

## Chapter 5

As we entered deeper into what had once been the city, the evidences of man's past occupancy became more frequent. For a mile from the arch there was only a riot of weeds and undergrowth and trees covering small mounds and little hillocks that, I was sure, were formed of the ruins of stately buildings of the dead past.

But presently we came upon a district where shattered walls still raised their crumbling tops in sad silence above the grass-grown sepulchers of their fallen fellows. Softened and mellowed by ancient ivy stood these sentinels of sorrow, their scarred faces still revealing the rents and gashes of shrapnel and of bomb.

Contrary to our expectations, we found little indication that lions in any great numbers laired in this part of ancient London. Well-worn pathways, molded by padded paws, led through the cavernous windows or doorways of a few of the ruins we passed, and once we saw the savage face of a great, black-maned lion scowling down upon us from a shattered stone balcony.

We followed down the bank of the Thames after we came upon it. I was anxious to look with my own eyes upon the famous bridge, and I guessed, too, that the river would lead me into the part of London where stood Westminster Abbey and the Tower.

Realizing that the section through which we had been passing was doubtless outlying, and therefore not so built up with large structures as the more centrally located part of the old town, I felt sure that farther down the river I should find the ruins larger. The bridge would be there in part, at least, and so would remain the walls of many of the great edifices of the past. There would be no such complete ruin of large structures as I had seen among the smaller buildings.

But when I had come to that part of the city which I judged to have contained the relics I sought I found havoc that had been wrought there even greater than elsewhere.

At one point upon the bosom of the Thames there rises a few feet above the water a single, disintegrating mound of masonry. Opposite it, upon either bank of the river, are tumbled piles of ruins overgrown with vegetation.

These, I am forced to believe, are all that remain of London Bridge, for nowhere else along the river is there any other slightest sign of pier or abutment.

Rounding the base of a large pile of grass-covered debris, we came suddenly upon the best preserved ruin we had yet discovered. The entire lower story and part of the second story of what must once have been a splendid public building rose from a great knoll of shrubbery and trees, while ivy, thick and luxuriant, clambered upward to the summit of the broken walls.

In many places the gray stone was still exposed, its smoothly chiseled face pitted with the scars of battle. The massive portal yawned, somber and sorrowful, before us, giving a glimpse of marble halls within.

The temptation to enter was too great. I wished to explore the interior of this one remaining monument of civilization now dead beyond recall. Through this same portal, within these very marble halls, had Gray and Chamberlin and Kitchener and Shaw, perhaps, come and gone with the other great ones of the past.

I took Victory's hand in mine.

"Come!" I said. "I do not know the name by which this great pile was known, nor the purposes it fulfilled. It may have been the palace of your sires, Victory. From some great throne within, your forebears may have directed the destinies of half the world. Come!"

I must confess to a feeling of awe as we entered the rotunda of the great building. Pieces of massive furniture of another day still stood where man had placed them centuries ago. They were littered with dust and broken stone and plaster, but, otherwise, so perfect was their preservation I could hardly believe that two centuries had rolled by since human eyes were last set upon them.

Through one great room after another we wandered, hand in hand, while Victory asked many questions and for the first time I began to realize something of the magnificence and power of the race from whose loins she had sprung.

Splendid tapestries, now mildewed and rotting, hung upon the walls. There were mural paintings, too, depicting great historic events of the past. For the first time Victory saw the likeness of a horse, and she was much affected by a huge oil which depicted some ancient cavalry charge against a battery of field guns.

In other pictures there were steamships, battleships, submarines, and quaint looking railway trains--all small and antiquated in appearance to me, but wonderful to Victory. She told me that she would like to remain for the rest of her life where she could look at those pictures daily.

From room to room we passed until presently we emerged into a mighty chamber, dark and gloomy, for its high and narrow windows were choked and clogged by

ivy. Along one paneled wall we groped, our eyes slowly becoming accustomed to the darkness. A rank and pungent odor pervaded the atmosphere.

We had made our way about half the distance across one end of the great apartment when a low growl from the far end brought us to a startled halt.

Straining my eyes through the gloom, I made out a raised dais at the extreme opposite end of the hall. Upon the dais stood two great chairs, highbacked and with great arms.

The throne of England! But what were those strange forms about it?

Victory gave my hand a quick, excited little squeeze.

"The lions!" she whispered.

Yes, lions indeed! Sprawled about the dais were a dozen huge forms, while upon the seat of one of the thrones a small cub lay curled in slumber.

As we stood there for a moment, spellbound by the sight of those fearsome creatures occupying the very thrones of the sovereigns of England, the low growl was repeated, and a great male rose slowly to his feet.

His devilish eyes bored straight through the semi-darkness toward us. He had discovered the interloper. What right had man within this palace of the beasts? Again he opened his giant jaws, and this time there rumbled forth a warning roar.

Instantly eight or ten of the other beasts leaped to their feet. Already the great fellow who had spied us was advancing slowly in our direction. I held my rifle ready, but how futile it appeared in the face of this savage horde.

The foremost beast broke into a slow trot, and at his heels came the others. All were roaring now, and the din of their great voices reverberating through the halls and corridors of the palace formed the most frightful chorus of thunderous savagery imaginable to the mind of man.

And then the leader charged, and upon the hideous pandemonium broke the sharp crack of my rifle, once, twice, thrice. Three lions rolled, struggling and biting, to the floor. Victory seized my arm, with a quick, "This way! Here is a door," and a moment later we were in a tiny antechamber at the foot of a narrow stone staircase.

Up this we backed, Victory just behind me, as the first of the remaining lions leaped from the throne room and sprang for the stairs. Again I fired, but others of the ferocious beasts leaped over their fallen fellows and pursued us.

The stairs were very narrow--that was all that saved us--for as I backed slowly upward, but a single lion could attack me at a time, and the carcasses of those I slew impeded the rushes of the others.

At last we reached the top. There was a long corridor from which opened many doorways. One, directly behind us, was tight closed. If we could open it and pass into the chamber behind we might find a respite from attack.

The remaining lions were roaring horribly. I saw one sneaking very slowly up the stairs toward us.

"Try that door," I called to Victory. "See if it will open."

She ran up to it and pushed.

"Turn the knob!" I cried, seeing that she did not know how to open a door, but neither did she know what I meant by knob.

I put a bullet in the spine of the approaching lion and leaped to Victory's side. The door resisted my first efforts to swing it inward. Rusted hinges and swollen wood held it tightly closed. But at last it gave, and just as another lion mounted to the top of the stairway it swung in, and I pushed Victory across the threshold.

Then I turned to meet the renewed attack of the savage foe. One lion fell in his tracks, another stumbled to my very feet, and then I leaped within and slammed the portal to.

A quick glance showed me that this was the only door to the small apartment in which we had found sanctuary, and, with a sigh of relief, I leaned for a moment against the panels of the stout barrier that separated us from the ramping demons without.

Across the room, between two windows, stood a flat-topped desk. A little pile of white and brown lay upon it close to the opposite edge. After a moment of rest I crossed the room to investigate. The white was the bleached human bones--the skull, collar bones, arms, and a few of the upper ribs of a man. The brown was the dust of a decayed military cap and blouse. In a chair before the desk were other bones, while more still strewed the floor beneath the desk and about the chair. A man had died sitting there with his face buried in his arms--two hundred years ago.

Beneath the desk were a pair of spurred military boots, green and rotten with decay. In them were the leg bones of a man. Among the tiny bones of the hands was an ancient fountain pen, as good, apparently, as the day it was made, and a metal covered memoranda book, closed over the bones of an index finger.

It was a gruesome sight--a pitiful sight--this lone inhabitant of mighty London.

I picked up the metal covered memoranda book. Its pages were rotten and stuck together. Only here and there was a sentence or a part of a sentence legible. The first that I could read was near the middle of the little volume:

"His majesty left for Tunbridge Wells today, he ... jesty was stricken ... terday. God give she does not die ... am military governor of Lon ..."

And farther on:

"It is awful ... hundred deaths today ... worse than the bombardm ..."

Nearer the end I picked out the following:

"I promised his maj ... e will find me here when he ret ... alone."

The most legible passage was on the next page:

"Thank God we drove them out. There is not a single ... man on British soil today; but at what awful cost. I tried to persuade Sir Phillip to urge the people to remain. But they are mad with fear of the Death, and rage at our enemies. He tells me that the coast cities are packed ... waiting to be taken across. What will become of England, with none left to rebuild her shattered cities!"

And the last entry:

"... alone. Only the wild beasts ... A lion is roaring now beneath the palace windows. I think the people feared the beasts even more than they did the Death. But they are gone, all gone, and to what? How much better conditions will they find on the continent? All gone--only I remain. I promised his majesty, and when he returns he will find that I was true to my trust, for I shall be awaiting him. God save the King!"

That was all. This brave and forever nameless officer died nobly at his post--true to his country and his king. It was the Death, no doubt, that took him.

Some of the entries had been dated. From the few legible letters and figures which remained I judge the end came some time in August, 1937, but of that I am not at all certain.

The diary has cleared up at least one mystery that had puzzled me not a little, and now I am surprised that I had not guessed its solution myself--the presence of African and Asiatic beasts in England.

Acclimated by years of confinement in the zoological gardens, they were fitted to resume in England the wild existence for which nature had intended them, and once free, had evidently bred prolifically, in marked contrast to the captive exotics of twentieth century Pan-America, which had gradually become fewer until extinction occurred some time during the twenty-first century.

The palace, if such it was, lay not far from the banks of the Thames. The room in which we were imprisoned overlooked the river, and I determined to attempt to escape in this direction.

To descend through the palace was out of the question, but outside we could discover no lions. The stems of the ivy which clambered upward past the window of the room were as large around as my arm. I knew that they would support our weight, and as we could gain nothing by remaining longer in the palace, I decided to descend by way of the ivy and follow along down the river in the direction of the launch.

Naturally I was much handicapped by the presence of the girl. But I could not abandon her, though I had no idea what I should do with her after rejoining my companions. That she would prove a burden and an embarrassment I was certain, but she had made it equally plain to me that she would never return to her people to mate with Buckingham.

I owed my life to her, and, all other considerations aside, that was sufficient demand upon my gratitude and my honor to necessitate my suffering every inconvenience in her service. Too, she was queen of England. But, by far the most potent argument in her favor, she was a woman in distress--and a young and very beautiful one.

And so, though I wished a thousand times that she was back in her camp, I never let her guess it, but did all that lay within my power to serve and protect her. I thank God now that I did so.

With the lions still padding back and forth beyond the closed door, Victory and I crossed the room to one of the windows. I had outlined my plan to her, and she had assured me that she could descend the ivy without assistance. In fact, she smiled a trifle at my question.

Swinging myself outward, I began the descent, and had come to within a few feet of the ground, being just opposite a narrow window, when I was startled by a savage growl almost in my ear, and then a great taloned paw darted from the aperture to seize me, and I saw the snarling face of a lion within the embrasure.

Releasing my hold upon the ivy, I dropped the remaining distance to the ground, saved from laceration only because the lion's paw struck the thick stem of ivy.

The creature was making a frightful racket now, leaping back and forth from the floor at the broad window ledge, tearing at the masonry with his claws in vain attempts to reach me. But the opening was too narrow, and the masonry too solid.

Victory had commenced the descent, but I called to her to stop just above the window, and, as the lion reappeared, growling and snarling, I put a .33 bullet in his face, and at the same moment Victory slipped quickly past him, dropping into my upraised arms that were awaiting her.

The roaring of the beasts that had discovered us, together with the report of my rifle, had set the balance of the fierce inmates of the palace into the most frightful uproar I have ever heard.

I feared that it would not be long before intelligence or instinct would draw them from the interiors and set them upon our trail, the river. Nor had we much more than reached it when a lion bounded around the corner of the edifice we had just quitted and stood looking about as though in search of us.

Following, came others, while Victory and I crouched in hiding behind a clump of bushes close to the bank of the river. The beasts sniffed about the ground for a while, but they did not chance to go near the spot where we had stood beneath the window that had given us escape.

Presently a black-maned male raised his head, and, with cocked ears and glaring eyes, gazed straight at the bush behind which we lay. I could have sworn that he had discovered us, and when he took a few short and stately steps in our direction I raised my rifle and covered him. But, after a long, tense moment he looked away, and turned to glare in another direction.

I breathed a sigh of relief, and so did Victory. I could feel her body quiver as she lay pressed close to me, our cheeks almost touching as we both peered through the same small opening in the foliage.

I turned to give her a reassuring smile as the lion indicated that he had not seen us, and as I did so she, too, turned her face toward mine, for the same purpose, doubtless. Anyway, as our heads turned simultaneously, our lips brushed together. A startled expression came into Victory's eyes as she drew back in evident confusion.

As for me, the strangest sensation that I have ever experienced claimed me for an instant. A peculiar, tingling thrill ran through my veins, and my head swam. I could not account for it.

Naturally, being a naval officer and consequently in the best society of the federation, I have seen much of women. With others, I have laughed at the assertions of the savants that modern man is a cold and passionless creation in comparison with the males of former ages--in a word, that love, as the one grand passion, had ceased to exist.

I do not know, now, but that they were more nearly right than we have guessed, at least in so far as modern civilized woman is concerned. I have kissed many women--young and beautiful and middle aged and old, and many that I had no business kissing--but never before had I experienced that remarkable and altogether delightful thrill that followed the accidental brushing of my lips against the lips of Victory.

The occurrence interested me, and I was tempted to experiment further. But when I would have essayed it another new and entirely unaccountable force restrained me. For the first time in my life I felt embarrassment in the presence of a woman.

What further might have developed I cannot say, for at that moment a perfect she-devil of a lioness, with keener eyes than her lord and master, discovered us. She came trotting toward our place of concealment, growling and baring her yellow fangs.

I waited for an instant, hoping that I might be mistaken, and that she would turn off in some other direction. But no--she increased her trot to a gallop, and then I fired at her, but the bullet, though it struck her full in the breast, didn't stop her.

Screaming with pain and rage, the creature fairly flew toward us. Behind her came other lions. Our case looked hopeless. We were upon the brink of the river. There seemed no avenue of escape, and I knew that even my modern automatic rifle was inadequate in the face of so many of these fierce beasts.

To remain where we were would have been suicidal. We were both standing now, Victory keeping her place bravely at my side, when I reached the only decision open to me.

Seizing the girl's hand, I turned, just as the lioness crashed into the opposite side of the bushes, and, dragging Victory after me, leaped over the edge of the bank into the river.



I did not know that lions are not fond of water, nor did I know if Victory could swim, but death, immediate and terrible, stared us in the face if we remained, and so I took the chance.

At this point the current ran close to the shore, so that we were immediately in deep water, and, to my intense satisfaction, Victory struck out with a strong, overhand stroke and set all my fears on her account at rest.

But my relief was short-lived. That lioness, as I have said before, was a veritable devil. She stood for a moment glaring at us, then like a shot she sprang into the river and swam swiftly after us.

Victory was a length ahead of me.

"Swim for the other shore!" I called to her.

I was much impeded by my rifle, having to swim with one hand while I clung to my precious weapon with the other. The girl had seen the lioness take to the water, and she had also seen that I was swimming much more slowly than she, and what did she do? She started to drop back to my side.

"Go on!" I cried. "Make for the other shore, and then follow down until you find my friends. Tell them that I sent you, and with orders that they are to protect you. Go on! Go on!"

But she only waited until we were again swimming side by side, and I saw that she had drawn her long knife, and was holding it between her teeth.

"Do as I tell you!" I said to her sharply, but she shook her head.

The lioness was overhauling us rapidly. She was swimming silently, her chin just touching the water, but blood was streaming from between her lips. It was evident that her lungs were pierced.

She was almost upon me. I saw that in a moment she would take me under her forepaws, or seize me in those great jaws. I felt that my time had come, but I meant to die fighting. And so I turned, and, treading water, raised my rifle above my head and awaited her.

Victory, animated by a bravery no less ferocious than that of the dumb beast assailing us, swam straight for me. It all happened so swiftly that I cannot recall the details of the kaleidoscopic action which ensued. I knew that I rose high out of the water, and, with clubbed rifle, dealt the animal a terrific blow upon the skull, that I saw Victory, her long blade flashing in her hand, close, striking, upon

the beast, that a great paw fell upon her shoulder, and that I was swept beneath the surface of the water like a straw before the prow of a freighter.

Still clinging to my rifle, I rose again, to see the lioness struggling in her death throes but an arm's length from me. Scarcely had I risen than the beast turned upon her side, struggled frantically for an instant, and then sank.