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A Tale of Madagascar.

"Well, well!" I exclaimed. "You seem to have been nearly everywhere. Have you ever been in Madagascar?"

My stateroom mate had turned over in his bunk: this was the day after we left Honolulu for San Francisco. He rolled back suddenly, with a keen look across at me.

"Say, had you ever heard anything about me before we met on this steamer?" he asked.

"Why, no," said I. "What makes you ask that?"

"Oh, nothing," he replied, laughing. "Madagascar happens to touch a sore nerve with me—that's all."

"Yes," he continued, "I was in Madagascar once—overnight. I had to leave suddenly. It took five French gendarmes to get me back to the steamer alive. About a thousand 'Betsies' were trying to pull me to bits."

"Why, what in the world had you done?" I exclaimed.

"They said that I had killed their grandmother, four or five of their uncles, and an aunt or two."

"Great Scott, but had you?"

"Well, in a way, yes," said he, laughing.

I suppose that I appeared puzzled, for he looked across at me and laughed again.

"It was like this," said he. "I went to Madagascar to get the seeds of two rubber-producing vines which grow there. But the French, who now control Madagascar, are not wholly neighborly in such matters. It was surmised that they might not allow a stranger to take seeds or cuttings away from the island."

"I had heard of a Chicago doctor, however, who was about to go there—Bowers, his name was—to practice among the natives. He was a physician and missionary, and his specialty was medical electricity. He gave electric treatments with a static machine, so called, and also taught hygiene and sanitation—a very good sort of man. I improved the chance to go as his assistant with the static machine, and said nothing about the rubber-vine seeds, which I imagined I could pick up quietly."

"We went first to Marseilles, and there applied to the French authorities for the necessary permit to visit Madagascar. I remember now that the French commissioner shrugged his shoulders and laughed when Doctor Bowers explained the uses of the static machine."

"Ma foi," he said. "The Malagasy have plenty electrification. Nature provides that for them. Mais oui, if monsieur wishes to go there. Pourquoi non?" And he laughed and shrugged his shoulders again after the manner of French officials."

"So we got our permits, had our passports vised, and voyaged to Madagascar on the weekly French liner from Marseilles, which landed us at Tamatave, the chief seaport of the island."

"Tamatave, however, was not our destination, for Doctor Bowes had decided to begin his medical labors at Tana-fangana, among the Betsies, or 'Betsies,' as they were called by the Americans who formerly traded here. The Betsies are the native race of Madagascar, and of much darker complexion than the Hovas, who live in the north part of the island."

"The little French steamer which brought us down the coast from Tamatave reached Tana-fangana shortly after noon on the following day. Here a friend of Doctor Bowers, from one of the Methodist missions, met us. The static machine, with our other luggage, was landed and drawn by ox-cart to a native house, four miles inland, which the owner had very obligingly vacated and put at our disposal at the low rental of fifty centimes, or about ten cents a day. It was a good, strong structure of teak logs, with a thick thatch and a door, or gate, of bamboo poles."

"We reached the place at about four o'clock in the afternoon, and unloaded the heavy static machine. I then took charge, while Bowers and his missionary friend went back to the waterside, to comply with certain regulations and to lay in a stock of provisions. I did not have much time to look about, but there seemed to be a considerable population; and it was a fine, wild-looking country, rising inland to heavily forested hills."

"While I was at work unpacking, I heard a thunder-peal, and the sky darkened. By this time it was near sunset. Soon I had to light a candle, of which we had a few in a tin box. Louder thunder-peals broke forth like heavy guns from a war-ship. The whole heavens were ablaze with lightning. My fingers tingled. In the twilight every tree and upstanding stub and post took on a pale glow."

"Faster and faster crashed the thunder-claps. It was one continuous bang and roar. Then the lightning began to strike all round—trees, huts, everywhere! I even heard the splitting and rending of the trees above the deafening din of the thunder, also cries and shouts from the people, far and near."

"I stopped work, and going to the door, stood there and looked out, for the door was divided, and the upper part was open. I thought that I had seen thunder-showers before, but never had I seen anything like this. Bolts were coming down all round; and soon I saw the glow of fires where native houses were burning. I counted six of these fires at once. Immediately two bolts fell close at hand, each with a deafening crash. Nearer outcries from the distressed people followed."

"I remembered suddenly what the French official at Marseilles had said about electricity in Madagascar—that the natives had plenty of it! Neither Doctor Bowers nor I had heard of the thunder-storms in Madagascar before. In point of fact, there is nothing quite like them elsewhere in the world. It is said that from three to four hundred people are killed by lightning every season in Tamatave alone, and that the same rate holds all over the island; but that is hard to believe."

"A few minutes later it began to rain, and the first awful sharpness of the lightning slackened a little. But I still stood there, counting the fires in different quarters."

"Suddenly I heard a peculiar, low, scraping noise at my feet, under the gate. Something was crawling into the house, and I caught a glimpse of a queer, mottled object moving in the obscurity. I stepped quickly back and got the candle, which I had set on the plate-glass frame of the static machine. Didn't I jump when I saw what that was crawling in under the gate! It was about the worst, most unwholesome-looking great snake that you ever saw, brown, with a row of light yellow spots, or blotches, running along both sides of its back. It came sliding in with its head up, stopped and twiddled its forked tongue at me when I held the candle down to it."

"I leaped back out of reach, put down the light, grabbed a little wooden handspike with which I had been leveling up the static machine, and struck the reptile several blows, then looked at it again with the candle. It was a particularly nasty-looking snake, nearly six feet long, and as thick through as my arm. I was about to open the gate and throw it out when another one, looking almost exactly like it, came crawling in. I grabbed my handspike again, and killed that one, too. Neither of them made much resistance."

"I had no more than finished with the second one than in came a third—and they kept coming, till I actually killed six of those ugly, yellow-spotted reptiles, the smallest one not less than five feet long."

"At the time I concluded that it was the shower which had driven them to shelter; for the rain was still pouring down in sheets, through which the lightning flashed viciously at intervals."

"For some time I stood there with my handspike, ready for more snakes, but no others came in; and after a while I opened the gate, threw the dead reptiles out, and blocked up the space under the gate with bits of board from our packing-boxes."

"Still it poured; and one shower followed another throughout the entire first part of the night. Doctor Bowers had not come back. I did not wonder at that, however; he would hardly start out from his friend's house in such a deluge; and napping at times, I passed the rest of the night there alone."

"Low voices outside waked me, at length. The sun was shining in over the gate. I rose hastily and looked out. A dozen natives, men and women,



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