked up at Hal admiringly. "A superhuman task, sir, but then a big feller like you ought to be almost able to do it. Maybe Fate's got a trick or two up her sleeve in bringing you here after all."

If Fate had any such motives—indeed, if that elusive maker of destinies was weaving Hal into her scheme of things in that queer household, she had not yet given a sign. But then, as Hal afterward wrote home to his mother in Ramapo, New York, perhaps he was the only sign needed.

CHAPTER XII

HAL IS HAL

Hal could not sleep. He sat up in bed, his elbows propped on the window-sill and his cheeks resting in his hands. Not only did the queer Holman household contribute to his wakefulness, but a series of sounds emanated from the jungle that were alien to his ears.

The trumpeting of elephants echoed through the night as they crashed along in their wanderings. At intervals the distant roar of lions brought a flush to Hal's cheek and a sparkle to his eyes. The whine of hyenas left a melancholy note lingering on the breeze and the snorting and bellowing of rhinos reminded him strangely of Dr. Holman. This, he thought, was Africa.

A little later the moon came up, struggling out of the east with a braver light than she had displayed on the previous night. Gradually she sailed through the vaulted skies until she shone down upon a grove of splendid mimosas on the edge of the jungle just opposite the stockade gate. The shimmering silver light seemed to slide over the topmost branches and suddenly flooded the farm with its mellow rays. Hal caught his breath for it was his first real view of Dr. Holman's property.

He shifted his position in order to get closer to the scene and leaned his head against the mosquito netting which was tacked on the outside of the window. Here is what Dudley had been looking at all his young life—the native huts of mud and grass circling the front yard, six in all. The

manyettas filled with the silently moving forms of the doctor's "specimens," and last but not least, the house itself which was as unsymmetrical as the lives of its occupants.

The bedrooms were in an ell of the building while the laboratory and Briggs' quarters comprised two combined shacks adjoining the kitchen. Hal remembered a small door to the right of the hall and it occurred to him that it must be another entrance to the laboratory and consequently, Briggs' refuge in times of storm.

He smiled to himself. To be sure, the farm was quiet enough now; steeped in silence almost, save for the occasional noises from the jungle and the murmurings of the breeze. It was a tomb-like quiet when one thought about it and he wondered if it was not because of the stockade hemming them in so effectually. Beyond the gate was civilization and freedom for Dudley and Briggs if they had the courage to go. But what was he thinking . . . beyond the gate there also was the jungle and perhaps, death.

"I'm crazy!" he said half aloud. "How ever did I get thinking of such things? Oh yes, the gate." He grinned, his sense of humor coming to the rescue. "Time I just made myself sleep. Guess it's all kind of getting under my skin. Spooky, sort of."

He leaned toward the foot end of the bed and was about to smooth down the blanket when he heard a light, creaking sound from the direction of the laboratory. Briggs, perhaps. They must certainly have a back entrance too. The poor old man was undoubtedly too wide awake from his experience in defying the tyrannical doctor and had gone out to stroll about in the moonlight. Yes, it must be he. Footsteps, soft and slow,

were coming around toward the ell. Suddenly a figure passed underneath Hal's window.

He sat up, startled, as the figure hurried off across the front yard and kept on going straight to the gate. He knew at once that the shambling walk was not Briggs'. Moreover, there was only one man in the world that he had ever seen looking constantly behind him without ever really turning his head and that man was Mr. Pine.

Just before he reached the gate the man stopped, as if listening. Then without a sound and with a cat-like movement he swung open the gate and hurried out.

CHAPTER XIII

SPYING

Hal waited, puzzled and tense. Five minutes passed as he noted by his wrist watch. Ten minutes. What could the man be doing outside the gate at this hour? What was there to do? The eerie laughing sound of some animal (which he later learned was a hyena) struck his senses unpleasantly and he jumped out of bed impulsively.

He dug his bare feet into a pair of slippers and wriggled his arms into a dressing gown. Then he stepped out into the dark silence of the hall, stood listening a moment and hurried forward to the living room. Not a soul was about, he was certain; no one save Piney and himself.

He tripped twice over the skins with which Dr. Holman covered his floor and stumbled headlong into the log-hewn settee which occupied the center of the room. Other log-hewn furniture stood about in ghostly precision around the walls and Hal experienced a sense of relief when he found the door and got out on the veranda.

He stepped across the front yard on tiptoe, but did not stop to listen. The native huts showed not a sign of life and the varied sounds of snoring betokened the sleepers' lack of interest in the conscious world. He did not care. In point of fact, he felt curiously glad that he was the only apparent witness to Piney's nocturnal departure.

In a moment he had slipped noiselessly past the opened gate. Piney had not bothered to close it. That augured well.

The man *did* intend coming back. Hal peered about cautiously wondering what to think about the incident.

It was rather dim and shadowy now. The fickle moon had moved on directly above the farm taking her light from the murmuring mimosas. They were almost in darkness and lay across the well worn road at a distance of about two hundred feet. Suddenly the tap-tapping of a hammer sounded from the direction of the trees. Then something happened which caused Hal to quake. Four lights, two on either side of the stockade gate, flooded their brilliant rays out over the road.

“Incandescent bulbs!” Hal breathed, astounded, and jumped back into the shadow of the gateway. But even as he stood there the lights flickered out simultaneously and before he had made up his mind as to what action he should next take, they had flashed on and off at minute intervals. It then occurred to him that this was Dr. Holman’s method of warning off the prowling beasts at night and he laughed at his fears.

He waited then for the interval of darkness and slipped safely out and across the road into the shadow of the grove before the lights again came on. Once there, he felt a little nervous and chilled but the continued sound of hammering gave him courage and he crept forward on tiptoe.

The dank smell of the jungle assailed his nostrils reminding him how close to danger he might be. He wondered if his temerity would bring him to grief. He had nothing but his bare arms. After all, what business of his was it that Piney had come out? Yet. . . .

The hammering became louder as he stole along. He knew now that whatever it was it came from the edge of the grove, at the very end. His heart thumped, not from fear but from

the excitement and wonder. Was it Piney? He told himself that it was just another of his crazy ideas. What could the man be doing hammering out in this wilderness at such an hour?

He tripped over a stump and almost lost his slipper. The sound of it made him stop in his tracks. But no, the hammering went right on. He put out his hand cautiously, gripped the bark of the nearest tree and continued on his way. Suddenly he saw the gleam of a light, a narrow slit of a light shining between the two end trees.

As he crept up he saw first that it was a tiny pocket flashlight held tightly in Mr. Pine's hand. The hammering had ceased evidently and even as Hal looked on the man was picking frantically at the bark of the tree with a penknife. At his feet lay a large blunt instrument which had probably produced the hammering sound when being used as leverage in the singular task.

Hal gasped with surprise as the man's intention became evident. He had been digging a hole in the side of the trunk for within a few seconds the piece of bark gave way under the man's continued picking leaving a void of perhaps six inches square.

The bark slipped to the ground and Piney was quick to retrieve it, keeping it in the hand which held the flashlight. Then with the other hand he deftly picked out of his inside coat pocket, an object which appeared to be a small-sized leathern bag. Manifestly he was trying to hold too much and do too much with his mere hands, for the bag slipped and tumbled noiselessly into the trampled grass.



NOT FIFTY YARDS DISTANT A LIONESS PAWED
THE GROUND.

He grumbled and stooped. At the same instant Hal saw a lioness standing not a hundred yards distant, pawing the ground and with an angry gleam in her eye.

CHAPTER XIV

A GAME OF CHANCE

“Piney! Look behind you!”

Hal rushed out of his hiding place, forgetting his rôle of spy, forgetting everything save that a fellow being was in danger. Frightened as he was, the majestic beast fascinated him, just as it obviously fascinated Mr. Pine. For a second they stood rooted to the spot then it dawned upon them both that the animal was deformed—she had but one ear.

Hal pulled Piney back forcibly, thinking how strange it was that in such a moment he should be more alert to that defect in the lioness than to the question of their own immediate safety. Meanwhile the beast pawed the ground and opened its huge jaws emitting an ominous roar. They could feel its fetid breath upon their faces.

Every nerve in Hal’s body was taut. Piney was cringing against him in a helpless hysteria. With so little space to do anything and apparently no time to do anything, Hal quickly decided to try and outwit the lioness if it could be done. Instinct warned him that it would be fatal for them to turn their backs. The beast was in no mood for that for she was already crouching tensely and her tail flapped ominously. No doubt she had cubs in the immediate neighborhood and her fighting instinct was thoroughly aroused.

A hysterical whine escaped Piney. Hal was furious. *“Shut up, you fool!”* he growled between set teeth. *“Don’t let her see you’re scared!”*

“But my . . .”

“*Hush!*”

The beast advanced, dragging her beautiful brown body a few feet over the trampled grass. Suddenly she espied the leathern bag right under her nose and pushed it with her huge paw. As it rolled an inch or two she backed away raising her head and roaring until the grove echoed. Hal did not move an inch but kept his jaw set and dug his hand into Piney’s shoulder.

“This may be our chance, Piney,” he hissed. “Step backward with me just an inch or two at a time! That tree . . . move as little as possible . . . she’s interested in that bag!”

“But . . .” Piney began again with a pathetic whine.

“It’s our *lives, you fool!*”

He kept his hold and forced Piney back a few steps. He had made up his mind that if the fellow hesitated he would take him up in his arms and throw him back. Never in his life had he been so conscious of his own mental and physical strength. He felt fully confident that he could hold his own even if he were to die in the attempt.

Piney, however, thought only of the little bag and Hal realized that the man was almost willing to sacrifice his life in order to regain it. It seemed preposterous, yet it was obvious that nothing else mattered to him. The hysteria and fright came from the fear of losing that and not from the danger of losing his life.

The lioness was still crouching but her attention was centered mostly on the bag. Twice she swung out her paw and pushed it much as a kitten would play with a piece of catnip. But her attention was not so occupied with that that she was not immediately aware of the cautious movements of

the two men. At their next step she raised her head and bared her dripping teeth.

Again she dragged herself forward a few inches while her tail lashed from side to side. At that point her paws almost touched the bag and that was the time her curiosity got the better of her for she bent down and smelled of it.

Hal took a quick stock of his surroundings. One thing heartened him. A fallen limb, stout and thick, lay at his feet almost, not more than three inches distant. He glanced toward the lioness with shining, hopeful eyes. She had closed her jaws over the bag.

Pine screamed shrilly. "Oh . . . oh . . ."

Hal almost knocked him down in reaching for the limb. But he got it and stood ready—waiting, while the beast worked her ponderous jaws queerly. Suddenly she gulped making a throaty, choking noise.

"*Swallowed it*—that's what she's done!" cried Piney.

Hal leaned forward and with all the strength of his muscular arms, swung the limb above his head. The beast saw it coming apparently for she slid backward and as if by magic melted off into the forest by the time the heavy limb had crashed to the ground.

Hal took Mr. Pine almost bodily and dragged him along until they had got clear of the grove. He was minus a slipper, but hobbled along thankful that they had escaped with their lives.

Not so his companion. He continued to moan and groan woefully about his bag, cursing the one-eared lioness in blatant tones. "You don't know what it means, Keen," he said dismally as they hurried back across the road. "You don't . . ."

“What’s in it, that’s worth more than your life or mine, huh?” asked Hal angrily. “What’s in it that’s worth being chewed up in pieces, huh?”

“My er—my money,” the man answered with a hopelessness that he could not disguise. “All I’ve got in the world.”

“Well, why in heaven’s name were you out there trying to hide it in that beast-infested spot?”

Piney passed a hand across his forehead. “Just because I had a hunch that it might be stolen or that I might lose it on safari. You can never tell. And it would have been safe there—oh my!”

They were at the gate then and the lights had just blinked on. Piney dropped something out of his hand and it fell to the soft road with a thud. Hal stooped and picked it up.

It was a small bottle of cement. “This what you were going to seal up that piece of bark with?” he asked.

Piney nodded and looked at him questioningly.

“I saw you pass my window,” Hal explained. Then as he shut the gate after him, he added: “Wonder if anyone’s up?”

“Don’t—don’t say anything about it,” Piney stammered. “Just say I was out for a walk or something—something.”

Hal glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. “There’s no reason why you couldn’t say you lost your money—none that I can think of.”

“I wouldn’t want the folks here to think I didn’t trust them that much to leave it here, don’t you see?” Piney said despairingly. “But I just had a hunch, Keen—you understand how that is?”

“I understand about hunches,” Hal said with a puzzled shake of his disheveled head, “but I don’t understand you,

Piney. Not at all. Anyway, let's not talk about it—I'm too shaken up with that experience. Phew! What a close one that was. Let's be quiet. No sense of waking up anyone, now that it's all over."

"Yes—yes," stammered Piney.

Hal took his arm and guided him across the yard. He was trembling and his face looked ashen in the pale moonlight. When they got into the shadow of the house he was visibly relieved. They stopped before the veranda.

"I don't have to go through the house to the laboratory," he whispered. "There's a back entrance—I'll go that way. See you in the morning and mum's the word, Keen!" he added in a hoarse, choked voice.

He hurried away on tiptoe and had gone only a few feet when he stumbled and almost fell. Something slipped to the ground, evidently from one of his pockets, but he seemed not to notice it for he had hurried right on and had shut the door of the laboratory behind him before Hal had picked it up.

There was no mistaking what it was; Hal knew the moment it was in his hands. Even in the dark one could distinguish a good leather wallet simply by the sense of feeling. Consequently, here in the moonlight it was no great task to recognize it and the profusion of banknotes that taxed the little leather pockets with their bulk.

"*All this money!*" he gasped. "And he told me that that lion had gone off with all the money he had in the world! Mm . . . there's something funny in Denmark."

And with that he turned and tiptoed into the silent house.

CHAPTER XV

GATHERING CLOUDS

Hal slept like one exhausted when he did sleep, but it took him the greater part of the night to calm down and forget his terrifying experience. Perhaps that is why his usually alert senses lay dormant in the small hours when a fickle fate stalked stealthily into the farmhouse and hovered about the laboratory.

In any event, he was aware of nothing until he was awakened by a tropical sun streaming in through the window at his bedside. A glorious blue sky with fleecy clouds stretched as far as the eye could see and here and there one could see swarms of game birds flying about; grouse, spur fowl, grey-brown guinea fowl and bustards with big fluffed heads. From the manyettas came a perfect riot of sound which was no great wonder, he realized as he got to his knees in the bed that he might better see the heterogeneous collection of specimens that Dr. Holman had.

A few tame oryxes were running furiously about and almost butted into a group of zebra, also tamed, who were having a private argument among themselves. Two bantam roosters strutted perkily about the back yard and crowed at every half-dozen steps. Hal laughed heartily and told himself that this was an aspect of the farm that he had never thought of. Certainly one couldn't deny that they brought something domestic into this lonely outpost of civilization.

As he thought of it, an insistent knock came at the door and before he could answer, Dudley walked in. One look at

his white, shaken countenance told Hal volumes. Something terrible had happened.

“What is it, Dud—for heaven’s sake, you look as if . . .”

“Hal, Briggs is dead!”

Hal jumped out to the floor in one bound. “*Dead?* You’re fooling . . . you’re . . . why I was just talking with him after you went . . . maybe it was about ten o’clock. No, you’re not fooling! Dud, what’s ever happened. . . .”

Dudley sat down in the chair beside the washstand and held his head in his hand for a moment. “Then if Briggs was talking with you last night he must have come in here after . . . well, I guess he told you about the argument and all. That’s why this morning Dad wouldn’t go in and see why he wasn’t in to breakfast at seven. That’s his time to eat breakfast, you see—he hasn’t missed in twenty years, he’s often boasted.”

Hal sat back on the bed. “You say your father wouldn’t go in to see?”

“No, he was still in a bad mood when I came out and he was too provoked with Briggs to go to his room.”

“Mm,” Hal muttered. “Go on, Dud.”

“There’s not much more. I went myself to see and I’ll always be sorry. It seems he and Mr. Pine had changed rooms sometime during the night. I’ll never forget the sight—*ever!* Right off I could see he was dead before I even got to the bed. I saw that terrible look—horror, it was. I smelled a sickish sweet sort of smell.”

“*Murder?*” Hal gasped.

Dudley shook his head. “Dad says not. He’s already examined him. Says there’s no sign of it and that Briggs died of heart failure.”

“We all really die of heart failure, Dud—know that?”

“That’s so, we do. But Dad ought to know, Hal. You knew he was a medical man besides, didn’t you?”

“Unk told me something of that once, but I’d forgotten. The point is, though, he says it was natural death, huh?”

“Yes, but I’m terribly upset. I depended on Briggs a lot. More like a father to me than Dad. I just can’t believe it!”

Hal got up and went over to him. “Cheer up, Dud—it’s funny why such things happen.” Then: “Where *is* Piney—what’s he got to say about it?”

“He’s been up since six he says,” answered Dudley brushing away a tear unashamed. “He told Dad he couldn’t sleep very well—it seems his sleep was broken up in the first part of the night on account of the animals moving around in the manyettas. He’s not used to it, of course. Briggs heard him and got up and offered him his bed because it’s much quieter in that room. That’s Briggs all over—you can see why I was so fond of him. Always making himself uncomfortable so that somebody else could be comfortable. This time he died in the attempt, it seems.”

Hal went back to the bed and again sat down. “So Briggs gave up his room to Piney, huh?”

“Yes, why do you ask?”

“Can’t honestly tell you. But it doesn’t sound right somehow.”

Dudley sprang up from the chair and came over to Hal. “That’s exactly how I’ve been feeling about it, isn’t that strange? Just as you said, I have a feeling. . . .”

Hal got up and reached for his clothes at the foot of the bed. “Wait a sec, Dud. I’ll be into things in a jiff. Before I go

out to breakfast I'm going to take a look at that room. Maybe I'm wrong and again, maybe I'm right."

"I think Piney kind of has a feeling about it too," Dud remarked as Hal was washing. "When I mentioned to Dad about the sweetish smell in the room, he got kind of white and funny looking."

Hal stopped, his face covered with soap. "Piney got white? What for?"

"How do I know? Death so close at hand and so sudden is enough to make anybody white. Look at me!"

"That's different," Hal said, his face in the wash bowl again. "I don't know, Dud, but I've got a hunch and when I've a hunch it means something."

"That's what your uncle once told me about you," Dudley said with a sad smile. "I hope for the peace of everybody concerned that it's just as Dad says." Then quickly he added: "Why, Dad wouldn't lie about it, would he? What reason. . . ."

"Don't ask me. I'm so full of suspicions that I might even try to fasten those zebras of yours onto it too."

Hal realized what suspicion was uppermost in his mind but he dared not even let it take thought. He tried to be fair in his thinking and did not let himself dwell upon it until he and Dudley had entered the room in which death had overtaken poor Briggs.

The bedrooms at the farm were all furnished on the same plan. There was nothing to differentiate this room from the one Hal was occupying except that it was smaller and had but one window. Also, like the one next to it which Mr. Pine had used, it opened directly into the laboratory.

Hal did not disturb the dead by so much as a look. He contented himself with a quick survey of the room as he stood in the doorway. But suddenly his bright alert eyes caught sight of something white half under the bed.

“Handkerchief,” he said softly, as he pulled it out. And putting it up to his nostrils, he added: “Chloroform, Dud.”

“*What?*” Dudley asked. “In that handker. . . .”

“*Chloroform!*” Hal repeated vehemently. “And I don’t mean maybe!”

CHAPTER XVI

DR. HOLMAN

They came out into the laboratory silently. Hal stuffed the telltale handkerchief into his pocket with a movement that Dudley was quick to notice.

“How are you certain it’s chloroform?” he asked faintly.

“I went on a case with Unk once and I’ll never forget the smell—never! The room was full of it just like Briggs’—I don’t see how your father, a doctor, could fail to smell that!”

“But Hal, my father may be odd and all that, but you don’t believe for a moment that he would . . .”

“I don’t believe or I don’t think anything yet,” Hal interposed kindly. “I wouldn’t want to believe that of anybody who slept under this roof last night. We’ll just have to see if there isn’t some explanation about it.”

Dr. Holman was outdoors when they arrived in the living room and as Achmed insisted upon serving the guest with breakfast, Hal had to sit down. But he had no appetite this morning. He sipped at some coffee and dawdled with his toast.

“Where’s Mr. Pine?” he demanded of the smiling cook who was hovering in the background.

Achmed shrugged his shoulders.

“He can’t speak very good English,” said Dud. “Piney’s out being shown around by Dad.”

“While Briggs is lying in there?” Hal was annoyed.

“Life has to go on, Hal,” answered Dudley with a brave smile.

Hal grunted and managed to drink the rest of his coffee in a gulp. “That cuts out safari for today at least, huh?”

“Of course.” Dud was pacing up and down the room, staring out of the windows.

Suddenly he said, “Here comes Dad. Piney must have gone into the lab.”

Hal didn’t wait for the doctor to greet him. “I’ve got something to show you, sir,” he said excitedly and, pulling the handkerchief out of his pocket, thrust it before the man’s nose. “Smell it!”

Dr. Holman’s bushy brows drew up in a frown. “Chloroform,” he said tersely. “What of it?”

“I—we—I was in taking a look at Briggs, sir,” Hal answered gaining courage with each word. “I found it under the bed.”

“Well?” the doctor bellowed.

“Well, I found it,” Hal answered bravely. “I thought I’d tell you about it. Don’t you think it looks funny?”

“If you mean *strange*—*no!* Why should there be anything strange in that?”

“But chloroform? Unk always . . .”

“Your uncle isn’t always right about things even if he is one of the best detectives in the States! I suppose you’ve got his darned habit of jumping at conclusions too, eh? Well, don’t be so precipitate. I won’t have any snooping people around here, guest or no guest.”

“I beg your pardon, sir,” Hal said, somewhat abashed. “I didn’t mean to snoop. I just had a hunch about Briggs, that was all. He seemed so well when I was talking to him last night, but then I’m willing to believe . . .”

“I don’t care what you’re willing to believe,” the doctor snapped brusquely. “Perhaps that handkerchief belonged to me! Perhaps I was cleaning something with it and happened to take it into the room with me when I went to look at Briggs. What of that, eh?”

“Nothing,” Hal answered apologetically. “I merely mentioned it because I thought it was something you’d overlooked.”

“If it was, that’d be my business!” the doctor shouted. “But it’ll be a rainy day when I overlook anything, don’t worry about that, young man.” He started toward the door again, but suddenly stopped.

“You say Briggs was talking to you last night? *When?*?”

Hal knew he was in for it. “After he came through with Dud. I heard some noise, sir, and I simply got up and asked him what it was. That was all.”

“Hmph—what did he say?”

Hal could visualize Briggs’ wizened little face and kindly eyes and it made him feel as loyal to the little man as if he had known him a lifetime instead of the few fleeting moments in which they had spoken. He looked straight at the doctor.

“Briggs told me that Dudley had fallen, sir—slipped, was the word he used. Then I introduced myself and after we chatted about Africa and the States we said goodnight. I never dreamed that my acquaintance with him would be so short-lived.”

“Well, it’s too bad,” said the doctor with little evidence of grief, “but he was old and I don’t think he’d have lived much longer even if his heart had held out. He had other organic

troubles. Makes it bad him going just when I need him most. But that's my confounded luck!"

He stalked out of the room and Achmed after clearing away the breakfast things came in from the kitchen and motioned to Dudley that he was going out to his hut to tidy it up. Hal felt relieved to know that they would be alone in that part of the house for a little while.

"Kind of a bad beginning for your visit, Hal," said Dudley hesitantly. "I—Dad is no respecter of people, not even guests—nephews of old friends! I feel simply sunk about it, honestly."

Hal looked down into the wistful face of the boy and smiled. "Dud, I'm thick-skinned about some things and your Dad is going to be one of those things, if it takes me weeks to get used to it. I feel that I've got to do it for your sake—funny isn't it? Just the same that's how I feel about it. If you've stood it all these years I can stand it for the weeks I'm to be here. Anyway it's worth while waiting for Unk and see how he whips things into shape. I'm going to write him today and prepare him."

"You're white all through, Hal!" Dudley said with real feeling. "I was scared stiff that you'd want to beat it right back home the first time Dad bawled you out. But you took it and grinned and gee, how can I thank you?"

"Thank yourself," Hal laughed and pushed the smiling young man playfully onto the settee. "I'll never be satisfied until I make it possible somehow for you to come back to the States with me and see something. You'd look great if you didn't have that sad, lonely look I catch on your face so much of the time."

Dudley smiled. "Maybe it's my natural look, huh?"

“Not on your life!” Hal kidded him. “You were meant to have a permanent smile.”

“I will when I get over the shock of Briggs. Listen, Hal, you believe what Dad said?”

Hal’s grinning face was an enigma. “The best way to get along with your father is not to think out loud.”

“But you do believe. . . .”

“Dud, I honestly don’t know what I believe. There’s so much on my mind—even the hunch is still there. Can’t shake it off, that’s the trouble. But even if I don’t believe what your father says about the chloroform, that doesn’t say I’m thinking or believing any awful thing of him, if that’s what you mean.”

“That’s what I *do* mean,” said Dudley quietly. “Dad may be terrible in lots of ways, but he’d never stoop to that. *I know it!* He’s had some feeling for Briggs after all these years even though he wouldn’t show it.”

“All right, Dud,” Hal said almost tenderly. “Forget about it for a while, huh? I’ve got something else on my mind now. Where’s Piney?”

“Must be in the lab. Dad’s taking a nap—he always does at this time of morning. Sleeps for an hour or so.”

Hal moved toward the door. “See you after a few seconds. There’s something I want to see Pine about—something I want to give him.”

CHAPTER XVII

MATCHING WITS

Mr. Pine was tidying up, as he explained to Hal when the latter came in and perched himself upon a handy stool. “And I’ve got no heart in it, Keen,” he whispered. “Between last night and what’s happened this morning. . . .”

“Your first day at work won’t amount to much, huh?” Hal interposed unsmilingly.

“Nor any other day.” Piney put down some bottles he had been assorting and replied. “I ain’t been able to think of anything but last night. You don’t know what that meant. All my money, Keen—*all!*”

Hal nodded soberly, attentively. “After all, you can always make more money, even *find* money if you look long enough and hard enough, but poor Briggs can never do anything more.”

Piney shook his head dolefully. “It’s terrible that it had to happen just when we come, eh? But the doc says he was old.”

“Funny thought I had about Briggs, Piney,” Hal said casually. “I had a feeling that maybe he wouldn’t have died if it hadn’t been that he changed rooms with you.”

Mr. Pine’s hands came down to his sides. “What difference would that have made?” he asked nervously.

“It might have been you, that’s all.”

The man’s face went white. “You’re crazy, Keen! Never heard such talk. Why might it have been *me?*”

“Just a notion, that’s all. It struck me as fateful that the poor old codger gave up his room to you on the night of his death. When did the exchange take place?”

“When—when I left you that time. Er—he heard me shut the door when I came in, I guess. Anyway, I no sooner got in my room than he knocked. I had to say something, why I was up, so I told him that the menagerie in the back yard was keepin’ me awake.”

“So he offered to swap, huh? More than you’d do for him, I bet.”

“Aw, I don’t know about that. I think I’d have liked the old guy.”

Hal looked at him long and searchingly. “Piney, you’re a puzzle. Everybody that I’ve met in this country so far has puzzled me, all except Dud and poor Briggs.”

Piney was hopelessly dull in some ways. Whether it was affectation or not, Hal would have to find out. Certainly his manner just then seemed to indicate plain stupidity.

“What’s so puzzlin’ about me?” he demanded softly. “Ain’t I been on the level with you about last night and . . .”

“Tell me,” Hal interrupted. “Did you hear any sounds after you got in Briggs’ nice, warm bed?”

“Nothing but the old guy himself movin’ around. Why?”

“I just asked because Dud told me that you mentioned about not sleeping very well at all. He said you were up at six-thirty.”

“Sure, I had it on my mind about last night.”

“How long was it that you heard Briggs moving around?”

“Bout an hour almost,” Piney answered, eyeing Hal suspiciously. “What is this—a third degree or something?”

“Hardly,” Hal grinned. “It’s more of a favor to poor Briggs. Sometimes people need favors after death you know. Hear any other noises after that hour?”

The man grasped the edges of a white, enamelled table top. “You got me feeling creepy and spooky like, Keen. What is it? Sure, I heard sounds on and off, but I couldn’t tell you where they came from. It might have been the old guy—I don’t know. Say, listen, I did kind of make out a door open and close, now that I come to think of it!”

“Good. Try and think of something else. Where and what door?”

“Search me. I ain’t used to this dump enough to make out noises that much. I just heard a door. It kind of got on my nerves, it was so soft—like that lioness. Wasn’t she a bad one? I’d like to find her, Keen. One ear! They don’t come like that very often. She wouldn’t be so hard to trail, eh? You don’t know what that meant . . .”

“I ought to by this time,” Hal interposed brusquely. “We’ll go into that some other time. That’s one bone I *am* going to pick with you! But as to Briggs—the doctor will probably bury him very soon and I want to find out as quick as I can. You certain that’s all you heard?”

Mr. Pine came around the table closer to Hal. “You ain’t meanin’ to hint that you got your doubts about what happened to the old guy, are you?”

“Just what I’m hinting, Piney!”

Piney cleared his throat with a nervous cough. “Not—*murder?*”

“I hope not,” answered Hal, “but I’m wondering and a few questions might help.”

He got up from the stool and put his hand in his pocket. “Here’s something you dropped as you went away from me last night,” he said, holding out the wallet.

Piney reeled where he stood and for a second Hal thought he was going to faint.

CHAPTER XVIII

AN EXPLANATION

“Just a second, Keen,” Mr. Pine said faintly as Hal strolled toward the door. “I’ll admit you’ve played a fast one on me this time, but I can explain it.”

Hal turned back and waved his hand gaily. “Keep it to yourself. I’ll find out the truth, don’t worry. You’ve lied to me a couple of times now so I wouldn’t believe you in any case. Murder will out and so will this one. Don’t think you can fool me forever. I’ll see you later. Don’t work too hard.”

Piney’s rejoinder was inaudible for Hal had closed the door.

The two young men spent a rather listless day together looking about the farm and idling on the veranda. Hal could not rid himself of the feeling that they were waiting, waiting for something to happen. He had no idea what that something was going to be and his only excuse for thinking so at all was his persistent “hunch.” Consequently he seemed not at all surprised when Dr. Holman invited him into the living room, late that afternoon.

Dudley was on the veranda taking a nap and the whole house was dim and cool and silent. It seemed a most propitious moment for the doctor to talk and Hal guessed that he had much to say as soon as he had dropped onto the settee.

The doctor did not sit down but walked back and forth, his eyes straight upon Hal all the time. “You’re just like Denis,” he said gruffly. Then lowering his voice: “You’ve got his

snoopy way no matter how much you deny it. Sometimes it's a good thing to have and other times it isn't. Maybe this is one of the times it isn't. One thing, though, it's better not to go around talking about what you think until you're certain."

"I've not gone around talking at all, Doctor Holman," Hal said without raising his voice. "I spoke to Mr. Pine this morning about poor Briggs. I didn't say I thought he had been murdered—I said I *hoped* he hadn't been. There's quite a difference in the meaning, sir."

The doctor scowled. "Don't make out a case for yourself. We've got enough of one right here. Hereafter don't even confide your hopes to this Pine man. After all he's only an employee and besides we don't know him from Adam. Or do you?"

"No, I don't. I met him on the train from Mombasa. I don't know what I think about him either—that's why I went in to talk to him this morning. If I come to any definite conclusion about him I'll tell you too."

Dr. Holman kept on pacing back and forth. "You're too alert for me to even try and keep anything from you, boy," he said grudgingly. "But what I tell you is not to go outside of this room—not even to Dudley's ears. Understand?"

Hal nodded.

"Your suspicions about Briggs were entirely correct. He *was* murdered!"

Hal stirred but his face showed no surprise. "I sensed that from the moment Dud told me that he was dead."

"Something uncanny about you," the doctor grumbled. "I had my reasons for not telling you this morning. Too many ears to hear what I said. Also, I don't want it to get out yet

for a while, especially to Achmed or the natives. I've got good reason!"

"But it ought to be reported to the police!" Hal protested.

"Yes, and then we'll never find out who did it!" the doctor whispered fiercely. "Don't you understand—everybody on this farm knows I bawled out Briggs last night! The police wouldn't hesitate to pin it on me right off. I—well, it would be circumstantial evidence and I wouldn't have a chance."

Hal stared at the man, curiously. Was it possible that he was frightened—this big blustering bully? "But you didn't do it, huh?" he asked as calmly as if he were making a comment on the weather.

The doctor wheeled around. "Are you crazy? Think I'd stoop to chloroform?" His face was red and he mopped his wide brow with a handkerchief. "As far as Briggs is concerned, we can't do any more about him. He's dead and I know how he died! The main thing is to keep it from the police until we can prove who did it. They'd ball things up right away."

Hal blinked as if he had been dreaming. Did the man think he was a blind idiot? Why this endeavor to keep off the police unless he had something to fear from them?

"You could soon clear yourself if the police did take you," he argued.

"How? When it was my chloroform? When I'd threatened Briggs just a few hours before? I could never prove it and I know it!"

"Then you're giving me to understand that Briggs can be buried and we'll find out who the murderer is afterward, huh?"

"Yes, that's what I thought."

“Well, sir, it’s singular no matter which way I look at it. But first of all, who would have the slightest reason to want poor Briggs out of the way, except . . .”

“*Me!*” the doctor sneered. “Isn’t that what you were going to say?”

Hal glanced toward the hall door. “There’s somebody listening in there,” he said softly.

The doctor raced to the door like an infuriated bull. He pushed it open only to find that the hall was empty of any eavesdropper and he was about to turn and close it when they heard the sound of departing footsteps going toward the laboratory.

“*That Piney!*” the doctor bellowed and disappeared into the hall.

Hal got up and strolled to the window and to his surprise saw Piney, placidly smoking a cigarette in the front yard. And from the recesses of the kitchen were wafted warm, savory odors indicating that Achmed was busy with the supper.

It was difficult to realize that Briggs had been murdered in his bed.

CHAPTER XIX

PERSONAL BUSINESS

Dudley and Hal sat talking on the veranda in the cool of early evening. Dr. Holman had gone to bed with a headache and Mr. Pine had also excused himself and retired. The animals were grazing contentedly, moving back and forth in the dusk and the jungle life had not yet stirred from the torpor of an oppressive day.

Dudley dropped a bombshell into the peaceful atmosphere by saying, "I heard most of the talk that went on between you and Dad this afternoon. I'm almost sorry I wasn't really asleep."

"So'm I, Dud. It wasn't exactly a pleasant thing to listen to, was it?"

"No, it wasn't."

"When did Piney come around into the front yard?"

"Before you told Dad you heard someone listening in the hall."

Hal lighted the pipe thoughtfully. "I thought it was Piney myself. I honestly did. Man alive, I'm puzzled, Dud! You heard what I said to your father about . . ."

"Yes, and I can't understand Dad acting like that," said Dudley sadly. "It may seem strange for me to say so, but even after what I heard between you two I can't believe that Dad is guilty of such a thing. Just as he said—he wouldn't stoop to that!"

"But you realize yourself, Dud, that it's his duty to notify the police. This is a horrible mess. Why doesn't he want

them? You can't blame me for thinking he *has* something to fear."

"I know how most anybody would take it, but I'll never believe it of my father—as bad as he's been."

"Dud, you're all wool and a yard wide. I don't think I'd like you if you agreed with me about this. I want you to be loyal because I want to believe that I'm wrong. I've got a little pride in the matter too. Your father's a life-long friend of Unk's—don't forget that."

Dudley stared into the dark. "There's something you want to do about it, isn't there, Hal?"

"Righto, you guessed that fine. How?"

"Don't know. Maybe I'm getting the hunch habit from you. What is it you want to do?"

"I want to cable Unk about it and ask his opinion. He's not here to be biased about the situation and he can advise me better. I'm a bug for getting to the bottom of things, Dud, and I frankly don't like it that your father is leary about having the police. Briggs didn't have a relative so he's got to have a friend even if he is dead. Willful murder of a poor old guy like that doesn't make me feel any too kindly toward anyone I think is connected with it. I don't forget what you said about that look of horror on his face."

"I know, I know. It was awful! You're right, Hal—you've got to cable your uncle and ask him. I'll have to be disloyal to Dad that much and urge you to do it. But I can't appear as having done so—understand? I wouldn't want Dad to think I've lost faith in him at any time for I really haven't. I just happen to disagree with him on the question of the police. He'd think it was sheer treason if he caught me aiding you even."

“Of course,” Hal said, smiling gently, “I don’t want you to get into trouble, not for anything. After all this is strictly my affair. Just give me a hint about sending that cable.”

“I’ll run the car out of the garage for you,” Dudley whispered. “It’ll be standing in the driveway when I say goodnight to you. Dad will be sound asleep—he wouldn’t hear a bomb go off in the room so don’t worry about that. If the natives ask any questions tell them you’re going for a little spin. Then you drive out of the gate and turn the car south. Keep straight on the road for thirty miles and you’ll come to the government quarantine station. Man by the name of Nunnally keeps it. He’ll let you phone to the telegraph station, a hundred miles from there.”

“No turn in the road?”

“About three, but keep straight in your own path and you won’t get lost. You can sort of word your cable so’s Nunnally won’t get wise, huh?”

“Leave that to me, Dud. Unk and I have a little code of our own. It may be a foolish errand, but I’ll feel better about it after it’s done.”

“Sure. It won’t take you more than three hours.”

“Much as that?”

“You’re not going to skim over a road like the ones you have in the States. This road is sort of an accidental one—it’s been worn down by our prowlers. Three hours will be making good time.”

Dudley got up and moved off into the darkness. Hal listened intently until he heard the soft purr of the engine from the driveway. A momentary twinge of fear stifled him and he felt as he had felt when he was a boy about to indulge in some forbidden prank.

But he was calm and composed when Dudley came around and up on the veranda. He knew instinctively that it was just what his mother and uncle would have him do and that was enough for him to know. He got up determinedly.

“All right,” Dudley whispered. “She’s got plenty of gas and you’ll find her easy riding. Wish I could say that much for the road, but I can’t.”

“That’s all right. I’m too excited to think of the bumps.”

“There’s a forty-five Colt in the seat. Always best to have it. Nothing will bother you if you keep going. Besides they’re scared of the lights.”

“Boy! Think I’m likely to encounter anything?”

“Plenty. Between here and Nunnally’s they thrive. Jungle runs parallel most all the way. Well, good luck, Hal, and goodnight!”

“Goodnight.”

Hal stepped softly around the side of the house. The outlines of the car were just visible and he was thankful for the dark. Dudley had made no mention of it, but instinct told him that it would be better to turn on the lights when once he was outside the gate.

As he put his foot on the running board he thought he saw something slink away into the shadows. Distinctly he heard footsteps, there was no doubt of that. Yet when he hurried all about the house and yard he did not discover a soul and to his whispered inquiries no answer came. Finally he gave it up, telling himself that he had imagined it and tiptoed back to the car.

Two minutes later he had put the farm behind him and was headed south.

CHAPTER XX ON THE VELDT

At times, even above the whirring of the motor, Hal could hear the noisy hyena. Once he caught a glimpse of a bull lion slinking across the road and off into the high grass, and immediately he stepped on the gas to get out of that neighborhood as quickly as possible. He had no desire to have another encounter with the beasts so soon.

The sky was clouded and black and not a star gleamed anywhere. He had to keep his eye on the road and watch, for he had already passed one turn and was approaching another which was in reality a forked trail. But he did not stop to ponder about it, keeping straight ahead and on what he thought was the same road.

African trails are deceiving and the wildness of the game country makes it still more difficult for the traveler to gauge the distance to his destination. And so it was with Hal that night when he stopped to look about and wonder how close he was to Nunnally's, for he had already added twenty-five miles to Dudley's estimate.

No light shone out of the darkness anywhere that he could see and the headlights did not help except directly on the trail. What if Nunnally's should be off the road a bit? He hadn't thought to ask Dudley—he didn't dream that it would be so dark.

Suddenly the motor stopped dead, but he didn't think anything of it then. He simply shrugged his shoulders and got out his pipe for a hasty puff or two before he went on.

But when he went to start it in earnest he could not get so much as a kick out of it.

For the next five minutes he grumbled and mumbled but there wasn't a sign of life from the motor. The noises from the jungle were increasing by the moment. Ten o'clock it was by his wrist watch—just about the time that he and Piney had been facing the lioness the night before.

After another five minutes he gave up trying to get any response from the motor that way and determined to find out if he could what the trouble was. He was not a mechanic even by inclination and when he got out and raised the hood the motor told him nothing. It was just a maze of metal to him and that was all.

Disconsolate, puzzled, he sat down on the running board. Fifteen minutes, twenty minutes passed but he felt as hopeless and helpless as ever. "I'd give almost anything to know what to do to make a car go when it acts up like this one is," he said dismally. "Man alive, I can't sit here all night."

Suddenly he bethought himself of the gas and jumped up, inspired. One glance at the gauge, however, took all the sparkle from his eyes. The tank was empty.

It occurred to him then that Dudley had told him there was enough gas to take him to Nunnally's and back. Once more he stepped down to the ground and it was then he distinctly smelled gasoline. He whipped a flashlight out of a bulging car pocket and walked cautiously back along the road a few hundred yards, investigating. Then he stopped, satisfied, for as far back as he could see there ran a thin line of damp black earth where the gas had been dropping.

He surmised that it was a leak and upon thorough investigation of the gas line, he was assured of it. The flashlight revealed a tiny puncture in the line obviously made by some sharp instrument.

“A fine thing this is,” he declared disgustedly and climbed back into the car. “Who is it that didn’t want me to reach Nunnally’s, I wonder? Who, but . . . oh, well, who else but the doctor? He wouldn’t want me to be cabling anything about this to Unk—I know it. So does Dud know it, else why did he help me sneak off like this when his father was asleep? But then there’s Piney . . . would he have any reason for not wanting me to cable Unk about Briggs? My gosh, someone listened in on that conversation between Dud and me. Someone did this! *Who?*”

He buried his head in his hands and groaned with despair. No one could be in a worse situation, he told himself. No one. There was absolutely no alternative. He would have to sit in the car all night and take his chances with prowlers. And after an all night vigil he would not even be certain that he was but five miles from Nunnally’s. He might be lost and if not, five miles meant five long, dreary, dangerous miles in this part of Africa. A Colt forty-five seemed to him in that wilderness not much better than a water pistol.

“A machine gun would keep up my morale better,” he laughed.

It was that laugh that kept up his morale for it helped him get back into his old spirits. And that to Hal, was life. He could do anything, face anything when he wasn’t depressed. Certainly he was not depressed now. He was gaily calling to the fates to bring on whatever they had in store.

He wrapped himself in Dr. Holman's car robe after relighting his pipe and settled down in the seat, determined not to go to sleep.

CHAPTER XXI

A MIDNIGHT CHARGE

Nature had her way with Hal. He was asleep in less than fifteen minutes. His long legs were flung over the steering wheel and his head hung heavily over the car door on the other side and his soft breathing could not have been heard ten feet away.

The headlights gleamed brilliantly on the road but for some strange reason, their effulgence did not deter a big bull buffalo which came lumbering along steadily toward them. Had Hal been awake, the sight of this unwieldy looking beast would have caused him some uneasiness for the car seemed to lie directly in his path.

Not one inch did it swerve but came steadily nearer, its great horned head swaying from side to side. Hal slept peacefully on while one foot moved slightly over the steering gear. His dreams were obviously pleasant for a wide smile lighted his face and as he related it afterward, he was just dreaming that Dudley and he had plunged in for a swim somewhere when the buffalo came to a head-on collision with one of the headlights.

Hal was thrown bodily out of the car but, luckily, was unhurt. He picked himself up in an instant, wide awake and thoroughly alarmed. One glimpse of the rearing and snorting buffalo sent him leaping into the back seat of the car.

The beast was furious and after pawing the ground once or twice brought his deadly horns against the bumper. The

car moved slightly but held its own and Hal remembered with a sense of relief that he had left on the emergency brake.

The encounter with the bumper did not placate the beast at all for he backed away a few feet and then came running slightly sideways heading dangerously for the other headlight. It occurred to Hal even as he grasped the Colt and aimed, that the buffalo was blind.

The bullet found its mark but not before the beast had thrown himself headlong against the remaining headlight. As his ponderous body thumped to the ground, Hal found himself in darkness. Then he thought of the flashlight, scrambled frantically after it in the front of the car, but could not find it.

He thought afterward how vital a necessity that little light had seemed to him in that emergency. But with the usual elusiveness of all such necessities the flashlight was not to be found. He felt in every nook and corner of the car, spending the greater part of the next few hours in hunting for it, but he was destined never to set eyes on it again.

However, hope springs eternal and partly because he had nothing else to do and partly because he felt helpless in that black night, he continued to search. At times when annoyance got the better of hope he would sit back and stare up into the dark sky and wonder why he had ever got into such a fix.

It was the longest night he had ever spent, he told himself, and struck a match to see what time it was. Only two o'clock and yet it seemed as if the buffalo had been dead for days. Before the match burned out he looked into the box and counted the remaining ones. Six there were, to be exact—not enough to make a flame that would scare away the jackals.

He shivered a little and pulled the robe about himself. The minutes dragged by and although his eyelids were heavy he knew he was too excited to fall asleep again. The buffalo had put him on his guard.

“Blind buffaloes and one-eared lions,” he mused. “I’m seeing Africa with a vengeance.”

Chuckling at his thoughts he did not hear the slinking beast that slipped around the car. It was only when he got a flash of something in the darkness that he became aware of danger. He held his breath and listened until he heard the telltale sound of heavy breathing near by.

His throat felt a little dry but his hands were steady when he struck a match against the box. As the tiny flame came into being an ominous hissing sound filled the air and he got a flashing glimpse of a leopard sniffing around the body of the dead buffalo. Impulsively he leaned forward and flung the lighted match over the hood.

It missed the beast by more than inches and had gone out before it struck the ground, but it frightened the leopard away as effectually as a flashlight would have done. Still, Hal did not contemplate with satisfaction the remaining hours of darkness.

The buffalo dead was greater bait to prowlers than he would have dreamed and long before the eastern sky showed the first rosy light he had exhausted his remaining matches. When they were gone he made use of his deep, cavernous voice to frighten off the continual line of slinking forms that came from the jungle. He wondered how far his thundering tones would echo in that trackless wilderness and entertained a forlorn hope that by some miracle, Nunnally would hear.

The dawn came at last, spreading its welcome light over the eastern horizon. With it came a sight that was not so welcome—a herd of big bull elephants, so many that Hal could not count them. The trumpeting of them was enough to put fear into the bravest heart, and as they lumbered along, the car and its occupant seemed like a mere dot compared with their combined bulk.

Hal's heart almost failed him, but not quite. He made a hasty survey of his surroundings and saw that the nearest tree was about twenty feet distant. Well, he could sprint that if he had to. But only if he had to would he leave his present shelter. After all, a tree was no guarantee of safety against that thundering herd.

On they came until the leader, a tremendous burly fellow, trotted on in advance of the others, his trunk up and sniffing as he trotted. Suddenly he seemed to discover the car and with a resounding trumpeting stopped in his tracks. Every movement was significant from then on.

Hal got a queer, cold feeling in his knees as he watched the big fellow throwing his trunk up into the air. He hurried back to his herd a moment, then suddenly turned and headed straight for the car with his trumpeting fellows close at his heels.

Hal was out of the car in a moment and sprinting for the tree. How he ever got up it he did not know. He got there and that was all he cared about. The elephants, however, suddenly changed their minds and stopped just short of the car, trumpeting as if they were asking each other where the tall young man had disappeared to. After a few seconds of this sort of thing they turned their backs on the car almost disgustingly and trotted off toward the jungle.

Hal watched them melt into the green with a whoop of joy. His perch on the limb was anything but comfortable but before he left it he took a look around the surrounding plain. Behind him lay the road and he could see quite clearly the fork that had so puzzled him in the night. He was no longer puzzled for he saw at first glance that he had taken the wrong turn and was completely off the trail. To see better he climbed a little higher.

He judged it was a distance of about two miles back with either side of the trail lined with bushes. The sight was not encouraging but he realized that he could not stay where he was very much longer. Then as he looked he saw a thin film of smoke rising heavenward and as he traced the road in his mind's eye he became convinced that the smoke was coming from Nunnally's. It had to be Nunnally's!

“Me for the open road, then,” he shouted with gay abandon.

The dawn seemed to follow him, shedding its roseate light on his shining red hair. And two hours later as he swayed down the road to the quarantine station, Dr. Nunnally espied him, thinking that he had never before seen such a powerful and commanding figure on the African horizon.

CHAPTER XXII

AT NUNNALLY'S

“And you had to go through all that in order to send a cable, eh?” said Dr. Nunnally, when Hal finished narrating his experiences.

“Unk won’t guess what price cable, huh?” Hal returned whimsically. “Honestly, Doctor, I’ve heard of people’s hair standing on end, but I’ve never seen it, and yet I could have sworn that mine flew right off my head. Nothing frightened me as badly as that gang of bull elephants because I knew that they could make me look like a period in two minutes if they had a mind to. And I think that’s just what was on their minds, but I fooled them by beating it up that tree.”

“Hmph,” said the doctor. “Did the experience take away your appetite?”

“Not on your life!” Hal said vehemently. “If I had stayed in that car a half hour longer, I would have resorted to buffalo steaks.”

The doctor laughed heartily. “I was just going to have breakfast when you came in. You can wash up a little and join me in the living room. Then you can think about your cablegram.”

As they ate breakfast Hal chatted along, telling the Doctor about Briggs’ death. “Died of heart disease,” he said, wondering if his face bespoke his real thoughts. “Did you know poor Briggs?”

“I’ve known both Briggs and Dr. Holman for the past eighteen years. Ever since they came to Medille.” Dr.

Nunnally looked at Hal inquiringly from behind his spectacles. "I'd never heard before that Briggs had any organic trouble. He was thin and sickly looking but Dr. Holman gave me to understand only a little while ago that he was as wiry as they go. Indeed, he did most of the hard work in the lab. I've seen that with my own eyes."

"Poor chap," said Hal softly. "I think he'd have liked to go back to the States for a visit, do you know it? He talked to me kind of wistfully about it that night before he died."

"That's the way with all of us here. We want to go home, but we never do. Death usually overtakes us."

Hal looked up at the doctor and smiled sympathetically. His young heart was filled with a sad perplexity at hearing this same complaint from still another man. Briggs, Dr. Holman and now Nunnally. The same words were uttered by each in turn and only the tone was different.

"I suppose a fellow would get tired of it year after year," he said musingly. "Not meaning any offense, sir, but I notice it sort of makes people act queer. Briggs had it one way, Dr. Holman has it another and that Mr. Pine I was telling you about—well, he doesn't come from around these parts but it affects him just the same. He talks of it too."

"And how about me?" asked the doctor whimsically. "Do I show any signs of eccentricity?"

Hal shook his head, smilingly. "Nope. You just act lonely, sir."

"Exactly," said the doctor. "That's what's the matter with all of us. Loneliness. There's much to be said for our shortcomings and vagaries if only for that alone."

"Yes, sir. I can understand that since last night. I never spent such lonely, hair-raising hours, that's a fact. I had lots

of time to think and I sort of understood what makes Dr. Holman such a bullish sort of man. He has to shout or he'll swamp himself in silence—isn't that the idea, sir?"

"Gad, if that isn't a good way of explaining it! So you know the doctor that much already, eh?"

"I think I know him very well, considering the short acquaintance," Hal said seriously. "Dud's to be pitied, huh?"

"Indeed; but Briggs' death may not be such an ill wind after all. It might prove a boon to poor Dudley for Briggs once told me that he had made over his insurance policy to Dr. Holman. The poor chap had no relatives."

Hal gaped. "You mean that Dr. Holman will get that money now?"

"Certainly. If it's money that's kept the doctor from sending Dudley to the States, why, that worry's at an end."

Hal stared down at his empty plate. Could that have been the reason for Briggs' death? The thought itself horrified him, but it did seem as if the thing was looking uglier all the time. It had one salutary effect on his troubled mind at least—it put Mr. Pine out of the picture for the time being. One suspicion at a time was enough. Two gave him a headache.

"I believe that's Dudley Holman driving up in a lorry now!" Dr. Nunnally exclaimed, jumping from his seat and hurrying to the window. "Hmph, it *is* he. Well, Keen, it looks as if they've been worried about you."

Hal smiled. "Dudley has—there's no doubt of that."

CHAPTER XXIII

TALK

They had talked it over and over on their way home and now that they were almost there, Dudley pleaded with Hal for the last time. "It'll only antagonize Dad if you tell him you went to Nunnally's to send your uncle a cable," he said. "It looks and sounds perfectly all right for you to say you just took a notion to spin about in the car. Dad wouldn't think anything of that. He wouldn't question a second that you lost your way and had a leak in the gas line."

"He wouldn't, huh?" Hal said stubbornly. "Don't be too certain of that, Dud. Maybe your father knew perfectly well that I came on out to cable Unk."

"How would Dad . . ." Dudley began.

"Who punctured that gas line, Dud?" Hal interposed.

"You surely don't think Dad is that despicable! Gosh, what an impression he's made on you! Why, he's not spiteful or intent on doing anybody physical harm. His temper and tongue are his own worst enemies."

"All right," said Hal good-naturedly. "Far be it from me to make a man out guilty when he isn't! But Dud, you must admit that that gas line puncture was the most deliberate thing you ever saw. Why would anyone do that if it wasn't to keep me from reaching Nunnally's and letting Unk in on the secret?"

"I've admitted right along, Hal, that there's black clouds hanging over our house. I'm not trying to tell you you're

dreaming or anything like that. I just want you to give Dad a chance!”

Hal hardly heard his pleadings for he was too intent on trying to visualize a certain form in the driveway, a form that had melted away into the shadows just before he had driven off on the previous night.

“I heard footsteps plainly too,” he said recounting the episode. “It wasn’t any of the animals, I could swear to it, Dud. It just came to me—whoever it was, they had been monkeying with the gas line between the time you got the car out and were talking to me, and when I came into the driveway.”

Dudley shook his head dismally. “I’m ashamed of it, Hal. Terribly ashamed!”

They swooped up the hill seeming to be pleasure bent on touching the fleecy clouds, but just as quickly did they dive downward where Hal could see the peaceful farm nestling at the shimmering lakeside. In five minutes they were skirting the grove and he bethought himself of his first African experience.

“How’s Mr. Pine?” he asked on the impulse of the moment. “Did he say anything about me?”

“Plenty. Asked all sorts of questions about you when I started off this morning. I told him as I told Dad that I thought maybe you had just gone off joy-riding and got lost. I constituted myself a searching party and here you’re all set to make my story go up in smoke.”

“If I had only you and me to think of, Dud, I’d not disappoint you. But you can see for yourself—I could have been done for several times last night. Some special

Providence must be watching over me in this spooky country. But don't think me hard."

"That's just what I don't think. Anybody that's as bent on fair play as you are, isn't hard. Briggs would have been crazy about you if he'd known you like I know you, Hal."

"Thanks," Hal grinned, and put his hand on Dudley's shoulder with a resounding slap. "Has your father said anything more about it?"

"Briggs? No. I meant to tell you before, Hal. We buried the poor old codger this morning. Dad thought it best."

CHAPTER XXIV

DEFIANT

Hal lost no time in carrying out his decision. He told Dr. Holman just what was the real purpose of his night ride and told it unflinchingly. And if he expected to find himself being roundly denounced by the irate man, he was disappointed.

The doctor's black piercing eyes danced behind his thick spectacles but that was his only display of anger. He merely turned away with a cynical smile. "Can't seem to keep down the detective spirit, eh? Wasn't my word enough?"

"Murder is murder, Dr. Holman," was Hal's rejoinder. "Unk could give us unbiased advice and you know it!"

"And how about Nunnally?" the doctor asked with a growl. "I suppose he heard every word. . . ."

"Doctor Normally doesn't know anything but that Briggs is dead. I gave you a promise and I mean to keep it until I hear from Unk."

"Hmph. If I didn't think your snoopiness had gone too far and endangered me, I'd admire your spirit. No man's going to let a young fellow like you threaten his freedom without fighting back, and I warn you for the last time, young man, to keep your nose out of things until I say. Right now I'm too worried to argue with you."

Hal thought of the doctor's words time and again throughout the day and when he retired early that evening, he took the memory of them to bed. There he lay for a little while pondering about it and wondering what the man had

really meant. After some time a knock sounded on the door and Piney came in.

“Tired, Keen?” he asked looking about the room nervously.

“And how!” Hal answered raising his head a trifle on the pillow. “If you’re in here to get me out to defend you in that grove again tonight, you’re mistaken.”

Piney put a finger to his lips. “Say, what you trying to do—tell the world? Listen, boy, I ain’t in here for anything but to ask you a question.”

“Shoot, I’m all ears,” Hal said with a yawn.

“You know that lioness?”

“I ought to after the other night, but I’m not crazy to pick up the acquaintance where we left off.”

“Listen, I’m not kiddin’! You got a wise head for a guy your age so I’m askin’ you whether you think I could ever find that lady and give her a slug in the ribs?”

“I presume you’re talking about the lioness?”

“Oke. Listen here, I meant what I said the other night about that bag meanin’ everything in the world I ain’t slept a night since, on the level. It has—er, the rest of my money, what I drew out of the bank—see? Yeh, it means a lot even if I got a thousand pounds in my jeans right now. I gave up a lot to get it.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” Hal said soberly. “But where do I come in?”

“About the lioness,” Piney whispered. “I’d like to get that bag if it’s the last and only thing on this earth and what I want you to tell me—do you think that big cat could digest it?”

“The bag? How should I know? I’m not a veterinary. But speaking as a layman, I don’t see how she could no matter how big a cat she is.”

“That’s what I’ve been thinkin’,” said Piney hopefully. “Well, the dope is this. I’m going to trail that cat and get that bag if I have to carry her along. Then I’m going to dust out of this creepy joint. I don’t like this doctor nohow and if he keeps orderin’ me around so fresh like as he’s been doing this mornin’ I know something that’ll shut him up for good.”

“Be careful, Mr. Pine. Them’s harsh words.”

“Just the same, that’s how I feel about him. Why, I didn’t happen to get him a bottle quick enough to suit him this morning and he swung out his arm at me, but I ducked! Say, nobody ever tried that with me before and lived to tell it!”

Hal laughed softly. “I think you’re just plain hokum, that’s what I think. It’s the chap that threatens that’s the least harmful generally. For one thing, Piney, the doctor could make mud pies out of you if he ever did land on you. And if he did, you’d stand for it the same as poor Briggs always did, I guess.”

“Don’t fool yourself,” said Piney ominously. “Doc Holman can try it once and that’s all! I ain’t any fool like Briggs to stay around here and let that Jack-the-Giant-Killer put me to sleep?”

“What are you getting at, Piney?”

“Don’t Piney me so innocent-like, boy. Achmed and every nigger on this place knows Briggs didn’t die of heart trouble. He was . . .”

“*Shush!*” Hal warned him. “Somebody’s at that door.”

Piney was at the door in a second, but it was a second too late. The hall was empty but they could distinctly hear the

sound of retreating footsteps toward the front of the house.

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE DARKNESS

Hal lay thinking about the elusive eavesdropper and also about his talk with Mr. Pine. However, neither matter kept him awake for very long. The house was unusually quiet; everyone had retired early and it seemed quite likely that the eavesdropper must be sleeping too. A cool breeze was blowing south and west and every bedroom shared its blessings.

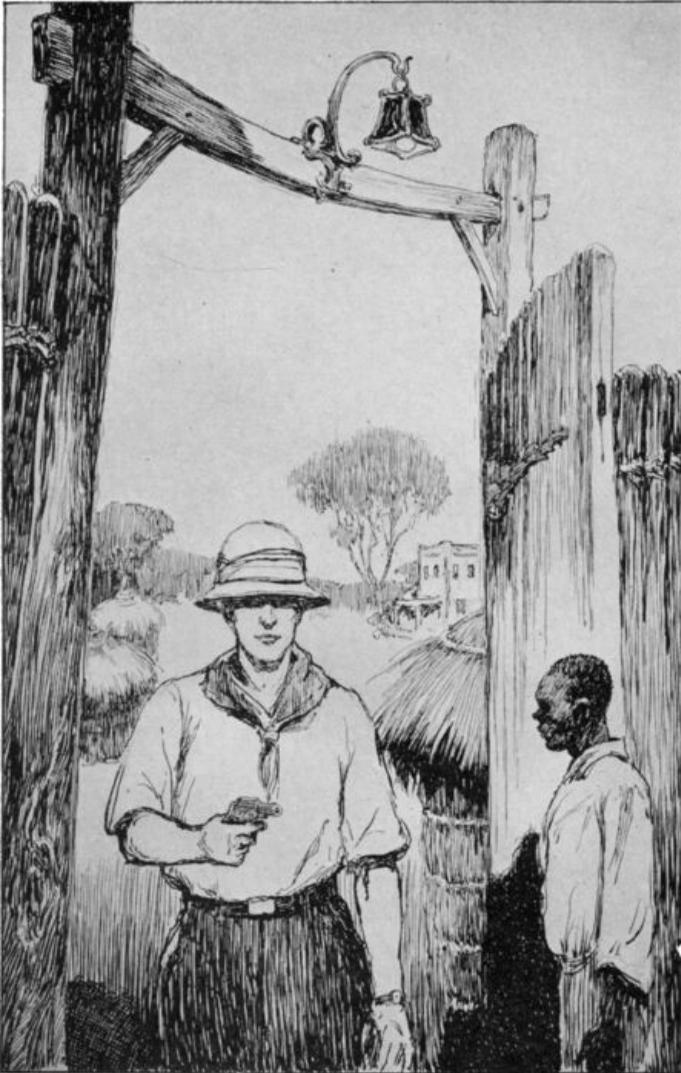
Midnight came with stealthy tread, or was it a human being that crept through the vast living room when the clock struck the morning hour? Hal could not know certainly, for he was deep in the realms of slumber. And if he heard the soft opening and closing of doors he probably imagined it as part of his dreams.

But when his door opened ever so slowly he became gradually conscious of it. By the time the door had fully opened and admitted a dark, powerful figure, he was wide awake. Yet he could not seem to move a limb for there was a fascination in the way the figure slid across the floor to his bedside.

He lay quite still, waiting with tense muscles and pounding heart. It was impossible for him to see clearly beyond the bedclothes that covered him, so dark was it in the room. The intruder too appeared not to be certain of himself for he seemed to hesitate after he reached the bedside.

Hal waited, plainly hearing the man's every breath. Then suddenly the figure bent over him, ever so slowly.

“What do you want?” Hal shouted, and jumped to his knees. He reached out his arms but there was nothing but empty space.



HAL, COLT IN HAND, STEPPED OUTSIDE THE STOCKADE.

Still shouting he got to the floor and ran to the door. It was open and he could hear those sliding footsteps running somewhere about the house. Dudley came running out of his room, and switched on the hall light.

“Whatever’s the matter?” he asked.

Hal shook back a troublesome lock of hair. “Where’s your father?”

“In bed I suppose—why?” Dudley’s voice quavered.

“Go see!” Hal said breathlessly.

Dudley shook his head and went to his father’s door and knocked. Again he knocked but no answer came. Hal stalked over and with an impulsive gesture swung open the door.

Dr. Holman was not in the room, but the bed was rumpled as if he had been lying in it. Just as Hal was about to make some comment, the door of the laboratory opened and the doctor sauntered into the hall. He was in pajamas and a dressing gown and his bushy hair was disheveled.

“What’s this?” he bellowed.

“Someone was in my room,” Hal interposed brusquely. “Sneaked in as nice as you please. When I jumped up for him at my bed he beat it *and how!* Where were you, sir?”

Dr. Holman grinned sardonically. “Think I came in for you? Well, I fooled you that time. I was in the lab making myself a dose to put me to sleep. Anything else you’d like to know?”

“Yes, sir,” Hal answered tersely. “Can you tell me why anybody should want to enter my room so stealthily?”

“Perhaps because they know you have the detective’s ear,” answered the doctor with a loud guffaw. He walked past Hal and his son and slammed the door in their faces.

“Goodnight!” he bellowed behind the closed panel.

Dudley took Hal's arm fraternally and walked with him into his room. "I'm sorry you came out here, you have to stand for so much annoyance," he said. "But what's to be done? If we could only get some definite clue to this sneaking. . . ."

"We will, Dud. Don't you worry about that. Whatever he's after he hasn't got what he's looking for. Something tells me we're going to hear further from him."

"You think it's Dad—I know you do. His being in the lab was incriminating in your eyes, wasn't it?"

"What's the difference if it was? It still doesn't prove much. Only makes me wonder more. Well, you better get to bed. I've an idea that I won't be bothered again tonight. One trip's enough for our lone wolf, huh, Dud?"

Dudley smiled rather ruefully. "I'd hate to have you suspect *me*. Boy, you never let up once you get going!"

"And why would I? The plot keeps thickening all the time and we don't get anywhere. Here Briggs is dead and still this pussy-footing keeps up. It looks as if one more of us was slated for the old camping grounds. Yes, you needn't shiver, that's just how things look to me. What's going to be the end of it?"

Dudley would have been horrified if he had known the answer to that question.

CHAPTER XXVI

WAITING

It was a queer household the following day. At mealtime there were painful silences when Hal eyed the doctor suspiciously and kept to his own thoughts. Mr. Pine's presence did not add anything in the way of harmony for he had managed to annoy his employer before breakfast was served and angry words had left a sullen resentment in the younger man's eyes.

He confided again in Hal, later that afternoon, declaring the farm couldn't hold him another day. "I was talking to that nigger, Dtorobo," he whispered gaily. "He's the one that tends the gate."

"What are you thinking of doing—taking his job?" Hal asked quizzically.

"Don't kid me, fellow. I ain't takin' another job anywheres near this joint, get me? This Dtorobo told me that one-eared lioness hangs out mostly in a donga fifteen miles from here."

"What did you tell Dtorobo, that you'd lost your life savings to the one-eared vampire?"

"Like fun I did—what you think I am? I told him I heard about a one-eared lioness, that's all. Things like that get to be common talk in Africa. There's freaks in animals just the same as in human beings. Anyway, Dtorobo knows just what trail she takes and everything. It's by some falls that's called Puhli Rapids and he says it's full of game around there."

"So you're going, huh?"

Mr. Pine deferred his answer for Dr. Holman put in an appearance at that juncture and broke up the conversation. Hal strolled out of the laboratory in silence, preferring that to another futile conversation with the doctor.

Toward evening the tension seemed to grow worse and after supper Hal wandered off, Colt in hand, outside the stockade. Inside of it the atmosphere stifled him and he felt much safer looking off at the violet cliffs rising beyond the lake and listening to myriads of chattering baboons. Suddenly a wart hog with its absurd snout and comical little tail came strutting up a lane to the right which made him forget his troubles in laughing at the creature.

He watched the tropical sun sinking and he felt a pang of regret that the strange order of things had upset the plans for safari. The doctor had made no further mention of it and seemed, like the rest, to be waiting.

Hal felt restive at the very thought of the word. There was no sense to it at all. What were they waiting for? The doctor admitted the unnatural manner of Briggs' death, yet refused to send for the police. And still they waited. They seemed pathetically helpless.

He waited until the dusk closed over the nearby jungle before he went inside the stockade. Dtorobo nodded as he passed in and Hal sensed that the native gave him a second glance. Was he too filled with suspicion? Were the rest of the natives suspicious also?

Dudley, he was glad to note, had gone indoors. That was one less argument they would have. It had been impossible for them to talk together at any time that day without recurring to the subject uppermost in mind while Hal accused and Dudley defended and they got nowhere at all.

He sat down on one of the veranda chairs and watched the shadows creep about the yard. After a time Achmed came through the living room and out of doors, stopping just long enough to nod goodnight before he became part of the shadows. His work for the day was done.

Hal sighed and got up. "What did I come to Africa for, anyway?" he asked himself softly. "To sit around like this and wait? Oh well. . . ."

He went into the living room and passed the doctor who was reading. No word was exchanged—not even a look. Hal smiled broadly when he had gone into the hall. This silent contempt was a peculiar way for a guest to be treating one's host. Still the doctor had only himself to blame.

He could see a slit of a light under the sill of Dudley's door and immediately he was seized with contrition for having neglected the lonely young man all the evening. He called.

"Gone to bed, Dud?"

Dudley opened the door smiling. "Gosh, where did you go dreaming to?"

Hal smiled and went in. "I've acted like a girl, huh? Well, listen, Dud. We won't argue any more. That's signed, sealed and settled. I guess it's because I've been too inactive, huh? I'll feel better if we ever get on safari."

"We will," Dudley assured him. "This can't go on. Besides, Dad's got to go!"

"That's the best argument in your father's favor that you've used yet," Hal laughed.

They made small talk for a few moments more and said goodnight. Dudley got into bed and Hal opened the door and

caught Mr. Pine in the questionable pose of standing so close to the panel that he almost knocked him over.

“Listeners hear no good of themselves,” said Hal sternly.

Piney was obviously disconcerted. “G’wan, you didn’t even mention my name.”

“So you were listening, huh?”

Piney coughed. “I wanted to find out if you were in your own room or here, that’s what. I heard voices, and say, listen, Keen, I wanted to tell you I’m. . . .”

The door from the living room opened revealing the doctor’s ponderous figure. In an instant, Piney had melted away into the laboratory.

CHAPTER XXVII

A FORTUNATE DISCOVERY

Hal knew that it was sheer instinct that had wakened him. He got out of bed, switched on the light and glanced at his watch. Two o'clock. The house was silent as a tomb, yet he listened. Something was wrong—he felt it in every fibre.

Hastily he slipped on his dressing gown and opened his door cautiously. The hall was dark and still. Loud snores issued from the doctor's room, but that was all. Yet something urged him, something he could not resist.

He stole up to Dudley's door and listened. Not a sound. He pressed against it and found that it was not shut tight for the pressure swung it open easily. A sweet, nauseating odor assailed his nostrils and sent him plunging apprehensively into the room.

He rushed to Dudley's bed and could see in the darkness that a piece of cloth covered the young man's face. With a flip of his hand he pulled it away, then sprang to the light switch and illuminated the room.

He had to hold his nostrils to keep from reeling as he bent over Dudley's still form. He felt the boy's heart and found it beating faintly and, with a quick but tender grasp, examined his pulse. That too, was faint. There was no time to lose or Dudley would go as Briggs had gone!

He shouted frantically as he ran to the doctor's room. Then he remembered what Dudley had said about his father's sleeping so soundly. Well, he would have to resort to drastic methods. He pulled and shook the man to no avail and finally

in despair dipped a glassful of water out of his washbasin and threw it into the sleeper's face.

That roused the doctor instantly. "Wh—what's . . ." he began.

Hal pointed to Dudley's room. "It's life or death, sir. It's . . ."

The doctor needed no further information. He was on his feet and out of the room in a flash. Hal was at his heels and as he entered his son's room, he uttered a strange little cry that sounded as if it came from his heart.

He gave Dudley a quick glance and sent Hal scurrying out to the laboratory, for some remedies.

"Any better?" Hal asked as he returned.

Dr. Holman nodded. "I've been rubbing him and giving him air." His voice sounded broken. "Keen, how did you ever find him this way?"

"Instinct—hunch, I'd call it. Man alive, I'm glad I made myself come in and look. The handkerchief was spread over his face."

"Just like Briggs," the doctor murmured. "Give me a hand with his head and we'll turn him about. There. His pulse is better." He went briskly to the water pitcher and mixed up some stuff from two of the bottles.

Hal helped him force the mixture down Dudley's throat. After that the boy revived quickly and his eyelids flickered normally. The doctor pressed his hand affectionately. "Feel better, son?" he asked, then grumbled as if he were instantly ashamed of this display of tenderness.

Dudley nodded but seemed too weak yet to speak.

Hal paced the room, feeling thoroughly disgusted with himself. "I owe you an apology, sir," he said meekly. "I—I'll

hunt the house and see if I can find the skunk that's done this!"

"Useless, Hal," the doctor grunted. "He's not going to be caught as easy as that. You might as well save yourself the trouble. We'll say nothing about this—understand? I'm going to do some watching tomorrow night and I'll catch this vile wretch, whoever he is!"

"I'll be glad to help you, sir. I'm sorry, so sorry . . ."

"Forget it. I'd forget your suspicion of me a thousand times simply because of what you saved Dudley from. Certain death, Hal. That's what he was headed for if that handkerchief hadn't come off."

"It was sopped. I knew the minute I smelled it."

Dudley opened his eyes. "I—has he gone?"

"Who?" asked the doctor.

"Whoever it was," Dudley sighed. "I heard somebody sliding toward the bed. When I opened my eyes I heard the words 'where are they?' Then I started to yell."

"And he shut you off with the handkerchief, huh?"

Dudley looked at Hal and smiled. "Exactly. Only I didn't know what it was . . . made me too sick and drowsy . . . mm . . . I thought of Briggs at the smell."

"Chloroform, son, that's what it was," said the doctor. "But don't worry, you'll never get it again. I'll sit up and watch tonight."

"We can take turns, huh?" Hal asked eagerly. "Toss up and see."

The doctor looked really human when he smiled. "All right," he said gruffly. "The main thing is to find the bottle of chloroform that was stolen from the lab. Then you'll find the murderer."

“Well, we won’t have long to wait, I’m thinking,” Hal said. “I agree with you, sir, about watching up. It’s the only way to do. I was a fool not to cooperate with you that very first night.”

“Better late than never,” grumbled the doctor. “But it’s a lesson never to believe in circumstantial evidence.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

A HUMAN BEING

They talked of nothing else all day. Dudley had entirely recovered by breakfast time and went about as usual which seemed to please the doctor greatly. He was insistent that nothing should be revealed relating to the night's near-tragedy and wore a more expectant air with each passing hour.

Mr. Pine had little to say at lunch and less at supper time because, as he confided to Hal, the doctor had been a little bit too bossy with him and a one-sided discussion had ended in a threat on Piney's part.

"He'll never get the chance to order me around again like a dog," said the man ominously. "That's settled."

"I warned you before you came here," Hal reminded him. "So did Dud. You were told everything there was to be told about Dr. Holman."

"Yeh, and why did I come here? Not because I was crazy to, believe me. *I had to!* But I can dust out of here now and I will."

"That's your business," Hal said, a little weary of the endless discussion.

"What do you think of this man Pine?" the doctor asked late that afternoon.

Hal felt honored. "You mean do I think he's not on the up and up?"

"Just so. Do you?" Dr. Holman's wide forehead was contracted in a frown.

“I’ve always felt he was a shady one,” Hal answered truthfully. “But as to how much he’s contributed toward the terror in this house—I can’t bring myself to feel. I just can’t picture him doing any chloroform stunts and that’s a fact!”

“I can,” Dr. Holman said tersely. “Besides, chloroform is the easiest kind of a weapon for an ignorant man to use.”

“But why would he want to do it?” Hal persisted.

“To rob,” the doctor replied promptly. “When he can’t find what he’s after he smothers his victim so they can’t talk again and tell on him.”

“I couldn’t make out whose voice it was that I heard,” Dudley spoke up. “I couldn’t see anyone, in fact.”

Hal bit his lip. “I’ll tell you a little story about Piney,” he said softly. “After you hear it you may change your opinion about him stealing anything in this house.”

The doctor heard of Piney’s adventures with the lioness and of Hal’s connection with it. But he was adamant in his conviction. “He’s just plain thief, that’s what I think,” he growled. “The money in that bag (which it probably was) and the money in his wallet was never earned. The man isn’t fond enough of work. Great Scott, when I think of the way poor Briggs has worked for me year in and year out!” Then: “If Piney’s stolen once or twice he’ll do it the rest of his life. He has evidently taken advantage of this lonely place.”

Hal hated to think that. As much as he distrusted Piney, he could not visualize him as a common sneak-thief. The man was a little above that sort of thing, he was certain.

Achmed came in a little later and began to set the table for supper. Once or twice he bowed to the doctor and murmured something unintelligible regarding the evening meal, but that seemed as far as his conversational powers extended.

“A perfect servant,” grunted the doctor when Achmed had gone to the kitchen. “I’d never lose my temper with a servant like that.”

Dudley smiled, but said nothing and presently they all became aware of Mr. Pine’s familiar footsteps coming along the hall from the laboratory. Before he came into the room the doctor looked at Hal and smiled.

“We’ll toss up about that after supper,” he said significantly.

Hal nodded, but was conscious of a guilty feeling when Piney strolled in and greeted him fraternally. He felt that he must show in his face the conspiracy so lately planned against the man. But no, Mr. Pine was smiling gaily and if he was aware of the tension in the living room he gave no sign of it.

Several times at the table, he caught Hal’s eye and winked. But supper dragged on the whole, for they were all more or less tense and it affected their appetites. Achmed deplored this condition of things with a vehement shrug of his broad, powerful shoulders and as he carried the last of the dishes into the kitchen they could hear him muttering to himself in Arabic.

Despite the intended vigil, there was a spirit of comradery among them which Piney coldly declined to share. He hied himself to his room and the boys sat down to a game of checkers while the doctor glanced idly over a magazine.

Dudley was sprightly and gay, an entirely new Dudley. His voice quavered no longer and he spoke with a note of joy and confidence. The doctor too bellowed not so loudly and when he addressed his son it was with no embarrassing

epithets. The sinister hand holding the house in its grip had brought good as well as evil.

Achmed bowed himself out, having earned his right to a night's repose, and still they played on. The doctor more often than not forgot to be brusque and Dudley's spirits rose by the minute. He even dared to mention safari, telling his father that Hal was looking forward to it.

"So am I," said the doctor. "And we're going too, as soon as we dispense with this business we have on hand."

"Here's hoping that we'll do that tonight," Hal said gaily, as he made his play.

The doctor frowned but there was a smile behind it. "And after safari and Denis Keen comes, I may take a notion to go back to the States with you, who knows?"

"Does that mean I could go back to college with Hal?" Dudley asked eagerly.

"Something like that, son. I think I'd like to hear the noise of Broadway and see the crowds. . . ."

"Well, if you haven't seen them for twenty years, you may as well prepare to see something different. My mother says Broadway isn't the Broadway of twenty years ago. The crowds are throngs, armies—and the noise is deafening."

"I don't care," said the doctor. "I'd like it just the same. But you're at the end of your game. You win, eh, Hal?"

"Righto," said Hal, and joined Dudley in a smile.

Dr. Holman solemnly drew from his pocket a coin. "Here," he said. "First shift will be heads you win, tails I lose."

Hal nodded and watched him toss the coin. It came down on the back of his hand without a sound and after looking at it, he smiled.

“Tails I lose, Hal. Last shift for me.”

CHAPTER XXIX

VIGIL

At the doctor's request, Hal sat huddled on a stool in the corner window of the laboratory. At about eleven o'clock, the light in Pine's room went out and the place was steeped in darkness after that. A murky black sky augured cloudy weather for the coming day and made it impossible for him to distinguish objects clearly, either outdoors or in.

The minutes ticked away slowly on his wrist watch and after a time he thought it must be midnight. With the thought the laboratory seemed a place filled with ghostly shadows and alien noises, but after his own emotions were quieted he neither heard nor saw anything extraordinary. Piney was not snoring but he judged that the man must certainly be asleep.

He thought of that old truism about locking the barn door after the horse was stolen and he wondered if that would apply to this particular case. Perhaps the culprit had had his fill of administering the deadly chloroform and had turned his attention to other pursuits. If so, they would never know who had killed Briggs.

As he contemplated that horrible possibility, the door slowly opened from the hall. Hal pulled himself up against the window, waiting, and then he heard the doctor's gruff whisper.

"Let me take a hand at it now," he said. "I can't sleep anyhow. Kind of upset. Guess it's the anticipation."

Hal got up and offered his stool. "Well, I think you'll be disappointed, sir. Everything seems so peaceful and quiet. If

it wasn't for the rumpus from the jungle, I'd swear I was right home listening to the crickets on a hot night. The world's the same all over except that it's noisier in some places."

"You think our friend's going to disappoint us, eh?" asked the doctor as he climbed onto the stool.

"Sh, if you don't want Piney to hear you!" Hal cautioned.

"The rascal!" hissed Dr. Holman. "I'd wager anything that he isn't asleep. Well, go on now. Get to bed."

"It must be one o'clock," Hal said, hesitating on the threshold. "Think there's any likelihood of him coming?"

"There better be!" Dr. Holman answered decisively. "Goodnight!"

"Good morning!" Hal chuckled and tiptoed out into the hall.

He got to his room and realized that he was utterly weary and glad of the chance to climb into the bed. He felt no apprehension about the doctor, but rather sensed something futile in watching at all. If he were not so sleepy, he told himself, he would go back to tell the doctor so and urge him to give it up.

"Nothing 'll happen," he said half aloud. "If Piney *is* the guilty one and staying awake to wait his chance, he certainly must have heard that stage whispering of the doctor's."

He lay awake for a time trying to listen. But there were too many sounds coming from the manyettas and the jungle to distinguish between them and any noises that might occur in the other part of the house and he soon found himself getting drowsy.

The hours passed and gradually the night wore away. The dawn came up murkily just as the night had been and

ominous rumblings could be heard in the east. The bantam roosters crowed lustily almost under Hal's window and woke him up.

He lay bewildered for a while and then got up, feeling about in the shadows of his bed for his gown. The floor was cool and he shivered slightly as he put his feet into his slippers. Then he hurried out of his room to see how the doctor had fared.

Dudley heard him and whistled low.

"Where are you going?" he asked sleepily. "I thought I heard you."

Hal poked his head in at the door. "I'm going to see how your father made out."

"Naturally he didn't get the wretch or you'd have heard," Dudley flung at him.

Hal laughed. "Either that or the wretch got him," he said. "In either case we should have heard."

Dudley nodded and Hal went on to the laboratory.

CHAPTER XXX

THE DOCTOR LOSES

He came stumbling back into Dudley's room within two seconds. His face was ashen and his voice trembled as he spoke. "*Dud!*" he said as gently as he could. Then, a bit louder, "*Dud!*"

Dudley sprang out of bed, fearfully. "Hal, I can tell by your face . . . something's wrong . . . something. It isn't—it can't be—*Dad?*"

Hal nodded grimly. "Just the same way, Dud. The place is reeking! My gosh—I never guessed such a thing would happen to *him!* I'd never have left him to that last shift—I feel it's all my fault. Everything's been my fault."

Dudley mumbled mechanically. "Tails he lost, he said—remember? Hal, I can't believe it. I—just when he was kinder to me and going back to the States with us and. . . ."

"*Don't!*" Hal pleaded. "It's simply awful, Dud. I never thought of that happening to *him.* Oh, why didn't I stay awake!"

"Where was his gun?"

"At his feet almost. He was lying right near the lab door—the outside one. Things are all upset as if they had a terrible scuffle."

"Where's Piney?"

"Don't know. Not in his room anyhow. I'll get my clothes on and find out. Brace up, Dud, old top, do you hear?"

Dudley allowed one tear to escape, then roughly brushed it aside. He looked at Hal with his old, sad smile. "Life's a

funny thing. Don't let anybody tell you that it isn't!"

That was all he ever said in reference to his grief. The next moment as he faced Hal he looked grim and determined and calmly announced that he'd find the man who had taken from him the only parents he'd had, Briggs and his father.

Hal left him and went to dress. When he had finished, he hurried out to the living room and met Achmed just coming in to make breakfast.

"There's one less for breakfast this morning, Achmed," he explained tragically. "Dr. Holman's dead—murdered!"

Achmed looked perplexed, but Hal was too shocked to explain further. He left the servant shrugging his shoulders and muttering the word, breakfast.

Dtorobo came up to Hal as the latter hurried out to find him. "Bwana not hear?" he asked enigmatically.

"Hear what?" Hal returned.

"Black men gone—black men no stay with evil spirits. Evil spirits come farm to kill bwana doctor."

Hal was scratching his head and trying to fathom the meaning of the native's words when Dudley came out and joined them. Dtorobo explained to him in Swahili.

Dudley grew pale. "Dtorobo says that the natives have all left because they're afraid of the evil spirits that came to kill my father."

"Nonsense," said Hal. "How do they know so soon that your father was killed? Ask him that?"

Dudley repeated the questions. Dtorobo kept up a veritable stream of chatter for a while, then bowed himself away. He went straight to the gate, opened it and closed it after him, looking through the palings from the outside.

"He gone too?" Hal asked puzzled.

“Yes,” Dudley said mournfully. “They’re all gone except Achmed and you and me.”

“And Piney?”

“Dtorobo said he left in one of our lorries for Puhli. Went long before daylight.”

“After the one-eared lioness.”

“You told us last night that he threatened Dad,” Dudley reminded him.

“I know,” said Hal. “I’ll admit I’ve been wrong about him and I never would have believed it. But that’s neither here nor there—the thing is to get him and get in touch with the police.”

“One of us will have to go to Nunnally’s, Hal. I want to go to Puhli myself and have the satisfaction of getting Piney.”

“Don’t blame you. But I don’t like the idea of you going alone—why can’t we send Achmed to Nunnally’s with a written message?”

“We can and we will! Piney’s got a good start on us but I happen to know the country better than he. That’s an advantage. We’ll take our guns and hustle the other lorry up there after him.”

They went into the house, swallowed a cup of coffee each and after writing a note for Dr. Nunnally, despatched it by Achmed. The stupid Arab surprised Hal, however, by at least being able to drive an old second-hand Ford which Dudley explained was Achmed’s own property.

“Wouldn’t think he’d know enough to steer a wheelbarrow straight,” Hal remarked as he drove out through the stockade gateway.

“I guess Achmed knows a great deal more than we think for,” Dudley said and went into the garage to get the lorry.

Hal gazed at the cloud of dust that rose in a reddish film about the palings but his thoughts were busy with Piney.

CHAPTER XXXI

PUHLI

Puhli was a paradise indeed and if the one-eared lioness made it her home it was not to be wondered at. Great rocks surrounded it, rocks that varied in hue from rose-red to a deep blue and on one side the falls flung themselves over the smooth, shining rocks with great velocity until the water seemed spun into foamy, white lace.

The valley which was really Puhli did not exceed more than a quarter of a mile in length and now, in the dry season, its greens were a bit dusty and its once gorgeous hued flowers were faded and brown. A donga cut through this peaceful stretch and from its bottom the tropical vines climbed up over the rocks.

From the waterhole which was bulwarked by four cliffs the water spread out until it became a swift stream that leaped down the donga, catching the falls into its basin and then disappearing round a bend. Butterflies flitted about by the score and goldfinches sang sweetly and it seemed almost impossible that wild beasts of all kinds should roar and snort against such a background. But such was Puhli.

Hal looked upon it with wonder as Dudley brought the lorry to a stop. Piney's borrowed car stood at the farther side of the road and as they got out they could see him lying immovable on one of the smaller cliffs. Apparently he did not see them for he made no sign whatever.

"Well, Dud," Hal said, "it doesn't look as if he's trying to give us the slip, does it, huh?"

“No, it doesn’t,” Dudley answered, disappointed. “He’s either made of brass or . . .”

“Innocent, huh?” Hal said.

Dudley said nothing but led the way across the valley and up toward the cliff.

Piney saw them then and waved, not moving, however. Hal looked behind several times as they walked across, expecting every moment to see a beast of some kind come leaping out of the high grass.

Dudley clambered up the cliff first and Hal followed. Piney hung over the edge and watched them intently and it was difficult to understand his expression. He seemed neither glad nor disappointed to see them.

“Well, I came like I told you,” he called to Hal. “I’m sorry, Dudley, that I had to come away like I did. I didn’t have the heart to tell you about your father—*honest!* I’m a funny guy that way. It scared me out of seven years’ growth and that’s no story. Say listen—I wouldn’t go back to that place if you paid me, but if it’s your lorry you came after—take it! I’d rather be eaten up by that mangy old lion than go back and see again what I saw this morning.”

Dudley was too surprised to speak. He sat down on the edge of the cliff and simply stared at the man.

“You mean to tell me you saw Dr. Holman?” Hal asked, amazed.

“Sure I did, and I’m not glad, believe me,” Piney declared.

Hal looked him squarely in the eye. “Tell me, Piney,” he said, “don’t you realize that it’s rather strange to discover a man murdered and not notify the people in the house immediately?”

“I just told you two why I didn’t tell you. I was scared stiff and that’s no joke. I like to get away from those things, not stay around where I have to talk about them.”

Dudley passed his hand across his forehead. “Piney, I really don’t believe you did it!” he said as if it amazed him.

The fellow suddenly looked astonished. “*Me!* Kill that cranky old guy? Say, what do you think I am!”

Hal felt relieved. “But you threatened him!” he protested weakly.

“Sure, and I threatened lots of other guys, but that’s all I’ve done. I’m no angel and I ain’t even supposed to be breathing free air, but that’s one thing I draw the line at.”

Dudley spread his hands deprecatingly. “Please, Piney, stop talking that way and tell me the one thing I want to know—who killed my father? Who killed Briggs?”

“I’m no Sherlock Holmes,” answered the man indignantly. “I saw it and that was enough, but I didn’t hear anything.”

“Then you must sleep like the dead,” said Hal, annoyed. “The whole place was upset as if there’d been a scuffle.”

Piney either did not know or would not tell. “I’m waitin’ here till I see that vampire that stole my stuff,” he insisted.

Hal sat down a moment, deep in thought. Then: “Listen, Dud,” he said, “what do you know of Achmed?”

Dudley shrugged his shoulders. “That’s a question. I know as much about him as you do. He only came by chance a few hours before we did the day you arrived. You see, Dad had had an argument with our other cook who also happened to be a mongrel. Achmed happened along in that Ford and asked Dad if there was any work he could do about the place. Naturally he was hired right away. I didn’t know about it myself until Dad mentioned Achmed in front of all of us. I

was annoyed and ashamed that he couldn't keep his servants and I didn't say anything about it. Why?"

"Why!" Hal repeated, getting to his feet. "Why in heaven's name didn't you tell me that before? I'd have known it was Achmed since that night he came in my room. Oh, my goodness—it all comes to me now! Dud, that Arab killed your father and Briggs!"

"Where are you going?" Dudley cried getting to his feet.

"Back to the farm," Hal answered as he scrambled head down along the cliff. "I'm going to get Achmed or die in the attempt."

"But we sent him to Nunnally's!" Dudley protested, yet following Hal withal.

"That doesn't mean a thing, Dud. Achmed's killed two men and almost killed you, but he hasn't yet got what he came to the farm for."

"What makes you think so?"

"I'll tell you on the way back."

Piney too became aroused and scrambled down, hurrying after the two young men as they ran across the field. "Hey, wait a minute," he cried. "I'm coming too!"

CHAPTER XXXII

RECOLLECTIONS

“Think back,” said Hal. “Remember Kassem?”

“How could I forget?” Dudley returned.

“Kassem was traveling with that Duncan fellow, if you recollect. Duncan never lived to open his eyes at Nairobi. That’s easy, huh?”

“Yes, go on.”

“All right, then. Kassem escaped and hired a man who owned a second-hand Ford. We have pretty certain proof that that rattle-trap went right on after Kassem was shot and it was headed for Medille.”

“So it was! *Achmed?*”

“Who else? Kassem had evidently told Achmed when he hired the car that he was following a man who had some treasure or other. There’s no doubt but what he had to promise Achmed part of it if they overtook your car.”

“I’m beginning to see now,” Dudley said. “They were after Piney, after his little leather bag maybe, huh?”

“You go to the head of the class for that, Dud. That’s exactly what Kassem wanted and what Achmed wanted afterwards. Piney didn’t attempt to hide his wallet in the tree that night—only that little brown bag so it’s proof positive that the bag contained something far more valuable than a thousand pounds.”

“My gosh!” Dudley gasped. “But why would Achmed want to kill poor Briggs? Or Dad? Or try to kill me?”

“Simple. Achmed didn’t know Piney from Adam. But he knew that one of us who came in the car after he did that night, had the bag. Remember Piney swapped beds with poor Briggs? Well, Achmed didn’t know that until he disturbed the poor old man, so he probably killed him to keep him from talking. Then there was me that night; but I heard him first. And then you. . . .”

“He asked me where something was!” Dudley interposed, excited. “That was the bag he meant, huh?”

“Sure. I could kick myself that I didn’t know about that mongrel coming the night we did. But about your father, Dud—Achmed did that to defend himself for he must have been terribly surprised. He did his sneaking in and out of that outer laboratory door, I guess.”

“Oh, it’s plain as day,” Dudley said brokenly. “Everything I cared about is gone, simply because I was too proud to let you know how much Dad argued with the servants. If I’d told you about Achmed all this might have been avoided.”

“Why say that? You did what you thought was right. It can’t be helped now. Just be thankful that your father was kind the last night he lived.”

“You’re right about that as you are about everything,” Dudley murmured. “It’s the one thing that’ll make me glad the rest of my life and help me to forget this terrible time. Dad was really decent to me last night!”

And for the rest of the journey home, Hal left him to his own thoughts.

CHAPTER XXXIII ON ACHMED'S TRAIL

Piney passed them on the road when they were three-quarters of the way home. He waved his hand and they waved back, little guessing that they would never again see or hear of the man. What became of him they never knew; the last trace they had of him was the Holman lorry which he drove straight through to Nairobi and abandoned in one of the quiet streets.

Dudley got the lorry back to the farm in record time. As they turned into the driveway they saw Achmed's Ford in the back yard. Another car which Dudley identified as Dr. Nunnally's stood parked beside it.

"Now that's queer!" he said. "Achmed couldn't have been to Nunnally's and back by this time. Yet the doctor seems to be here!"

Doctor Nunnally came out to explain his presence almost the moment the young men stepped down from the lorry. He stood on the veranda, his kindly face full of sympathy. Achmed was nowhere in sight.

"I'm so sorry, boys," he said. "I hadn't any idea of this. Just by accident I came, because I wanted something to do. I towed back the car you left down the line the other night."

"The car that Achmed was monkeying with," Hal said to Dudley. "That's another mark against him."

Dudley nodded. "Have you seen Achmed? The cook?"

"Why yes," the doctor answered. "He's in the kitchen now, I believe. He told me about this Piney! The man must

be crazy!”

“Piney, did he tell you about?” Dudley asked.

“Yes, about him killing Briggs and your father.”

“He’s a liar, Doctor,” Hal spoke up.

“We’ve got not a moment to lose. Achmed is the murderer, not Piney!”

The doctor followed them into the house and through to the kitchen. But as Hal was fearful, Achmed was not there. They rushed into the laboratory and looked in all the bedrooms and were about to step into the back yard when they heard the familiar purr of a motor.

All looked up at once and Hal shouted. “Achmed!” he cried. “He’s taken the lorry!”

“He couldn’t get his own car past it,” said the doctor. “Look, boys, he’s turned toward Puhli. Let’s chase him in my car!”

It was no sooner said than done and they were coasting out of the gate in a moment. Dtorobo was standing just outside and put up a detaining hand. The doctor pulled his car up with a jerk.

“What is it, Dtorobo?” Dudley asked breathlessly.

“Achmed, he go Puhli for one ear simba. I tell him what Bwana Piney say about simba swallow bag. Achmed, he say he know what bag was and he go to kill simba so he get it. I tell Bwana Dudley because Achmed bad fella.”

Dudley thanked Dtorobo and they continued on their way. Achmed was not in sight but that did not worry them for it was evident that he thought nothing of pursuers and everything of the bag reposing in the lion’s stomach.

“He doesn’t give it a thought that we halloed at him,” Hal said confidently. “If he’s told Dr. Nunnally that Piney did it,

you can rest assured that he feels safe.”

“And that’s not at all a bad way for him to feel under the circumstances,” the doctor said. “We wouldn’t see him if he thought we were after his head, bag or no bag.”

“But he took desperate chances to try and find that bag before this,” Hal reminded him. “A man must want something terribly bad when he’ll kill two men and almost kill another to get it. He made up his mind, I bet, that he’d go through every one of our pockets if he had to.”

“What do you suppose that little brown bag contains?” Dr. Nunnally asked curiously.

Dudley said he didn’t know. “Hal’s convinced me that it couldn’t be just a lot of money,” he said, “because Piney had a thousand pounds in his wallet besides.”

“A thousand pounds!” exclaimed the doctor. “And yet he came to work for Dr. Holman for a paltry few pounds a month, you say?”

“Yes, and I think I’ve guessed Piney right from the minute I laid eyes on him, Dr. Nunnally,” said Hal. “The police were just arresting a native that Piney afterward told me tried to sell him a diamond, cheap. I’ll never forget the way that poor devil cried and begged Piney to save him.”

“What did Piney say?” Dudley asked.

“He turned his back on him and told me indifferently that he supposed the fellow had stolen a diamond from Kimberly and that the police were probably looking out for diamond thieves. But do you know what I think?”

“What?” Dudley asked eagerly.

“I think that poor native was the original diamond thief, working in Kimberly, but I’ve got a pretty good hunch that Piney and that Duncan that Kassem killed, were the big

bosses. They turned the native over but they had the real diamonds themselves. And like all such thieves, one wanted it all and took it. That one was Piney.”

“It fits together, Hal—it sure does!”

“And the little brown bag probably contains a fortune in diamonds,” Dr. Nunnally agreed.

“Well, there’s one lioness who’s worth her weight in diamonds, huh?” Hal said whimsically. “You know when I was in the train with Piney coming up from Mombasa, Kassem came sneaking in the compartment and tried to get at my clothes. I think Duncan sent him in because he was trailing Piney. Piney did tell us that much. And Kassem fell under the spell of greed and wanted them for himself too. They were all trying to get them away from Piney. And now, where are they?”

“Achmed’s going to try and find out,” the doctor answered. “But your story fits together nicely, Keen. I think you’ve doped it out pretty thoroughly. Seems a great pity though, that two men, disinterested, should lose their lives through a thing like that.”

“And it all comes back to poor Dad’s temper,” Dudley said sadly. “If he hadn’t quarreled with his last lab helper, he wouldn’t have had to advertise and get a thief like Piney. One thief brings another.”

They fell into a silence, Dudley grieving quietly, Hal wondering if this new trouble would effectually block his hopes of safari for all time, and Dr. Nunnally considering whether he could get back home on the gas he had.

CHAPTER XXXIV

TWO FATES

They sighted smoke rising from Puhli's grassy valley long before they got there. Smoke was a thing to worry about in the dry season and Dudley and the doctor fell to discussing it at length.

Hal kept a sharp eye out for the parked lorry and at length he saw it. Achmed had driven it into the same spot where Piney had parked his borrowed one. It was to the right of it that the high grass was burning.

"We'll leave this car well out in the center of the road," the doctor said. "There's a pretty stiff breeze and it wouldn't take long to lick it up."

They got out quickly and hurried down into the rolling valley. Dudley led the way and once they had skirted the burning brush, they began to look for Achmed. Hal saw him first, stretched out prone upon the ground, surrounded by a circle of five lions who sat watching him with flapping tails.

It was evident at once what had happened for Achmed's gun was lying under the paw of a male lion, while the Arab's body was at least twenty-five feet distant.

"Knocked the gun out of his hand when they charged him," Dudley explained to Hal. "They've probably been in that brush over there by the donga and Achmed's stumbled on them."

"Looks as if Fate turned the trick on him, eh?" said Dr. Nunnally standing on tiptoe and watching the graceful assemblage. "If we can climb up on that nearest cliff, boys,

we'll get your one-eared lioness. There she is behind the male."

"How about Achmed?" Hal asked.

"We'll get him when they scatter. Too bad they're not man-eaters. Nothing's too bad for that chap. I wouldn't give him burial space in my back yard."

They scrambled up the rocky cliff once more, accompanied by a steady roaring from the circle below. The beasts had got their scent and resented the intrusion.

"Only the lioness now, if possible," the doctor warned Dudley who was taking aim. "If we can scatter them without killing any more so much the better."

The first shot grazed the back of the one-eared cat and she jumped to her four feet with a terrific howl which was taken up by the group and Hal put his fingers to his ears to shut out the deafening roar. The next shot found its mark and the infuriated beast plunged forward among her comrades with a thud. They seemed unwilling, however, to scatter as the doctor had hoped and stood their ground defiantly.

The trio waited a while thinking to wear out the patience of the howling beasts, but no such good fortune was theirs. Instead, the fickle breeze took a turn and flung the flames in a complete circle until they began licking at the cliff. Hal pointed to it, horrified.

Their one avenue of escape was down the cliff and alongside the donga. The doctor declared that they would have to make it or be burned to death.

"Shoot our way out, that's about the size of it," he said.

But here Fate intervened again for the animals suddenly caught the acrid smell and felt the heat of the sizzling grass.

With a last unanimous roar, they slunk away and soon disappeared in the brush.

The frightened boys scrambled down the cliff and pulled the dead lioness along with them. They had no time for Achmed and, as the doctor explained, he wasn't worth a scorched finger. So the hapless Arab went to a fate he richly deserved, unknown for all eternity.

The lioness, however, went down to posterity for the approving eyes of multitudes for, as Dudley inherited his naturalist father's love of such things, he had the beast preserved and presented it to the Museum of Natural History. Hal always declared that it would have made a far better showing in one of Coney Island's freak shows.

Dudley had reason to be proud of the beautiful beast. At her death she yielded a fabulous fortune in uncut diamonds that had doubtless passed through the hands of many thieves. The Kimberly interests were not without gratitude for, not many weeks later, Dudley received a letter from the great mining town with a substantial check enclosed.

"Half is yours," he told Hal.

"I'll have half your life if you mention it again," that young man said. "Don't forget—you're a man of the world now, Dud, and it may be years before you get another check for absolutely nothing at all."

And that was Hal all over.

CHAPTER XXXV

HOPES

Before we leave young Keen in the heart of East Africa it is only fair to say that he was destined to see that land of fleecy blue skies in a happier light. Dudley's grief lessened gradually and with Dr. Nunnally's help he sold his father's farm and belongings to the highest bidder.

They left Medille without a backward glance and rode until they came to the quarantine station. Dr. Nunnally fell easily and graciously into the rôle of host and after a week's time, Hal's uncle joined them.

Denis Keen knew his nephew thoroughly and hardly had he set eyes on him than he guessed what was making the usually easygoing Hal suddenly pensive.

"You're afraid we're going to do you out of safari, isn't that it?" Mr. Keen asked.

"Sure," Hal said smiling. "What do you suppose I came all this way for, huh? Man alive, I've only half seen things!"

"You're right there, Hal," said Dr. Nunnally. "That was only half the lion's ears you saw."

Hal grinned. "Anyway, are we going? That's the point!"

"What do you suppose I took this terrible trip from England for, eh?" countered Mr. Keen.

"And here I can't wait until I see New York and hear it besides! I want noise and fun and pushing about the streets. Gee, I'm sick of loneliness and safari and the roar of beasts!" Dudley's eyes seemed to glisten and his mouth quivered. "Never again for me!"

“And I’m with you, Dudley,” said Dr. Nunnally suddenly. “There’ll come a day soon when I can get away and go home. Home. . . .”

Hal looked at them both and then gazed out of the window. The plains were swarming with game, the clouds a fleecy white and a brilliant sun shone down upon it all. Away on the horizon the mountains rose up to the sky. Violet hills dipped down to the plains—it was all too beautiful. Yet Dudley was right and Dr. Nunnally was right. Africa was home to the few.

THE END

[The end of *The Mysterious Arab* by Percy Keese Fitzhugh (as Hugh Lloyd)]