

## Chapter 7

We stood there, grouped about the body of the dead Grabritin, looking futilely down the river to where it made an abrupt curve to the west, a quarter of a mile below us, and was lost to sight, as though we expected to see the truant returning to us with our precious launch--the thing that meant life or death to us in this unfriendly, savage world.

I felt, rather than saw, Taylor turn his eyes slowly toward my profile, and, as mine swung to meet them, the expression upon his face recalled me to my duty and responsibility as an officer.

The utter hopelessness that was reflected in his face must have been the counterpart of what I myself felt, but in that brief instant I determined to hide my own misgivings that I might bolster up the courage of the others.

"We are lost!" was written as plainly upon Taylor's face as though his features were the printed words upon an open book. He was thinking of the launch, and of the launch alone. Was I? I tried to think that I was. But a greater grief than the loss of the launch could have engendered in me, filled my heart--a sullen, gnawing misery which I tried to deny--which I refused to admit--but which persisted in obsessing me until my heart rose and filled my throat, and I could not speak when I would have uttered words of reassurance to my companions.

And then rage came to my relief--rage against the vile traitor who had deserted three of his fellow countrymen in so frightful a position. I tried to feel an equal rage against the woman, but somehow I could not, and kept searching for excuses for her--her youth, her inexperience, her savagery.

My rising anger swept away my temporary helplessness. I smiled, and told Taylor not to look so glum.

"We will follow them," I said, "and the chances are that we shall overtake them. They will not travel as rapidly as Snider probably hopes. He will be forced to halt for fuel and for food, and the launch must follow the windings of the river; we can take short cuts while they are traversing the detour. I have my map--thank God! I always carry it upon my person--and with that and the compass we will have an advantage over them."

My words seemed to cheer them both, and they were for starting off at once in pursuit. There was no reason why we should delay, and we set forth down the river. As we tramped along, we discussed a question that was uppermost in the mind of each--what we should do with Snider when we had captured him, for

with the action of pursuit had come the optimistic conviction that we should succeed. As a matter of fact, we had to succeed. The very thought of remaining in this utter wilderness for the rest of our lives was impossible.

We arrived at nothing very definite in the matter of Snider's punishment, since Taylor was for shooting him, Delcarte insisting that he should be hanged, while I, although fully conscious of the gravity of his offense, could not bring myself to give the death penalty.

I fell to wondering what charm Victory had found in such a man as Snider, and why I insisted upon finding excuses for her and trying to defend her indefensible act. She was nothing to me. Aside from the natural gratitude I felt for her since she had saved my life, I owed her nothing. She was a half-naked little savage--I, a gentleman, and an officer in the world's greatest navy. There could be no close bonds of interest between us.

This line of reflection I discovered to be as distressing as the former, but, though I tried to turn my mind to other things, it persisted in returning to the vision of an oval face, sun-tanned; of smiling lips, revealing white and even teeth; of brave eyes that harbored no shadow of guile; and of a tumbling mass of wavy hair that crowned the loveliest picture on which my eyes had ever rested.

Every time this vision presented itself I felt myself turn cold with rage and hate against Snider. I could forgive the launch, but if he had wronged her he should die--he should die at my own hands; in this I was determined.

For two days we followed the river northward, cutting off where we could, but confined for the most part to the game trails that paralleled the stream. One afternoon, we cut across a narrow neck of land that saved us many miles, where the river wound to the west and back again.

Here we decided to halt, for we had had a hard day of it, and, if the truth were known, I think that we had all given up hope of overtaking the launch other than by the merest accident.

We had shot a deer just before our halt, and, as Taylor and Delcarte were preparing it, I walked down to the water to fill our canteens. I had just finished, and was straightening up, when something floating around a bend above me caught my eye. For a moment I could not believe the testimony of my own senses. It was a boat.

I shouted to Delcarte and Taylor, who came running to my side.

"The launch!" cried Delcarte; and, indeed, it was the launch, floating down-river from above us. Where had it been? How had we passed it? And how were we to reach it now, should Snider and the girl discover us?

"It's drifting," said Taylor. "I see no one in it."

I was stripping off my clothes, and Delcarte soon followed my example. I told Taylor to remain on shore with the clothing and rifles. He might also serve us better there, since it would give him an opportunity to take a shot at Snider should the man discover us and show himself.

With powerful strokes we swam out in the path of the oncoming launch. Being a stronger swimmer than Delcarte, I soon was far in the lead, reaching the center of the channel just as the launch bore down upon me. It was drifting broadside on. I seized the gunwale and raised myself quickly, so that my chin topped the side. I expected a blow the moment that I came within the view of the occupants, but no blow fell.

Snider lay upon his back in the bottom of the boat alone. Even before I had clambered in and stooped above him I knew that he was dead. Without examining him further, I ran forward to the control board and pressed the starting button. To my relief, the mechanism responded--the launch was uninjured. Coming about, I picked up Delcarte. He was astounded at the sight that met his eyes, and immediately fell to examining Snider's body for signs of life or an explanation of the manner in which he met his death.

The fellow had been dead for hours--he was cold and still. But Delcarte's search was not without results, for above Snider's heart was a wound, a slit about an inch in length--such a slit as a sharp knife would make, and in the dead fingers of one hand was clutched a strand of long brown hair--Victory's hair was brown.

They say that dead men tell no tales, but Snider told the story of his end as clearly as though the dead lips had parted and poured forth the truth. The beast had attacked the girl, and she had defended her honor.

We buried Snider beside the Rhine, and no stone marks his last resting place. Beasts do not require headstones.

Then we set out in the launch, turning her nose upstream. When I had told Delcarte and Taylor that I intended searching for the girl, neither had demurred.

"We had her wrong in our thoughts," said Delcarte, "and the least that we can do in expiation is to find and rescue her."

We called her name aloud every few minutes as we motored up the river, but, though we returned all the way to our former camping place, we did not find her. I then decided to retrace our journey, letting Taylor handle the launch, while Delcarte and I, upon opposite sides of the river, searched for some sign of the spot where Victory had landed.

We found nothing until we had reached a point a few miles above the spot where I had first seen the launch drifting down toward us, and there I discovered the remnants of a recent camp fire.

That Victory carried flint and steel I was aware, and that it was she who built the fire I was positive. But which way had she gone since she stopped here?

Would she go on down the river, that she might thus bring herself nearer her own Grabritin, or would she have sought to search for us upstream, where she had seen us last?

I had hailed Taylor, and sent him across the river to take in Delcarte, that the two might join me and discuss my discovery and our future plans.

While waiting for them, I stood looking out over the river, my back toward the woods that stretched away to the east behind me. Delcarte was just stepping into the launch upon the opposite side of the stream, when, without the least warning, I was violently seized by both arms and about the waist--three or four men were upon me at once; my rifle was snatched from my hands and my revolver from my belt.

I struggled for an instant, but finding my efforts of no avail, I ceased them, and turned my head to have a look at my assailants. At the same time several others of them walked around in front of me, and, to my astonishment, I found myself looking upon uniformed soldiery, armed with rifles, revolvers, and sabers, but with faces as black as coal.