

Brereton Frederick Sadleir

**With Wolseley to Kumasi: A Tale
of the First Ashanti War**



Frederick Brereton

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F.S. Brereton

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Chapter One. Great Misfortune

Dick Stapleton tossed restlessly on his bamboo bed, till the rickety legs creaked ominously and the mosquito net waved to and fro, threatening to descend upon his head. The heat was stifling. Inside his room the thermometer stood at an unusual height, even for this Gold Coast country, where high readings are a common occurrence, and where hot nights are the rule rather than the exception. The windows of the house in which he slept, or vainly attempted to do so, were thrown wide open, but despite that fact, they admitted nothing but the deep and ever-recurring boom of the surf, which beats upon the sandy beach of the Fanti country without ceasing. Boom! Boom! The thunder of the waves seemed to shake even the land, while in his mind's eye Dick could see the spray rise high, and then fall back as white as milk, seething and foaming, to be swallowed by the next breaker as it curled its green crest on to the sand. Not a breath stirred on this sultry night. The leaves on the forest trees within a stone's-throw of the house made no movement. Nothing, in fact, appeared to have the energy for movement on this night save the myriad mosquitoes, which seemed to revel in the heat, and an occasional beast in the forest, whose piercing cry was wont at one time to startle our hero.

"Oh, for a breeze!" sighed Dick. "If only a cool wind would play into the room a fellow might fall asleep. This mosquito net stifles me, and yet I dare not throw it aside or I shall be well-nigh eaten. I feel, too, as if I had a little fever, and that is just the very thing I wish to avoid. I've work before me; difficulties to set aside, and – and affairs to arrange."

For some reason his hand sought for a box deposited beneath the bed, and his fingers touched the lock to make sure that it was closed.

"All that stands between me and starvation," said Dick. "Just a bare two hundred pounds in gold, a store almost depleted of goods, and two houses which no one seems to want. There's the business, too, and James Langdon."

For a while his thoughts went to the man whose name he had mentioned, and he brooded uneasily.

"He ought to go," he said to himself. "Father trusted him, I know; but I am sure of his dishonesty. He has been robbing the store for years, and he will rob me if I let him stay. He is a sneaking half-caste, a rogue who cannot be trusted, and if it were not for father he should be dismissed. Well, to-morrow I will go into the matter. I'm tired to-night. If only it were not so frightfully hot!"

Dick was peevish and out of temper. He had worked hard all day, and was very tired, for the heat had been great. And now that he had thrown himself on his bed he could not sleep. The old worries filled his mind, only instead of being lessened, the silence of the night, the droning insects, the shrill cries from the forests, and the deep boom of the surf, intensified his difficulties, till they sat upon his young shoulders like a millstone. Presently, however, he fell into a doze, and later his deep breathing showed that he was asleep. Asleep? No! For he started suddenly and sat erect on his bed.

"I thought I heard something," he said in a whisper. "That was a step outside. Some one knocked against the chair on the platform and tipped it over. I don't like that noise."

He threw one leg half out of the bed and waited, for, to be candid, Dick had no liking for an encounter with some evil-doer in the small hours. Then, mustering courage, he threw the mosquito net aside, rearranged it over the bed, and stealthily crept to the farther side. His hand sought the box

which contained his worldly possessions, and tucking it beneath his arm he stole softly out on to the verandah. There was a brilliant moon, high up in the sky, and the silvery rays played softly upon the sandy beach, upon the crests of the breakers, upon the white street and the white houses, and upon the bush and forest which formed at this time the surroundings of Cape Coast Castle. There were deep shadows everywhere, and Dick's eyes sought them, and endeavoured to penetrate to their depths. He stood still and listened, though the thump of his fast-beating heart was all that came to his ears above the boom of the surf. That and the eternal droning of the insects which swarmed around. No one seemed to be abroad this night, and yet —

“Some one was here,” thought Dick, with conviction, as he stepped across the wooden platform, with its overhanging roof, which went by the name of verandah. “Here is the deck-chair in which I was sitting just before I turned in, and it is now on its side: I left it all right. And — That's some one!”

He drew back somewhat suddenly, while his breathing became faster. For some one, an indefinite shape, a native perhaps, had stepped from one of the shadows and had peered at the verandah. Then detecting the white youth, he had vanished into the shadow again, as silently and as stealthily as any snake.

“I don't like that at all,” thought Dick. “I'm alone here, and the people know that there is gold. They know that father kept his money in the house, and now that he is gone they must be aware that I have it. I'll camp out here for the night. I wish to goodness I had gone down to the Castle and left this box under lock and key.”

He stepped back into the room which he had just vacated, and felt along the wall till his hand hit upon a rifle. Then he sought for cartridges, and, having found a handful, tucked them into the pocket of his pyjamas, and one into the breech of his weapon. That done, he went on to the verandah, and, pulling his chair into a corner, sat down with the gun across his legs and the box beneath his feet.

“I could have slept,” he grumbled. “But that's out of the question. Some blackguard wants the money, and that must be prevented. Besides, these Fantis would knife me with pleasure. I don't care for the thought of that, so here goes for a night-watch, Dick Stapleton, my boy, you'll be anything but fresh tomorrow.”

Had he been an older soldier, Dick would have remained on his legs, and would have patrolled the length of the verandah, and even shown himself beyond the house, out in the brilliant patch where the moon rays fell. But he was only a young fellow, and, in addition, he was tired, fagged out by work and anxiety. The heat told upon him, too, and the booming of the surf, instead of helping to keep him wakeful, seemed, now that he was outside his room, to lull him to sleep.

His excitement, and the forebodings which the strange figure had brought to his mind, soon calmed down and disappeared. His head drooped. A cool wind got up and gently fanned his heated cheek, and within half an hour he was asleep — far more deeply, too, than he had been when stretched beneath his mosquito net. He snored loudly and contentedly. The gun slipped to the ground, and caused him to stir uneasily. But he did not awake. He slipped farther down into his chair, and slept the sleep of the exhausted, oblivious of his danger, forgetful of the vow he had made, and of the watch which he had meant to keep. And his snores, the click of his rifle, and the shuffle of his feet as he stretched them out, were as a signal to the rascal who lurked in the shadows. He slipped into the open and listened. Then he dropped on all fours, and stealthily crept towards the verandah. At times he was hidden in the deep shade cast by the many shrubs which surrounded the house, while at others he knelt fully outlined — a short, broad-shouldered savage, as naked as the day when he was born, dark grey in colour, and glistening under the moon's rays, for his body was freely anointed with oil. At such moments his pace quickened till he reached another friendly shadow, where he lurked for a minute or more, only the whites of his eyes showing occasionally as he stretched his head from the shade. Soon he was near the verandah, and seemed on the point of leaping the low rail which enclosed it, when an unearthly shriek — the familiar night-call of a forest animal — broke the silence, and set him trembling.

“I’d wring its neck!” he growled hoarsely, while he wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead. “The brute startled me, and may have awakened the young fool on the verandah. If it has – well, I must have the money. I must have it this night, too, and without further waiting. To-morrow will be too late. He’ll know the truth then. He’s cunning, this young Stapleton – cunning. He’s deep and too knowing, and he suspects. To-morrow the books will show what has been happening these five years and more, and then – ”

His eyes rolled, and an oath escaped his lips, for he thought of the Castle, of the cell which would receive him, and of the labour to which he would be condemned.

“To-night or never!” he muttered. “And if the youngster stirs or attempts to hold me, why, there’s something here to make him alter his mind. Something to stop him altogether, to shut his mouth, and keep his evidence from reaching the authorities.”

The thought seemed to please him, for he sat back on his heels and gripped his revolver more tenaciously. But a moment later reflection brought some doubt to his mind, and his breathing became deeper and more hurried.

“They’d know,” he said, with an oath. “They’re bound to know, in any case, for I must go. Once I have the money, I must take to the forest, and trust to picking up a boat along the coast. Even then I shall have to wait for months, for there will be a hue and cry. I’ll have to make for King Koffee’s country, and take service with him. He’ll remember who has been so good about the supply of guns and ammunition. Yes, I’ll make for Kumasi, and wait there till the storm has blown over. Ah! he’s snoring again. I must be quick. The morning will be coming in a couple of hours.”

The thought that he had a haven near at hand seemed to spur the miscreant on to his purpose, for he rose to his feet and emerged into the open, where the brilliant moon showed him even more clearly. It was obvious that he had purposely darkened his skin, for behind his ears, on the broad of his back, and on the palms of his hands were dusky-white patches, which he had omitted to cover. In fact, the robber who lurked so close to the house, and whose fingers grasped the revolver, was none other than James Langdon, whose name was uppermost in Dick Stapleton’s mind. This thief, who came stealthily in the night, was the half-caste manager of the store which Dick’s father had kept for many a year in Cape Coast Castle. Short and squat he appeared in the moon’s rays, but the light was insufficient to show what manner of man he actually was. Had it been lighter one would have seen a heavy, ugly face, with thick lips and splayed-out nose, telling unmistakably of his negro origin. Crisp, airy locks, jet black in colour, covered his head, while some straggling hairs grew from his upper lip. The brows were low; the eyes too close together, while the thickness of the lips alone seemed to denote a cruel nature. James Langdon was, in fact, far from prepossessing in appearance, while he bore a character which was none of the best. He had a dusky complexion, sharp, white teeth, and that whiteness of the eye which belongs to a native.

For years he had acted as Mr Stapleton’s manager, and tales were whispered in the place that he robbed his employer, that he had dealings with the natives of the interior which, had they come to the knowledge of Mr Stapleton or to the ears of the authorities, would have gained for him instant dismissal, and in all probability imprisonment. But Mr Stapleton had never suspected, and the apathy of the officials had caused them to disregard rumours. And so it happened that James went on with his speculations and his illicit trading till Dick came out to the Gold Coast, just four months before, and at once plunged into the business with the intention of mastering every detail. Gradually, as the books and the working of the store became familiar to him, Dick had begun to suspect, and then had become almost certain of the fact that the manager was dishonest.

“I’ll make sure first of all,” he had said. “I am new to ledgers and journals, and, in fact, to trade of any sort, and it is possible that I may be mistaken. I’ll go through the entries again, so that there shall be no room for doubt.”

Unconsciously his manner had altered to the manager. He was too honest to be on familiar terms with a man whom he suspected of robbing his father and as a result James guessed that he was

found out, that this young Englishman regarded him with suspicion. He would have fled the place then and there had he had the means. But he had long since spent all his ill-gotten wealth. He remained, therefore, and while still contemplating the step, went on with his work as if he had nothing to fear. A few days later a sharp bout of fever, not the first which he had suffered by any means, attacked Mr Stapleton, and to Dick's inexpressible grief he succumbed.

"Then I must go," said James Langdon, and with that he promptly decided to rob the son and decamp.

Only a week had passed since Mr Stapleton's death, when the half-caste proceeded to put his plan into execution; and there he was, disguised in order that Dick should not recognise him, naked and well smeared with oil, so that if his young employer happened to awake and endeavoured to detain him, his grip would instantly slip from his body.

"He's fast asleep, and now's the time," whispered James, running his fingers across his forehead to wipe the perspiration away. "I'll creep in and search for the box."

He stood to his full height and peered over the rail of the verandah at the sleeping figure. Then he hoisted himself over the low wall and stole along the wooden flooring. It took more than a minute to reach the door of the room which Dick had recently vacated, for the sleeper was evidently troubled with dreams, and he breathed and snorted heavily, each sound bringing the robber to a stop, and setting him shivering with apprehension, for this half-caste was a coward at heart. But at length he found himself within the room.

"Beneath the bed," he said to himself. "That's where his father kept the gold, and no doubt the young fool does the same. He'll have left the box there, and I shall be able to get it and slip away without discovery."

He was at the bed by now, and his arms were groping vainly beneath it. An oath escaped him when he discovered that the box was gone, and he sat back on his heels trembling, and furious with disappointment.

"Perhaps he has moved it," he said at length. "He guessed that some one was about, else why did he go on to the verandah to keep watch, and why the gun? I'll strike a match and take a look round. First of all, is he quiet?"

He stole to the open door and peered at the recumbent figure, now half illuminated by the moon. He could see the head lolling forward, the hands and arms trailing to the floor, and the stock of the rifle. The legs and feet, and the box for which he sought, were still in the shadow.

"All's well," he thought. "A match will not awake him, and there is no one about to see the light."

There was a faint, rasping sound, and the glimmer of a flame lit the room. The half-caste searched each corner diligently till the match burned to his fingers. Then he flung it aside with an oath and rapidly struck another.

"Then he must have the box with him," he exclaimed hoarsely, while the frown on his ugly brows increased as he realised that his difficulties were suddenly increased. "He's asleep. I'll capture the prize and run to the nearest shadow. If he follows –"

His fingers felt the lock of the revolver while he lifted the weapon and took aim at the moonlit doorway.

"I could hit him with ease, though I have never fired one of these before," he said. "Time's going. It must be done at once."

Bracing himself with the thought, the miscreant stole to the door, and then along the verandah till he was close to Dick. His hand went out to search for the coveted box, and then drew back suddenly, while the blood in his veins froze with terror. For Dick moved restlessly and spoke in his sleep. Had he discovered the attempt? Was he about to pounce upon the intruder? The doubt set the half-caste shivering till desperation lent him strength, and he levelled the revolver. His eyes shone strangely in the moon's rays as they fixed themselves on the unconscious youth, while the finger which lay on the trigger stiffened, causing the hammer to rise slowly into cocking position. Another

movement would have been Dick's last. But the dream had passed, the nightmare which had troubled him was gone, and he slept easily.

"I thought it was all up," growled the robber hoarsely, to himself. "He startled me. There's the box."

His eye had suddenly lit upon it, and lowering his revolver he stretched out to it, caught the handle, and with a tug dragged it from beneath Dick's feet. Then he scrambled from his knees, and was in the act of leaping the rail of the verandah when the sleeper started erect. A cry escaped him, and in an instant he was on his feet. Then with a shout of fury he threw himself upon the robber. One hand gripped the ruffian's neck, while the other closed about his arm. For a second, perhaps, he retained his hold. Then a quick movement of the half-caste threw him off, his hands slipping from the well-oiled surface. There was a sharp report, and the flash of a revolver in his face. Then he was left, still gripping at the air, while James Langdon sought safety in flight, his dark figure flitting across the brilliant moonlit patch to the nearest shadow.

"Stop!" shouted Dick, now thoroughly awake. "I know who it is. I recognised you by means of the flash. It is James Langdon, the man who has robbed my father for years. Stop, and return the box this instant. I promise to let you go free afterwards. If you refuse I will shoot you down as you run."

He stooped swiftly and picked up his weapon. Then he leapt over the rail and ran into the open.

"Now," he said, as he faced the deep shadow in which James had disappeared, and in which he still lurked, fearful that his figure would be seen as he crossed to the next, "come out and return the box. I give you half a minute. After that I fire."

He could see the faint outline of the man, while the moving leaves told of his probable position. Dick levelled his weapon, and waited till he judged the half-minute had passed.

"Once more," he called out, "are you coming?"

There was no answer, only the leaves shook more violently. Dick took careful aim, and pulled the trigger, sending a bullet into the very centre of the figure which he had dimly perceived. But he had a cunning fox to deal with, and forgot that he himself stood brilliantly outlined in the open. James Langdon knew that he had but to draw his fire to escape to the forest, for long before Dick could load again he would have gained the woods. He waited, therefore, till our hero's patience was exhausted. Then he threw himself flat on the ground till the shot rang out. An instant later he was on his feet racing into the forest. And after him went his pursuer, hot with rage and anxiety. Dashing into the thick bush he endeavoured to come up with the fugitive, but all was dense darkness here. He struck his head against an overhanging bough, and a moment later caught his feet in a twining vine, coming with a crash to the ground. He was up in a moment, only to meet with the same fate again, while the half-caste, better versed in the ways of the forest, crept steadily along on all fours, feeling his way through the tangle. Dick was beaten, and in his rage he blazed right and left into the forest; but the shots did no harm to the fugitive, while hardly had their reverberation died down when there followed the mocking calls of the half-caste.

"Set a watch and keep it, Dick Stapleton," he shouted, "and learn to be wary when James Langdon is about. As to the box, have no fear for its safety. I promise to take care of the gold which it contains."

He gave vent to a boisterous laugh, a laugh of triumph, and then went on his way, leaving Dick trembling with fury.

"Listen to this, you ruffian," he shouted back. "You are a knave, and have robbed me as you did my father. Don't think to escape. Some day we shall meet again, and then you shall answer for this crime."

A jeering laugh was his only answer, and dispirited, and well-nigh on the verge of tears, he retraced his steps to the house, and threw himself into his chair, a prey to the worst misgivings, wondering what he should do next, how he was to live, and how to repair his ruined fortunes.

Chapter Two. Gallant Rescue

Moderately tall and broad, with well-tanned skin and pleasant features, Dick Stapleton looked a gentleman and a decent fellow as he lolled on an old box which lay on the beach at Cape Coast Castle. He was dressed in white ducks from head to foot, while a big solar topee covered his head. His collar was thrown wide open, a light scarf being tied loosely round the neck, while his whole appearance gave one the impression that he was decidedly at ease. And yet he was not happy. A week had passed since the robbery, and in that time he had given full particulars to an apathetic police force. He had offered a reward for the recovery of the treasure, and he had wondered how and where he was to live.

“There are the two houses,” he had said over and over again to himself. “One is the store, and has perhaps fifty pounds worth of goods in it. The other, the living-house, is of greater value. But they are useless to me, for without capital I cannot run the store, while without means I cannot live in the house. And I haven’t, so far, been able to come across a tenant. I’ve five pounds in cash, and when that goes I’m penniless.”

He began to throw pebbles aimlessly, vaguely wondering what he could do to lighten his difficulties.

“It is plain that there is no work for me here,” he said at length. “Practically every white man between this and Elmina is an official of some sort, while the natives don’t count. Of course there are the merchants and the storekeepers, but then I am neither the one nor the other now. Father even never made much more than a bare living, thanks, perhaps, to that robber. Ah, if I had had the means to organise an expedition I would have followed him; but then where should I have obtained an escort? These Fantis, fine fellows though they look, are really cowards, so I am told.”

He watched one of the ebony natives lounging in the shade some little distance away, and noted his tall and well-proportioned figure. Then he turned to others, who sat with their toes dipping in the water, and their knees submerged every now and again as a big wave thundered on the sand. They were the kroomen, who were accustomed to play between shore and ship, and bring off passengers and baggage.

“They will have work soon,” thought Dick, as his eye lit upon a steamer approaching. “But they know that it will be an hour yet before she is at her moorings off the coast. She’s a big vessel. One of the regular callers.”

For a little while he gazed at the ship, wondering who were aboard, and which of the white officials who had gone away on leave some time before, fagged and debilitated by the trying climate, would return, and come ashore fresh and cheery, with that ruddy complexion common to Europeans and to natives of the British Isles.

“Lucky beggars,” he thought. “They will have everything dear before them. They will take up the old work as if they had merely been for a day’s shooting up-country, and their friends whom they relieve will take their bunks and sail away. It would be a fine thing for me if I could get a billet under the Government.”

He lay there for a long time reflecting, and as he did so the ship came rapidly closer. When a mile from the sandy coast she dropped her anchor, and those ashore could easily see the splash as it entered the water. Then she lay to, with her broadside facing the land, rolling and heaving with monotonous regularity. Dick watched the bustle aboard listlessly, for it was no unusual sight for dwellers on the Gold Coast, the White Man’s Grave. Time and again he wondered whether there might be some one aboard to whom he could offer the store and the house, or some one who would befriend him and perhaps obtain some post for him which would enable him to work for a living. For as the reader will have learned, Dick was in difficulties. He had come out some months before at

his father's urgent call, and had barely had time to look into the business of the store when his father died. Then came the theft of the gold, and here was our hero stranded indeed, with little experience, and with very few years behind him. No wonder that he was dismayed. That as his fingers closed on the five golden sovereigns in his pocket his mind went time and again to the future, wondering what would happen when those golden coins had perforce been changed into silver, and the silver had dwindled away.

"If it had been in London," he said, "I should have soon found work of some sort, or I would have eagerly taken the Queen's shilling and enlisted. Here there is no work, at least not for a white man, and there is no supervising or overseeing job that I can get. Lastly, there is no recruiting station."

He had but stated the facts. For the past week he had been the round of the town, and had even gone, cap in hand, to the Governor.

"We're sorry for you, Stapleton," the hitter's secretary had said, as he shook Dick's hand, "but we have nothing to offer. We can't even take over your property, nor promise to look after it while you may be away. The best thing for you to do will be to get back to the Old Country, and try your luck there. You think of enlisting, do you? Well, it's a fine profession, is soldiering, and you are the lad to do well. Perhaps you might even find your way out here again, for let me tell you something. That rogue, King Koffee, is stirring his Ashantee tribesmen up for war. He is itching for a fight, and means to force one. So you might pay us a visit. By the way, are you really in earnest?"

"About the army, sir?" asked Dick.

"Yes, about enlisting. So many young fellows threaten to take the step, but fail for want of pluck when the critical moment comes. You see, there are not so many gentlemen rankers, and whatever others say, there's no doubt that the life is a rough one, and particularly so to the son of a gentleman. That's barrack life, of course. Out on active service it's different, for then officers and men live practically the same life, and put up with the same hardships."

"I know it's not all a feather bed, sir," replied Dick, respectfully. "But I'm stranded. I can't be kicking my heels out here in idleness, and I see few prospects of selling the store and the property. So I shall take what I can get for the goods now on hand and get a passage to England. If I can I shall work my way back, for it would be as well to learn to rough it from the first."

"And perhaps I could help you," was the answer. "Look here, Stapleton, we're sorry for you. It was very hard luck losing your money in that way, and if you are really keen on returning home with a view to entering the army, I'll get you a post aboard a steamer. A word from the Governor would influence the captain, and as you say, it is better to rough it now, and get a little practice, before joining the ranks. There, too, I can do something, I imagine. Come again when you have thoroughly made up your mind, and I will see what can be done."

Dick had to be satisfied with that, and as he lay there on the sand he had firmly come to a decision, and resolved to ask for a post aboard the steamer then lying in the roads, and return in her to England.

"But first I'll see whether there is any one there who wants a store or a house," he said. "They'll be coming soon. I see the surf-boats are on the way, and the rope gangway has been lowered."

He watched as some passengers clambered down the gangway, their white drill clothing showing crisply against the dark background of the ship, while others, less capable of the somewhat difficult feat of descending a swaying ladder, were lowered in a chair slung from the yard. Then his eye lazily followed as the kroo boys thrust their long paddles into the sea, and shot the big craft from the vessel's side. A second took its place at the gangway, and another load of passengers, all in gleaming white clothes as before, descended or were slung into the boat, and were rowed away. After that he could see the baggage being lowered down till other boats, which had now gone alongside, were well filled.

“There’s Brown, who went home six months ago, just before I came out,” said Dick, suddenly, as the first boat drew near the outer margin of the surf. “I remember he brought a message to me from father. How well he’s looking. When I saw him last he was a skeleton.”

He rose to his feet and strolled down to the edge of the sandy beach, where he waited to greet his friend. There were one or two others whom he recognised, and they waved to him. But for a little while passengers and friends ashore were completely divided, for a wide belt of raging surf stretched between them. On the outer fringe of this the surf-boat lay to, the kroo boys standing along the sides with the tips of their paddles just dipping in the water. They made no movement save every now and again when a big swelling breaker caused them to roll, and threatened to carry the boat into the surf. Then there was a word from the headman, the paddles dipped deeply, and the boat swung back from the surf.

“It wants doing to-day,” said an officer, who had now taken his place beside Dick. “There’s no wind to speak of, but there’s quite a heavy surf. I always like watching those kroo boatmen. Clever beggars, Stapleton, and full of pluck when engaged in a job of this sort. Ah, they are off.”

A shout came over the water, and at once all the paddles were plunged deep into the sea. The boat, helped by a breaker, sprang forward into the surf, and then being caught up by an enormous rolling billow, she shot forward on its crest, being lifted many feet into the air, till, in fact, those aboard her seemed to be far above those on the beach. But in a moment she dropped down again, and for a few seconds was out of sight.

“Looks as though the following wave would cover her,” said the officer, as he watched keenly for another sight of the boat. “Those beggars are paddling as if for their lives.”

At that instant the surf-boat had again come to view, and as the officer had remarked, the kroo boys were plying their paddles with tremendous energy. They looked over their shoulders with some apprehension, and then at the repeated shouts of their leader they dug their blades into the boiling surf and struggled to push the craft towards the shore. But in spite of their exertions the surf-boat seemed to be receding. She appeared to be slowly gliding backward down the far side of the billow which had just passed, falling, in fact, towards the gulf which lay between it and the monstrous wave which followed.

“They’re done,” cried the officer.

“They’ll manage it, I think,” said Dick, quietly. “But it’s touch and go.”

And that it proved to be. The men aboard shouted, and drove their paddles with fierce energy, while the spray licked about them, and the following wave seemed to surround them. The passengers, seeing their danger, behaved like sensible beings. They sat still and clutched their seats, while they looked backward apprehensively. Suddenly the boat began to move forward. The efforts of the paddlers were having the desired effect. It slowly gathered way, though the following wave, with its green curling crest now erected high above the craft, seemed to be about to fall upon it and swamp the passengers. Another shout, another fierce struggle, and the boat shot forward, the crest of the wave doubled up, caved in at that point, subsided into the seething boil about it, and then glided under the surf-boat, lifting it swiftly into the air. How it moved! It might have been shot from a gun. And the kroo men had reversed their paddles. They were now doing their utmost to restrain the boat, to keep her from being dashed on the shore. It was a magnificent struggle. The curling wave, a huge mass of foam and water, burst with a thunderous boom on the sand, and breaking into a million cascades, shot its torrents up on to the beach. The boat fell as suddenly till its keel was close to the sand, when it leapt forward again and finally came with a bump to the ground. At once the kroo boys leapt over the side, waist-deep in the receding water. They were almost dragged from their feet, but they clutched the boat, and putting their united strength to the task, ran her a few feet higher up, till, when the water subsided, she was left almost high and dry.

“Bravo!” shouted the officer and Dick together. “It was a narrow squeak. Ah, how are you, Preston?” went on the former as he recognised a friend, while our hero turned to the young fellow whom he had last seen in England.

By now a number of other residents had arrived, and there was an animated meeting, the passengers leaping out and shaking hands. Amid all the excitement, the hand-gripping, the questions as to friends at home, and as to matters on the Gold Coast, no one took notice of the following boats save Dick, who had greeted his friend and left him to pass on to others. He watched, therefore, as the second craft approached, and stared at the occupants as the stout vessel lay off the breakers waiting for the propitious moment to arrive when it would be wise to push forward.

There were five passengers in all, three of them officers returning to duty, and two others, of whom one seemed to be a man of some fifty years of age, thin and almost cadaverous, while the last by all appearances was a very stout, short man, who found the heat trying, for he fanned his face with an enormous topee, then mopped his brows with an exceedingly red bandana handkerchief, and finally, with a start of surprise, stood up and stared back at the oncoming waves with every appearance of dismay. Dick heard him shout, and a moment later the tall, thin man had swept him to his seat again with an adroit movement of the arm.

“A stranger, evidently,” thought Dick. “He has never been in the surf before. The other man knows the ropes well, while the officers I recognise as old residents. Ah, they’ve started. The little fat beggar doesn’t like it.”

The stout man evidently felt some tremors, for he clutched at the side, pushing his head in between two of the kroo men, till his companion, seeing that he was in the way, dragged him back and spoke sharply to him. After that he remained as if rooted to his seat, staring at the wave which followed, and shuddering as the boat was lifted to the summit of a crest, and again as she as quickly slid back into the abyss behind. A shriek escaped him as the craft slowly receded, while the harder the paddles worked and their leader shouted, the more did the terror of the unaccustomed situation seem to fill this little stranger. A moment later a shout from Dick and a chorus of yells attracted the attention of those ashore. They turned to find the boat gone. She had been completely engulfed by the following wave, and for a minute nothing but seething water could be seen. Then a black arm shot up, and later the whole of the kroo rowers bobbed to the surface like corks, and knowing what was wanted, merely struggled to keep their heads above the surface while the water swept them ashore. Then the three officers appeared, and rapidly followed the example set them.

“Two are missing,” shouted Dick, “the fat little man and the thin one.”

“Then one at least has gone for good,” replied one of the passengers who had just come ashore. “The Dutchman couldn’t swim if you paid him. The other could, no doubt. Hullo! What’s happening, Stapleton?”

“I’m going in,” said Dick, quietly, as he tore at his coat and kicked his shoes off. “Look; there’s one, and he’s helpless!”

He had no time for more, but coolly nodding to the group, ran into the water, and as a wave crashed into seething foam at his feet he dived into the mass and disappeared. A minute later he was in the trough beyond, and the wave which followed merely lifted him high in the air. There was a warning shout from the shore, and a dozen fingers pointed to his right. But did not see them. Nor did he even hear, for the roar of the surf was so great. But he happened to catch sight of an arm, which was instantly submerged.

“That is one,” he said to himself. “I’ll get him if I dive.”

Dick had learned to be wary, and knew that it is as dangerous to approach a drowning man from behind as from the front when he is still full of vigour. He dived, struck out beneath the water, touched something, and struggled to the surface, clutching the tail of a coat. He pulled at it, and slowly the fat face of the stout little passenger appeared, and close to his that of the thin man, the one with cadaverous cheeks. Then a pair of arms came into sight, and Dick gathered that the stout stranger

had gripped at the nearest person and had dragged him down with him, making escape impossible, making it even out of the question for the taller man to struggle for existence.

“Better get them ashore like this,” he thought, with wonderful coolness considering the danger. “There’s a wave coming. I’ll copy the kroo boys and wait for it. Then I’ll try to get all three of us flung on the beach.”

He took a firm hold of the collar of the stout man, who was apparently unconscious, for his eyes were tightly closed, though his arms still retained their grip. But the hold which Dick had obtained enabled him to keep the fat stranger’s lips just clear of the water, while it also raised the other man’s face. Then Dick lifted his free arm for a second. Those ashore saw the movement and shouted, while three or four of them ran down into the sea. A wave was coming. Dick could see it in spite of the blowing spray which whisked across the water. He took a deep breath and gripped the coat with both hands. The curling crest of a green wave shut out the horizon. There was a crash in his ears. The torrent caught him and almost tore his grip from the collar. Then he felt that he was moving. He and the weight to which he clung shot towards the shore, a foot or more of water covering them. Then there was a second crash, loud shouts from those on the beach, and afterwards —

“Hullo! Does it hurt? Broke just above the elbow and we had such a job. No. Lie down, sir! You are not to move. Lie down, I say! You are safe out of the water.”

Dick collapsed flat on his back and stared indignantly at the individual who had dared to give the order. He was a trim, dapper Englishman, with a small beard, and as he returned our hero’s gaze he showed every sign of being a man who meant what he said, and would have no nonsense. He was minus his coat, and his sleeves were rolled to the shoulder.

“That’s an order,” he laughed. “Remember that, youngster. An order. See that you obey it.”

He shook his fist, laughed merrily, and proceeded to unroll his sleeves and don his coat.

They were in a large, airy room, and when Dick turned his head, he could catch, through the widely opened windows, a view of the sea, of the ship which had just reached the roads, and a small section of the sandy beach. No one was stirring. The sun was right overhead, and the shadows short and barely perceptible. The atmosphere quivered with the heat. Even the birds and the insects seemed to have succumbed. An unnatural quiet reigned over that portion of the Gold Coast, and only the surf thundered and roared. But that was partly imagination. Dick could not shake off the impression that he was even then swallowed in that huge mass of water, and that he could still hear, was deafened, indeed, by the crash of the billows. He looked again down at the sands. A solitary Fanti boy languidly sauntered across the view. There was a boat drawn up clear of the breakers, and another lay off the ship, a mile from the shore. Was it all a dream, then?

“I say,” he suddenly remarked, and he felt surprised that his voice should sound so low and weak. “Er, I say, if you please, where am I, and what has been happening?”

“Happening?” exclaimed his companion, with elevated eyebrows. “Oh, nothing at all. You acted like a madman, they tell me. You dived into the surf, and, as a result, the surf threw you back as if it objected to you. It threw you hard, too, and wet sand is heavy stuff to fall on. You’ve a broken arm, and may thank your stars that that is all. It ought, by rights, to have been a broken neck and hardly a whole bone in your body. Where are you? Why, at the Governor’s, of course. In clover, my boy.”

The jovial individual laughed as he spoke, and came close to the bed.

“You’ve been an ass,” he said bluntly, and with a laugh. “Seriously, my lad, you’ve done a fine thing. You went into the surf and brought out those two drowning men. It was a fine thing to do, but risky. My word, I think so!”

He took Dick’s hand and squeezed it, while the bantering smile left his lips.

“A nigger is at home sometimes in the surf,” he explained; “but when you know the coast as I do, you will realise that to get into those breakers means death to most white men. You want to be a fish in the first place, and you need to be made of cast iron in the second. I’m not joking. I’ve seen many a surf-boat splintered into bits as she bumped on the beach. Men are thrown ashore in

the same way, and they get broken. Your arm is fractured, and a nice little business it has been to get it put up properly. The Dutchman is still unconscious, and I fancy he swallowed a deal of salt water. Mr Pepson, the other individual whom you saved, is quite recovered. He's one of those fellows who is as hard as nails. But there, that'll do. I'm talking too much. Lie down quietly and try to sleep like a good fellow."

So it was real after all. He had not dreamed it. He had gone into the surf, and the Dutchman was saved.

"And who's this Mr Pepson?" thought Dick. "And this fellow here must be the doctor. One of the army surgeons, I suppose. Fancy being at the Governor's house. Phew! That ought to get me the billet aboard the ship." Suddenly he recollected that his fractured arm would make hard work out of the question for a time, and he groaned at the thought.

"Pain?" asked the surgeon. "No? Then worry? What's wrong?"

Dick told him in a few words.

"Then don't bother your head," was the answer. "The Governor is not likely to turn you out while you are helpless, and the time to be worrying will be when you are well. You've friends now, lad. You were no one before – that is, you were one amongst many. Now you have brought your name into prominence. We don't have men fished out of the surf every day of the year."

He spoke the truth, too, and Dick soon realised that his gallant action had brought him much honour and many friends. The Governor came that very afternoon to congratulate him, while the members of the household, the ladies of the Governor's party, fussed about their guest. Officers called to see the plucky youngster, while, such is the reward of popularity, two of the traders on the coast made offers for Dick's houses and the good-will of the stores. It was amazing, and if our hero's head had hummed before with the memory of his buffeting in the surf, it hummed still louder now. He was in a glow. The clothes on his bed seemed like lead. The place stifled him. He longed to be able to get out, to shake off the excitement.

"An attack of fever," said the surgeon that evening, as he came to the room and found Dick wandering slightly. "The shock, hard times for the last few weeks, and thoughtless exposure to the sun, are probable causes. That's what many of the youngsters do. They think that because an older hand can at a pinch work during the heat of the day and in the sun, they can do the same. They can't. They haven't the stamina of older men. Here's an example. He'll be in bed for another week."

And in bed Dick was for more than that time. At last, when the fever had left him, he was allowed to get into a chair, where for a few days he remained till his strength was partially restored. Another week and he emerged into the open. And here at length he made the acquaintance of the men he had rescued from the surf.

Chapter Three.

A Mining Expedition

Dick could have shouted with merriment as the two strangers whom he had rescued after their upset in the surf came up the steep steps of Government House to greet him, and still more was his merriment roused as the stout little man came forward to shake him by the hand. For this rotund and jolly-looking individual was dressed in immaculate white, with an enormously broad red cummerbund about his middle, making his vast girth even more noticeable. His round, clean-shaven face beamed with friendly purpose, while there was about him the air of a leader. He struggled to appear dignified. He held his head high, and showed no sign of feeling abashed, or ashamed at the memory of his conduct aboard the boat.

“Ah, ah!” he gasped, for the climb had taken his breath away. “Bud id is hod for walking, Meinheer Dick, and zese steps zey are sdeep. I greed you brave Englishman as one brave man would anozer. I render zanks for your aid. I am proud to shake ze hand of mine comrade who came into ze wild sea to give me ze help.”

“Goodness!” thought Dick, “he speaks as if he had actually been attempting to save his friend, and had not really been the means of almost drowning him.”

He glanced furtively at the second stranger, as the fat man grasped his hand and pumped it up and down, while at the same time he vainly endeavoured to mop his streaming forehead. But Dick could read nothing in the face of Mr Pepson. Perhaps the keen sunken eyes twinkled ever so little. Perhaps that twitch of the thin lips was a smile suppressed. Beyond that there was nothing. Mr Pepson gazed at his rescuer with evident interest, and seemed barely to notice the presence of his companion. At length, however, he moved forward a step and addressed himself quietly to Dick.

“Let me introduce our friend,” he said, with a quaint little bow, removing his topee as he did so. “This is Meinheer Van Somering, of Elmina.”

“Dutch by birdh and a Dutchman to ze backbone, Meinheer,” exclaimed the stout man, as he released Dick’s hand. “I am one of ze residents of Elmina, which was in ze hands of mine country till ladely, you undersdand. Id is a spod to visid. Ah! zere you will find comford. But I have nod zanked you.”

“Indeed you have. You have said enough. I did nothing to speak of,” exclaimed Dick, hastily. “How are you? None the worse for your adventure?”

“None, we thank you,” answered Mr Pepson, interrupting the voluble Dutchman as he was in the act of launching forth into a speech. “We grieve to hear how badly you have fared, and we hope that you are now on the mend. You do not like thanks. I see that plainly. Then I will say very little. I owe you my life, Mr Stapleton, and I and all consider your action to have been an extremely plucky one. Now, may we sit down? It is hot, as Meinheer says. And these steps are steep.”

“Sdeep! Mein word! In Elmina zere are none like dese. Here, in Cape Coast Castle, everyzing is sdeep. You climb or you run downhill. Zere is no level. Id is derrible!”

The fat little Dutchman threw his hands into the air with a comical expression of disgust, and then flung himself back into a basket chair, causing it to creak and groan and bend to one side, till Dick thought it would certainly collapse.

Mr Pepson smiled. “Our friend does not think greatly of this English possession of ours,” he said, “and there I agree with him, for Elmina is by contrast a charming spot. You have been there, Mr Stapleton – Dick I think they all call you?”

“No, I have never been to Elmina,” Dick was bound to admit.

“Ah, well, it lies some sixteen miles to the west, as you will know, and the Dutch held it for many years – in fact, till recently, when England bought the place. It is beautiful in many ways. There is little fever. The spot is drained and the bush cut back into wide clearings.”

“Ah, yes, Meinheer, and led me add, zere is a harbour. Look zere!”

The little Dutchman danced to his feet and tiptoed to the edge of the steep steps by which he had so recently ascended. Then he pointed a condemning finger at the white sandy beach, and at the thundering surf which crashed upon it.

“See id! Ze cruel waves, which so nearly robbed me of a dear, dear friend, for whose life I struggled till Meinheer Dick plunged do ze rescue. Zere is none of zat at Elmina. We Dutchmen made a harbour years ago. You can land at Elmina as you might in Holland. There is nod even a – ah, whad do you call him – ah, I have him, yes, a ribble, zere is nod even zat, Meinheer.”

The comical little fellow threw out his chest, as if that were necessary considering its huge dimensions, and patted it gracefully, while he looked round upon his listeners in turn as if seeking for some words of praise and commendation.

“It is true enough,” admitted Mr Pepson, and again Dick thought he detected a half-suppressed smile. “The country to which our friend belongs sent excellent colonists to Elmina. They have a harbour, and why we have not one here passes belief. But there. Why let us compare the two places and their governments? It is sufficient to say that Elmina has advanced as the years have passed, while this possession, which has been in our hands for more than two hundred years, has receded if anything. A cargo of cement and two months’ work would have made a harbour. An engineer with limited skill and knowledge could have erected a breakwater which would have enabled small boats to lie snug and secure, while there would have been no need for surf-boats. As to the bush. They call this ‘the white man’s grave.’ And so it is. But the health of the town could be vastly improved if proper efforts were made. The bush could be cleared and the place drained.”

He paused and looked out to sea, while Dick, as he watched the surf and thought over what had been said, could not help feeling that had the measures just mentioned been carried out, his father might still be living, and many another Englishman with him. Indeed, there is little doubt that at the time and until this period Cape Coast Castle and its neighbourhood had been sadly neglected. No English colony had advanced less, and none was so unhealthy, though a little effort would easily have improved matters.

“You are lately from home?” asked Mr Pepson, suddenly, turning to Dick.

“Four months ago. I came to help my father, who had had a store here for many years. He died a week before you landed.”

“Before you aided us in our efforts to reach the land, I think,” was the smiling rejoinder. “I knew your father slightly, and I sympathise with you in your loss. Do you propose to remain in these parts?”

The question was asked so quietly that Dick could not imagine that Mr Pepson had the smallest interest in the answer. And yet, had he watched this stranger, he would have seen a keen glance of the eye, a movement of the hand which denoted eagerness.

“I shall sail for England as soon as my arm is strong enough. I have been promised help in getting a place aboard one of the ships. I shall work my way home, and then seek for employment. I have been rather unlucky.”

“You were robbed, we hear. But you still have some property left, and perhaps you might find work here. What would you say to a trip up-country?”

Mr Pepson leaned back and surveyed our hero. He drew a cigar from his pocket, bit the end off, and applied a match. And all the while his eyes were on the young fellow who had saved his life. As for Meinheer Van Somering, his cheeks were puffed out with suppressed excitement. He leaned forward till his chair looked as if it would capsize, and he devoured the figure seated before him with eyes which were almost hidden behind the wreathes of fat which clothed his cheeks.

“Mind,” said Mr Pepson, calmly, “a trip such as I suggest would not be a holiday. There are dangers other than connected with fever. There are natives. Have you heard of King Koffee’s hosts of warriors?”

Dick had heard a great deal, and acknowledged the fact.

“Every one seems to think that there will be trouble with them before very long,” he said. “The Fantis, the people on this side of the Pra, go in terror of their lives. Yes, I know that there is danger up-country, but then, Mr Pepson, it is not so great as to keep an Englishman away.”

“Nor one of my gread coundry, Meinheer!”

“Quite right! Quite so, Van Somering. Now listen, Mr Dick. We – that is, Meinheer and myself – are about to march into the interior, to a spot some miles north and east of the Pra. We are bent on gold-mining, and we have bought a concession from this King Koffee. Meinheer has had his agents there for the past six months – a Dutchman and natives – and there are shafts sunk, a stockade erected, and gold is being obtained. Now I have come into the venture. The agent is about to retire, and we desire to see our concession, and to place an agent in charge who can be relied upon. The post is a dangerous one. It is also one of responsibility, for many ounces of gold pass through the hands of the man who is in charge. We have been seeking for a successor, and we believe we have found him. You are the young man upon whom our choice has fallen.”

Dick could have fallen from his chair, so great was his astonishment.

“But – but – I am only eighteen,” he stammered. “And I don’t know anything about mining.”

“We want a reliable and straightforward man,” said Mr Pepson, quietly, “and we believe you to be that. Your age does not come into the question. In England you might be just leaving for college, or have held a commission in the service for a year. You would hardly be deemed fitted for a post of great responsibility. Out here it is different. You have pluck and tenacity. Every one in the place says that. You speak a little of the Fanti language, and you have some knowledge of the country and the natives. As to the mining, no knowledge is required. The natives sink the shafts and get the gold. You take charge of it, and, at stated periods, send it down to the coast. Your greatest task will be to see that all is secure. To make sure that the Ashantees are friendly, and in the event of probable trouble, to secrete the gold and beat a retreat. In other words, we want a sensible individual, with some command over the natives, and with enough pluck to enable him to live almost alone in the forests.”

The offer was a tempting one. Dick saw employment before him, and a life which he judged would suit him well. Then, too, longer residence in the country would enable him to safeguard his interests on the coast, and perhaps to sell or let the property which was all that he possessed.

“As to the pay,” said Mr Pepson, “that will be liberal, far better, indeed, than an official of your years obtains in these parts. We have a valuable concession, and we can afford to pay the right man. Then, too, there is a question of the store. You have one, we learn. We are prepared to enter into an agreement to take a share of it from you, or we will take all, paying for the house and the goodwill of the business. In addition, since we shall want a residence, we are prepared to rent or buy the residence in which your father lived.”

Could he believe his ears? Could it be that he was listening to a proposition which would relieve him of all his difficulties? Dick felt stunned. The roar of the surf, which had troubled him ever since his adventure, threatened to deafen him. He felt dizzy, and sat back in his chair, grasping the arms for support. Meanwhile, Mr Pepson watched him calmly, Meinheer Van Somering beaming upon him as though he alone were the author of all these suggestions, and as if Dick were indebted to him only.

“I can see a brave man wid half one eye,” he gasped, as he fanned his hot cheeks. “Meinheer is brave. He will fight for us. He is ze man we look for.”

“Then I accept,” exclaimed Dick, eagerly. “I feel that I am too young for the task, or rather, that I should be at home in England. Out here it is different. I can speak a little of the language, and, if it is any advantage, I can shoot straight. I will go to this concession, and will do my best in your interests. As to the property, your suggestions take my breath away.”

“While we are only too glad to have the opportunity of thus helping a friend. Now, Mr Dick, we shall leave you. It is hot, and you are tired. I will call to-morrow, and will then make a definite offer for the business, or a share of it. Meanwhile I will send some one to you who can give you independent advice as to its value. For business is business, my lad, and it is necessary that your interests should be protected. Now, Meinheer, we will go. It is downhill to the hotel, and therefore easy walking.”

He rose as Dick sprang to his feet, and shook our hero warmly by the hand. Meinheer Van Somering repeated the process, and having backed to the edge of the stairs, swept his topee from his head and treated Dick to an elaborate bow. “We shall meed again, Meinheer Dick,” he called out. “Till zen a Dutchman is proud do call himself your gread friend. Mein word! bud id has been a pleasure to meed you.”

He swept his topee on to his head again, mopped the perspiration from his face, and descended slowly, leaving Dick with his head in a whirl, and feeling half inclined to laugh at the memory of this Dutchman’s comical figure, his absurd attempts to be dignified, and his vast stock of self-assurance; and more than half disposed to shed tears of joy and relief at the words of Mr Pepson, at the offer which had been made to him, and at the prospect for the future. Then he sat down and did what many another youngster has done, who has been hurt and has been sick for a time. He fainted from sheer weakness and inability to withstand so much excitement.

“And that is all the thanks I get for allowing them to come,” exclaimed the trim-bearded doctor, as he glared at Dick some minutes later. “It’s all the work of that fat little Dutchman, of that I’m sure. He’d talk till any one was weary. Well, he shall not come again. You are to be a prisoner here, my boy, till you show signs that you are really mending. Fainted! Just fancy!”

He went off with a sniff and a smile, leaving Dick quite well again, but ready now to inflict the direst punishment upon himself for displaying such weakness.

“I could kick myself!” he exclaimed in disgust. “Here am I, in clover, as the doctor says, but till half an hour ago with starvation before me. I was on my beam ends, and did not know where to look for work or help. And here I am, with a post assured, and every prospect of earning a decent living. And the news upsets me. I’m a donk ey! A fine thing if Mr Pepson had seen me. A nice thing for him to know that his future manager might faint like a girl at the first critical moment. Pah! I wish some one would kick me!”

There was no one at hand to comply with his invitation, and presently the memory of his weakness wore off and Dick fell asleep. A few days later he was far stronger, and when three weeks had passed he was himself again, his arm was out of the splints, and carried in a sling, while, when the doctor or Mr Pepson were not about, he amused himself with using the hand and fingers.

“As well get accustomed to working the limb,” he said to himself, with a smile. “I am sure that the expedition is dallying here till I am well, for that is just like Mr Pepson. He is really grateful, and his liberality is wonderful. I must get this arm out of the sling as soon as possible.”

Another week, in fact, brought the consent of the doctor, whereupon active preparations for the trip up-country were commenced. Meanwhile our hero had learned more of his new friends. Mr Pepson, he found, was a wealthy trader from Sierra Leone, while Meinheer Van Somering was, as he had proudly stated, a native of Elmina. Born and bred there, he spoke the native tongue like his own, and knew the Gold Coast intimately. It was he who had learned of the goldfield on the Pra, and unable to purchase the concession himself, he had sent the information to Mr Pepson. Dick learned to like the Dutchman immensely, to laugh at his comical appearance, his efforts towards dignity, his mighty ways with the natives, and his good temper. He was vastly amused at Meinheer’s other side, at his obvious nervousness, and at his boastful ways and words.

“He is a good friend, and an amusing companion,” said Mr Pepson one day, “and if he has his little faults we must not complain. The truth is that he is no fighter, Dick. When that is said, we have said sufficient. If we meet with trouble we may rely upon his seeking for and finding a secure retreat. We will not count on his help to protect the expedition. After all, it is only fair that the work should

be divided. I shall command, and you will aid me. Meinheer is chief interpreter till you have made more acquaintance with the natives, and he will advise us about the mines and their working. Now let us go into the question of the expedition. You know the site of the mines?"

Dick had heard that it was somewhere on the river Pra, and said so.

"It is exactly ninety-four miles from here," said Mr Pepson, "and is surrounded by dense bush. To get to it we ascend the river Pra till we reach a point on a level with the mines. Then we strike into the jungle. We shall take with us a few sets of hand winding gear, for at present the natives lower themselves into the shafts by their own efforts. The gear we have brought is simple, but it will answer well and save labour. Then we are taking guns and ammunition, rockets, grenades, and a small brass cannon. In addition there will be picks and spades, and iron boxes, in which the gold will be packed. As to conveyances, there is a large launch for our own use, and she will tow a couple of narrow native craft, and more if necessary. Once we have settled there, she will return with us, and will make periodical trips from the mines as soon as you have taken charge. She will be close to your hand, and if you meet with trouble you will know that there is a means of flight, and a way by which you can reach the coast. Now let us see to our personal outfit, for remember, we may be months away, and we are going into parts which try the best of clothing."

They took their way into the town, for they had been chatting on the beach, where many of the stores for their expedition had been accumulated. Then they went by the road which led to the house which Dick's father had erected, and which had now passed into the keeping of the two partners. There they found a native tailor, with his wares already spread out on the verandah.

"He is a humble and patient individual," said Mr Pepson, with a smile, "and he will have carried out my orders to the letter. These natives cannot always cut garments, and for bush work, as for any other, it is essential that one's clothes should fit easily and well, for otherwise in this hot climate they are apt to chafe. That being the case, I have for years made it a practice to get a stock of clothes when in England, and then allow a native to copy. You understand, he picks a suit to pieces, and makes use of the bits as patterns. He has a couple of suits here for us both. Yours is a copy of one which we found in your room. Come along. Give it a trial."

This slender, cadaverous-looking Englishman from Sierra Leone seemed to be able to think of everything. Time and again Dick had cause to wonder at his thoughtfulness, his care for others, and particularly for our hero; and long ago he had ceased to do more than murmur his thanks, for Mr Pepson would arrest him at once with a warning finger and a friendly smile.

"What!" he would exclaim, "am I not to be allowed to do something for the comfort of one who saved my life, and that, too, of our stout friend, Meinheer Van Somering? The world is indeed an ungrateful place if one is to receive such an act with only passing thanks, to reward it with a nod and a few polite words, and then in the rush which surrounds us to forget the deed and the one who gallantly performed it. Surely there is as much pleasure in remembering a brave act and a good friend as in anything. I hold that a gentleman never forgets his debts of gratitude, for they are indeed debts of honour, which can never be settled too completely."

And Dick would become silent, though now and again he would lamely protest that he had done nothing at all.

"That is your modesty, Dick," would be the answer. "I may say the same. I have done nothing more than any business man would do. You are to be my agent. I have a big stake in these mines, and I wish all to go well. Consequently, to avoid future loss, I equip my agent with the best and see to his welfare."

There was no arguing with such a man. He would smile that dry smile of his and would turn away. But Dick did not forget. If Mr Pepson was grateful, so also was he, for he was indeed in clover. He saw work before him, hard work, too; for he had been given to understand that the post of agent would be no sinecure. Then he was now a partner with Mr Pepson and the Dutchman in the store which his father had had for so many years. It had reopened already with a flourish. A manager had

been appointed, and there were prospects of reviving the business, so that Dick might look forward to an income. Then he had been credited with a good sum, which Mr Pepson had insisted was the value of the partnership, while a further sum was to be paid every year in the way of rent for the residence. And now, as if that were not enough, here was a complete outfit. Dick donned the clothes which the native had prepared, and stepped into the centre of the verandah for Mr Pepson's approval.

"You will do well," said the latter, when he had surveyed him critically. "The stuff is some which I imported specially. It is a dark cloth, as you observe, and, while being thin and light, it is strong, and to a certain extent waterproof. It will stand the thorns in the jungle, and better perhaps, should we meet with trouble, you will find that it does not make the wearer conspicuous. There is a green shade in it, and that will be difficult to detect against the foliage. Now the hat. That will do, too. It is made of the same material, and is just the thing for the jungle. A topee would be in the way, and besides, the sun does not penetrate very much, and, indeed, is often not to be seen. You will carry a topee in your kit for open spaces."

Three days later all was in readiness, and Dick found himself dressed in preparation for an early start. As he looked in his glass that morning, an hour before the sun rose above the steaming jungle and bush, he saw there a young fellow of medium height, dressed in a loose-fitting knickerbocker suit, with wide-awake hat to match. A leather belt was about his waist, and slung to it was a revolver, while on the other hip he carried a short sword, with a keen cutting edge on one side, the reverse being fashioned like a saw, for they would have dense jungle to pass through, and such an implement was necessary. Beneath the loose coat he wore a light flannel shirt and turn-down collar, open at the neck. A pair of gaiters covered his calves, while his feet were clad in strong shooting boots. Altogether he looked a likely young fellow, and his smooth features and firm chin, disclosing a creditable amount of determination and obvious courage for one so young, set off his general appearance and led one to believe that the mining partners had not made such a bad choice after all.

"It's we who have made the mistake," said the Governor that morning to his secretary, as he bade farewell to the expedition. "We knew the lad was in difficulties and wanted a job, but we thought him too young. We let him kick his heels till he was miserable. We looked on while he was robbed and ruined, and we should have helped him to slip from the country had it not been for that plucky dash of his. I tell you, there are bad times coming. I could have found him useful as a police officer. We want a likely fellow, who can speak this Fanti tongue, to keep an eye open for the doings of the Elmina natives. This fellow would have done well. But there! we've lost him. It's always the way with those in authority. We hesitate. We know that our choice must be sanctioned by some man in office away at home, a man, mind you, who has never seen the object of our choice. That's red tape. It kills initiative. It has lost us a good fellow, and these men, Pepson and the Dutchman, have been too smart for us. They have jumped at him, and they've a real good fellow."

There was quite a commotion in Cape Coast Castle that morning. Many turned out to see the last of the expedition, and there was a cheer as the party embarked on a surf-boat, and put out to the steam launch lying just off the beach.

"Good luck! and watch the Ashantees," shouted one of the Government officials.

"Bring back plenty of gold," called out another.

"Good-bye and good luck!"

The words of encouragement and a last cheer came to them as they boarded the launch. There was a sharp order from Mr Pepson, then the engines revolved, the propeller thrashed the water, and they were off, Dick and his friend watching the receding figures on the shore, while the sprightly Van Somering climbed to the highest point of the narrow deck and there held himself with head erect so that all might view him and admire.

"A great swell he is, too," laughed Mr Pepson, as he and Dick turned from the shore. "His appearance alone should mean our security from attack."

And our hero was fain to agree. For the fat little Dutchman had exceeded any former attempt. True, he was dressed in the same loose clothing, made of the selfsame material as worn by his comrades. But his vanity had added embellishments to it. His shirt was red, a red which dazzled the eye, while the belt which surrounded his ample waist was some five inches in width – strong enough, in fact, to bear the weight of two such Dutchmen, while it carried in front an enormous revolver and a dagger of like proportions, all of which made it appear as if Meinheer Van Somering were a man of pugnacious disposition, and therefore to be avoided.

An hour later, a little while after the sun had risen over the jungle, the launch glided into the river at Elmina, and came to rest close to the mole.

“We will see first of all that our stores are here,” said Mr Pepson, as he leaped ashore. “Then we will move on without delay. Come with me, Dick, and go over the list of our possessions.”

Everything had been sent on some few days before from the neighbourhood of Cape Coast Castle, where they had been landed from the steamer, and thanks to the careful foresight of Mr Pepson, Dick found that three dugouts, of large proportions, lay close to the mole, roped firmly together, and in these were disposed the belongings of the expedition. In the bows of one was the brass gun, while there were sniders in all three and an ample supply of ammunition. In addition, half a dozen Fanti warriors sat on the thwarts waiting for the forward move.

“Hook on the launch,” said Mr Pepson. “Now, all aboard. Send her ahead, Johnnie.”

Johnnie was the native boy who had been trained to man the engines of the launch, and he rejoiced in the name given. At the word he opened the steam throttle till the merest jet was fed to the cylinders, and gently drew ahead of the boats, slowly stretching out the hawser connecting them till it was taut. Then again there was a commotion at the end of the launch. The water was thrashed into foam, the ropes creaked and stretched, and finally the launch was under way, the three boats following gaily in the wake of the plucky steamer. Mr Pepson was at the wheel, and promptly put his helm over till they were heading for the very centre of the river.

“All clear here,” he said, with a smile. “Now we make out for the sea, for this is not the river Pra. It lies a few miles to the west. Once there we shall not always have a wide, open stretch to steer through, particularly when we have ascended a few miles. Then, indeed, the fun will commence, for there are sure to be sandbanks and shallows, while I believe that crocodiles abound. In any case the river will narrow, and before very long the trees will come closer together and will shelter us from the sun. Send her full steam ahead, Johnnie.”

By now they were feeling the swell at the mouth of the harbour of Elmina, and for some minutes all clung to the sides, for the light craft were tossed by the enormous surf running outside. When that was safely passed the steam launch turned to the west, and they went off along the coast, just as they had done that morning, watching the white sandy beach as they swept past it, the interminable forests beyond, and the blue haze hanging over the hills and mountains in the distance. Two hours later they reached the mouth of the river, and having approached it carefully, for mud banks lay off it in many directions, they shot into an open channel, and soon found themselves ascending the Pra, a broad river, there known as the Bustum.

“Higher up it is called the Pra,” explained Mr Pepson, “until it bifurcates. The branch flowing from the east is then called the Prahsu, while the one from the west is known as the river Offwin. We do not ascend either of these. Our route takes us by a narrow tributary flowing into the Pra, and by that means we reach our destination. Now we can go full ahead.”

Once more the throttle was opened to its full extent, and with the three boats in tow the launch steamed up into the heart of the country, with every prospect of covering many miles ere the darkness came and caused her to come to a stop.

Chapter Four. A Chase and a Fight

“In a little while the sun will be down,” said Mr Pepson, as he sprawled on the deck of the steam launch that evening. “Then it will be dark in half an hour or less, and we shall have to think of setting a watch. Meinheer will take the first one. From seven to nine, Meinheer. Dick will follow from that hour till midnight, and I shall take the watch from the first moment of the new day till the light comes. That will be about three o’clock. Now let us get our supper.”

All day they had been steaming without adventure and without interruption up the broad sweep of the river Pra, seeing nothing to alarm them, and meeting with no difficulties. So far they had had plenty of water beneath their keels, and an ample space through which to steer. But there were signs that the river was narrowing, while all felt as if the forest was hemming them in.

“Zis is noding do whad we shall have soon,” the Dutchman said, with a wave of his arm. “Zis forest – I have been for some miles into him before, mine friends – sdredches for a long, long way. Id is tick, too. See how ze drees shoed up close togeder. And watch below. Ze creepers are everywhere. Id would dake a day do cud a new road a mile long. Yes. Id is dense. Bud we shall have no drouble. Ze river dakes us do ze mine.”

“For which I am only too thankful,” added Mr Pepson. “Our journey should occupy but three days, or at the most four. If we had to march through the forest we should have to take an army of Fanti labourers to cut a road. And then think of the fever.”

“And of the machinery, too,” exclaimed Dick.

“Yes, that is another point,” agreed Mr Pepson. “This country has been noted for its gold for many years. The Ashantis have carried on a trade since they became a nation, and there is no doubt that there are vast natural stores. You may ask, why have others not attempted to open mines before this? They have done so. The beach at Elmina and at Cape Coast Castle is strewn with rusting machinery, which has been landed with a purpose, and then left to rot and rust simply because of the difficulty of transport, and because of this forest. Luckily for us our mine is near the river. But here’s supper. Sit down, Van Somering.”

It was delightful to be out there in the open, even though the air hummed with myriads of mosquitoes. The launch and her three consorts lay moored out in the stream some hundred yards or less from the left bank of the river. About them, but for the buzz of the insects and the ripple of the water, all was still and silent. Not a beast seemed to be stirring, while even aboard the boats all had settled down to rest. Johnnie, the stoker and driver, sat in the engine-well wiping his black hands after an inspection of the machinery, while the Fanti crew lay curled up in the bottom of the boats, two in each one, content with the world, waiting quietly for their evening meal. And now it was ready. With a broad grin Johnnie announced that the water boiled, while Dick, who had been superintending a dish of bacon which he had placed at the furnace door, sang out that it was done to a turn.

“Then I will make the coffee,” cried Mr Pepson. “Meinheer, see that the cloth is laid; and, Dick, steady with the bacon. We will start fair together.”

The cloth consisted of a sheet of newspaper, a very ancient London daily, which the Dutchman spread out on the deck. Plates were of enamelled iron – the class of ware to stand half a dozen campaigns – while mugs were of the same hardy material, and were apt to be used for soup or coffee, water or good wine, just as circumstances dictated. It was all very jolly. This *al fresco* picnic delighted Dick, and he set-to at the meal with gusto, apologising for his appetite.

“Id is goot! Id will make you grow sdoud, mine friend,” grunted Meinheer, in the midst of consuming a rasher. “Id will make you grow so big zad ze natives will zink you a gread man. See how zey dread me, Meinheer Van Somering!”

He looked down at his ample proportions with evident satisfaction, and then completed his attack upon the rasher.

“Do-nighd all will be quied, mine friends,” he went on. “I shall be on guard, and zese natives will not come. Perhaps lader zey will ask who we are. I will speak wiz zem. There will be no difficulty. Anozer rasher, Meinheer Dick.”

They ate till they were satisfied, for there was no reason to be careful with the rations, as they had an ample supply. The repast was ended with a second cup of steaming coffee, when the burly Dutchman produced a pipe of dimensions as ample as his own, and with a bowl which took quite a quantity of tobacco to fill it. Mr Pepson lighted up a cigar, while Dick produced a briar pipe. Then for some minutes there was silence between them, while the darkness deepened, and the cigar and the pipes shone redder and redder.

At length it was dark, so dark on the surface of the river that nothing was visible, and Dick could hardly see the figures of his comrades. But that was only for a little while. Soon a big pale, African moon got up, and, riding clear of the jungle, flooded the course of the river, the left bank near which the boats lay, and the tree-tops and jungle along that side. On the far bank all was densely dark, and no eye could penetrate the deep shadow which cloaked the dark and forbidding forest which stretched unbroken beside the Pra.

“Bed!” called out Mr Pepson, indulging in a yawn. “Meinheer, yours is the first watch. Wake Dick at nine. Good-night.”

“Good nighd, mine friends. Sleeb well, for I shall protect you.”

The Dutchman went aft to the tiny cabin, and fetched his rifle and a bag of cartridges. Then he seated himself upon the roof of the saloon, the rifle across his knees, and his pipe held firmly between his teeth.

Dick, too, was tired. It had been a long and interesting day, and he had watched the passing banks of the river till his eyes ached. Now he felt drowsy. He got up from the deck, stretched his arms and yawned, and then went off to the bows. A minute later he was wrapped in his blanket, which covered him from head to foot, his head was on a bag containing clothing, while his legs were stretched along the deck. Half an hour later he was asleep; all aboard, in fact, had turned in for their rest, save the solitary Dutchman, who still nursed his rifle, and puffed volumes of smoke from his lips without ceasing.

No wonder that Dick was charmed with this trip up-country. It appealed with all its force to a young fellow of his age. He revelled in the strangeness of the scenery, the dense, awe-inspiring forests, and all the teeming life hidden in their midst, and the silent, slow-flowing river. That evening, too, he had thought how beautiful it all was, and how peaceful. He had admired the cold rays of the moon, the sleepy boats lying beneath it, and the dark figures stretched out beneath the thwarts. He had listened, too, for a time to the music of the bush, which came now more loudly to his ear. There was the chatter of a regiment of monkeys, the call of night birds innumerable, and the droning hum of the insects. Ever and anon there came a deeper sound, as if from some beast wandering in search of its meal, while once, as he awoke and rose on his elbow, he caught sight of a graceful four-footed animal – a gazelle – tripping gently into the river to drink. After that he stretched out again, and, lulled by the droning sounds, slept deeply.

“What was that? Ah! that beast again!” he suddenly said in a whisper, as, some two hours later, he wakened with a start, only to close his eyes again, for he realised at once that the shriek he had heard was one which had often disturbed him at Cape Coast Castle – one which proceeded from the throat of a harmless forest animal.

“Hoot! Hoot! Hoot!”

“An owl now,” thought our hero, dreamily. “There it goes again, and quite close, too. Bother the bird!”

“Hoot! Hoot!”

This time Dick sat up on his elbow, and looked about him vainly for the bird. "Hoot! Hoot!" It came from his right, and he slowly turned his head in that direction. Then he did a curious thing. He lay flat of a sudden, and rubbed the sleep from his eyes vigorously.

"That's rummy!" he murmured beneath his breath. "One of the boats has disappeared, and the others are moving away, and – what does it all mean?"

He rolled on to his back, lifted his head cautiously, and stared at the roof of the cabin. There was the figure of the Dutchman – immovable, looking fantastically huge, and sprawled out at full length. There was no pipe now to be seen, no smoke issued from his lips, while the rifle reposed beside him. Then came a deep, muffled snore. Meinheer Van Somering was asleep.

"Then there is some one near us," said Dick, swiftly. "Some one is stealing the boats. I must act with caution."

He had had experience of a midnight marauder before, and he determined on this occasion not to be so easily beaten. He rose to his knees, and crawled along the deck till he reached the Dutchman. A moment later he had the rifle in his hands, and had drawn back the lock. Click! At the crisp sound some one stirred. A dusky figure stood up on one of the boats close by, and commenced to pole lustily. Then a second stood erect, and Dick could hear the splash as his pole fell into the water.

"Stop!" he shouted. "Bring that boat back, or I fire!"

He covered the nearest figure with his weapon, and waited, while his shout was followed immediately by a scuffling behind him, and by the almost instant appearance of Mr Pepson. The latter seemed to take in the position at a glance. His eye detected the boat now so far away, the two remaining ones being poled by the two dark figures, and the huge, lumbering body of the Dutchman, still motionless and asleep.

"Shoot," he said, quietly.

Dick lifted the weapon again, sighted for his man, and fired. There was a loud shriek, and hardly had the echo of the shot died down when a splash told that the bullet had reached. But our hero was not content. He stretched for the bag, snatched another cartridge, and, having placed it in the rifle, covered the second man. However there was no need to fire, for a second splash told that the miscreant, warned by the fate of his comrade, had leaped overboard.

"What has happened?" demanded Mr Pepson, sharply, but with no trace of excitement in his voice. "You were asleep, for it is barely half-past eight. You found our watchman also asleep, and the boats departing. Did you see any one else?"

"No one," answered Dick, promptly. "But there must be one other at least. Look! There is a man poling the far boat."

"And he is too far away for a shot now. I might hit him, but the light is deceptive."

"Then why not follow sir?" exclaimed Dick. "Johnnie banked the fires, and in a few minutes there should be steam. That boat won't have a chance. We shall be up with her before she can get far."

"But not before our goods are stolen. No, we will give chase in one of the other boats," said Mr Pepson, with decision. "Meinheer, bring the steamer along at once. Dick and I will follow."

Already he was throwing off the hawser which held the anchor, and, as he did so, Dick seized a pole. A few strokes took the launch close to the moving boats which had been so silently set adrift.

"Hold on, Johnnie, and you too, Meinheer," called out Mr Pepson. "Now, Dick, get aboard with the gun, and I'll follow with another. We'll make one boat fast and pole the other down."

He ran along the deck of the launch, while Dick leaped into one of the native craft, two of which remained lashed side by side, and were floating away together. Suddenly a thought occurred to him. He sprang back into the launch, seized the bag of cartridges, and satisfying himself that it was well filled, slung it over his shoulder and again sprang into the native boat.

"Better get all ready for the pursuit," he said to himself. "I'll set the two boats free, and toss the end of a rope attached to one to Meinheer. He can make it fast aft and follow with the boat in tow."

He fell upon the lashings with eagerness, and when Mr Pepson appeared from the cabin, carrying a rifle, Dick had the two boats separated, and had tossed a rope attached to one to the Dutchman.

“Catch, Meinheer!” he shouted, for the burly Dutchman, since he had become fully awake, seemed to be endeavouring to collect his wits. The report of the rifle had brought him languidly to his feet, and now he stared at his two comrades in amazement, wholly unable to understand the need for such bustling, or for so much excitement.

“Bud whad is zis?” he demanded. “Is id ze middle of ze nighd, or – whad?”

“It means that you’ve been asleep when you ought to have been keeping watch,” answered Mr Pepson, bluntly. “Some thieves have cut our boats adrift, and one is being poled away. Don’t stare, Meinheer. Take the rope Dick has thrown and make it fast. Then follow as soon as you have steam. Johnnie, get that fire to blaze.”

He stepped into the native craft and took the pole which Dick offered him.

“Ready?” asked Dick.

A loud splash was the only answer, as Mr Pepson let his pole fall into the water. Dick followed suit, and in a little while they were shooting down the river, which in these parts was sufficiently shallow to allow of poling.

“Keep her in near the bank, sir,” sang out Dick. “It gets deeper out there, and I’ve noticed that the fellow who is poling is sometimes unable to bottom. We are getting nearer already. Can we try a shot?”

“Wait,” was the answer. “We have him in any case. He cannot escape us, and if we only keep him in sight he cannot take our goods. Keep on as we are till we are certain of a shot. If he tries to make to the opposite shore, where all is dense shadow, we will drop our poles and fire together.”

Ten minutes later they had overhauled the runaway to some extent, and when half an hour had passed they judged that they were within easy distance.

“Try a shot,” said Mr Pepson. “Your young eyes are better than mine. Don’t hesitate, my lad. These fellows are rogues and would kill us without a thought. We must teach them a lesson.”

Till that moment our hero would not have thought of hesitating, for he had felt the excitement of the chase, and he realised that he had to do with robbers who no doubt would have no scruples in killing him were he to come upon them. But just then the excitement had lessened somewhat. They were overhauling the chase without a doubt, and the figure poling the runaway boat looked so harmless there in the moonlight. Also he appeared to be unarmed. However, an order was an order, and his duty was plain. He dropped his pole into the bottom of the boat, picked up his rifle, and took a careful sight.

“Sight about the middle of his body – no higher,” said Mr Pepson. “That should find a mark.”

Crash! The report of the rifle set the jungle ringing, while it reverberated along the still surface of the river. Then came a shriek, followed by a shout from the shore. The native who poled the boat staggered and almost fell. Then he recovered himself, answered the shout from the shore, and in an instant had swung the boat’s head round in that direction.

“We have him sure enough,” cried Mr Pepson, for the first time showing some trace of excitement. “He is making for the moonlit side, and cannot escape. At least, the boat and its freight are ours again. Drop the rifle and take to the pole.”

They plunged their long poles into the water and sent the craft dancing after the other. But quick as they were, the boat in advance seemed to shoot across the moonlit stretch, and rapidly gained the bank. Again there was a shout, a dark figure ran out into the river, splashing the water loudly. Then a second followed, while the native who had been aboard threw his pole aside and staggered ashore.

“Heavily hit,” gasped Mr Pepson, for the exertion of poling was beginning to tell upon him. “But I was right. We have the boat, and, after all, what more do we want? Pole easily, Dick, and keep an eye on those fellows. Ah, they seem to have run for it. We have nothing to fear from them at least.”

They pushed their craft gently into the shallows, till they were almost beneath the trees. Then, giving one lusty push, Dick stepped over the side and waded, dragging the boat after him. A minute later both were ashore, and were inspecting the other craft.

“We were just in time,” said Mr Pepson, in tones of the greatest satisfaction. “Another few minutes and they would have got clear away, and then good-bye to the expedition, for a time at any rate. Make her fast, Dick, and keep a watch ashore.”

Well was it for both of them that Dick did as he was told. Indeed, from the moment at which he had leaped into the river and commenced to wade, his suspicions had kept him alert with his eyes fixed upon the jungle and bush into which the three dark figures had disappeared. And now he was to find good cause for his wariness, for, of a sudden, as Mr Pepson took the rope which was made fast to the bows of the runaway, and dragged it towards the craft in which they had undertaken the pursuit, a sharp sound came from the depths of the jungle. It was the snapping of a dried twig, a crisp and startling noise which caused both to look up suddenly.

“They are not so far away, I think,” said Dick, in a low voice. “Wouldn’t it be better if we moved away, sir? We are in the full blaze of the moon’s rays here, while they are in the shadow. That’s how that robber managed to get away from me down at the coast.”

Hardly had the words left his lips when a single shot rang out, startling the silence, while the flash of the weapon lit up the immediate surroundings of the bush, and showed a dozen dark figures perhaps, all in the act of running forward. Dick noticed that in the twinkling of an eye, and heard also the click of the missile as it struck a hanging bough some feet in front of him. Then there was a dull thud, that thud which in the old days of large calibre rifles and heavy bullets told unmistakably of a hit. A second later a heavy splash and a sickening gurgle told the young Englishman the horrid truth. His comrade had been struck and had fallen into the shallow water.

It was a terrifying position, and for a second Dick stood rooted to the spot with consternation. Then his courage returned, and with the memory of that glimpse of charging figures which the flash of the rifle had given him, he stooped, clutched his fallen friend, and staggered to the boat. Half throwing him into it, he leaned across the thwarts, seized his rifle, and extracted a cartridge from the bag. He had still a moment to spare, for the patter of feet and the snap of many a twig told him that the enemy were not yet quite at hand.

“They are bound to kill us both here in the light,” he thought, as the prominence of their position flashed across his brain. “I’ll get into the shadow.”

He had always been noted for his agility, and on this fine night our hero surpassed himself. Fear gave him strength, or else he could hardly have lifted his comrade as he had done. And now the same stimulus seemed to have sharpened his wits. He leaped at the gunwale of the boat and pushed the craft into deeper water. Then with a parting thrust of his leg he scrambled aboard, while the boat, impelled by the push he had given it, shot across the moonlit shadows, and burst its way into the deep shade of an overhanging tree. Dick clutched a bough and arrested its further progress. Then leaning his shoulder against the same friendly limb of the tree, he raised the rifle to his shoulder. There was a chorus of loud shouts, the splash of many feet, and in a second ten dusky figures burst into the full light of the moon and rushed towards the tree which hid their quarry. Not till then did Dick fully realise his danger. He had imagined till now that his foes were natives from the river-banks, thieves who had come out to rob the expedition during the night. But there was one amongst the group charging down upon him who showed that he was mistaken. There was no chance of his being in error, for the brilliant moon lit the scene too well, and showed before him the half-caste James Langdon, who had so recently fled from the coast, carrying Dick’s store of gold with him.

“Then he at least shall suffer now, whatever happens to the others,” exclaimed our hero. Lifting his weapon again he covered the half-caste, waited till he felt sure of his aim, and pressed the trigger. Once again there was a shout, and one of the unfortunate natives who aided the rascally half-caste, leaped high into the air to fall next instant with a splash into the water.

“Rush! He is now unarmed! Cut the dog to pieces!” shouted James Langdon.

There was an ugly gleam in the eyes of the robbers as they heard the shout, and slight though Dick’s knowledge was of the language of these Fantis, he recognised the meaning of the words. Quick as thought he threw his weapon down and drew his revolver. They were close to the tree now, and nothing but the darkness baffled them. But there was their disadvantage, and Dick made the most of it. Singling out the foremost he fired full in his face, and then, ere the report died down, pulled heavily on the bough and dragged himself and the native boat still farther into the shadow. A second later the weapon spoke again, and another of the miscreants fell. But still their commander urged them on.

“Think of the rifles and other goods,” he shouted. “There is only one between you and the prize, and he is only a boy. Rush him! Cut him to the chin! Stand aside and I will lead you. Now, are all ready?”

He turned to look at his men, and waved a native sword overhead to encourage them. Then he peered into the dense shadow and was in the very act of leading a final charge when there was a sudden and unexpected interruption. A single shot rang out from the river, while one of the enemy fell on his face in the water and disappeared from sight.

“Ahoy! Mine friends! Are you zere?” came in the guttural tones of the Dutchman.

“Fire on them,” shouted Dick, levelling his revolver again and sending a shot into the group. “Fire, Meinheer! Drive them off. Mr Pepson is badly wounded.”

An instant later the nose of the steam launch shot into view, some fifty yards from the bank, and Dick caught a glimpse between the leaves of the big tree which sheltered him of the anxious face of Johnnie, peering from over the engine-well, and of the portly figure of the Dutchman, a portion of which was hidden by the cabin aft. He stood there prominent in the rays of the moon, a rifle in his hands, and his short sword attached to his side. Then, as his eye lit again on the group of natives, he lifted the weapon, and hardly had the report of Dick’s revolver died down when there was a flash, and the half-caste who had formerly robbed our hero, and who had now made such an artful attack upon the boats of the expedition, clapped his hand to his thigh and gave vent to a loud bellow. Then he turned and fired a shot at the Dutchman, a shot which flew past in the air, screaming and hissing towards the opposite bank of the river. But long before it could have reached that destination the robber had swung round on his heel, and with a shout of defiance had raced for the shadows. After him Dick sent the remainder of his magazine, while Meinheer Van Somering, when he had recovered from the consternation into which the shriek of the shot had thrown him, followed his example, much to our hero’s trepidation, for the bullets flew on either hand, cutting a shower of leaves from the trees.

“Steady, Meinheer!” he shouted. “You will be hitting us soon. We are here under the tree. I had to seek shelter from the light, for they would have picked us off easily. Bring the launch in and I will wade out to you. I fear that Mr Pepson is seriously hurt.”

Leaping overboard he pushed the boat clear of the tree and of the shadow, and soon had it alongside the launch, for the latter steamed gently into the shallows. Then the leader of the expedition was lifted aboard, the two boats were made fast to the stern of the steamer, and they pushed out into the stream.

“Better make for the far shore,” said Dick. “Then we shall not be treated to long shots.”

“Bud zese wicked robbers, Meinheer,” gasped the Dutchman. “Shall we led zem go free? Shall zey escape?”

“We can do nothing more,” was Dick’s answer, given with decision. “They are gone long ago. The forest has swallowed those who are alive. Let them run, Meinheer, and do not trouble any more about them at the present time. To-morrow, when there is light, we will visit the bank again and see what has happened to them. For the moment let us look to Mr Pepson. Now, Johnnie, steer us for the far side, and when you reach the shadow, come to a stop just inside its edge. Whatever you do, keep steam up, and have the propeller just moving, so that we shall not be drifted down-stream. Now we will light the lamp and see to our friend.”

Without hesitation he took the lead, now that Mr Pepson was incapacitated, for he realised in a moment that Meinheer Van Somering was not to be relied on in such an emergency. Indeed, he had been struck with amazement at the boldness already displayed by his stout friend, for who would have expected, knowing him as they did, that he would have dared to stand there so conspicuously on the deck of the launch and fire upon the robbers? Meinheer Van Somering had gone up in Dick's estimation. He had proved that he had some store of courage after all. But he lacked self-control. At this moment when he should have been cool and thoughtful, for the danger had passed, he was tramping the deck from end to end, causing the stout launch to heel to either side. And every minute he would halt and stare at the forest which had just been left. At such moments his fist would close round his rifle, while his finger would feel for the trigger.

"Mein word!" he cried. "Bud zey would have killed us! Zey were robbers and murderers. Ah! I shod two of zem. Meinheer Dick, you saw me do id."

"I saw," growled our hero, "but we can talk of that later. Come and help with the lamp. Put your rifle down and leave the robbers to take care of themselves. Come, Meinheer, our comrade may be bleeding to death."

There was a tone of command now in his voice, and at the sound Meinheer dropped his weapon and came aft. Already Dick had been able to find the lamp, and just as the Dutchman reached him he struck a match and lit the wick of the candle.

"Hold the lamp, please," he said. "Higher, so that I can get a good view. Now, what has happened? I heard the bullet strike heavily. Ah! Thank heaven! He is alive."

"And zere, I zink, is ze wound. See, Meinheer Dick, zere is blood. Oh, mine poor friend! How he has been hurd!"

"Higher!" commanded Dick, as the Dutchman, forgetful of his request, lowered the lamp. "That is right. Keep it there, please, till I have ripped the coat open. Ah, here is another wound in the head. That will account for his being insensible."

Together, the Dutchman's tendency to undue excitement arrested by the coolness displayed by his young companion, they cut the shoulder of the coat away and inspected the wound. Then they went in search of bandages and dressings, for the thoughtful Mr Pepson had included a cabinet of drugs and instruments in the outfit of the expedition. Neither of the two friends who looked to the wounds had had previous experience, but common sense helped them, while the lamp allowed them to read the clearly printed directions contained in the cabinet. They bathed the wounds in the shoulder and the scalp, and applied the dressings. Then they put the arm in a sling, and placed it across the wounded man's chest.

"He is coming to," said Dick, after a while. "We will give him a few drops of water. Hold his head so, Meinheer. Now I will pour a little between his lips."

An hour later their friend was conscious again, and was sitting up with his back leaning against the gunwale.

"I feel dizzy and my head aches dreadfully," he said, with a plucky smile. "Look in the cabinet, Dick, and you will find something there which will quiet me. Then perhaps I shall get to sleep and be myself to-morrow. Never fear, my friends. The wounds are not so serious, for the gash in my shoulder is merely a flesh wound, and the bone is quite uninjured. As to the scalp wound, I am a fortunate man. I think that the bullet must have glanced from a bough, for I heard a sound just before I was struck. Then it hit my shoulder, and as it flew on just touched my head, glancing from the bone, and hitting me hard enough to stun me. By the way, I was standing in the water. I suppose Dick pulled me out again? That is another debt I owe him."

"You ought to keep quiet," was our hero's answer, as he arrived with a bottle and a glass in his hand. "Here we are, sir. A teaspoonful in a little water, and then silence. There, drink it up, and sleep. We will look to the safety of the boats."

He held the glass to Mr Pepson's lips and watched as he feebly drained it, for there was little doubt that the leader was sadly injured, and only his pluck had allowed him to chatter at all. However, he obediently drank the mixture, and seemed to be glad to settle down on the rug which the Dutchman produced. Another rug was thrown over him, a cushion placed under the wounded limb, and the lamp removed from before his eyes. Dick and Meinheer retired to the far end of the launch and stood there chatting in whispers, till, in less than half an hour, the deep breathing of the sufferer told that he was asleep.

All this while the launch, with the boats trailing out behind her, lay in the dense shadow of the river-bank, her propeller barely moving, so that she just held her place in the river. Close at hand could be heard the murmur of the leaves in the forest, the chatter of monkeys, and the call of night birds, arrested a little while ago by the reports of the rifles. And on the other side a fine moonlit vista was displayed. The surface of the river Pra lay spread out in the rays of the pale African orb, while the water rippled and slid down toward the sea, seeming to be particularly peaceful on this lovely night. Looking at its shining surface, and at the wonderful lights and shadows beyond scattered along the face of the jungle, one almost wondered whether the coming of the robbers were not after all a dream. Whether murder and theft had, in fact, been attempted, and whether away on that far shore there actually lay the dark forms of the attacking natives who had lost their lives in the bold and dastardly attempt. But there could be no doubt. As Dick Stapleton stood in his shirt sleeves upon the roof of the tiny cabin, rifle in hand, and cartridge bag about his sturdy shoulders, his eager eyes searched every shadow, and followed every line of river and forest which was illuminated. Suddenly his arm shot out. His figure became rigid, while his finger pointed across the water.

"There is one of the rascals, at any rate," he said. "He has come to look to his comrades, and no doubt thinks that we are far away by now. See, Meinheer, I could pick him off from here as if he were a bird, and I should be justified. But that's not the sort of game I like to play. They're beaten. They've had a lesson, and I fancy Master James Langdon will remember it. As for us, I should say that we have had a very narrow escape."

There was a grunt of approval and acquiescence from Van Somering, a puff of smoke proceeded from his lips, and he growled out a reply.

"Mein friend," he said, in condescending tones, "we are conquerors, is id nod so? Zen zere is no need to kill more of zese men. Led zem go peacefully while we make ze mosd of ze nighd which remains. Meinheer, id is near ze hour of midnighd. Your wadch should commence now. I will sleeb, for I am weary."

He seemed to have forgotten the fact that it was his drowsiness which had almost brought disaster to the expedition, and that Dick's watch should have commenced at nine and ended at twelve. With a grunt he rolled along the deck, leaving our hero in command of the situation.

Chapter Five.

A Question of Importance

Dick shivered and fidgeted. He tapped the deck gently with his toe, and then got up and clambered to the roof of the tiny cabin again, for he was ill at ease. It was not the chill air of the early morning which made his blood run cold, nor the damp mist which rose on every side from river and jungle, from the stagnant pools lying amidst the roots of giant trees and boulders, and from the mossy margins of the stream, where the eddies played, and the current was still. It was neither of these, for there was no chill in the heart of this African country. The morning was almost as stiflingly hot as the night had been, though the green of the leaves, and the shimmer of the river surface as it met his eye through the thin mist, looked cool and refreshing. Dick was uneasy in his mind. As he had sat the hours of darkness through his thoughts had been busy. Remorse, anguish, bitter self-condemnation had come in turn to torture his mind, and now, as the darkness waned and the light increased, he was constantly on the move, searching the river-bank on the far side.

“There! Yes, that is the tree,” he said, as he pointed to the bush beyond. “I can recognise it, and beneath it lie those poor fellows. I killed them! They are stretched out there cold and stiff, those whom the water does not cover. Oh, it is awful to think about.”

He wrung his hands, while there was a look of anguish on his usually jolly face. Had James Langdon, the rascal who had made the attack in the night which had just passed, been able to see him he would have laughed, for this sturdy young Englishman, looking so strong and active on this early morning, would hardly have dared to lift his rifle. He was suffering the torment of mind which has come to many a thousand young warriors before him. Not because he wished it, but owing to pure accident, he had the blood of fellow beings on his hands. He had killed men. He had seen them fall. He remembered the horrid gurgling sound made by the unhappy wretch who had fallen into the water and sunk to the mud. The hideous noise had haunted him the night through, so that he was unmanned and shivering. His fists were clenched, and his teeth held tight together.

“I killed them,” he murmured.

“And they have themselves to thank,” said a voice at his elbow. “So that’s how the wind blows! Our gallant young agent would rather fall himself and see his comrades massacred than fire on rascals who were ready to murder all. No! No, I did not mean that, my lad. But – look here!”

It was Mr Pepson, standing there on the deck as erect as ever, as if he had received no wound, though the bandages about his head and his shoulder and the blood-stains upon them, showed that he undoubtedly had. But Dick had begun to discover some unsuspected points about this employer of his, and had come to the conclusion that he was possessed of no ordinary pluck and go, though he showed it in his own quiet and unassuming manner, and, in addition, that thin and cadaverous though he seemed to be, yet this trader from Sierra Leone was as hard as nails. He stared at him in amazement, and then flushed at his words.

“Why, you ought to be wrapped in your rug!” he exclaimed sharply. “You are hurt, and need a little nursing.”

“A mere scratch – a flea-bite, I assure you. I have had many worse before this, as you may learn when I tell you a little of my life’s history. But speaking of rugs. That’s what you want, my lad, and a good talking-to besides. Now, listen to me, Dick. I don’t blame you, nor do I smile at your thoughts and feelings, for every decent fellow has them. I remember a ruffian who thought to rob me in South America, many years ago. Yes, I was a youngster little older than you are. I shot him dead, and lay down beside him through the night, because that was the safest place. When the sun came up and showed me that I was alone and that there was no more trouble to fear, I looked at that poor fellow. He was lying on his back, his legs curled up beneath him, and his hands stretched out as if he

were asleep. But his white face and the pool beside him told me the awful truth. I bolted. I ran away, Dick. I felt like a murderer, and for days wondered whether I should be tracked. Then I saw the other side. A rancher took me in hand, just as I am doing with you, and he made me see the right side. Why, bless me, the world is filled with honest people and with rogues, and the latter prey upon their fellows. Are the honest men to put up with robbery and violence? Did you agree so easily to James Langdon's taking your gold? Did you? Come, answer the question."

Dick was cornered, and began to see the other side of the matter. The sun was coming up, too, and the damp mist was already beginning to disappear. Our surroundings often have an immense effect upon the brightness or otherwise of our thoughts, and our hero, usually so jolly and so genial, had felt the depression common to many who keep watch alone during the dark hours after an action.

"Of course I didn't," he answered. "I tried to shoot him, just as I did last night, and he would have richly deserved his fate."

"Quite so. And these rascals last night deserved theirs, without a doubt. It happened that you were the one to stand between them and their wishes, and they did their utmost to remove you. Theirs was might against right, and right prevailed. They paid the penalty, and here are you grieving because all has happened as it should. Come. No more of this nonsense! Tell me about the action, for, remember, after the moment when we set foot ashore, I know nothing, save that I found myself aboard this launch, with you and Meinheer staring into my face. That reminds me. Where is our fine friend? A precious mess his laziness got us into last night."

"Turned in and snoring," said Dick. "Listen!"

Above the ripple of the water and the sough of the wind in the trees the sounds proceeding from the nose of the Dutchman could be distinctly heard.

"He must have his sleep," laughed Mr Pepson. "Did I not tell you that we must needs rely upon ourselves for protection? He is made for commerce, not for warfare."

"And yet he did well last night. I'll tell you what happened."

They sat down on the tiny roof while Dick told how the bullet had struck his friend, and how the flash had showed him a dozen men rushing down upon them.

"That was an awkward position," interrupted his friend. "I understand that I was lying in the water. Covered, in fact?"

There was a queer little smile on his lips, and he looked swiftly into Dick's honest and open face.

"Yes. You had gone below the surface. I was stunned by the mishap. I thought it was all up with us."

"With me, you mean. You could have bolted. The boat was close at hand."

Dick flushed to the roots of his hair, and tore his hat from his head as if the weight troubled him. He stared at Mr Pepson in amazement, and then, seeing the smile, smiled back at him.

"You are chaffing me," he said. "Trying to humbug me. You know well enough that no decent fellow would do that. You wouldn't. I wasn't going to desert a comrade who was down and helpless, particularly when there were such ruffians about. So I set to work as quickly as possible."

"You made up your mind to see the business through?"

"Yes. I was staggered at first. Then I caught you up, not too gently, I fear, and dumped you into the boat. After that I pushed her out and shoved off into the shadow of the trees."

"Why? What was your reason?"

Mr Pepson was like an inquisitor. He still smiled the same little smile, and still treated his agent to an occasional flash of his brilliant eyes, as if he would probe him to the utmost depth.

"My reason? Oh, we were in the light, you see. The moon was up, and the beggars could pot us easily. They had guns, remember, else you would not have been hit. I reckoned – all of a sudden – I don't know how it was, quite – that we should be safer there, and so into the shadow I went. Then they occupied our position. I could see to shoot, while they were bothered. Still, they made a fine rush,

and things began to look ugly when the launch came into view. Our friend showed his mettle, for he fired at once, and his shot practically ended the engagement. Then we steamed off, and, and – ”

“And here we are. And I owe you a life again, Master Dick. Very good. No, I won’t say a word more, save that you tackled the task well. It was an ugly position and you seem to have chosen the only way out. I’m glad, too, that Meinheer put a spoke in their wheel. Now do me the favour of dressing these wounds again, and then we will breakfast. Get the bandages and a looking-glass, for then I shall be able to see the hurts myself, and give an opinion. You see, I am a bit of a surgeon.”

At this moment the blanket beneath which the ample figure of the Dutchman was shrouded stirred and was thrown back, and very soon, yawning and stretching his arms, Meinheer came along the deck. By then Dick had the bandages and fresh dressings, as well as a bowl of water, drawn from the river, and some clean linen to act as a sponge. How different, how lighthearted he looked, for, thanks to his chat with Mr Pepson, and to the other’s common sense, all his worries were dispelled, and he saw things with an eye which was not jaundiced. He had, in fact, reached the stage at which others in a similar position had arrived before. He could see that killing was not a joyous trade, that no ordinary human being lightly undertook it, and only when circumstances made it imperative that he should act so as to protect his own life and that of his friend. Then there was no blame to be attached to the one who had shed the blood of his fellow, so long as he was not a wanton aggressor.

“Here we are,” he called out as he came along. “Good day, Meinheer. Hold the bowl, please, while I get the bandages undone. Ah, here’s the pin. Now, sit up, sir. That’s right. We’ll have it done in a jiffy.”

Very carefully and skilfully he unwrapped the bandages, and presently the dressing was removed from the shoulder. Mr Pepson lifted the glass, arranged it so that he could obtain a clear view, and then grunted.

“Humph!” he said, with one of his inscrutable smiles. “A mere scratch. Take the probe, Dick. Now dip it into that other bowl which has the carbolic in it. That’s the way. Gently put it into the wound. No. Don’t be nervous. I’ll soon shout if it hurts. Press gently towards the other place where the bullet came out. Hah! A mere flesh wound, barely an inch deep. Not even that. I’m lucky! The shoulder is scarcely stiff, and a little rest in a sling will put it right in a week. A schoolboy would laugh at it. Put on fresh dressings and we’ll inspect the head. Lucky that I’m such a surgeon!”

He was as cheery as possible, and thanks to his lightheartedness his friends, who had been looking on and helping in the task with some misgivings, began to feel that their comrade was, after all, not so badly hurt.

“I tell you that it was only the crack on my skull that mattered,” persisted Mr Pepson. “The bullet slipped through my shoulder, a mere wound of the cuticle, and then happened to glance against my scalp and skull. A man can’t stand that. It knocks him stupid. That’s why I fell, and that’s why our young friend had to help me. But it doesn’t explain why he – a mere youngster – pulled me through so well, and why he stuck to me when many another would have bolted to save his own skin. Heh? What did you say, Meinheer?”

“Zat we hab a drasure. Zat Meinheer Dick will be a gread man one of zese days. When he is big like me, when he has grown fine and dall, and, and – ah, yes, sdoud, you call him; yes, when he is sdoud, then he will be one gread, fine man. And he is brave! Yes, I see zad with half one eye, for a brave man knows when he meeds one of ze same.”

“Quite so, Meinheer,” answered Mr Pepson, dryly. “Which reminds me. Dick says that you fired in the nick of time, and turned the tide of the battle. It was a good shot. You did well, and Johnnie also, to bring up the launch just then. But stand aside a little and give me the glass. Hah! Looks nasty, doesn’t it, Dick,” he went on, as the wound on his scalp was exposed, and he noticed our hero wince and turn a little pale at the sight. “Come, come! Looks are the worst part of it. Bathe the wound and cover it again. An Irishman would not give it a second thought. I haven’t even a headache.”

He rose to his feet when the dressing was completed, and walked up and down the deck, looking perhaps a little more sallow than usual. But his spirits were not in the least damped or downcast. Indeed, his two companions had yet to learn that their leader was, in his quiet way, a remarkable man. As hard as nails, as Dick had already observed, cool and courageous, and possessed of a dogged nature which defied the utmost fatigue, which laughed, or rather smiled only, at danger, and which made light of any wound. Meanwhile, Dick and Johnnie were engaged at the furnace door, and presently the aroma of coffee came to the nostrils of the leader and the Dutchman, causing the latter to turn an eager and expectant gaze in that direction.

“By Jobe!” he cried, “bud zad is a scend zad is goat, yes, ver goot. Whad shall we ead zis day?”

His question was answered almost at once, for Johnnie came along the deck bearing a steaming dish, Dick following with the coffee and biscuit. The newspaper was again spread on the roof of the cabin, and all set to work with eagerness.

“And now for future movements. We are a day’s journey from the mouth of the river, and three from the mine,” said Mr Pepson. “The question is whether we should push on alone as we are, or whether we should return. There is no doubt that all our Fanti men were in league with these robbers, and left us at the first opportunity.”

“And would do the same again,” Dick ventured. “If we returned for a second crew, who is to guarantee that they will not behave in a similar manner?”

“That is the very point. We should run that danger. What are your views about this attack during the night?”

He swung round on his elbow and looked keenly at our hero.

“You saw them,” he said. “This precious rascal nearly shot you. How much has he had to do with the matter?”

“More than any one, I think,” was Dick’s answer. “I believe him to be a thorough rogue, and in league with the Ashantis. Inquiries which I made at Cape Coast Castle convinced me that he had been engaged on many occasions in running guns and ammunition to the coast, and sending them up-country. Well, we have heard that there is trouble brewing. The natives at Elmina are in almost open insurrection. Murders have been committed under the eyes of the garrison, and a few white men carried off. In addition, there are tidings that parties of Ashanti warriors are in the neighbourhood of the Pra. It is my opinion that this James Langdon is their spy, that he is watching for them and sending news of the doings at Elmina and Cape Coast Castle to King Koffee. That would have brought him tidings of our expedition, for all in Elmina and along the coast knew of our intentions – ”

“While the king of the Ashantis had given us the concession, and had promised that we should be protected,” interposed Mr Pepson. “Not that I will trust his sable majesty’s word. The best protection that we can have will be our rifles. But I interrupted. You think – ?”

“That this James Langdon is a spy, and that while engaged in that work he has time to see to other matters. The cargo we carry is valuable. If he could have taken the boats the expedition would have been ruined, and we should have had to return. Then, too, we do not know how much more ambitious the scheme of last night’s attack may have been. They may have arranged to steal the boats and make sure of their prize, then to return and cut our throats. There were sufficient of them, and I fancy that what James Langdon would willingly do, the others would also carry out.”

“Precisely. They would hack us all to pieces. Never you hesitate again to shoot, my lad. Where such rascals have to be dealt with it is as well to press a trigger without delay, remembering that the man who hesitates very often is killed before he has another chance. And you think that this ruffian has been on the lookout for us, and that we are not only fortunate in having our goods secure, but also in having our lives? I believe it. I think the fellow would willingly have had a little private revenge with his booty. He has his knife in you, Dick, because you were the first to discover him, and he will not be more friendly disposed to us, for we are whites, and he is an outcast. To return to the subject of Elmina. I heard about the natives. Perhaps Meinheer can tell us more.”

“Zey are pigs, I dell you. Mein word! Bud do you know zis, mine ver good friend? Zese blacks were once servands. Zey would run, and quick, when ze order was give. Now – now zere is no ordering zem. Zed do nod move. Zey glare ad me, ad me, Meinheer Van Somering. Zey used to sband and shake, so” – the burly Dutchman let his knees knock together, while he trembled till his fat cheeks quivered – “ver good, now zey laugh, yes zey laugh and run away.”

“All of which points to disaffection and probable mutiny,” said Mr Pepson. “Then it is clear that a second crew from Elmina would be worse than useless. We shall have dangers to face. We can well do that alone.”

“While I am sure that we can manage the launch and the boats, particularly if we tie up before it is dark, and then change our position once the night has fallen.”

“A brilliant idea, Dick, and we will carry it out. Once at the stockade I shall have no fear, for the men are Ashanti gold-diggers, who are not much given to fighting. There are a dozen of them, and I think their loyalty can be controlled by the prospect of gold. You see, they are paid a percentage of what they recover from the soil. Yes, we will push on up-stream and avoid another attack. If there is a moon again we will keep on during the night. Now about those fellows over there. We must go across and see how many are killed, and if any are still living. Meinheer, what do you say?”

The Dutchman did not reply hastily, for he was considering the danger of such an expedition. However, in his heart of hearts, Meinheer was a humane man when his fears were quieted, and he argued that here there could be no danger.

“Good. We will go, Meinheer,” he said. “Ze sooner ze bedder.”

“And as I am the lightest and perhaps the most active, I will land,” added Dick. “Then, in case of an attack, you two can cover me with your rifles. There is no trusting these rascals, particularly when James Langdon commands them.”

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