

Foster James H.

The Forest of Mystery



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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	12
CHAPTER IV	15
CHAPTER V	17
CHAPTER VI	20
CHAPTER VII	23
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	26

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CHAPTER I

The Chinaman

BANG! *Crash!*

“What was that?” Joe Lewis had turned suddenly, every nerve on edge. His eyes tried to penetrate the darkness of the San Francisco night.

“Sounded like an automobile accident,” came from Bob Holton. “Come on. Let’s go around and see.”

The two chums dashed across the street and around the corner, hoping that nothing tragic had taken place. They passed several people who were hurrying to investigate the strange noise.

Reaching the thoroughfare, the youths drew back with cries of alarm, for the sight before them was fearful and unpleasant.

Lying on its top, wheels in the air, was a small automobile, which had evidently crashed into a pole near by. All about was broken glass, and water[Pg 9][Pg 10] was still oozing from the radiator. The pole was dented severely, indicating that the car had probably been traveling rapidly.

As Bob and Joe looked on spellbound, a smothered cry for help came from the automobile. It was repeated several times in rapid succession.

With throbbing hearts, the boys ran over to the wreck, followed by several other people. In the darkness they could not see clearly inside the car and could only guess who was calling for help. A near-by street lamp, although bright did not illuminate the automobile sufficiently.

“Let’s get this door open,” muttered Bob. “Hurry. There isn’t any time to lose.”

Working feverishly, the chums reached through the broken window and tugged at the door. It had been wrenched severely and refused to open. What made the task still more difficult was the fact that broken edges of glass projected from the sides of the window.

With a mighty effort, the youths managed to pull the door open, although they almost lost their balance from the sudden impact. But now they were greatly relieved. They had had an uneasy feeling that perhaps the door would not yield.

Without hesitation Bob reached into the car, caught hold of someone, and pulled him out. Then, after making sure that no one else was in the car, he turned to the stranger.

The youths were a bit surprised to see that he was a Chinaman, a short, fat man of middle age. From all appearances he had not been injured in the accident. There was but one little scratch in the side of his face.

“You do velly well – get me out queek,” he said to Bob gratefully. “I was fear I have to stay in machine long ttime.”

“What was the trouble?” asked Joe, edging closer to the overturned automobile as the crowd of spectators grew larger. “Did a wheel come off or something?”

The little Chinaman laughed sheepishly.

“Nothing like that,” he said. “My machine here it was velly new, and I was not good enough dliver. It run loose and clash into this pole. Then it turn over.”

“It was just luck that you weren’t hurt,” said Bob grimly. “Not many could have been in a smash-up like that and come out unharmed.”

At this moment a policeman stepped up to obtain the man's name and address and the details concerning the crash. While the Chinaman talked, the officer wrote in a small notebook, on which he turned a flashlight.

"Don't you think you'd better see a doctor?" asked Joe, when the officer had finished. "You might be hurt and not know it."

The Chinaman shook his head.

"Not hurt, no," he assured them. "I come through without a scratch, as far as I know. But I velly much nervous."

"No wonder," said Bob. "That wreck was enough to shake anybody's nerves."

Bob and Joe remained at the scene for several minutes. Then, as they realized that it was nearly seven o'clock, they started to leave. But at that moment the Chinaman called them back.

"Before you go I want that you make me a promise," he said.

The youths looked inquiringly.

"I want that you promise you come to my shop tonight. Will you come?"

The boys were not a little surprised. They wondered what the man's object was in asking them to visit him.

"Yes," said Bob at last, knowing that his chum would also consent. "We'll come. But where is it? And just when do you want us?"

Bob wrote what the man told them on a piece of paper. The latter asked that they be there at nine o'clock, although just why they could not guess.

"What do you think of it?" asked Joe, as he and his friend walked rapidly down the street.

"I hardly know," was the reply. "Maybe he wants to reward us for getting him out of the car."

"But – that was nothing. Anyone would have done it. No, I'll bet he has something up his sleeve."

"What would it be?" demanded Bob.

"More than I know. We'll see before long. And, say, he wants us to be there by nine o'clock, too. That doesn't give us much time. We'll have to get back to the hotel and see our dads first. We've been gone a long time, you know."

"Maybe they can tell us how to get to this Chink's shop," suggested Bob. "Do you suppose it's in Chinatown?"

"Where else would it be? Chinese here in San Francisco don't live anywhere else, do they?"

"Beyond me."

The chums reached the corner and boarded a street car for the business district. They knew it would not be necessary to transfer, and so relaxed in their seat.

"San Francisco is a swell place, all right," remarked Joe, after a short silence. "Sure has a lot of interesting things to see. Take Golden Gate Park, for instance. It's one of the finest in the country."

"You could get lost there," smiled Bob. "Why, it's as big as a small city. And full of interesting attractions. I'd like to spend a whole day there some time. Won't have time on this visit, though."

When they were well into the business district, the boys moved toward the exit of the car. At a corner directly opposite the hotel at which they were staying, they left the street car.

Anxious to see their fathers, they went to the building without delay. In the elevator they were hurried to the tenth floor, where their rooms were located.

Mr. Holton and Mr. Lewis were waiting for them. The men had returned earlier in the day and had remained inside to discuss business matters.

"How do you like San Francisco by now?" inquired Bob's father quizzically. "Seen much of interest yet?"

"Plenty," returned Joe. "Sure is a busy place, isn't it? We ought to know. We've been about everywhere."

“Took in the sights, did you?” asked Mr. Lewis. “Well, there are many here. Howard” – referring to Bob’s father – “and I, however, haven’t had much time to look around. All our time has been occupied in talking with this Thompson, the man we came out here to see.”

Bob and Joe looked up with interest. All day they had wondered what would come of their fathers’ conversation with Thompson. The latter was a noted naturalist, who had just recently returned from Africa. There was a chance, the youths reasoned, that he could interest their dads, who were themselves naturalists, in making an expedition to the Dark Continent to collect specimens of animal life. And of that expedition, if there should be any, Bob and Joe hoped to be a part.

“What did you find out?” inquired Bob anxiously. “Did he come across anything unusual in the way of animals and birds?”

“Did he?” Mr. Holton smiled happily. “He shot several creatures that were previously unknown to civilized man.”

“It seems that Thompson’s expedition penetrated a region that has been invaded by very few whites,” explained Joe’s father. “Oh, it was worth their while, all right.”

“Sounds interesting,” grinned Joe. “Go on.”

Mr. Holton looked up suddenly.

“What do you mean, ‘go on?’” he asked suspiciously.

“Oh, nothing.” Joe made an attempt to be casual.

The naturalists chuckled.

“Nothing, huh?” laughed Mr. Holton, who at the start had grasped the hidden meaning in Joe’s words. “You weren’t by any chance thinking of another expedition going to Africa, were you?”

Joe started. He wondered how his chum’s father had caught on so quickly.

“You’re a mind reader, if there ever was one,” the youth grinned. “But how in the dickens did you get wise?”

“You just told me,” Mr. Holton answered whimsically. “I’m a mind reader.”

“Come out of it, Dad.” Bob was becoming impatient. “Cut out this stalling. Is there going to be an expedition to Africa?”

“What do you think?”

“How are we to know?” countered Bob. “We’re not the head naturalists.”

“Listen to that, Howard,” teased Mr. Lewis. “Not the *head* naturalists! It beats all how these young squirts get ideas in their heads that they’re actually scientists. Why, they – ”

“All right, we take it back.” Bob was tiring of getting nowhere. “Once more, is there going to be an expedition to Africa?”

“Want to know, do you?” his father persisted. “What for?”

“Oh-h, nothing! Come on, Joe. We might as well give it up as a bad job.”

The youths turned to leave for their room, but Mr. Lewis called them back.

“I’ll tell you,” he said seriously. “We may go to Africa. There’s a chance that we will. But there is also a very big chance that we won’t. We just wanted to come out here and see this Thompson about the strange animals he saw. Whether we go will depend on how the museum heads look at it. Now, are you satisfied?”

“Sure,” answered Bob with a smile. “When, if you decide to go, will we leave?”

“There you go with that ‘we’ stuff,” came from Mr. Holton. “Aren’t you fellows taking a lot for granted?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” returned Joe. “Judging from the past we’re not. You will take Bob and me along, won’t you? That is, of course, if you go.”

“We can’t say just now,” his father returned. “It might be arranged. All that can be decided later.”

“Hurrah for Africa!” cried Bob with enthusiasm. “We’ll – ”

He stopped quickly, as he happened to glance at a small clock that was on the dresser.

“Past eight!” he cried. “Wow! We’ve got to be in Chinatown by nine!”

CHAPTER II

A Grim Discovery

“**CHINATOWN!**” repeated Bob’s father, while Mr. Lewis looked up quickly.

“Yes,” answered Joe. “That is, I suppose we should go there. Here’s the address. I jotted it down while we were in the street car coming to the hotel.”

“But – but what’s it all about?” asked Mr. Holton, taking the slip of paper Joe handed him. He added: “Yes, it’s in Chinatown. Grant Avenue.”

“It happened this way,” explained Bob. “Joe and I got a Chinaman out of an automobile he turned over. He asked us to come and see him tonight at nine, and we told him we’d be there. That’s all there is to it.”

“You say he turned his car over?” queried Mr. Lewis. “Was he hurt?”

“Luckily not,” returned Bob. “But it was a pretty narrow escape. Big wonder he wasn’t killed.”

There was a short silence. Neither of the men liked the prospect of the youths going to the Oriental settlement at that late hour.

“Don’t you think it’s rather dangerous?” inquired Mr. Lewis. “Most anything might happen at such a late hour.”

“I don’t see why it should be,” returned his son. “Bob and I are old enough to take care of ourselves. If we could come safely out of the jungles of Brazil, the Sahara, and the Andes, we surely ought to be able to watch ourselves here in America.”

“Well, maybe so. Chinatown, after all, isn’t like it used to be,” admitted Mr. Holton. “But be on the lookout. Any idea what time you’ll be back?”

Bob shook his head.

“We won’t stay any longer than we have to,” he assured him. “And don’t worry. We’ll be all right.”

The chums left the hotel without delay. They realized that they had barely a half hour to get to the Chinaman’s shop, and they knew this would mean some hustling.

“The trouble is,” said Joe, “we’re too near Grant Avenue to take a street car and too far away to walk.”

“That is a problem,” laughed Bob. “But if we hurry I think we’ll get there in time.”

The boys hastened down busy Market Street in the direction of the Ferry Building, amid the crowd of pleasure seekers. As they walked, they took in the sights of the great city. Lights, lights. Tall buildings. Four rows of street cars. An ever-moving procession of pedestrians. This was San Francisco.

It did not take the two long to reach Grant Avenue, and up this they turned. Then their eyes were given another treat.

Northward for many blocks stretched a line on both sides of the street of pagoda-like structures that were distinctly Oriental. Many of the shops displayed colorful electric signs, often in Chinese. On the sidewalks were more than a few people of the yellow race.

“So this is Chinatown.” Bob was taking in the scene with interest.

“Sure is different,” observed Joe. “Even New York doesn’t have anything quite like this.”

The youths walked on until they came to a little shop that exhibited the words “Pong Lee Co.” Here they stopped.

“This must be the place,” said Joe. “At any rate, it has the same street number that I have down on this paper.”

“O. K. Let’s go in.”

As the boys make their way through the curious doorway, let us have a word about them and their experiences up to the present, as related in the preceding volumes of *The Exploration Series*.

Bob, usually the leader of the two, was a shade over six feet tall, with huge, powerful shoulders that were now bronzed from his life in the open. His bright blue eyes and regular features displayed a frank, open disposition that won favor with everyone.

Joe, about the same age, was of medium size, with a dark complexion that was now still further darkened by the tropical sun. He was of much lighter build than his friend, but was tough and wiry. He seldom started a task without finishing it.

The chums lived next door to each other in Washington, D.C., where their fathers were employed as naturalists by a large museum. Much to their delight the boys were permitted to accompany their fathers to the jungles of Brazil, where they encountered wild animals and treacherous natives. Their thrilling experiences on this expedition are told in the first volume, entitled *Lost in the Wilds of Brazil*.

A little later, when they had graduated from high school, they left for another little-known region – the Sahara Desert. Here they endured terrible sand storms, went for days without water, and fought hostile Arabs. These and many more adventures are related in the volume *Captured by the Arabs*.

Scarcely had the chums and their elders returned from northern Africa when they were given another opportunity to penetrate the unknown. In the Andes Mountains of South America they had still more exciting experiences. How they were guided by an old scientist along a narrow secret trail and met with not a few breath-taking adventures is told in the third volume, entitled *Secrets of the Andes*.

Back in America, the youths were making preparations to enter college the coming fall, when their fathers announced that they were going to San Francisco to see a naturalist, Thompson, of whom something has been said. Bob and Joe asked to go along, and the request was granted.

Now, as we return to the youths, we see that they are facing a small Chinaman, the man they had met earlier in the evening.

“Ah, I glad to see you,” he said, recognizing them at once. “Come. We go back to room behind store.”

The chums followed their host through the shop, noting carefully the wares for sale.

Those wares were a motley mixture, including everything from bottled herbs to Chinese adding machines. Never before had the boys been so interested in a store. They found themselves lagging behind the man to examine the many objects peculiar to the Oriental.

At the rear of the building, separated from the shop by a queer curtain, was a little room. Here it was apparent that the Chinaman, Pong Lee, lived.

“Sitee down,” he directed his visitors, pointing to two crude chairs. “I want talk with you.”

The boys did as told, wondering what was meant.

After a short silence the little man continued.

“You did me gleet good – gettee me out of upset machine,” he began. “For that I want give you something to bling you much good luck.”

“Good luck?” repeated Bob wonderingly, and then watched the Chinaman walk over to a tall cabinet in the corner of the room.

The latter opened a drawer, looked about carefully to see that no one other than the boys was looking at him, and then took out something.

“Here,” he said, unfastening the lid of a tiny box, “are two good luck rings. I want you wear them – all ttime. They bling you much good luck. Wear them and you will keepee away flom all evil.”

He handed the boys each a grotesque ring, which was engraved in many queer Oriental figures. Bob’s ring was particularly odd. On it were depicted two curious dragons, one of which was spouting fire.

“Why – thank you very much.” Joe was delighted. Of course, he had no faith in the charm the ring was supposed to have possessed, but he appreciated it as a rare piece of Chinese jewelry.

“You velly welcome,” Pong Lee said. “But there is a secret about those rings. You must know.”

“A secret?” Bob leaned forward in his chair. His friend looked up interestedly.

“Bleeg secret,” Pong Lee answered, nodding vigorously. “You must guard those rings velly close. There are much men after them.”

“You mean someone else wants to get these?” asked Joe, intensely interested.

“Yes. Much men want them. I have gleet many more. I not tell how I get them. But I say for you to watch them close. They worth much money.”

“What do these people want with them?” inquired Joe. “Are they so valuable as all that?”

Pong Lee nodded.

“They worth gleet deal,” he said. “Much times men come in here after them. They know I have a velly lot in little box. But I play tlick on them. They not find rings. I keep them hid – where no man find them. Moy Ling – he one of dangerous people. He keel you queek if he gettee chance, yes. You guard rings. They bling you much good luck.”

He arose and walked over to the corner of the room.

The youths looked at each other. They had been greatly impressed with what the little man had said.

“What do you think of it all?” asked Joe in a low voice.

“It’s a mystery to me. Wish he’d tell us where he got the rings. I’m curious to know.”

Suddenly Joe sat up with a start. His eyes were fixed on the curious curtain that separated this room from the store.

Bob’s eyes followed those of his chum.

“That curtain – it moved!” whispered Joe, a queer feeling of fear creeping down his spine. “There’s somebody hiding there. Maybe it’s one of those fellows that want these rings.”

“I’m going out there.” Bob had gained his feet. “No, don’t!” his friend pleaded. “They might shoot you – or maybe do worse.”

Bob hesitated. He finally decided to remain where he was.

“But if that guy wants these rings, he’ll get fooled,” the youth said decisively. “We’ll – ”

He was interrupted by Pong Lee, who had returned to his chair. The Chinaman was not aware of what had happened.

“Do you have anyone else working in the store?” asked Bob, his eyes still on the curtain.

“No one else but me, Pong Lee, no. Why you ask?”

“Well,” Bob faltered, his voice lowering to a whisper, “there – there’s someone in there, near the curtain. I don’t know who it is. Looked like they were listening to us.”

Pong Lee was panting. His eyes were wild with fury.

“The rings!” he cried. “It is someone after the rings! They will keel us!”

“Not if we can help it they won’t,” Bob said grimly. “They – ”

He stopped suddenly as he noticed a pistol in Pong Lee’s hand. How the man had produced the weapon so quickly he never knew.

“What are you going to do?” asked Joe. “Better not go out there. It isn’t safe.”

The Chinaman, paying no attention to the warning, slipped silently over to the end of the curtain, near the wall. His little mouth was rigid; his eyes glared. The gun he held in readiness.

The curtain he pulled back so slowly that only the movement of the cloth was not noticeable.

Bob and Joe, annoyed by the suspense, waited breathlessly.

CHAPTER III

Good News

WHEN he had made an opening barely large enough to see into the store, Pong Lee stepped forward and peered out, holding the pistol with a grip of steel.

For the first time Bob and Joe saw how dangerous this harmless-looking Chinaman could become. They were indeed glad he was their friend and not their enemy.

Bob cautiously glided over beside the Chinaman, although well aware of the grave danger. The youth looked through the opening, and then his jaw dropped.

There, running rapidly but quietly toward the door, was a tall, slim Oriental, a plait of black hair reaching halfway down his back. It was evident that he knew he had been discovered, for he ran in desperation.

Bang! Bang! Pong Lee's pistol spoke twice in rapid succession but without result. The intruder escaped unharmed.

The moment he disappeared through the doorway, Pong Lee dashed out into the room.

"We must shoot him!" cried the little Chinaman, reaching the outside.

Bob, hesitating to follow because of the peril, watched closely until Pong Lee was out of sight. Joe too had parted the curtain to see what was going on.

They heard several pistol shots, but no other noise followed. Apparently Pong Lee's aim was not true.

A moment later the Chinaman returned, holding the smoking weapon.

"Gone, yes." Pong Lee was facing the boys. "Man he leave queek. I not gave a chance to shoot him."

"He sure went out of the store quickly," commented Bob. "Must have been barefooted or something."

The remark provoked a smile from Joe, but not from the Chinaman. That the latter was still greatly worried was clear to the youths.

Had the invader, whoever he was, seen where the valuable jewels were kept? Did he intend to return later? Pong Lee's mind was in a whirl. He felt that it would be necessary to find another hiding place for the valuables, one that could not be located by anyone.

"I should think this fellow, or someone else, would come in and make you tell them where you keep this stuff," remarked Joe. "Even threaten to kill you if you didn't tell."

The Oriental shook his head.

"They know I not tellee, even if I get killed," he explained. "That do them no good, no."

"Then you ought to feel fairly safe," laughed Bob. "Your life isn't in any great danger, anyway. Do you wear any of the jewelry?"

"I keepee good luck ring on finger all ttime," Pong Lee returned. "Only once I had bleep excitement."

"How was that?" asked Joe.

"I was knocked down by a man that he want ring. I get run flom him. He thlow hatchet at me. It miss my head by many few parts of inches."

"A close shave, all right," said Bob grimly. "Here's hoping Joe and I don't have such an experience tonight."

The youths remained in the building for nearly an hour talking with the amiable Chinaman. Then, as they realized that it was past ten, they departed, after having again thanked the man for the rings.

While still in that vicinity they remained quiet, slinking along like wolves. They feared all too much that the sinister Moy Ling, of whom Pong Lee spoke, might cause them trouble. But as time passed they lost their apprehension and became their natural selves again. Thus far no Oriental had stopped them.

“I had a hunch that Chink wanted to give us something,” remarked Bob, breaking the silence. “But of course I had no idea what it would be.”

“Wouldn’t doubt that these rings are really worth a lot,” Joe said.

“You don’t mean they’ll actually bring us good luck?” asked Bob, very much amused.

“Not that,” was the answer. “I mean worth something in money. Pong Lee said they were. Do you suppose they’re gold?”

“More than I know. I’m not going to sell mine, though. I’d rather keep it to remember this experience with Pong Lee.”

“I’ll bet you really think it will bring good luck,” teased Joe.

“Quit your kidding. I’m not unusually smart, but I’ve got more sense than to believe that.”

There was a general laugh.

“Do you know,” began Joe, a little later, “I’m beginning to wonder something.”

Bob glanced up expectantly.

“Pong Lee said there is a big secret connected with those rings,” Joe resumed.

“That’s right. He did.”

“Then – there’s a chance that they are worth more than their actual gold value. Get my point?”

Bob’s face lightened.

“Golly, Joe. You may be right. But what could the secret be?”

“That’s the mystery of it all. Maybe,” Joe continued, struck with a sudden thought, “there’s a piece of paper or something concealed in the rings. I’m going to find out. It’s light here under this street lamp.”

“Don’t, you sap!” cried Bob, whirling his friend around. “Why, there might be a dozen Chinks spying on us. It would about be our finish if you’d go to examining that ring here at this late hour.”

Joe laughed sheepishly.

“I must be crazy,” he smiled. “Funny, but I never thought of that. We’ll wait till we get back to the hotel.”

Although it was late, the friends walked idly along Grant Avenue, desiring to see everything that had previously escaped their eyes. They wanted to “go off the beaten path,” as Joe expressed it, to see a part of Chinatown that was not spoiled by the Occidental. But as it was late they knew this could not be done.

The chums finally came to Market Street and turned toward the hotel, walking along silently.

The naturalists looked up quickly as the boys entered. They regarded the latter quizzically.

“We’re anxious to know just what that Chinaman wanted of you,” said Mr. Lewis with a smile. “Sit down and tell us.”

Bob removed the good luck ring from his finger. He passed it to Mr. Lewis.

“He just wanted to reward us for getting him out of that wrecked automobile,” Bob explained. “Gave us rings. And, say, there’s some secret connected with them. He wouldn’t tell us, and we haven’t been able to find out.”

“Hmm.” Joe’s father examined the ring eagerly while Mr. Holton looked over Joe’s.

“No secret openings in them, are there?” inquired Bob.

“Apparently not,” his father returned. “Each has a lot of Chinese letters and figures on it, though. Perhaps if you knew what they mean you could solve the mystery.”

Joe yawned and stretched.

“Whatever it is, I’m not going to stay up any longer to find out, even if I could,” he said.

Without further discussion all retired, eager to get all the sleep the night would afford them.

Late the next morning, Bob and Joe were awakened by their fathers.

“Whazzamatter?” demanded Bob drowsily.

“We have some news for you,” Mr. Holton said, his eyes twinkling. “Thought maybe you’d like to hear it.”

All the sleep knocked out of them, the chums sat up quickly, wondering what was meant.

CHAPTER IV

Seeing the Sights

“**DO** you remember what we said yesterday about making an expedition to Africa?” asked Mr. Lewis as the youths sat up in bed expectantly.

“Why – you said you might go,” Bob answered.

“Well, there isn’t going to be any ‘might’ in it,” Mr. Lewis said. “We’re going.”

The youths bounded out of bed in wild excitement.

“You mean we’re actually going to Africa?” cried Joe, falling over himself in enthusiasm.

The naturalists laughed significantly.

“We’re not certain how that ‘we’ will work out,” chuckled Mr. Holton. “But we’re almost sure of one thing: Ben [Mr. Lewis] and I are going. How many more will make up the expedition we haven’t decided as yet. In fact, it was only this morning that we came to a conclusion.”

“Oh, you’ve got to take Joe and me,” Bob begged. “We always have wanted to explore in the Dark Continent. We’re plenty old enough to take care of ourselves. You see how we made short work of dangerous wild animals in the Andes and in Brazil. Well, we could do the same with lions and elephants.”

“Don’t be too sure of that,” said his father gravely but with twinkling eyes. “There’s scarcely anything worse than a charging elephant.”

“Just the same, we’d take care of the situation,” said Bob boastfully. “They wouldn’t stand much chance before the Lewis-Holton expedition. Why we’d mow ’em down right and left. But seriously, Dad, Mr. Lewis, why can’t Joe and I go with you?”

“We’d like to have you,” his father assured him. “But of course you’ll have to reckon with your mothers. Suppose,” he went on, “we don’t say anything more about this matter until we get back to Washington. You see, there’s a chance that the museum heads will have something else for us to do. In that case, we won’t go.”

“I’m betting you will,” smiled Joe, who felt there was a big chance of an expedition.

“Perhaps,” smiled Mr. Holton. “Right now, though, let’s think of something else. We want to leave for Washington tomorrow morning. We’d go today if Ben and I didn’t have some more business to look after.”

“Had breakfast yet?” inquired Joe.

“Breakfast? You mean lunch?” Mr. Lewis laughed. “Boys, in case you don’t know it, it’s nearly ten o’clock.”

“Wow!” cried Bob. “If Joe and I get to see any more of old San Francisco we’ll have to do some hustling.”

“Be careful that you don’t get in any danger. Don’t be carried away on some ship,” Mr. Holton said, grinning. “And now,” he added, “we’re leaving. Be back about three this afternoon. Take care of yourselves, boys. And be careful.”

“We will. So long, Mr. Lewis, Dad.”

The youths had been dressing during the conversation with their fathers, and now they were ready to get breakfast. After the meal, they would start out to see more of San Francisco and perhaps visit other cities across the bay.

A half hour later they were walking down Market Street toward the Ferry Building, having decided to see the busy waterfront.

It was no short distance to their destination, but they moved rapidly, dodging in and out among the crowd of shoppers. They were so interested in the sights about them that they found themselves almost without knowing it at the Ferry Building.

“Now let’s go around to the docks,” suggested Bob. “I’d like to see the boats coming in from the Orient.”

“Ought to see some,” Joe said. “There are a lot of steamship lines here.”

Directly in back of the building were the ferry slips. Bob and Joe stopped a few minutes to watch passengers board a boat to Oakland. Then they continued around to the docks, where scores of vessels were anchored.

Beside one dock was a huge liner almost ready to embark for Honolulu. The gangplank was being pulled in, ropes were loosened, and a general scene of excitement prevailed. Relatives and friends of the leavetakers waved hearty farewells as, with long blasts of the whistle, the ship slowly left the wharf.

Bob and Joe watched closely as it steamed majestically out into the blue Pacific. Not far out there was the Golden Gate. Beyond this was the Orient, with all its lure, its beckoning.

“I sure would give a lot to sail out on the Pacific,” sighed Bob, turning and walking on with his chum.

Away on around Embarcadero Street the boys came to Fishermen’s Wharf, where their eyes met with a sight slightly different. At a miniature harbor were scores of Italian fishing vessels. Their crew were busily engaged in preparing the boats for sailing, or in unloading the huge cargoes of fish.

“Look over here,” called Joe. “They’re selling fresh crab sandwiches. Let’s get some.”

“O.K. What do they taste like?”

The chums soon found out. A short, exceedingly fat man who always smiled served them with tempting steaming sandwiches in return for a meager sum. After the eventful morning they tasted delicious.

As they ate, Bob and Joe walked back down past the docks, their eyes always ready to single out the unusual. Although they had been in many interesting cities, never had they been more captivated than now.

Soon their attention was attracted by a coarse whistle, and looking around they saw a large freighter steaming up to the dock.

Ordinarily the boys would have paid little or no attention to the ship, for they had often watched vessels arriving and departing. But this time they looked up in wonder.

The freighter was listing badly to starboard and looked as though it were partly filled with water. How it kept from going over on its side was a puzzle to the chums.

When the ship had entered the dock and was moored by several men who stood by waiting, the gangplank was lowered, and the captain walked down, followed by others of the crew.

One of the men paused at the foot of the gangplank, and Joe took advantage of the opportunity.

“What was the trouble?” the youth asked, desiring to know what misfortune had befallen the ship.

“Struck a derelict,” was the reply. “It was an old clipper that was about rotted through. We can’t see yet how it got through the hull, but it did.”

“But how did it happen that your ship didn’t sink?” Joe inquired, his curiosity thoroughly aroused.

The sailor laughed.

“Be pretty hard to sink the *Southern Cross*,” he said. “She’s got watertight compartments. When she gets a leak, all we have to do is close up the doors. It – Hullo, Red. Let’s get goin’.”

With another of the crew, for whom he had been waiting, the seaman left the youths and moved on over to the dock.

Bob and Joe stood for some time looking at the unfortunate vessel. Then, as nothing of further interest happened, they walked on around the harbor, absorbed in thought.

The last few days had indeed been eventful to the chums. What did the future hold in store?

CHAPTER V

A Welcome Announcement

“**WELL**, boys, we’re leaving San Francisco tomorrow,” said Mr. Lewis as he greeted the chums late that afternoon.

“I’ll be glad to get back to Washington,” remarked Bob. “Of course, I’ve had a good time here – saw a lot of interesting sights and the like. But, after all – ”

“There’s no place quite like home,” chimed in his father with a smile.

“Especially with a trip to Africa in prospect,” Bob added.

“Ah! That accounts for your ardent desire to leave, does it?” asked Mr. Lewis. “I wondered why you made that remark about wanting to get back to Washington.”

Bob and Joe smiled.

“That partly accounts for it,” came from Joe. “But, honestly, Dad, you don’t blame us, do you?”

The youth hoped to corner his father, but the latter was more clever than he had imagined.

“Not in the least,” Mr. Lewis answered quickly. “I would want to go to Africa if I were you.”

Again the boys found themselves “stumped,” and again they were forced to drop the matter regarding the expedition to the Dark Continent. They could only hope for the best, remarked Bob as that night he retired.

Early the next morning the chums and their fathers were up making preparations for the journey across the continent. They had everything in readiness by eight o’clock.

In the hotel garage they were shown to Mr. Holton’s sedan. A porter had followed them with their grips, which were placed in the car’s trunk.

The chums gazed out fondly at the last views they got of San Francisco. Then they settled themselves down for the long ride.

Nothing of significance happened during the journey, and at last, after stops had been made at Denver, Kansas City, and a small city in Kentucky, they pulled into Washington.

At their homes, which were located next door to each other, the four received a warm welcome from the youths’ mothers, Joe’s sister, and Bob’s small brother.

“I sure enjoyed our stay in San Francisco,” remarked Bob that evening, as he sat on the porch with his father and chum.

“Especially right at this time,” put in Joe. “I’m glad to get back.”

“Why right at this time?” inquired Mr. Holton.

“Because,” explained Joe, “there’s a circus in town. And as I haven’t been to a circus for quite a while, I’m going. How about you, Bob?”

“It’s a go,” said Bob at once. “Let’s you and I drive over tomorrow in my new coupé. It’s a pip, all right.”

“What, the circus, or the car?” grinned Mr. Holton.

“Well, I don’t know about the circus,” said Bob. “But I know the car is. Anyway, I’d like to take a look at wild animals that were brought from Africa. Lions, leopards, and the like. Don’t you and Mr. Lewis want to go, Dad? We can put you in the rumble seat.”

“Rumble seat, huh? Hmm. I’d want better service than that.” The naturalist viewed his son critically though with twinkling eyes. “No, we men won’t go to the circus,” he added with a grin. “But you boys can.”

“Listen to that!” cried Bob, squaring his powerful shoulders. “I guess you men enjoy it about as much as anybody does. Now, you might,” he went on, struck with a sudden thought, “take Tommy. Of course, he’d like it. That would give you an excuse to go.”

“Maybe your little brother would rather play baseball,” suggested Mr. Holton. “He finds that interesting now, you know.”

“Nix,” countered Bob. “Tommy’s all for a circus. He’d rather see the wild animals than eat. And to tell the truth, Dad,” he added mischievously, “you’re about the same way. Don’t deny it, now.”

Mr. Holton smiled.

“I see you’re putting me up a tree,” he said. “But say!” – in a tone of dismay – “come to think of it, Tommy is going to Baltimore with his mother tomorrow.”

The naturalist’s face was a perfect picture of disappointment. Bob and Joe burst out in loud laughter, and Bob gave his father a shove.

“Now who can you take?” Bob chuckled, very much amused at Mr. Holton’s plight.

“That settles it,” the naturalist said. “Ben and I won’t go. We have some work in the museum that must be attended to, anyway.”

Bob gave his father an odd glance, and then, at a call of “dinner,” the little party disbanded.

The circus was on its second day in the city, and because of several unusual attractions was receiving considerable attention. One thing being featured was an immense gorilla which had just recently been brought from western Africa. It was supposedly the largest specimen in captivity.

The next morning Bob and Joe left for the circus grounds. There they found that a large crowd had already gathered to gain admittance.

“Suppose we go to the menagerie tent first,” suggested Bob. “We have some time yet before the performance opens. I want to take a look at that big gorilla.”

“And if what we’ve heard is true, he’s a whopper.”

This was no exaggeration, as the chums found a little later. The big ape seemed the very personification of power. His huge chest was several times as big as a man’s. His long large arms looked capable of crushing an enemy into a shapeless mass. The little beady eyes were defiant, moving from one to another of the spectators.

“How would you like to meet that fellow in a wrestling match?” said Bob with a laugh.

Joe smiled unwillingly.

“He wouldn’t leave a grease spot of you,” he said. “Fifteen or twenty champion wrestlers wouldn’t have the slightest chance in the world with him.”

There was a far-away look in Bob’s eyes, which Joe noticed as he happened to turn about.

“What’s got into you?” the latter asked. “You look like a great scientist that’s just made a wonderful discovery.”

Bob roused himself and laughed.

“I was just thinking,” he said.

“About what?”

“Africa. Gorillas like this fellow here. Lions. Wild elephants. Tall forest giants. Adventure.”

“Wow!” cried Joe. “You’ll have me running around in circles. You know,” he went on more seriously, “it’s up to us to get our dads in the notion of going to Africa very soon now. And we’ll have to make them let us go along. They – ”

He stopped abruptly and smiled sheepishly as he caught sight of two men standing beside him. Those men were none other than Mr. Lewis and Mr. Holton.

“What th – ” cried Bob, who had also seen.

“Didn’t expect to find us here, did you?” asked Mr. Holton with a grin.

“And you said you weren’t coming!” roared Bob. He looked about.

“Tommy didn’t come,” his father said. “He went with his mother. But,” with a glance at Mr. Lewis, “Ben and I decided to take a look at this whale of a gorilla here. What do you think of him, boys?”

“Biggest I’ve ever seen,” came from Joe. “Wonder how he was captured.”

“It wasn’t an easy job,” said Mr. Lewis. “I once saw natives in Africa capture a gorilla. Was in the Mountains of the Moon. They used a peculiar trap consisting of a circular hole in the ground. When the animal fell into the hole, a noose was tightened around its neck.”

“You say you were there?” asked Bob. “How long ago has it been?”

“A good many years – four, to be exact. Howard and I went together on a big expedition. We brought back several unusual specimens of animal life.”

“Then,” began Bob with a smile, “you’ll probably go again in the next few days, won’t you? Back in San Francisco you said you were going.”

Mr. Lewis and Mr. Holton exchanged amused glances.

“Shall we tell them, Ben?” asked Bob’s father.

“Tell us what?” cried Joe, sensing that something was in the wind.

“Simply that we’re leaving for Africa Friday,” was the quiet answer from Mr. Lewis.

CHAPTER VI

The Business Card

AT Mr. Lewis's words, Bob and Joe stood mouth agape. They stared at the naturalist for several seconds in sheer surprise. Then they were overcome with joy.

"You're not kidding, are you?" cried Bob, finally managing to utter the words.

"Not a bit," said Mr. Lewis. "In fact, as soon as we put the proposed expedition before the museum heads, they were captivated by the idea. Said they greatly desired new specimens from Africa, and if we could get them it would be perfectly all right. They're going to fix everything up for us."

"Man alive!" cried Joe. "It'll be a wonderful opportunity. Of course," he went on, "there's a chance that Bob and I may go with you, isn't there?"

"Let's not discuss that matter just now," Mr. Holton said. "Of course, you know there are others besides Ben and I who have a say. But we'll give it a thought, boys."

"And now we're off for the museum," announced Joe's father.

"Aren't you going to stay for the circus performance?" asked Bob in some surprise.

"Really we haven't the time, Son," answered Mr. Holton. "With this African mission on our hands we'll have to do some hustling. We just came down here to take a look at this big gorilla. Well, we'll see you later, boys. Be good."

With this the naturalists took their leave, while their sons glanced at each other.

"A trip to Africa!" cried Bob joyfully. He picked his chum up and danced around with him in happiness.

"Better cut this stuff out," advised Joe. "As soon as you calm down a little you'll lose some of that excess strength – and then maybe you'll let me drop."

Bob released his chum and stopped his dance of joy, as he noticed that people were beginning to trickle into the tent. But his face retained its look of exultation.

The boys still had some time before the performance was to start and amused themselves by looking about the grounds.

Later, in the main tent, the chums enjoyed the show immensely. Perhaps, however, as Bob said, they could have enjoyed it still more had they not been so absorbed in the coming expedition to Africa.

"We'll just have to go with you," pleaded Joe when the two had gone to the museum to join their fathers. "Why, you know it wouldn't be complete without us."

"Perhaps not," came from Mr. Lewis, "although we hadn't thought of it in that light."

"You know we can take care of ourselves," Bob defended himself and his friend. "And we're both good shots. Remember the time when we potted off those gazelles on the Sahara?"

"Sure thing," said Mr. Holton, nodding. "And you've brought us many other valuable specimens, too. But to tell the truth, boys, we're not anxious for you to go with us this time. You see, we have orders to shoot some very dangerous game. Lions, rhinos, buffaloes, and the like."

"Better and better!" exclaimed Bob, his eyes brightening still more. "Just where do you intend to explore?"

"In the middle of the Congo Basin," returned his father. "Our ship will take us to Mombasa. From there we'll take a train –"

"Train?" interrupted Joe, greatly puzzled. "Do they have trains in the heart of Africa?"

"Not exactly in the heart of Africa," Mr. Holton answered. "But there is a railroad running from Mombasa to Lake Victoria. As I was saying, we'll board a train and go as far as it will carry us. Then we'll have to organize a safari."

"Exactly what is that?" inquired Bob. "I've often heard the term, but never was quite clear about its meaning."

“Safari means practically the same as expedition,” Mr. Lewis explained. “It is an Arabic term that is used quite frequently in Africa. A safari is composed of the explorers, the native police, bearers, and the like. It may vary from just a few people to several hundred. In our case, however, we won’t need a large number of carriers. If we do need more, we can engage them in the jungle to carry our specimens back to the coast. The money that they charge is only a very meager amount.”

“Just what animals do you want especially to bag?” asked Bob. “Of course, you want lions, don’t you?”

“Lions, yes,” returned his father. “And other dangerous game. But we also want to investigate reports of several strange animals that are at present generally unknown. Whether we’ll find them we have yet to see – if nothing with sharp teeth stops us,” he added with a smile.

“Nothing will,” said Bob conclusively. “But just what is the most dangerous game of Africa?” The naturalists glanced at each other.

“Better not ask that question, or you’ll start a heated debate,” laughed Mr. Lewis. “Howard and I are very much in disagreement about it.”

“Why?” persisted Bob.

“Your father is inclined to place the rhino as the most dangerous, while I would say the buffalo comes first. But to settle the argument, both are bad enough when they’re after you.”

“But what about the lion?” demanded Joe. “Isn’t he dangerous?”

“Very much so,” answered Mr. Holton. “However, he isn’t considered anything like the two animals that Ben mentioned. That doesn’t mean, though, that it’s advisable to go out and pick a quarrel with the king of beasts,” he added whimsically.

“Let me get a map of Africa, boys,” said Joe’s father, rising. “Then we can see exactly where we intend to explore.”

He went over to a bookcase in a corner of the office, returning a moment later with a large cloth map of the Dark Continent.

But at that moment the telephone rang, and Mr. Holton stepped over to answer it.

A few seconds later he uttered a cry of surprise. His brow wrinkled, and his face took on a look of dismay.

“Why, it can’t be!” he cried excitedly. “Stolen! Gone!”

At the scientist’s ominous words Mr. Lewis looked up in wonder. The boys too listened intently. They were growing impatient when Mr. Holton again spoke.

“Stay where you are,” he directed the person at the other end of the line. “We’ll meet you at once.”

With these words he hung up and turned to the others.

“Those specimens that we bought from Thompson in Chicago – they’ve been stolen!” he explained in a worried voice.

“What!” cried Mr. Lewis angrily. “Do you mean that?”

“Every word of it,” was the response. “We must go at once. If we get there in time we may be able to find the culprit.”

The naturalists grabbed their hats and dashed out of the office and through the building to the outside. Bob and Joe followed them, although without knowing where they were going.

All got in Mr. Holton’s car, which was parked near the museum.

“Now we must hurry,” Bob’s father said, starting the engine. “The robbery took place but a short time ago, and there is a chance that we can overtake the thief.”

“Weren’t the specimens covered by insurance?” inquired Joe.

Mr. Lewis shook his head.

“But even if they were,” the naturalist said, “this is a case where insurance could not replace the loss. Such rare birds and animals as those can be procured only with great patience and labor

under a hot sun. You fellows know what a job it is to stalk wild animals. And it isn't likely that we'll find others like them in Africa."

With a roar and a rush the automobile shot out into the street and was soon caught in the midst of heavy traffic. Although Mr. Holton greatly desired to travel at a rapid pace, he found it impossible to do so.

"Where are we going?" asked Bob. "We've been so interested in the robbery itself that Joe and I haven't thought to inquire where the specimens were when they were stolen."

"In a railroad freight yard," returned his father. "The museum sent one of its trucks after them as soon as they arrived. I don't have the details about the happening, but the box of specimens must have been stolen while the truck driver was not around. Apparently the robber was familiar with the contents of the box. Perhaps he had carefully planned the theft in advance. Heard us talking about the specimens, maybe."

"Well, he won't get away with it if we can help it," said Bob with determination. "We'll catch him somehow."

"Let's hope you're right," Mr. Holton said gravely as he pushed the accelerator still nearer to the floorboard.

After what seemed like hours they pulled up at their destination – a railroad freight yard.

Inside the main building they found the truck driver awaiting them, on his face a look of deep anxiety. His features relaxed a little as he caught sight of the two naturalists.

Mr. Lewis at once demanded an account of what had happened and urged the man to relate every detail.

The driver explained that he had loaded the box of specimens on the truck and, not doubting that they would be safe, had gone into the freight office for a brief stay. When he returned to the truck, he found, to his astonishment, that the box was gone. It was only then that he fully realized what had happened.

"If I'd only seen the guy that took them we might catch him," he finished.

The scientists were greatly vexed at the driver for not taking better care of such valuable goods, but they managed to keep their temper.

They walked out to the truck to discover, if possible, the thief's means of escape.

"He probably had another automobile waiting to take those specimens," remarked Joe. "Maybe we can find its tracks. The ground here is soft after the recent rain."

A careful survey of the roadway was not in vain, for soon they saw wide tracks of automobile tires which possessed a very odd tread.

"Here's a clue, anyway," said Mr. Holton. "Every little thing counts, you know."

Bob had gone a piece toward the street. Now he came running toward the others.

"Look!" he cried excitedly. "I've found something. Let's see what it is."

CHAPTER VII

The Thief Turns Up

AS the others crowded around him, Bob held up a small business card. It had apparently been dropped near the museum's truck, perhaps by the thief himself. On it was printed the name Thomas Jordan.

"Thomas Jordan!" exclaimed Mr. Lewis, reaching for the card. "Why, he's a wealthy sportsman. Practically everybody has heard of him. Of course it couldn't have been he that stole those specimens."

Bob's father agreed with him.

"Scarcely anybody is more respected," he said.

"You say he's a sportsman, huh?" said Joe thoughtfully. "What does he do?"

"A lawyer by profession," Mr. Lewis returned. "But in addition he heads a private museum, merely as a hobby, I guess. Has a very wide collection of fauna from all parts of the world. He charges a small admission fee. Makes a lot of money at it."

"Where does he get his specimens?" inquired Joe.

Mr. Lewis looked puzzled for a moment.

"Why, from different sources," the naturalist replied. "Goes after some occasionally, buys some _"

"Buys some, does he?" Joe still spoke in a very thoughtful voice. "Then might it not be possible that he will buy those that were stolen – get them from the thief, I mean?"

"By George!" exclaimed Mr. Holton, his eyes brightening. "You may be right, Joe. Strange that none of the rest of us thought of that now. Yes, it's quite possible for such a thing to happen. Perhaps the thief has already made arrangements with this Mr. Jordan to sell him the specimens."

"I suggest that we hunt up Jordan immediately," came from Mr. Lewis. "But I refuse to think that he had a part in the robbery."

"I don't think so either," put in Bob. "From what I've heard, he's considered one of the leading citizens. But it's possible that the thief could disguise himself as a dealer in wild animals and easily sell them to Jordan."

"Chances are that is what will happen, if we do not interfere," Mr. Lewis said. "So I believe we should look up this fellow at once."

Bob's father, having instructed the truck driver to return to the museum, led the way to his car. He desired to lose no time in calling on Mr. Jordan, who must be informed of the theft in time to prevent the sale of the stolen specimens.

The object of their remarks lived in a very fashionable residential section, which was at the very edge of the city. His private museum was located but a few squares from his home.

"If we can't find him one place, perhaps we can another," said Bob. "That is, if he hasn't left the city."

"In that case we'll have as good a chance to see him first as the thief," laughed Joe.

Some time later the four pulled up in front of a spacious home in an exclusive residential district. They left the car and moved up to the house.

A butler took the card Mr. Lewis handed him, standing aside a moment later for them to go in. Then, after taking their hats, he disappeared into another room.

The visitors had not long to wait. They had barely taken the chairs offered them when a tall erect man walked up to them.

"You are Mr. Jordan?" asked Joe's father, rising.

"Yes."

The naturalist introduced himself and his friends and then lost no time in getting to the point. He told of the theft in the freight yard, then of finding the attorney's card.

"Naturally we resolved to hunt you up," he said. "It is entirely possible that this thief has been to see you about buying specimens from him. Of course, you probably did not in the least suspect him. Or, if this is not the case, he got your card from some other source."

Mr. Jordan was silent for several moments, as if in deep thought. Finally he turned to the others.

"I think I know the very man who stole them," he announced.

"Good!" cried Joe impulsively.

"A very well-dressed chap," the lawyer resumed, staring hard at the floor. "He came here about a month ago and said he dealt in all descriptions of specimens. But there was something about him that aroused my suspicions at once. Perhaps it was the way he acted. At any rate, I didn't trust him. Appeared to be one of these, ah, slick, well-dressed rascals that you see so much of. I told him I desired nothing at present but rare specimens from Africa. He wore a blank look for a minute; then suddenly he gave a start and turned to me with a queer smile. 'I'll find you something,' he said. 'I think I know where I can get exactly what you want.' I gave him one of my cards."

"Perhaps that's the very man we're looking for," said Bob. "Possible, anyway. Has he called you yet?"

"No. But if we think correctly, he may very soon now. Of course, though, he might wait till after the news of the robbery gets in the papers and has died down a bit."

Mr. Holton shook his head.

"I'm of the opinion that he will sell those specimens before the news gets in the papers," the naturalist said. "Perhaps he will pick today to do it. The sooner he gets them off his hands, the better chance he'll have to get away without being found out."

"Suppose you give me a description of them – the specimens, I mean," Mr. Jordan suggested. "Then, if the thief comes, I'll know at once and have him arrested."

"That will be fine." Mr. Lewis tore out a sheet of paper from his notebook and wrote down the names of each animal included in the collection. He handed the paper to the attorney.

"I shall be glad to do this for you," the latter said. "If the thief comes, I'll slip away somehow to a telephone."

"We don't know how to thank you enough," Mr. Holton said gratefully. "In doing this you will be performing an invaluable service for the museum –"

He stopped abruptly as he noticed the butler entering the room.

"Mr. Henry Overton to see you," the servant announced, as the attorney arose.

Mr. Jordan took the card the butler handed him. He pondered for several minutes before speaking. Finally he turned his gaze upon the naturalists and their sons.

"Gentlemen," he said with a smile, "I think the time is at hand. The thief, I believe, is here now."

There were looks of surprise and astonishment on the faces of the visitors.

"Suppose we four hide in an adjoining room while you talk to this man," suggested Bob Holton. "Then we can hear what's being said."

"You're fairly sure the caller is the man we were talking about?" asked Mr. Lewis, hesitating a moment before following Bob's move.

"No, not sure," Mr. Jordan responded. "But he is a collector of wild animals. And that seems suspicious enough, doesn't it?"

"Tell you what," he continued. "Suppose you four do as suggested – hide in this room and listen in on us. If it happens that the man is someone else, no harm will have been done."

The naturalists and their sons needed no urging. They hurried into the next room and hid near the entrance. There was a curtain separating them from the reception room, and all crouched near to peep through.

Their hearts were in their mouths when a minute later a stranger was admitted.

“Doesn’t look much like a crook,” whispered Joe, as he noticed that the man was dressed handsomely.

“Look at his eyes, though,” returned Bob, also keeping his voice very low.

The four listeners strained every nerve to catch what was being said in the next room. They were delighted beyond expression when they found that they could make out every word of the conversation.

“I was here a good while ago,” the stranger was saying. “No doubt you remember me. You told me to let you know as soon as I found some rare specimens from Africa.”

“And you’ve found some?” asked Mr. Jordan rather impatiently.

“Ah, yes. You will be delighted when I tell you what they are. The rarest of the rare. Mounted beautifully by one of my expert taxidermists.”

He opened a small black satchel which he had carried. After a few seconds of nervous fumbling he removed a small leather notebook.

“Here,” he said, handing the book to Mr. Jordan. “The complete list of specimens is here. Each is described carefully. All told, there are five of the most unusual wild creatures imaginable.”

“Only five!” whispered Mr. Holton, appearing suddenly angered. “Why, there were ten in the box that was stolen.”

Almost at once the attorney broached the same matter.

“Five are all you have for sale?” he asked casually. “Why, that is only a small handful, so to speak.”

“Well, ah – ” the stranger hesitated before speaking – “I might be able to secure more for you.”

Mr. Jordan looked up suddenly.

“Is that so?” he asked quietly. “It’s rather surprising that you can have them so readily. Of course” – he laughed to relieve the tension – “you don’t go after them yourself, do you?”

The alleged buyer and seller of specimens faltered for a brief period, but at last looked up.

“These I was able to secure from a collector friend, who went on an expedition merely for the pleasure it afforded him, and not for the advancement of science.”

“Oh, yeah?” whispered Bob to his friends who were hiding like himself. “He got ’em from his ‘collector friend’ like I got ’em off a hot-dog stand.”

“No wise-cracking,” grinned Joe. “You might get me to laughing.”

The next few moments of conversation convinced the youths’ fathers that the man in the adjoining room was the thief. A few descriptions of the specimens, which Mr. Jordan purposely read aloud, were sufficient to convict the stranger in the minds of Mr. Holton and Mr. Lewis.

From then, the conversation appeared uninteresting, although Bob and Joe, as well as the naturalists, were anxious to see how the attorney would dispose of the stranger.

“And,” continued Mr. Jordan, “what are you asking for these five specimens?”

“The small sum of a hundred dollars,” was the reply.

Mr. Jordan gasped in astonishment. Only a hundred dollars for what should be worth a great deal more than that!

Meanwhile, in the next room, Joe had decided on a plan of action.

“Now that we are convinced that this man is the thief, we are free to do almost anything,” he began, speaking in a very low whisper.

The others looked at him inquiringly.

“My scheme is this,” Joe continued, “I’ll go out – ”

“If you’re doing anything, I’m in it with you,” interrupted Bob.

“All right, then. We’ll go out to this man’s car. It’s probably parked in front – ”

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