

## Chapter 4

It was during the morning of July 6, 2137, that we entered the mouth of the Thames--to the best of my knowledge the first Western keel to cut those historic waters for two hundred and twenty-one years!

But where were the tugs and the lighters and the barges, the lightships and the buoys, and all those countless attributes which went to make up the myriad life of the ancient Thames?

Gone! All gone! Only silence and desolation reigned where once the commerce of the world had centered.

I could not help but compare this once great water-way with the waters about our New York, or Rio, or San Diego, or Valparaiso. They had become what they are today during the two centuries of the profound peace which we of the navy have been prone to deplore. And what, during this same period, had shorn the waters of the Thames of their pristine grandeur?

Militarist that I am, I could find but a single word of explanation--war!

I bowed my head and turned my eyes downward from the lonely and depressing sight, and in a silence which none of us seemed willing to break, we proceeded up the deserted river.

We had reached a point which, from my map, I imagined must have been about the former site of Erith, when I discovered a small band of antelope a short distance inland. As we were now entirely out of meat once more, and as I had given up all expectations of finding a city upon the site of ancient London, I determined to land and bag a couple of the animals.

Assured that they would be timid and easily frightened, I decided to stalk them alone, telling the men to wait at the boat until I called to them to come and carry the carcasses back to the shore.

Crawling carefully through the vegetation, making use of such trees and bushes as afforded shelter, I came at last almost within easy range of my quarry, when the antlered head of the buck went suddenly into the air, and then, as though in accordance with a prearranged signal, the whole band moved slowly off, farther inland.

As their pace was leisurely, I determined to follow them until I came again within range, as I was sure that they would stop and feed in a short time.

They must have led me a mile or more at least before they again halted and commenced to browse upon the rank, luxuriant grasses. All the time that I had followed them I had kept both eyes and ears alert for sign or sound that would indicate the presence of *Felis tigris*; but so far not the slightest indication of the beast had been apparent.

As I crept closer to the antelope, sure this time of a good shot at a large buck, I suddenly saw something that caused me to forget all about my prey in wonderment.

It was the figure of an immense grey-black creature, rearing its colossal shoulders twelve or fourteen feet above the ground. Never in my life had I seen such a beast, nor did I at first recognize it, so different in appearance is the live reality from the stuffed, unnatural specimens preserved to us in our museums.

But presently I guessed the identity of the mighty creature as *Elephas africanus*, or, as the ancients commonly described it, African elephant.

The antelope, although in plain view of the huge beast, paid not the slightest attention to it, and I was so wrapped up in watching the mighty pachyderm that I quite forgot to shoot at the buck and presently, and in quite a startling manner, it became impossible to do so.

The elephant was browsing upon the young and tender shoots of some low bushes, waving his great ears and switching his short tail. The antelope, scarce twenty paces from him, continued their feeding, when suddenly, from close beside the latter, there came a most terrifying roar, and I saw a great, tawny body shoot, from the concealing verdure beyond the antelope, full upon the back of a small buck.

Instantly the scene changed from one of quiet and peace to indescribable chaos. The startled and terrified buck uttered cries of agony. His fellows broke and leaped off in all directions. The elephant raised his trunk, and, trumpeting loudly, lumbered off through the wood, crushing down small trees and trampling bushes in his mad flight.

Growling horribly, a huge lion stood across the body of his prey--such a creature as no Pan-American of the twenty-second century had ever beheld until my eyes rested upon this lordly specimen of "the king of beasts." But what a different creature was this fierce-eyed demon, palpitating with life and vigor, glossy of coat, alert, growling, magnificent, from the dingy, moth-eaten replicas beneath their glass cases in the stuffy halls of our public museums.

I had never hoped or expected to see a living lion, tiger, or elephant--using the common terms that were familiar to the ancients, since they seem to me less unwieldy than those now in general use among us--and so it was with sentiments not unmixed with awe that I stood gazing at this regal beast as, above the carcass of his kill, he roared out his challenge to the world.

So enthralled was I by the spectacle that I quite forgot myself, and the better to view him, the great lion, I had risen to my feet and stood, not fifty paces from him, in full view.

For a moment he did not see me, his attention being directed toward the retreating elephant, and I had ample time to feast my eyes upon his splendid proportions, his great head, and his thick black mane.

Ah, what thoughts passed through my mind in those brief moments as I stood there in rapt fascination! I had come to find a wondrous civilization, and instead I found a wild-beast monarch of the realm where English kings had ruled. A lion reigned, undisturbed, within a few miles of the seat of one of the greatest governments the world has ever known, his domain a howling wilderness, where yesterday fell the shadows of the largest city in the world.

It was appalling; but my reflections upon this depressing subject were doomed to sudden extinction. The lion had discovered me.

For an instant he stood silent and motionless as one of the mangy effigies at home, but only for an instant. Then, with a most ferocious roar, and without the slightest hesitancy or warning, he charged upon me.

He forsook the prey already dead beneath him for the pleasures of the delectable tidbit, man. From the remorselessness with which the great Carnivora of modern England hunted man, I am constrained to believe that, whatever their appetites in times past, they have cultivated a gruesome taste for human flesh.

As I threw my rifle to my shoulder, I thanked God, the ancient God of my ancestors, that I had replaced the hard-jacketed bullets in my weapon with soft-nosed projectiles, for though this was my first experience with *Felis leo*, I knew the moment that I faced that charge that even my wonderfully perfected firearm would be as futile as a peashooter unless I chanced to place my first bullet in a vital spot.

Unless you had seen it you could not believe credible the speed of a charging lion. Apparently the animal is not built for speed, nor can he maintain it for long. But for a matter of forty or fifty yards there is, I believe, no animal on earth that can overtake him.

Like a bolt he bore down upon me, but, fortunately for me, I did not lose my head. I guessed that no bullet would kill him instantly. I doubted that I could pierce his skull. There was hope, though, in finding his heart through his exposed chest, or, better yet, of breaking his shoulder or foreleg, and bringing him up long enough to pump more bullets into him and finish him.

I covered his left shoulder and pulled the trigger as he was almost upon me. It stopped him. With a terrific howl of pain and rage, the brute rolled over and over upon the ground almost to my feet. As he came I pumped two more bullets into him, and as he struggled to rise, clawing viciously at me, I put a bullet in his spine.

That finished him, and I am free to admit that I was mighty glad of it. There was a great tree close behind me, and, stepping within its shade, I leaned against it, wiping the perspiration from my face, for the day was hot, and the exertion and excitement left me exhausted.

I stood there, resting, for a moment, preparatory to turning and retracing my steps to the launch, when, without warning, something whizzed through space straight toward me. There was a dull thud of impact as it struck the tree, and as I dodged to one side and turned to look at the thing I saw a heavy spear imbedded in the wood not three inches from where my head had been.

The thing had come from a little to one side of me, and, without waiting to investigate at the instant, I leaped behind the tree, and, circling it, peered around the other side to get a sight of my would-be murderer.

This time I was pitted against men--the spear told me that all too plainly--but so long as they didn't take me unawares or from behind I had little fear of them.

Cautiously I edged about the far side of the trees until I could obtain a view of the spot from which the spear must have come, and when I did I saw the head of a man just emerging from behind a bush.

The fellow was quite similar in type to those I had seen upon the Isle of Wight. He was hairy and unkempt, and as he finally stepped into view I saw that he was garbed in the same primitive fashion.

He stood for a moment gazing about in search of me, and then he advanced. As he did so a number of others, precisely like him, stepped from the concealing verdure of nearby bushes and followed in his wake. Keeping the trees between them and me, I ran back a short distance until I found a clump of underbrush that would effectually conceal me, for I wished to discover the strength of the party and its armament before attempting to parley with it.

The useless destruction of any of these poor creatures was the farthest idea from my mind. I should have liked to have spoken with them, but I did not care to risk having to use my high-powered rifle upon them other than in the last extremity.

Once in my new place of concealment, I watched them as they approached the tree. There were about thirty men in the party and one woman--a girl whose hands seemed to be bound behind her and who was being pulled along by two of the men.

They came forward warily, peering cautiously into every bush and halting often. At the body of the lion, they paused, and I could see from their gesticulations and the higher pitch of their voices that they were much excited over my kill.

But presently they resumed their search for me, and as they advanced I became suddenly aware of the unnecessary brutality with which the girl's guards were treating her. She stumbled once, not far from my place of concealment, and after the balance of the party had passed me. As she did so one of the men at her side jerked her roughly to her feet and struck her across the mouth with his fist.

Instantly my blood boiled, and forgetting every consideration of caution, I leaped from my concealment, and, springing to the man's side, felled him with a blow.

So unexpected had been my act that it found him and his fellow unprepared; but instantly the latter drew the knife that protruded from his belt and lunged viciously at me, at the same time giving voice to a wild cry of alarm.

The girl shrank back at sight of me, her eyes wide in astonishment, and then my antagonist was upon me. I parried his first blow with my forearm, at the same time delivering a powerful blow to his jaw that sent him reeling back; but he was at me again in an instant, though in the brief interim I had time to draw my revolver.

I saw his companion crawling slowly to his feet, and the others of the party racing down upon me. There was no time to argue now, other than with the weapons we wore, and so, as the fellow lunged at me again with the wicked-looking knife, I covered his heart and pulled the trigger.

Without a sound, he slipped to the earth, and then I turned the weapon upon the other guard, who was now about to attack me. He, too, collapsed, and I was alone with the astonished girl.

The balance of the party was some twenty paces from us, but coming rapidly. I seized her arm and drew her after me behind a nearby tree, for I had seen that with both their comrades down the others were preparing to launch their spears.

With the girl safe behind the tree, I stepped out in sight of the advancing foe, shouting to them that I was no enemy, and that they should halt and listen to me. But for answer they only yelled in derision and launched a couple of spears at me, both of which missed.

I saw then that I must fight, yet still I hated to slay them, and it was only as a final resort that I dropped two of them with my rifle, bringing the others to a temporary halt. Again, I appealed to them to desist. But they only mistook my solicitude for them for fear, and, with shouts of rage and derision, leaped forward once again to overwhelm me.

It was now quite evident that I must punish them severely, or--myself--die and relinquish the girl once more to her captors. Neither of these things had I the slightest notion of doing, and so I again stepped from behind the tree, and, with all the care and deliberation of target practice, I commenced picking off the foremost of my assailants.

One by one the wild men dropped, yet on came the others, fierce and vengeful, until, only a few remaining, these seemed to realize the futility of combating my modern weapon with their primitive spears, and, still howling wrathfully, withdrew toward the west.

Now, for the first time, I had an opportunity to turn my attention toward the girl, who had stood, silent and motionless, behind me as I pumped death into my enemies and hers from my automatic rifle.

She was of medium height, well formed, and with fine, clear-cut features. Her forehead was high, and her eyes both intelligent and beautiful. Exposure to the sun had browned a smooth and velvety skin to a shade which seemed to enhance rather than mar an altogether lovely picture of youthful femininity.

A trace of apprehension marked her expression--I cannot call it fear since I have learned to know her--and astonishment was still apparent in her eyes. She stood quite erect, her hands still bound behind her, and met my gaze with level, proud return.

"What language do you speak?" I asked. "Do you understand mine?"

"Yes," she replied. "It is similar to my own. I am Grabritin. What are you?"

"I am a Pan-American," I answered. She shook her head. "Whatis that?"

I pointed toward the west. "Far away, across the ocean."

Her expression altered a trifle. A slight frown contracted her brow. The expression of apprehension deepened.

"Take off your cap," she said, and when, to humor her strange request, I did as she bid, she appeared relieved. Then she edged to one side and leaned over seemingly to peer behind me. I turned quickly to see what she discovered, but finding nothing, wheeled about to see that her expression was once more altered.

"You are not from there?" and she pointed toward the east. It was a half question. "You are not from across the water there?"

"No," I assured her. "I am from Pan-America, far away to the west. Have you ever heard of Pan-America?"

She shook her head in negation. "I do not care where you are from," she explained, "if you are not from there, and I am sure you are not, for the men from there have horns and tails."

It was with difficulty that I restrained a smile.

"Who are the men from there?" I asked.

"They are bad men," she replied. "Some of my people do not believe that there are such creatures. But we have a legend--a very old, old legend, that once the men from there came across to Grabritin. They came upon the water, and under the water, and even in the air. They came in great numbers, so that they rolled across the land like a great gray fog. They brought with them thunder and lightning and smoke that killed, and they fell upon us and slew our people by the thousands and the hundreds of thousands. But at last we drove them back to the water's edge, back into the sea, where many were drowned. Some escaped, and these our people followed--men, women, and even children, we followed them back. That is all. The legend says our people never returned. Maybe they were all killed. Maybe they are still there. But this, also, is in the legend, that as we drove the men back across the water they swore that they would return, and that when they left our shores they would leave no human being alive behind them. I was afraid that you were from there."

"By what name were these men called?" I asked.

"We call them only the 'men from there,'" she replied, pointing toward the east. "I have never heard that they had another name."

In the light of what I knew of ancient history, it was not difficult for me to guess the nationality of those she described simply as "the men from over there." But what utter and appalling devastation the Great War must have wrought to have

erased not only every sign of civilization from the face of this great land, but even the name of the enemy from the knowledge and language of the people.

I could only account for it on the hypothesis that the country had been entirely depopulated except for a few scattered and forgotten children, who, in some marvelous manner, had been preserved by Providence to re-populate the land. These children had, doubtless, been too young to retain in their memories to transmit to their children any but the vaguest suggestion of the cataclysm which had overwhelmed their parents.

Professor Cortoran, since my return to Pan-America, has suggested another theory which is not entirely without claim to serious consideration. He points out that it is quite beyond the pale of human instinct to desert little children as my theory suggests the ancient English must have done. He is more inclined to believe that the expulsion of the foe from England was synchronous with widespread victories by the allies upon the continent, and that the people of England merely emigrated from their ruined cities and their devastated, blood-drenched fields to the mainland, in the hope of finding, in the domain of the conquered enemy, cities and farms which would replace those they had lost.

The learned professor assumes that while a long-continued war had strengthened rather than weakened the instinct of paternal devotion, it had also dulled other humanitarian instincts, and raised to the first magnitude the law of the survival of the fittest, with the result that when the exodus took place the strong, the intelligent, and the cunning, together with their offspring, crossed the waters of the Channel or the North Sea to the continent, leaving in unhappy England only the helpless inmates of asylums for the feebleminded and insane.

My objections to this, that the present inhabitants of England are mentally fit, and could therefore not have descended from an ancestry of undiluted lunacy he brushes aside with the assertion that insanity is not necessarily hereditary; and that even though it was, in many cases a return to natural conditions from the state of high civilization, which is thought to have induced mental disease in the ancient world, would, after several generations, have thoroughly expunged every trace of the affliction from the brains and nerves of the descendants of the original maniacs.

Personally, I do not place much stock in Professor Cortoran's theory, though I admit that I am prejudiced. Naturally one does not care to believe that the object of his greatest affection is descended from a gibbering idiot and a raving maniac.

But I am forgetting the continuity of my narrative--a continuity which I desire to maintain, though I fear that I shall often be led astray, so numerous and varied

are the bypaths of speculation which lead from the present day story of the Grabritins into the mysterious past of their forbears.

As I stood talking with the girl I presently recollected that she still was bound, and with a word of apology, I drew my knife and cut the rawhide thongs which confined her wrists at her back.

She thanked me, and with such a sweet smile that I should have been amply repaid by it for a much more arduous service.

"And now," I said, "let me accompany you to your home and see you safely again under the protection of your friends."

"No," she said, with a hint of alarm in her voice; "you must not come with me-- Buckingham will kill you."

Buckingham. The name was famous in ancient English history. Its survival, with many other illustrious names, is one of the strongest arguments in refutation of Professor Cortoran's theory; yet it opens no new doors to the past, and, on the whole, rather adds to than dissipates the mystery.

"And who is Buckingham," I asked, "and why should he wish to kill me?"

"He would think that you had stolen me," she replied, "and as he wishes me for himself, he will kill any other whom he thinks desires me. He killed Wettin a few days ago. My mother told me once that Wettin was my father. He was king. Now Buckingham is king."

Here, evidently, were a people slightly superior to those of the Isle of Wight. These must have at least the rudiments of civilized government since they recognized one among them as ruler, with the title, king. Also, they retained the word father. The girl's pronunciation, while far from identical with ours, was much closer than the tortured dialect of the Eastenders of the Isle of Wight. The longer I talked with her the more hopeful I became of finding here, among her people, some records, or traditions, which might assist in clearing up the historic enigma of the past two centuries. I asked her if we were far from the city of London, but she did not know what I meant. When I tried to explain, describing mighty buildings of stone and brick, broad avenues, parks, palaces, and countless people, she but shook her head sadly.

"There is no such place near by," she said. "Only the Camp of the Lions has places of stone where the beasts lair, but there are no people in the Camp of the Lions. Who would dare go there!" And she shuddered.

"The Camp of the Lions," I repeated. "And where is that, and what?"

"It is there," she said, pointing up the river toward the west. "I have seen it from a great distance, but I have never been there. We are much afraid of the lions, for this is their country, and they are angry that man has come to live here.

"Far away there," and she pointed toward the south-west, "is the land of tigers, which is even worse than this, the land of the lions, for the tigers are more numerous than the lions and hungrier for human flesh. There were tigers here long ago, but both the lions and the men set upon them and drove them off."

"Where did these savage beasts come from?" I asked.

"Oh," she replied, "they have been here always. It is their country."

"Do they not kill and eat your people?" I asked.

"Often, when we meet them by accident, and we are too few to slay them, or when one goes too close to their camp. But seldom do they hunt us, for they find what food they need among the deer and wild cattle, and, too, we make them gifts, for are we not intruders in their country? Really we live upon good terms with them, though I should not care to meet one were there not many spears in my party."

"I should like to visit this Camp of the Lions," I said.

"Oh, no, you must not!" cried the girl. "That would be terrible. They would eat you." For a moment, then, she seemed lost in thought, but presently she turned upon me with: "You must go now, for any minute Buckingham may come in search of me. Long since should they have learned that I am gone from the camp--they watch over me very closely--and they will set out after me. Go! I shall wait here until they come in search of me."

"No," I told her. "I'll not leave you alone in a land infested by lions and other wild beasts. If you won't let me go as far as your camp with you, then I'll wait here until they come in search of you."

"Please go!" she begged. "You have saved me, and I would save you, but nothing will save you if Buckingham gets his hands on you. He is a bad man. He wishes to have me for his woman so that he may be king. He would kill anyone who befriended me, for fear that I might become another's."

"Didn't you say that Buckingham is already the king?" I asked.

"He is. He took my mother for his woman after he had killed Wettin. But my mother will die soon--she is very old--and then the man to whom I belong will become king."

Finally, after much questioning, I got the thing through my head. It appears that the line of descent is through the women. A man is merely head of his wife's family--that is all. If she chances to be the oldest female member of the "royal" house, he is king. Very naively the girl explained that there was seldom any doubt as to whom a child's mother was.

This accounted for the girl's importance in the community and for Buckingham's anxiety to claim her, though she told me that she did not wish to become his woman, for he was a bad man and would make a bad king. But he was powerful, and there was no other man who dared dispute his wishes.

"Why not come with me," I suggested, "if you do not wish to become Buckingham's?"

"Where would you take me?" she asked.

Where, indeed! I had not thought of that. But before I could reply to her question she shook her head and said, "No, I cannot leave my people. I must stay and do my best, even if Buckingham gets me, but you must go at once. Do not wait until it is too late. The lions have had no offering for a long time, and Buckingham would seize upon the first stranger as a gift to them."

I did not perfectly understand what she meant, and was about to ask her when a heavy body leaped upon me from behind, and great arms encircled my neck. I struggled to free myself and turn upon my antagonist, but in another instant I was overwhelmed by a half dozen powerful, half-naked men, while a score of others surrounded me, a couple of whom seized the girl.

I fought as best I could for my liberty and for hers, but the weight of numbers was too great, though I had the satisfaction at least of giving them a good fight.

When they had overpowered me, and I stood, my hands bound behind me, at the girl's side, she gazed commiseratingly at me.

"It is too bad that you did not do as I bid you," she said, "for now it has happened just as I feared--Buckingham has you."

"Which is Buckingham?" I asked.

"I am Buckingham," growled a burly, unwashed brute, swaggering truculently before me. "And who are you who would have stolen my woman?"

The girl spoke up then and tried to explain that I had not stolen her; but on the contrary I had saved her from the men from the "Elephant Country" who were carrying her away.

Buckingham only sneered at her explanation, and a moment later gave the command that started us all off toward the west. We marched for a matter of an hour or so, coming at last to a collection of rude huts, fashioned from branches of trees covered with skins and grasses and sometimes plastered with mud. All about the camp they had erected a wall of saplings pointed at the tops and fire hardened.

This palisade was a protection against both man and beasts, and within it dwelt upward of two thousand persons, the shelters being built very close together, and sometimes partially underground, like deep trenches, with the poles and hides above merely as protection from the sun and rain.

The older part of the camp consisted almost wholly of trenches, as though this had been the original form of dwellings which was slowly giving way to the drier and airier surface domiciles. In these trench habitations I saw a survival of the military trenches which formed so famous a part of the operation of the warring nations during the twentieth century.

The women wore a single light deerskin about their hips, for it was summer, and quite warm. The men, too, were clothed in a single garment, usually the pelt of some beast of prey. The hair of both men and women was confined by a rawhide thong passing about the forehead and tied behind. In this leathern band were stuck feathers, flowers, or the tails of small mammals. All wore necklaces of the teeth or claws of wild beasts, and there were numerous metal wristlets and anklets among them.

They wore, in fact, every indication of a most primitive people--a race which had not yet risen to the heights of agriculture or even the possession of domestic animals. They were hunters--the lowest plane in the evolution of the human race of which science takes cognizance.

And yet as I looked at their well shaped heads, their handsome features, and their intelligent eyes, it was difficult to believe that I was not among my own. It was only when I took into consideration their mode of living, their scant apparel, the lack of every least luxury among them, that I was forced to admit that they were, in truth, but ignorant savages.

Buckingham had relieved me of my weapons, though he had not the slightest idea of their purpose or uses, and when we reached the camp he exhibited both me and my arms with every indication of pride in this great capture.

The inhabitants flocked around me, examining my clothing, and exclaiming in wonderment at each new discovery of button, buckle, pocket, and flap. It seemed

incredible that such a thing could be, almost within a stone's throw of the spot where but a brief two centuries before had stood the greatest city of the world.

They bound me to a small tree that grew in the middle of one of their crooked streets, but the girl they released as soon as we had entered the enclosure. The people greeted her with every mark of respect as she hastened to a large hut near the center of the camp.

Presently she returned with a fine looking, white-haired woman, who proved to be her mother. The older woman carried herself with a regal dignity that seemed quite remarkable in a place of such primitive squalor.

The people fell aside as she approached, making a wide way for her and her daughter. When they had come near and stopped before me the older woman addressed me.

"My daughter has told me," she said, "of the manner in which you rescued her from the men of the elephant country. If Wettin lived you would be well treated, but Buckingham has taken me now, and is king. You can hope for nothing from such a beast as Buckingham."

The fact that Buckingham stood within a pace of us and was an interested listener appeared not to temper her expressions in the slightest.

"Buckingham is a pig," she continued. "He is a coward. He came upon Wettin from behind and ran his spear through him. He will not be king for long. Some one will make a face at him, and he will run away and jump into the river."

The people began to titter and clap their hands. Buckingham became red in the face. It was evident that he was far from popular.

"If he dared," went on the old lady, "he would kill me now, but he does not dare. He is too great a coward. If I could help you I should gladly do so. But I am only queen--the vehicle that has helped carry down, unsullied, the royal blood from the days when Grabritin was a mighty country."

The old queen's words had a noticeable effect upon the mob of curious savages which surrounded me. The moment they discovered that the old queen was friendly to me and that I had rescued her daughter they commenced to accord me a more friendly interest, and I heard many words spoken in my behalf, and demands were made that I not be harmed.

But now Buckingham interfered. He had no intention of being robbed of his prey. Blustering and storming, he ordered the people back to their huts, at the same

time directing two of his warriors to confine me in a dugout in one of the trenches close to his own shelter.

Here they threw me upon the ground, binding my ankles together and trussing them up to my wrists behind. There they left me, lying upon my stomach--a most uncomfortable and strained position, to which was added the pain where the cords cut into my flesh.

Just a few days ago my mind had been filled with the anticipation of the friendly welcome I should find among the cultured Englishmen of London. Today I should be sitting in the place of honor at the banquet board of one of London's most exclusive clubs, feted and lionized.

The actuality! Here I lay, bound hand and foot, doubtless almost upon the very site of a part of ancient London, yet all about me was a primeval wilderness, and I was a captive of half-naked wild men.

I wondered what had become of Delcarte and Taylor and Snider. Would they search for me? They could never find me, I feared, yet if they did, what could they accomplish against this horde of savage warriors?

Would that I could warn them. I thought of the girl--doubtless she could get word to them, but how was I to communicate with her? Would she come to see me before I was killed? It seemed incredible that she should not make some slight attempt to befriend me; yet, as I recalled, she had made no effort to speak with me after we had reached the village. She had hastened to her mother the moment she had been liberated. Though she had returned with the old queen, she had not spoken to me, even then. I began to have my doubts.

Finally, I came to the conclusion that I was absolutely friendless except for the old queen. For some unaccountable reason my rage against the girl for her ingratitude rose to colossal proportions.

For a long time I waited for some one to come to my prison whom I might ask to bear word to the queen, but I seemed to have been forgotten. The strained position in which I lay became unbearable. I wriggled and twisted until I managed to turn myself partially upon my side, where I lay half facing the entrance to the dugout.

Presently my attention was attracted by the shadow of something moving in the trench without, and a moment later the figure of a child appeared, creeping upon all fours, as, wide-eyed, and prompted by childish curiosity, a little girl crawled to the entrance of my hut and peered cautiously and fearfully in.

I did not speak at first for fear of frightening the little one away. But when I was satisfied that her eyes had become sufficiently accustomed to the subdued light of the interior, I smiled.

Instantly the expression of fear faded from her eyes to be replaced with an answering smile.

"Who are you, little girl?" I asked.

"My name is Mary," she replied. "I am Victory's sister."

"And who is Victory?"

"You do not know who Victory is?" she asked, in astonishment.

I shook my head in negation.

"You saved her from the elephant country people, and yet you say you do not know her!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, so she is Victory, and you are her sister! I have not heard her name before. That is why I did not know whom you meant," I explained. Here was just the messenger for me. Fate was becoming more kind.

"Will you do something for me, Mary?" I asked.

"If I can."

"Go to your mother, the queen, and ask her to come to me," I said. "I have a favor to ask."

She said that she would, and with a parting smile she left me.

For what seemed many hours I awaited her return, chafing with impatience. The afternoon wore on and night came, and yet no one came near me. My captors brought me neither food nor water. I was suffering considerable pain where the rawhide thongs cut into my swollen flesh. I thought that they had either forgotten me, or that it was their intention to leave me here to die of starvation.

Once I heard a great uproar in the village. Men were shouting--women were screaming and moaning. After a time this subsided, and again there was a long interval of silence.

Half the night must have been spent when I heard a sound in the trench near the hut. It resembled muffled sobs. Presently a figure appeared, silhouetted against the lesser darkness beyond the doorway. It crept inside the hut.

"Are you here?" whispered a childlike voice.

It was Mary! She had returned. The thongs no longer hurt me. The pangs of hunger and thirst disappeared. I realized that it had been loneliness from which I suffered most.

"Mary!" I exclaimed. "You are a good girl. You have come back, after all. I had commenced to think that you would not. Did you give my message to the queen? Will she come? Where is she?"

The child's sobs increased, and she flung herself upon the dirt floor of the hut, apparently overcome by grief.

"What is it?" I asked. "Why do you cry?"

"The queen, my mother, will not come to you," she said, between sobs. "She is dead. Buckingham has killed her. Now he will take Victory, for Victory is queen. He kept us fastened up in our shelter, for fear that Victory would escape him, but I dug a hole beneath the back wall and got out. I came to you, because you saved Victory once before, and I thought that you might save her again, and me, also. Tell me that you will."

"I am bound and helpless, Mary," I replied. "Otherwise I would do what I could to save you and your sister."

"I will set you free!" cried the girl, creeping up to my side. "I will set you free, and then you may come and slay Buckingham."

"Gladly!" I assented.

"We must hurry," she went on, as she fumbled with the hard knots in the stiffened rawhide, "for Buckingham will be after you soon. He must make an offering to the lions at dawn before he can take Victory. The taking of a queen requires a human offering!"

"And I am to be the offering?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, tugging at a knot. "Buckingham has been wanting a sacrifice ever since he killed Wettin, that he might slay my mother and take Victory."

The thought was horrible, not solely because of the hideous fate to which I was condemned, but from the contemplation it engendered of the sad decadence of a once enlightened race. To these depths of ignorance, brutality, and superstition had the vaunted civilization of twentieth century England been plunged, and by what? War! I felt the structure of our time-honored militaristic arguments crumbling about me.

Mary labored with the thongs that confined me. They proved refractory--defying her tender, childish fingers. She assured me, however, that she would release me, if "they" did not come too soon.

But, alas, they came. We heard them coming down the trench, and I bade Mary hide in a corner, lest she be discovered and punished. There was naught else she could do, and so she crawled away into the Stygian blackness behind me.

Presently two warriors entered. The leader exhibited a unique method of discovering my whereabouts in the darkness. He advanced slowly, kicking out viciously before him. Finally he kicked me in the face. Then he knew where I was.

A moment later I had been jerked roughly to my feet. One of the fellows stopped and severed the bonds that held my ankles. I could scarcely stand alone. The two pulled and hauled me through the low doorway and along the trench. A party of forty or fifty warriors were awaiting us at the brink of the excavation some hundred yards from the hut.

Hands were lowered to us, and we were dragged to the surface. Then commenced a long march. We stumbled through the underbrush wet with dew, our way lighted by a score of torchbearers who surrounded us. But the torches were not to light the way--that was but incidental. They were carried to keep off the huge Carnivora that moaned and coughed and roared about us.

The noises were hideous. The whole country seemed alive with lions. Yellow-green eyes blazed wickedly at us from out the surrounding darkness. My escort carried long, heavy spears. These they kept ever pointed toward the beast of prey, and I learned from snatches of the conversation I overheard that occasionally there might be a lion who would brave even the terrors of fire to leap in upon human prey. It was for such that the spears were always couched.

But nothing of the sort occurred during this hideous death march, and with the first pale heralding of dawn we reached our goal--an open place in the midst of a tangled wildwood. Here rose in crumbling grandeur the first evidences I had seen of the ancient civilization which once had graced fair Albion--a single, time-worn arch of masonry.

"The entrance to the Camp of the Lions!" murmured one of the party in a voice husky with awe.

Here the party knelt, while Buckingham recited a weird, prayer-like chant. It was rather long, and I recall only a portion of it, which ran, if my memory serves me, somewhat as follows:

Lord of Grabritin, we Fall on our knees to thee, This gift to bring.  
Greatest of kings are thou! To thee we humbly bow! Peace to our camp  
allow. God save thee, king!

Then the party rose, and dragging me to the crumbling arch, made me fast to a huge, corroded, copper ring which was dangling from an eyebolt imbedded in the masonry.

None of them, not even Buckingham, seemed to feel any personal animosity toward me. They were naturally rough and brutal, as primitive men are supposed to have been since the dawn of humanity, but they did not go out of their way to maltreat me.

With the coming of dawn the number of lions about us seemed to have greatly diminished--at least they made less noise--and as Buckingham and his party disappeared into the woods, leaving me alone to my terrible fate, I could hear the grumblings and growlings of the beasts diminishing with the sound of the chant, which the party still continued. It appeared that the lions had failed to note that I had been left for their breakfast, and had followed off after their worshippers instead.

But I knew the reprieve would be but for a short time, and though I had no wish to die, I must confess that I rather wished the ordeal over and the peace of oblivion upon me.

The voices of the men and the lions receded in the distance, until finally quiet reigned about me, broken only by the sweet voices of birds and the sighing of the summer wind in the trees.

It seemed impossible to believe that in this peaceful woodland setting the frightful thing was to occur which must come with the passing of the next lion who chanced within sight or smell of the crumbling arch.

I strove to tear myself loose from my bonds, but succeeded only in tightening them about my arms. Then I remained passive for a long time, letting the scenes of my lifetime pass in review before my mind's eye.

I tried to imagine the astonishment, incredulity, and horror with which my family and friends would be overwhelmed if, for an instant, space could be annihilated and they could see me at the gates of London.

The gates of London! Where was the multitude hurrying to the marts of trade after a night of pleasure or rest? Where was the clang of tramcar gongs, the screech of motor horns, the vast murmur of a dense throng?

Where were they? And as I asked the question a lone, gaunt lion strode from the tangled jungle upon the far side of the clearing. Majestically and noiselessly upon his padded feet the king of beasts moved slowly toward the gates of London and toward me.

Was I afraid? I fear that I was almost afraid. I know that I thought that fear was coming to me, and so I straightened up and squared my shoulders and looked the lion straight in the eyes--and waited.

It is not a nice way to die--alone, with one's hands fast bound, beneath the fangs and talons of a beast of prey. No, it is not a nice way to die, not a pretty way.

The lion was halfway across the clearing when I heard a slight sound behind me. The great cat stopped in his tracks. He lashed his tail against his sides now, instead of simply twitching its tip, and his low moan became a thunderous roar.

As I craned my neck to catch a glimpse of the thing that had aroused the fury of the beast before me, it sprang through the arched gateway and was at my side--with parted lips and heaving bosom and disheveled hair--a bronzed and lovely vision to eyes that had never harbored hope of rescue.

It was Victory, and in her arms she clutched my rifle and revolver. A long knife was in the doeskin belt that supported the doeskin skirt tightly about her lithe limbs. She dropped my weapons at my feet, and, snatching the knife from its resting place, severed the bonds that held me. I was free, and the lion was preparing to charge.

"Run!" I cried to the girl, as I bent and seized my rifle. But she only stood there at my side, her bared blade ready in her hand.

The lion was bounding toward us now in prodigious leaps. I raised the rifle and fired. It was a lucky shot, for I had no time to aim carefully, and when the beast crumpled and rolled, lifeless, to the ground, I went upon my knees and gave thanks to the God of my ancestors.

And, still upon my knees, I turned, and taking the girl's hand in mine, I kissed it. She smiled at that, and laid her other hand upon my head.

"You have strange customs in your country," she said.

I could not but smile at that when I thought how strange it would seem to my countrymen could they but see me kneeling there on the site of London, kissing the hand of England's queen.

"And now," I said, as I rose, "you must return to the safety of your camp. I will go with you until you are near enough to continue alone in safety. Then I shall try to return to my comrades."

"I will not return to the camp," she replied.

"But what shall you do?" I asked.

"I do not know. Only I shall never go back while Buckingham lives. I should rather die than go back to him. Mary came to me, after they had taken you from the camp, and told me. I found your strange weapons and followed with them. It took me a little longer, for often I had to hide in the trees that the lions might not get me, but I came in time, and now you are free to go back to your friends."

"And leave you here?" I exclaimed.

She nodded, but I could see through all her brave front that she was frightened at the thought. I could not leave her, of course, but what in the world I was to do, cumbered with the care of a young woman, and a queen at that, I was at a loss to know. I pointed out that phase of it to her, but she only shrugged her shapely shoulders and pointed to her knife.

It was evident that she felt entirely competent to protect herself.

As we stood there we heard the sound of voices. They were coming from the forest through which we had passed when we had come from camp.

"They are searching for me," said the girl. "Where shall we hide?"

I didn't relish hiding. But when I thought of the innumerable dangers which surrounded us and the comparatively small amount of ammunition that I had with me, I hesitated to provoke a battle with Buckingham and his warriors when, by flight, I could avoid them and preserve my cartridges against emergencies which could not be escaped.

"Would they follow us there?" I asked, pointing through the archway into the Camp of the Lions.

"Never," she replied, "for, in the first place, they would know that we would not dare go there, and in the second they themselves would not dare."

"Then we shall take refuge in the Camp of the Lions," I said.

She shuddered and drew closer to me.

"You dare?" she asked.

"Why not?" I returned. "We shall be safe from Buckingham, and you have seen, for the second time in two days, that lions are harmless before my weapons. Then, too, I can find my friends easiest in this direction, for the River Thames runs through this place you call the Camp of the Lions, and it is farther down the Thames that my friends are awaiting me. Do you not dare come with me?"

"I dare follow wherever you lead," she answered simply.

And so I turned and passed beneath the great arch into the city of London.