

## Chapter 6

Victory was nowhere in sight. Alone, I floated upon the bosom of the Thames. In that brief instant I believe that I suffered more mental anguish than I have crowded into all the balance of my life before or since. A few hours before, I had been wishing that I might be rid of her, and now that she was gone I would have given my life to have her back again.

Wearily I turned to swim about the spot where she had disappeared, hoping that she might rise once at least, and I would be given the opportunity to save her, and, as I turned, the water boiled before my face and her head shot up before me. I was on the point of striking out to seize her, when a happy smile illumined her features.

"You are not dead!" she cried. "I have been searching the bottom for you. I was sure that the blow she gave you must have disabled you," and she glanced about for the lioness.

"She has gone?" she asked.

"Dead," I replied.

"The blow you struck her with the thing you call rifle stunned her," she explained, "and then I swam in close enough to get my knife into her heart."

Ah, such a girl! I could not but wonder what one of our own Pan-American women would have done under like circumstances. But then, of course, they have not been trained by stern necessity to cope with the emergencies and dangers of savage primeval life.

Along the bank we had just quitted, a score of lions paced to and fro, growling menacingly. We could not return, and we struck out for the opposite shore. I am a strong swimmer, and had no doubt as to my ability to cross the river, but I was not so sure about Victory, so I swam close behind her, to be ready to give her assistance should she need it.

She did not, however, reaching the opposite bank as fresh, apparently, as when she entered the water. Victory is a wonder. Each day that we were together brought new proofs of it. Nor was it her courage or vitality only which amazed me. She had a head on those shapely shoulders of hers, and dignity! My, but she could be regal when she chose!

She told me that the lions were fewer upon this side of the river, but that there were many wolves, running in great packs later in the year. Now they were north

somewhere, and we should have little to fear from them, though we might meet with a few.

My first concern was to take my weapons apart and dry them, which was rather difficult in the face of the fact that every rag about me was drenched. But finally, thanks to the sun and much rubbing, I succeeded, though I had no oil to lubricate them.

We ate some wild berries and roots that Victory found, and then we set off again down the river, keeping an eye open for game on one side and the launch on the other, for I thought that Delcarte, who would be the natural leader during my absence, might run up the Thames in search of me.

The balance of that day we sought in vain for game or for the launch, and when night came we lay down, our stomachs empty, to sleep beneath the stars. We were entirely unprotected from attack from wild beasts, and for this reason I remained awake most of the night, on guard. But nothing approached us, though I could hear the lions roaring across the river, and once I thought I heard the howl of a beast north of us--it might have been a wolf.

Altogether, it was a most unpleasant night, and I determined then that if we were forced to sleep out again that I should provide some sort of shelter which would protect us from attack while we slept.

Toward morning I dozed, and the sun was well up when Victory aroused me by gently shaking my shoulder.

"Antelope!" she whispered in my ear, and, as I raised my head, she pointed up-river. Crawling to my knees, I looked in the direction she indicated, to see a buck standing upon a little knoll some two hundred yards from us. There was good cover between the animal and me, and so, though I might have hit him at two hundred yards, I preferred to crawl closer to him and make sure of the meat we both so craved.

I had covered about fifty yards of the distance, and the beast was still feeding peacefully, so I thought that I would make even surer of a hit by going ahead another fifty yards, when the animal suddenly raised his head and looked away, up-river. His whole attitude proclaimed that he was startled by something beyond him that I could not see.

Realizing that he might break and run and that I should then probably miss him entirely, I raised my rifle to my shoulder. But even as I did so the animal leaped into the air, and simultaneously there was a sound of a shot from beyond the knoll.

For an instant I was dumbfounded. Had the report come from down-river, I should have instantly thought that one of my own men had fired. But coming from up-river it puzzled me considerably. Who could there be with firearms in primitive England other than we of the Coldwater?

Victory was directly behind me, and I motioned for her to lie down, as I did, behind the bush from which I had been upon the point of firing at the antelope. We could see that the buck was quite dead, and from our hiding place we waited to discover the identity of his slayer when the latter should approach and claim his kill.

We had not long to wait, and when I saw the head and shoulders of a man appear above the crest of the knoll, I sprang to my feet, with a heartfelt cry of joy, for it was Delcarte.

At the sound of my voice, Delcarte half raised his rifle in readiness for the attack of an enemy, but a moment later he recognized me, and was coming rapidly to meet us. Behind him was Snider. They both were astounded to see me upon the north bank of the river, and much more so at the sight of my companion.

Then I introduced them to Victory, and told them that she was queen of England. They thought, at first, that I was joking. But when I had recounted my adventures and they realized that I was in earnest, they believed me.

They told me that they had followed me inshore when I had not returned from the hunt, that they had met the men of the elephant country, and had had a short and one-sided battle with the fellows. And that afterward they had returned to the launch with a prisoner, from whom they had learned that I had probably been captured by the men of the lion country.

With the prisoner as a guide they had set off up-river in search of me, but had been much delayed by motor trouble, and had finally camped after dark a half mile above the spot where Victory and I had spent the night. They must have passed us in the dark, and why I did not hear the sound of the propeller I do not know, unless it passed me at a time when the lions were making an unusually earsplitting din upon the opposite side.

Taking the antelope with us, we all returned to the launch, where we found Taylor as delighted to see me alive again as Delcarte had been. I cannot say truthfully that Snider evinced much enthusiasm at my rescue.

Taylor had found the ingredients for chemical fuel, and the distilling of them had, with the motor trouble, accounted for their delay in setting out after me.

The prisoner that Delcarte and Snider had taken was a powerful young fellow from the elephant country. Notwithstanding the fact that they had all assured him to the contrary, he still could not believe that we would not kill him.

He assured us that his name was Thirty-six, and, as he could not count above ten, I am sure that he had no conception of the correct meaning of the word, and that it may have been handed down to him either from the military number of an ancestor who had served in the English ranks during the Great War, or that originally it was the number of some famous regiment with which a forbear fought.

Now that we were reunited, we held a council to determine what course we should pursue in the immediate future. Snider was still for setting out to sea and returning to Pan-America, but the better judgment of Delcarte and Taylor ridiculed the suggestion--we should not have lived a fortnight.

To remain in England, constantly menaced by wild beasts and men equally as wild, seemed about as bad. I suggested that we cross the Channel and ascertain if we could not discover a more enlightened and civilized people upon the continent. I was sure that some trace of the ancient culture and greatness of Europe must remain. Germany, probably, would be much as it was during the twentieth century, for, in common with most Pan-Americans, I was positive that Germany had been victorious in the Great War.

Snider demurred at the suggestion. He said that it was bad enough to have come this far. He did not want to make it worse by going to the continent. The outcome of it was that I finally lost my patience, and told him that from then on he would do what I thought best--that I proposed to assume command of the party, and that they might all consider themselves under my orders, as much so as though we were still aboard the Coldwater and in Pan-American waters.

Delcarte and Taylor immediately assured me that they had not for an instant assumed anything different, and that they were as ready to follow and obey me here as they would be upon the other side of thirty.

Snider said nothing, but he wore a sullen scowl. And I wished then, as I had before, and as I did to a much greater extent later, that fate had not decreed that he should have chanced to be a member of the launch's party upon that memorable day when last we quitted the Coldwater.

Victory, who was given a voice in our councils, was all for going to the continent, or anywhere else, in fact, where she might see new sights and experience new adventures.

"Afterward we can come back to Grabritin," she said, "and if Buckingham is not dead and we can catch him away from his men and kill him, then I can return to my people, and we can all live in peace and happiness."

She spoke of killing Buckingham with no greater concern than one might evince in the contemplated destruction of a sheep; yet she was neither cruel nor vindictive. In fact, Victory is a very sweet and womanly woman. But human life is of small account beyond thirty--a legacy from the bloody days when thousands of men perished in the trenches between the rising and the setting of a sun, when they laid them lengthwise in these same trenches and sprinkled dirt over them, when the Germans corded their corpses like wood and set fire to them, when women and children and old men were butchered, and great passenger ships were torpedoed without warning.

Thirty-six, finally assured that we did not intend slaying him, was as keen to accompany us as was Victory.

The crossing to the continent was uneventful, its monotony being relieved, however, by the childish delight of Victory and Thirty-six in the novel experience of riding safely upon the bosom of the water, and of being so far from land.

With the possible exception of Snider, the little party appeared in the best of spirits, laughing and joking, or interestedly discussing the possibilities which the future held for us: what we should find upon the continent, and whether the inhabitants would be civilized or barbarian peoples.

Victory asked me to explain the difference between the two, and when I had tried to do so as clearly as possible, she broke into a gay little laugh.

"Oh," she cried, "then I am a barbarian!"

I could not but laugh, too, as I admitted that she was, indeed, a barbarian. She was not offended, taking the matter as a huge joke. But some time thereafter she sat in silence, apparently deep in thought. Finally she looked up at me, her strong white teeth gleaming behind her smiling lips.

"Should you take that thing you call 'razor,'" she said, "and cut the hair from the face of Thirty-six, and exchange garments with him, you would be the barbarian and Thirty-six the civilized man. There is no other difference between you, except your weapons. Clothe you in a wolfskin, give you a knife and a spear, and set you down in the woods of Grabritin--of what service would your civilization be to you?"

Delcarte and Taylor smiled at her reply, but Thirty-six and Snider laughed uproariously. I was not surprised at Thirty-six, but I thought that Snider laughed louder than the occasion warranted. As a matter of fact, Snider, it seemed to me, was taking advantage of every opportunity, however slight, to show insubordination, and I determined then that at the first real breach of discipline I should take action that would remind Snider, ever after, that I was still his commanding officer.

I could not help but notice that his eyes were much upon Victory, and I did not like it, for I knew the type of man he was. But as it would not be necessary ever to leave the girl alone with him I felt no apprehension for her safety.

After the incident of the discussion of barbarians I thought that Victory's manner toward me changed perceptibly. She held aloof from me, and when Snider took his turn at the wheel, sat beside him, upon the pretext that she wished to learn how to steer the launch. I wondered if she had guessed the man's antipathy for me, and was seeking his company solely for the purpose of piquing me.

Snider was, too, taking full advantage of his opportunity. Often he leaned toward the girl to whisper in her ear, and he laughed much, which was unusual with Snider.

Of course, it was nothing at all to me; yet, for some unaccountable reason, the sight of the two of them sitting there so close to one another and seeming to be enjoying each other's society to such a degree irritated me tremendously, and put me in such a bad humor that I took no pleasure whatsoever in the last few hours of the crossing.

We aimed to land near the site of ancient Ostend. But when we neared the coast we discovered no indication of any human habitations whatever, let alone a city. After we had landed, we found the same howling wilderness about us that we had discovered on the British Isle. There was no slightest indication that civilized man had ever set a foot upon that portion of the continent of Europe.

Although I had feared as much, since our experience in England, I could not but own to a feeling of marked disappointment, and to the gravest fears of the future, which induced a mental depression that was in no way dissipated by the continued familiarity between Victory and Snider.

I was angry with myself that I permitted that matter to affect me as it had. I did not wish to admit to myself that I was angry with this uncultured little savage, that it made the slightest difference to me what she did or what she did not do, or that I could so lower myself as to feel personal enmity towards a common sailor. And yet, to be honest, I was doing both.

Finding nothing to detain us about the spot where Ostend once had stood, we set out up the coast in search of the mouth of the River Rhine, which I purposed ascending in search of civilized man. It was my intention to explore the Rhine as far up as the launch would take us. If we found no civilization there we would return to the North Sea, continue up the coast to the Elbe, and follow that river and the canals of Berlin. Here, at least, I was sure that we should find what we sought--and, if not, then all Europe had reverted to barbarism.

The weather remained fine, and we made excellent progress, but everywhere along the Rhine we met with the same disappointment--no sign of civilized man, in fact, no sign of man at all.

I was not enjoying the exploration of modern Europe as I had anticipated--I was unhappy. Victory seemed changed, too. I had enjoyed her company at first, but since the trip across the Channel I had held aloof from her.

Her chin was in the air most of the time, and yet I rather think that she regretted her friendliness with Snider, for I noticed that she avoided him entirely. He, on the contrary, emboldened by her former friendliness, sought every opportunity to be near her. I should have liked nothing better than a reasonably good excuse to punch his head; yet, paradoxically, I was ashamed of myself for harboring him any ill will. I realized that there was something the matter with me, but I did not know what it was.

Matters remained thus for several days, and we continued our journey up the Rhine. At Cologne, I had hoped to find some reassuring indications, but there was no Cologne. And as there had been no other cities along the river up to that point, the devastation was infinitely greater than time alone could have wrought. Great guns, bombs, and mines must have leveled every building that man had raised, and then nature, unhindered, had covered the ghastly evidence of human depravity with her beauteous mantle of verdure. Splendid trees reared their stately tops where splendid cathedrals once had reared their domes, and sweet wild flowers blossomed in simple serenity in soil that once was drenched with human blood.

Nature had reclaimed what man had once stolen from her and defiled. A herd of zebras grazed where once the German kaiser may have reviewed his troops. An antelope rested peacefully in a bed of daisies where, perhaps, two hundred years ago a big gun belched its terror-laden messages of death, of hate, of destruction against the works of man and God alike.

We were in need of fresh meat, yet I hesitated to shatter the quiet and peaceful serenity of the view with the crack of a rifle and the death of one of those

beautiful creatures before us. But it had to be done--we must eat. I left the work to Delcarte, however, and in a moment we had two antelope and the landscape to ourselves.

After eating, we boarded the launch and continued up the river. For two days we passed through a primeval wilderness. In the afternoon of the second day we landed upon the west bank of the river, and, leaving Snider and Thirty-six to guard Victory and the launch, Delcarte, Taylor, and I set out after game.

We tramped away from the river for upwards of an hour before discovering anything, and then only a small red deer, which Taylor brought down with a neat shot of two hundred yards. It was getting too late to proceed farther, so we rigged a sling, and the two men carried the deer back toward the launch while I walked a hundred yards ahead, in the hope of bagging something further for our larder.

We had covered about half the distance to the river, when I suddenly came face to face with a man. He was as primitive and uncouth in appearance as the Grabritins--a shaggy, unkempt savage, clothed in a shirt of skin cured with the head on, the latter surmounting his own head to form a bonnet, and giving to him a most fearful and ferocious aspect.

The fellow was armed with a long spear and a club, the latter dangling down his back from a leathern thong about his neck. His feet were incased in hide sandals.

At sight of me, he halted for an instant, then turned and dove into the forest, and, though I called reassuringly to him in English he did not return nor did I again see him.

The sight of the wild man raised my hopes once more that elsewhere we might find men in a higher state of civilization--it was the society of civilized man that I craved--and so, with a lighter heart, I continued on toward the river and the launch.

I was still some distance ahead of Delcarte and Taylor, when I came in sight of the Rhine again. But I came to the water's edge before I noticed that anything was amiss with the party we had left there a few hours before.

My first intimation of disaster was the absence of the launch from its former moorings. And then, a moment later--I discovered the body of a man lying upon the bank. Running toward it, I saw that it was Thirty-six, and as I stopped and raised the Grabritin's head in my arms, I heard a faint moan break from his lips. He was not dead, but that he was badly injured was all too evident.



Delcarte and Taylor came up a moment later, and the three of us worked over the fellow, hoping to revive him that he might tell us what had happened, and what had become of the others. My first thought was prompted by the sight I had recently had of the savage native. The little party had evidently been surprised, and in the attack Thirty-six had been wounded and the others taken prisoners. The thought was almost like a physical blow in the face--it stunned me. Victory in the hands of these abysmal brutes! It was frightful. I almost shook poor Thirty-six in my efforts to revive him.

I explained my theory to the others, and then Delcarte shattered it by a single movement of the hand. He drew aside the lion's skin that covered half of the Grabritin's breast, revealing a neat, round hole in Thirty-six's chest--a hole that could have been made by no other weapon than a rifle.

"Snider!" I exclaimed. Delcarte nodded. At about the same time the eyelids of the wounded man fluttered, and raised. He looked up at us, and very slowly the light of consciousness returned to his eyes.

"What happened, Thirty-six?" I asked him.

He tried to reply, but the effort caused him to cough, bringing about a hemorrhage of the lungs and again he fell back exhausted. For several long minutes he lay as one dead, then in an almost inaudible whisper he spoke.

"Snider--" He paused, tried to speak again, raised a hand, and pointed down-river. "They--went--back," and then he shuddered convulsively and died.

None of us voiced his belief. But I think they were all alike: Victory and Snider had stolen the launch, and deserted us.