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By HENRY SETON MERRIMAN
Author of "The Red Rover," "The Red Rover's Boy,"
"From One Generation to Another," etc.

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Lady Cantourne waited with perfectly suppressed curiosity, and while she was waiting Millicent Chylo came into the room. The girl was dressed with her habitual perfect taste and success, and she came forward with a smile of genuine pleasure, holding out a small hand neatly gloved in suede. Her ladyship was looking, not at Millicent, but at Guy Oscar.

"Ah!" said Miss Chylo. "It is very good of you to take pity upon two lone females. I was afraid that you had gone off to the wilds of America or somewhere in search of big game. Do you know, Mr. Oscar, you are quite a celebrity? I heard you called the 'big game man' the other day; also the 'traveling fellow'."

The specimen smiled happily under this delicate handling. "Mr. Oscar has just been telling me," interposed Lady Cantourne conversationally, "that he is thinking of going off to the wilds again."

"Then it is very disappointing of him," said Millicent, with a little droop of the eyelids which went home. "It seems to be only the uninteresting people who stay at home and live humdrum lives of enormous duration."

"He seems to think that his friends are going to cast him off because his poor father died without the assistance of a medical man," continued the old lady meaningly.

At this moment another visitor was announced and presently made his appearance. He was an old gentleman of no personality whatever, who was nevertheless welcomed enthusiastically, because two people in the room had a distinct use for him. Lady Cantourne was exceedingly gracious. She remembered instantly that horticulture was among his somewhat antiquated accomplishments, and she was immediately consumed with a desire to show him the conservatory which she had had built outside the drawing room window. She took a genuine interest in this about the house and watered the plants herself with much enthusiasm—when she remembered.

Added to a number of positive virtues the old gentleman possessed that of abstaining from tea, which enabled the two horticultural experts to repair to the conservatory at once, leaving the young people alone at the other end of the drawing room.

Millicent smoothed her gloves with downcast eyes and that delicate air by which the talented fair imply the consciousness of being alone and out of others' earshot with an interesting member of the stronger sex.

Guy sat and watched the suede gloves with a certain sense of playful enjoyment. Then suddenly he spoke, continuing his remarks where they had been broken off by the advent of the useful old gentleman.

"You see," he said, "it is only natural that a great many people should give me the cold shoulder. My story was a little lame. There is no reason why they should believe in me."

"I believe in you," she answered. "It was a very unpleasant business," he said in a jerky, self-conscious voice. "I didn't know that I was that sort of fellow. The temptation was very great. I nearly gave in and let him do it. He was a strong-minded man. You know—we did not get on well together. He always hoped that I would turn out a literary sort of fellow, and I suppose he was disappointed. I tried at one time, but I found it was no good. From indifference it turned into most bitter hatred. It distressed me in the tender, and I am afraid I did not care for him very much."

Millicent was listening gravely without interrupting like a man. She had the gift of adapting herself to her surroundings in a marked degree.

"And," he added curtly, "no one knows how much I wanted that three thousand a year."

The girl moved uneasily and glanced toward the conservatory.

"It was not the money that tempted me," said Guy very deliberately; "it was you."

She rose from her chair as if to join her aunt and the horticultural old gentleman.

"You must not say that she said in little more than a whisper, and without looking round she went toward Lady Cantourne. Her eyes were gleaming with a singular suppressed excitement, such as one sees in the eyes of a man fresh from a mad run across country.

Guy Oscar rose also and followed more deliberately. There was nothing for him to do but take his leave.

"But," said Lady Cantourne graciously, "if you are determined to go away, you must at least come and say goodbye before you leave."

"Thanks; I should like to do so, if I may."

"We shall be deeply disappointed if you forget," said Millicent, holding out her hand, with a smile of light heartedness and a pair of light friendship.

All around him the vegetable kingdom had asserted its sovereignty. At his back loomed a dense forest, impenetrable to the foot of man, defying his puny hand armed with ax or saw. The trees were not high, few of them being above twenty feet, but from their branches creepers and parasites hung in tangled profusion, interlaced, joining tree to tree for acres—nay, for miles.

As far as the eye could reach either bank of the slow river was thus covered with rank vegetation—mills after mile, without variety, without hope. The glassy surface of the water was broken here and there by certain black forms floating like logs half hidden beneath the wave. These were crocodiles. The river was the Ogowe, and the man who cursed it was Victor Durnovo, employee of the Loango Trading association, whose business it was at that season to travel into the interior of Africa, to buy, barter or steal ivory for his masters.

He was a small-faced man, with a squarely aquiline nose and a black mustache which hung like a valance over his mouth. From the growth of that curtain-like mustache Victor Durnovo's worldly prosperity might have been said to date. No one seeing his mouth had before that time been prevailed upon to trust him. Nature has a way of hanging out signs and then covering them up so that the casual fall to see. He was a man of medium height, with abnormally long arms and a somewhat truculent way of walking, as if his foot was ever ready to kick anything or any person who might come in his way.

Victor Durnovo had sent his boatmen into the forest to find a few dates, a few handfuls of firewood, and while they were absent he gave vent to that wild unreasoning passion which is fabled into the white man's lungs with the air of equatorial Africa.

"Curse this country!" he shouted. "Curse it, curse it—river and tree, man and beast!"

Presently a peacefulness seemed to come over him, for his eyes lost their glitter and his heavy lids drooped. His arms were crossed behind his head. Before him lay the river.

Suddenly he sat upright, all eagerness and attention. Not a leaf stirred. It was about a o'clock in the evening, the sunset hour of the twenty-four. In such a silence the least sound would travel almost any distance, and there was a sound travelling over the water to him. It was nothing but a thud repeated with singular regularity, but to his practiced ears it conveyed much. He knew that a boat was approaching, as yet hidden by some distant curve in the river. The thud was caused by the contact of six paddles with the gunwale of the canoe as the paddlers withdrew them from the water.

Victor Durnovo rose again and brought from the boat a second rifle, which he laid beside the double-barreled belly which he never more than a yard away from him, waking or sleeping. Then he waited. He knew that no boat could reach the bank without his full permission, for all the rovers could be killed before they got within a hundred yards of his side. He was probably the best rifle shot but one in that country, and the other, the very best, happened to be in the approaching canoe.

After the space of ten minutes the boat came in sight—a long, black form on the still waters. It was too far away for him to distinguish anything beyond the fact that it was a native boat.

"Eight hundred yards," muttered Durnovo over the sight of his rifle. He looked upon this river as his own, and he knew the native of equatorial Africa. Therefore he dropped a bullet into the water, under the bow of the canoe, at 300 yards.

A moment later there was a sound which can only be written "P-tit" between his legs, and he had to wipe a shower of dust from his eyes. A puff of blue smoke rose slowly over the boat and a sharp report broke the silence a second time.

Then Victor Durnovo leaped to his feet and waved his hand in the air. From the canoe there was an answer, greeting and the man on the bank went to the water's edge, still carrying the rifle from which he was never parted.

Durnovo was the first to speak when the boat came within hail.

"Very sorry," he shouted. "Thought you were a native. Must establish a funk—get in first shot, you know?"

"All right," replied one of the Europeans in the approaching craft, with a courteous wave of the hand, "no harm done."

There were two white men and six blacks in the long and clumsy boat. One of the Europeans lay in the bow while the other was stretched at his ease in the stern, reclining on the canvas of a neatly folded tent. The last name was evidently the leader of the cruise expedition, while the manner and attitude of the man in the bow suggested the servitude of a disciplined soldier slightly relaxed by abnormal circumstances.

"Who fired that shot?" inquired Durnovo, when there was no longer any necessity to shout.

"Joseph," replied the man in the stern of the boat, indicating his companion. "Was it a near thing?"

"About as near as I care about. It threw you the dust between my legs."

The man called Joseph grinned. Nature had given him liberally of the whetstone for indigestion in that relaxation, and Durnovo smiled rather constrainedly. Joseph was grabbing at the long reed grass, bringing the canoe to a standstill, and it was some moments before his extensive mouth submitted to control.

Imparted such a safety and comfort to the way you were to that impulsive guess which ever lurks in West African blood.

"I say," he said, when you told me that you were a native, money, were you?"

"I am sure you are Mr. Durnovo," said the man in the stern of the boat, rising leisurely from his recumbent position and speaking with a courteous sarcasm which seemed slightly out of place in the wilds of central Africa.

He was a tall man with a small aristocratic head and a refined face, which somehow suggested an aristocrat of old France.

"Yes," answered Durnovo. The tall man stepped ashore and held out his hand.

"I am glad we have met you," he said. "I have a letter of introduction to you from Maurice Gordon of Loango."

Victor Durnovo's dark face changed slightly. His eyes—lilacs, fever shot, unhealthily—took a new light.

"Ah!" he answered. "Are you a friend of Maurice Gordon's?"

There was another question in this, an unasked one, and Victor Durnovo was watching for the answer. But the face he watched was like a delicately curved piece of brown marble, with a courteous, impenetrable smile.

"I met him again the other day at Loango. He is an old Etoulan, like myself."

This conveyed nothing to Durnovo, who belonged to a different world, whose education was like other things about him, an unknown quantity.

"My name," continued the tall man, "is Meredith. John Meredith—some times called Jack."

They were walking up the bank toward the dusky and uninviting tent. "And the other fellow?" inquired Durnovo, with a backward jerk of the head.

"Oh, he is my servant."

Durnovo raised his eyebrows in somewhat contemptuous amusement and proceeded to open the letter which Meredith had handed him.

"Not many fellows," he said, "on this coast can afford to keep a European servant."

"I understand," answered Meredith, with a half-suppressed yawn, "that the country gets finer farther up; more mountainous."

The proprietors of very dark eyes would do well to remember that it is dangerous to glance furtively to one side. The attitude of dark eyes is more easily felt than the glances of gray or blue orbs.

Jack Meredith's suspicious were aroused by the suspicious manner of Durnovo.

"There is no white man known this river as I do, and I do not recommend it. Look at me, on the verge of famine; look at this wound on my arm, it began with a scratch and has never healed. All that comes from a month up this cursed river. Take my advice. Try somewhere else."

"I certainly shall," replied Meredith. "We will discuss it after dinner. My chap is a first rate cook. Have you got anything to add to the menu?"

"Not a thing. I've been living on plantains and dried elephant meat for the last fortnight."

"Doesn't sound nourishing. Well, we are pretty well provided, so perhaps you will give me the pleasure of your company to dinner? Come as you are; no ceremony. I think I will wash, though. It is as well to keep up these old customs."

CHAPTER VII.

IN that part of Africa which lies within touch of the equator life is essentially a struggle. There is hunger about, and where hunger is the emotions will be found also. Now, Jack Meredith was a past master in the concealment of these, and, as such, came to Victor Durnovo in the guise of a new creation. He had lived the latter and the larger part of his life among men who said, in action if not in words, I am hungry or I am thirsty; I want this, or I want that; and if you are not strong enough to keep it, I will take it from you.

This man was different, and Victor Durnovo did not know, could not find out, what he wanted. He had at first been inclined to laugh at him. What struck him most forcibly was Joseph, the servant. The idea of a man swaggering up an African river with a European manservant was so preposterous that it could only be met with ridicule; but the thing seemed so natural to Jack Meredith, he accepted the servitude of Joseph so much as a matter of course that after a time Durnovo accepted him also as part and parcel of Meredith.

Joseph took off his coat, turned up his sleeves and proceeded to cook such a dinner as Durnovo had not tasted for many months. There was wine also, and afterward a cigar of such quality as appealed strongly to Durnovo's West Indian palate.

The night settled down over the land while they sat there, and before them the great yellow equatorial moon rose slowly over the trees. With the darkness came a greater silence, for the myriad insect life was still.

"So," said Durnovo, returning to the subject which had never really left his thoughts, "you have come out here for pleasure?"

"Not exactly. I came chiefly to make money, partly to dispel some of the illusions of my youth, and I am getting on very well. Picture book illusions they were. The man who drew the pictures had never seen Africa."

The evening had turned out so very differently from what he had expected that Durnovo was a little carried off his equilibrium. Things were so so-called and pleasant in comparison with the habitual loneliness of his life. The fine cracked so cheerily, the moon shone down on the river so grandly, the subdued chatter of the boatmen

"In the dearest earnest," replied Jack Meredith in the half-mocking tone which he never wholly learned to lay aside.

"Then I think I can get you in the way of it. Oh, I know it seems a bit premature; not known you long enough and all that. But in this country we don't hold much by the formalities. I like you. I liked the look of you when you got out of that boat so cool and self-possessed. You're the right sort, Mr. Meredith."

"Possibly for some things. For sitting about and smoking first class cigars and thinking second class thoughts I am exactly the right sort. But for making money, for hard work and steady work, I am afraid, Mr. Durnovo, that I am distinctly the wrong sort."

There was a little pause. Durnovo looked round as if to make sure that Joseph and the boatman were out of earshot.

"Can you keep a secret?" he asked suddenly.

Jack Meredith turned and looked at the questioner with a smile. His hat had slipped to the back of his head, the light of the great yellow moon fell full upon his clean-cut sphinxlike face. The eyes alone seemed living.

"Yes! I can do that."

"I can see you're a gentleman," Durnovo said. "I'll trust you. I want a man to join me in making a fortune. I have got my hand on it at last. But I'm afraid of this country. I'm getting shaky; look at that hand. I've been looking for it too long. If take you into my confidence, the first corner, you'll think. But there are not many men like you in this country, and I'm beastly afraid of dying. I want to get out of this for a bit, but I dare not leave until I set things going."

"Take your time," said Meredith, quietly and soothingly. "Light that cigar again and lie down. There is no hurry."

Durnovo obeyed him meekly.

"Tell me," he said, "have you ever heard of simlacine?"

"I cannot say that I have," replied Jack. "What is it for, brown boots or spurs?"

"It is a drug, the most expensive drug in the market. And they must have it, they cannot do without it, and they cannot find a substitute. It is the life of a shrub, and you know it is worth a thousand pounds."

"Where is it to be found?" asked Jack Meredith. "I should like some in a sack."

"Ah, you may laugh now, but you won't when you hear all about it. The scientific chips called it simlacine, because of an old African legend which, like all these things, has a grain of truth in it. The legend is that the simlacine first found out the properties of the leaf, and it is because they live on it that they are so strong. Do you know that a goliath's arm is not half so thick as yours, and yet he could snap your neck with his hands across his knees? He would bend a gun barrel as you would bend a cane, merely by the turn of his wrist. That is simlacine. He can hang on to a tree with one hand and make a dozen men like his hands—that's simlacine. At home they are only just beginning to find out its properties. It seems that it can bring a man back to life when he is more than half dead. There is no buying what children that are brought up on it may turn out to be. It may double the power of the human brain; some think it will."

Jack Meredith was leaning forward, watching with a certain sense of fascination the wild, disease-stricken face, listening to the man's breathless periods. It seemed that the fear of death, which had got hold of him, gave Victor Durnovo no time to pause for breath.

"Yes," said the Englishman, "yes, so on."

There is practically no limit to the demand that there is for it. At present the only way of obtaining it is through the natives, and you know their manner of trading. They send a little packet down from the interior. It is very often the case that two months and more to reach the buyer's hands. The money is sent back the same way, and each man who fingers it keeps a little. The natives find the leaf in the forests by the aid of trained monkeys and only in very small quantities. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, I follow you."

Victor Durnovo leaned forward until his face was within three inches of Meredith's, and the dark, wild eyes flashed and glared into the Englishman's steady glance.

"What," he hissed—"what if I know where simlacine grows like a weed? What if I could supply the world with simlacine at my own price? Eh-h-h! What of that, Mr. Meredith?"

He threw himself suddenly back and wiped his dripping face. There was a silence, the great African silence that drives educated men mad and fills the imagination of the poor heathen with wild tales of devils and spirits.

Then Jack Meredith spoke without moving.

"I'm your man," he said, "with a few more details."

Victor Durnovo was lying back at full length on the hard, dry mud, his arms beneath his head. Without seeing his position, he gave the details, speaking slowly and much more quietly. It seemed as if he spoke the result of long pent up thought.

"We shall want," he said, "at least \$2000 to start it, for we must have an armed force of our own. We have to penetrate a cannibal country of the fiercest devils in Africa. It is a pla-

[TO BE CONTINUED]

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