

SERVANT OF THE BEAST



By L. PATRICK GREENE

Four men and a girl face the Beast Peril of the Death Worshippers—deep in the cradle land of civilization

Complete Tropic Adventure Novel



HE man lay full length on a ledge of rock overhanging the swift-flowing river. He seemed to be alone in a desolate waste of stony kopjies—ridge after ridge of them in endless profusion. The hot rays of the African sun beat down fiercely upon the man, but, though the rock felt red hot to the touch, he did not change his position and rarely shifted his gaze from the scene below him.

A large python lay coiled up on a nearby rock. Even in repose the huge reptile suggested a brutal strength. Its eyes, drowsily opening, shone black with evil malice—cold and cruel. The man and the snake had much in common—the same basilisk glance, the hidden menace and cunning.

A klipspringer, that small buck of the Mashona hill country, was browsing close by, unconscious of the lurking perils.

Once the man put out his hand to take up his rifle, then shook his head in indecision.

“Not yet,” he murmured. “I’ll wait a little longer.”

Of a sudden his muscles tensed and his eyes contracted to pin-points. The buck moved uneasily, and the python stirred fitfully in its sleep. It was as if the evil intention of the man had been, by some strange telepathy, conveyed to the mind of the timid klipspringer, as if the snake recognized the presence of a kindred spirit.

From out of the labyrinth of rocks and toward the river there walked a man.

Through the sights of his rifle the human on the rock watched. His finger gently caressed the trigger.

When the newcomer had reached the river he stooped to drink.

Shifting his aim to the buck, the man on the rock fired. The animal sprang high into the air and, falling, toppled down the rocks almost to the river’s brink.

He fired again, and the man in the river

stumbled in his stride; his hands outstretched before him as if seeking purchase on the air. For a moment he swayed backward and forward, then fell headlong into the river and was carried away by the swift current.

The man on the rock smiled grimly, then clambering down the rock to where the buck had fallen, he slung it over his back and, whistling a cheerful tune, hastened in the direction of the camp.

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As the sound of the rifle shots reached the camp, a girl sprang up joyfully.

"Dad!" she cried. "Dick's made a kill.

"We'll soon have some broth made that will make a new man of you."

The man on the roughly constructed cot smiled. His flowing beard and long white hair gave him a patriarchal appearance; his deep-set blue eyes were the eyes of a dreamer.

"You're a hard-hearted nurse, Dorothy," he said. "I ought to be helping the others. I know that we are getting near our goal."

The girl's face clouded.

"I wish you'd give up the search, Daddy," she sighed. "It seems that we've had nothing but bad luck lately. First of all the native carriers desert with most of our provisions, then you come down with fever and—"

"The fever has gone now," the sick man interrupted, "and as for the carriers deserting, Jan's a host in himself."

At the sound of his name a tall, mightily-muscled native came toward them.

"You called, *baas*?"

"No. Your name was used in speech."

"Jan, what do you think of this search?" the girl asked.

He grinned and opened his hands with a gesture of resignation.

"Shall I question the *baas*' will? I am well content. Why does Missy ask?"

"It does not matter."

Jan returned to his place by the fire.

The girl was silent for a while, then, looking steadily at her father, she said:

"I don't think Jan trusts Burgess, and I—"

"Don't be silly." The sick man hesitated a

moment. "Yesterday," he continued presently, "Burgess told me that he loved you and asked me to use my influence."

"And what did you say?" The question came quickly.

"I told him that I would do what I could. I wish you would marry him, Dorothy—He's rich and can take care of you properly. Besides, if this search should turn out to be a wild-goose chase—not that I think for a moment it will—I owe him a lot of money."

"I know," she answered soberly, "and Dick's poor."

A gay whistle sounded.

"What luck?" she cried as the man who had been on the rock came into view.

"Only a klipspringer."

He handed the buck to Jan.

"Only one?" There was a hint of raillery in the girl's voice. "We heard two shots. You don't usually miss your aim."

"I didn't this time," he said with a smile. "There's the klipspringer."

He turned to help Jan with the task of cleaning and skinning the buck, and the girl sat down on a nearby boulder to watch them.

SOON their task was finished and big pieces of meat were put before the fire to roast. From a pot came the fragrant, appetizing odor of buck stew.

"I wonder where Dick is? He said he'd be back by noon, and it's long past that now." The girl's tone was anxious.

"Where did he go?" Burgess' tones were almost too casual.

"Up among the hills over there." Dorothy pointed across the river. "I think he intends to climb every kopje in the country hoping to find the valley. I'm beginning to think we'll never find it. What do you think?"

Burgess laughed shortly.

"Do you want my candid opinion?"

She nodded.

"Well, I think your father is a gullible fool. Just because one of his patients, an old prospector, tells him about a mysterious valley where there are diamonds to be had for the taking, your father chucks up his practise and comes up to this God-forsaken spot—looking for 'the Mysterious

Valley.' Bah! Why even if it existed, what chance would we have of finding it? The vaguest of directions, no map—nothing but the babblings of a delirious old man."

The girl sighed.

"I know. It does sound hopeless. But Daddy and Dick feel sure that there's something in it—you forget that Old Tom had a large diamond which he claimed came from the valley. But if you thought the search was a hopeless one, why did you encourage Daddy by lending him money? Why did you come yourself?"

"Can you ask that?" he asked softly. "It was to be near you."

"Scoff's ready, Missy."

She jumped up gleefully at Jan's call, and Burgess followed her, looking angrily at the grinning native.

"I'm anxious about Dick," Dorothy said when, the meal finished, there was still no sign of the fourth member of their party.

"There's no need to be worried," Burgess replied lightly. "What can happen? He's big enough to take care of himself."

"I know, but—"

She rose to her feet with an air of determination.

"Perhaps he's found the valley," Burgess laughed.

She ignored the sarcasm.

"Are you all right, Daddy? I'm going to look for Dick."

"Be careful, dear. Better take Jan with you. Yes, I'm all right."

Jan came eagerly forward.

"Yes, I go, Missy. We go down to the ford and pick up the spoor where he crossed the river."

Burgess watched them hasten down to the banks of the stream, assailed by a sudden doubt, then, with a shrug of his shoulder, he ran after them, coming up with them just as they had crossed the ford.

"Here is Baas Dick's spoor," said Jan., "It points toward the hills. Missy had better stay here. Baas Burgess and I will follow the spoor."

He started on the trail at a slow lope, but was quickly halted by a hail from Burgess.

"Here the trail leads back, Jan," he cried.

Jan returned to Burgess' side.

"Yes," he said. "It is the homeward spoor."

Jan followed it to the river, which he crossed and searched for a continuation of the trail on the other side.

Soon Jan returned with a woeful, puzzled expression on his face.

"What is it, Jan?" Dorothy asked breathlessly.

Jan shook his head slowly.

"Baas Dick came to the river, but there is no spoor on the other side."

"Then he came back to this side?"

"No, Missy. The spoor does not say that."

"Perhaps he came out on the other side, either above or below the ford."

"No. He could not do that. Only at the ford can a man cross. Above and below the water runs deep."

"What does it mean?" Dorothy appealed to Burgess. "Where is Dick?"

"It means that Dick will never come back." Burgess' tone was correctly mournful. "He must have stumbled, lost his footing and was carried away by the swift current. He'd have no chance against it, and even if he managed to swim to the bank, how could he get a foothold?"

Burgess pointed to the rocks which rose sheer out of the water on each side of the river.

Clever actor though he was, Burgess could not totally disguise his feeling of elation.

"I believe you're glad," the girl flashed suddenly. "But I can't believe it's true."

Jan shook his head mournfully.

"Without doubt the baas speaks true, Missy."

"Yes," Burgess continued. Again the note of elation crept into his voice. "Now we can persuade your father to give up this fool search, Dorothy. You accused me of being glad that Harding had gone. I'll be frank—in a sense I am glad. He didn't like me and I didn't like him. You know that and you know why."

Dorothy began to cry quietly, and a sly, satisfied smile flickered over Burgess' face.

"Take care of Missy, Jan," he said. "I'm going back to tell the old baas."

"It is an order, baas."

Jan's tone was meek, but his eyes flashed anger as he watched the white man ford the stream and vanish up the trail which led to the camp.

"Missy," he said as soon as Burgess had

passed out of sight, "Baas Burgess speaks freely, yet he hides much in his heart."

Dorothy looked up hopefully.

"You mean there is hope for Baas Dick?"

"Not that, Missy, but without doubt Baas Burgess knows how Baas Dick died."

"You mean, Jan, that he killed Baas Dick?"

"I no say that, Missy. Perhaps yes. We go down to where the water make big jump." Jan pointed down stream. The dull thunder of falling water sounded clearly on the still air. "Perhaps the spirits will tell us things."

CHAPTER II

TWO BULLET HOLES

THEY had not gone far along the precipitous bank of the river when Jan pointed excitedly to an object caught on a ledge of rock which protruded out of the river directly below them, close to the bank.

"What's that, Missy?"

Dorothy's gaze followed the pointing finger.

"It's Baas Dick's helmet, Jan," she said excitedly.

"Jan will get it, Missy."

He took the long rope which he habitually carried and made fast one end to a stunted tree standing back a few yards from the bank. Then, hand over hand, he lowered himself to the water.

Soon Jan came to the end of the rope and Dorothy heard him utter an exclamation of disgust.

"*Tchat!*"

She peered cautiously over the brink.

"What is it, Jan?"

"The rope's too short, Missy. But wait—"

Jan lowered himself still farther until his hands were gripping the last inch of the rope. Hanging so his feet barely reached the ledge of rock and, by careful maneuvering he managed to get the helmet firmly between his feet. Then, hanging by one hand, he doubled up and, taking the helmet from between his feet, placed it firmly on his head.

He grinned assurance and a moment later scrambled over the top and lay gasping on the

ground.

Quickly recovering, he sat up to find Dorothy staring at him wide-eyed.

"Look!" she cried excitedly, and taking the helmet from him pointed to the two small holes which punctured the crown. "You were right, Jan. Baas Burgess killed Baas Dick."

Jan took the helmet from her and examined it closely.

"I think, Missy, the bullet did not kill Baas Dick," he said. "Look." He put the helmet on his head and pointed to the location of the holes. "Baas Dick's head is bigger than mine, helmet not go so far down. Perhaps bullet only hurt him a very little."

"Then do you think—?"

"Have you found something interesting?"

They turned quickly at the sneering voice of Burgess, who had come up unobserved, so absorbed were they in their discovery.

Dorothy held the helmet toward him.

"We heard you fire twice," she said, pointing accusingly to the holes in the helmet, "and you didn't miss your shot."

He shifted uneasily before her direct gaze.

"What do you mean?" The air of lightness was forced.

"That you shot Dick."

He saw that evasion was useless, but his only feeling was one of annoyance. It meant a changing of his plans. But he had nothing to fear—from the girl, or the old man, her father.

"Yes, I shot him and now there's nothing stands between us. You can't prove anything and—"

"Do you call this nothing?" There was a world of hate and scorn in her voice as she pointed to the hat—the mute evidence of a cold-blooded murder.

Laughing, he made a move toward her, but she lightly evaded him, and before he could take another step he was seized from behind by two powerful hands.

High above his head Jan held the kicking, cursing Burgess.

"Shall I throw him down, Missy, down into the water?"

"No!" she said breathlessly. "We can't do that. Put him down. I must think this out."

"Better let me kill him, Missy," Jan muttered

as he obeyed her commands.

"Take away his gun, Jan, and tie him fast."

Jan gleefully performed the task, nor was he very gentle as he trussed up the cursing man. With a small rope which he took from Burgess' belt he tied the white man's hands to the trunk of a tree. His legs he tied to another. In that position Burgess was helpless.

"I will stop his mouth, too, Missy; his talk is evil." And Jan deftly inserted a gag in the white man's mouth.

"I don't know what to do with him, Jan!" she cried.

"*Help! Help!*"

The voice sounded faint and seemed to come from the ground under their feet.

"It's Dick," cried Dorothy.

She leaned far over the cliff, scanning the water below.

"Dick!" she called. "Where are you?"

As she spoke there was a movement in the reeds growing close to the cliff directly beneath her. As she watched, a man emerged from them and climbed on the ledge of rock from which Jan had rescued the helmet.

He pointed to the rope which still hung down the cliff.

"I can't reach it," he shouted. "Send Jan back to the camp for more rope."

But Jan shook his head.

"It's too far to camp, Missy. Baas Dick perhaps he get sick and fall off rock. I make rope longer."

Jan untied the rope from the tree and looped it securely around his wrists, then leaned far over the cliff. With the additional length thus gained it was possible for Harding to pass it around his body.

"All ready, Baas?" Jan cried.

Again a wave of the hand.

"Then the Baas will hold the rope with his hand and try to walk up the rock. Now."

Jan exerted his enormous strength. Inch by inch he moved from the edge of the cliff, and the man below ascended slowly but surely.

In a very little while Harding's white face appeared over the top of the rock.

"Hullo, Dorothy," he said with a smile, then fainted.

All thought of Burgess now forgotten, Jan

picked up the unconscious man and started back for the camp.

At the ford they stopped long enough for Dorothy to bathe and bandage the wound that creased Dick's forehead. He stirred fitfully under her ministrations, but it was not until they had carried him to the camp and had given him a generous dose of whisky that he fully recovered.

He looked at the anxious faces which surrounded him.

"Feel all right now, Dick?" Dorothy asked.

"Head throbs a bit—but that's nothing."

He chuckled at a sudden thought.

"The Baas has a story to tell," said Jan.

"Yes, Dick, what is it? We had given you up for lost. Lucky for you the bullet wasn't an inch lower."

Dick made a wry face.

"It's bad enough, Doc, but if it hadn't been for that I wouldn't have found—"

Crompton looked up excitedly.

"You've found it, Dick" he cried. "You've found the valley?"

"Sit down, Daddy. You'll bring on your fever again."

"Bosh! Nothing can give me fever now."

"Well, then, think of Dick."

Crompton sobered instantly.

"Sorry, Dick," he said, sitting down, "but I felt I must let off steam or burst. How's your head?"

"Head's all right now, Doc. I don't blame you for being excited. I shall bust myself if I don't tell you."

"Then where is it?"

"Tell us from the beginning, Dick," interposed Dorothy.

"When I came to the ford on my way back to camp," began Dick, "I was pretty much tuckered out and stopped to have a drink of water. Directly after, I heard a shot and, looking up, saw a buck falling down the rocks. Then came another shot and a pain went through my head. All went black before my eyes, I became dizzy and fell into the river.

"The plunge cleared my brain and I tried to head for one of the banks, but the current was too strong. Then I was aware of the fact that the current was slacking. There was an abrupt turn in the river, and I was on the outside of the curve.

"I managed to swim a few strokes toward the bank and found the water was only up to my waist. Nearby was the ledge of rock on which Jan found my helmet.

"I was still in a mess, for, as you know, the banks of the river are very steep and I couldn't see how I could reach the top without assistance. My head ached frightfully, so I took off my helmet and bathed the wound. Then I noticed a clump of reeds growing close to the cliff and, thinking that would make a good hiding-place in case Burgess came along—I was sure he had tried to shoot me—I made toward them. Something seemed to be pulling at my legs, dragging me toward the weeds. It was an undercurrent, and I thought it strange that it should be running at right angles to the natural flow of the river.

"THEN I saw that the reeds concealed the entrance to a sort of tunnel and, forgetful of everything else, I cautiously entered it. It led straight into the heart of the rock!

"The water came up to my waist and for the most part the roof of the tunnel was so high that I could barely reach it with my hands, and it was never so wide that I could not, by stretching out my hands, reach the sides.

"I started to explore the place—thinking it might lead to an opening so that I could get back to the camp in safety. Gradually the light which filtered through the opening became dimmer and dimmer. When I came to the place where no light reached me at all I was scared. It was like being buried alive!

"On I went in pitch darkness, afraid every minute I'd fall into some hole in the floor of the tunnel.

"After what seemed a long time the darkness lessened. Soon I was able to see, dimly, the walls of the tunnel and the dark, swirling waters.

"I hurried forward and came to the tunnel end where the water dropped a hundred feet or more into a valley below.

"To the left of the stream was a small, bare plateau. I climbed onto it and discovered a sort of game trail leading down into the valley. Then, as there seemed to be no other way of getting out of the valley, I started the return trip through the tunnel.

"That's all," Dick concluded gaily. "Now

how soon will you be ready to make the trip into the valley?"

"Are you sure, Harding?" Crompton expressed a doubt he was far from feeling.

"Sure, Doc. Isn't it all just as the old timer said? The hidden entrance; the dark river and—on the far side of the valley—I could see a waterfall."

"Where is Burgess?" Crompton asked.

Dorothy looked at Jan, then burst out laughing.

"Why we left him trussed up like a fowl on the rocks back there. In the excitement of rescuing you, Dick, we forgot all about him."

"Well, it won't do him any harm. Let the cur stay there."

"But we can't do that, Daddy. We can't leave him lying bound out in the open."

"No, I suppose not," grumbled Crompton. "Jan, go and get Baas Burgess. We'll have to watch him very closely."

Jan rose to his feet and ran down the trail leading to the ford.

"You go with him, Dick," pleaded Dorothy.

"Jan's in the mood to drop Burgess over the cliff."

CHAPTER III FOOTPRINTS OF LEOPARDS

ABOUT an hour later Dick and Jan returned. Burgess was not with them.

"Where's Burgess, Dick?" Crompton asked curtly. "You didn't kill him, did you?"

Dick shook his head.

"He's vanished—"

"But how could he?" Dorothy's tone was incredulous. "He couldn't possibly have freed himself. He couldn't move an inch. Jan, did you kill Baas Burgess?"

"No, Missy. Jan speaks true word. Baas Dick speaks true word. Together we came to the place where I tied Baas Burgess. He not there. The rope with which I tied him has gone—everything gone.

"No rope, no spoor, no Baas Burgess. Pof! All gone!"

"It's true, Dorothy," said Dick, answering the girl's appealing look.

"And there's no spoor showing how he went? No sign of a struggle?"

Dick shook his head.

Later that night, after Dorothy was curled up in her blankets fast asleep, Crompton, Dick and Jan again went over the exciting happenings of the day and made plans for their expedition into the valley.

Just before they, too, sought their blankets, Crompton looked at Dick with a quizzical expression.

"Did you really kill Burgess, Dick? Not that I'd blame you if you did."

Harding hesitated a moment before answering.

"No. The story was true—only—there was spoor—leopards' spoor."

"What do you mean by leopards' spoor?" Crompton asked sarcastically. "Do you mean to tell me that leopards have eaten the man?"

Dick shook his head.

"There was no sign of that. No struggle; no blood—but all around where Burgess had been lying were the footprints of leopards. How many, Jan?"

"Six, perhaps seven, Baas."

"What nonsense are you trying to tell me?"

"What we saw we have told you, Baas. What happened we cannot say. I cannot read the spoor. But of this I am sure: the Baas Burgess is not where I tied him, and there is nothing to tell how he went, save, as we have said, the spoor of the leopards."

Next morning the party left for the journey into the valley.

What little provisions they took were carefully wrapped, together with their rifles, revolvers and ammunition, in waterproof sheets.

Dick, sure of the absence of any pitfalls, led the way through the tunnel at a fast pace.

Each member of the party carried an electric flashlight, but they used them but little. The lights only disclosed the slimy sides and roof of the tunnel and attracted swarms of winged insects—clammy and evil-smelling—so that Dorothy preferred the darkness.

Once a cold, squirming, loathsome *something* fell on the girl's neck.

"On my neck, Jan, look quick." Her voice was tense with fear of the unknown.

Jan, who was behind her, switched on his light and knocked the thing off with his hand.

"It was only a lizard, Missy," he said with a laugh.

But Dick and Crompton, who had turned at the girl's cry, saw that "it" was a black adder, and knew that its bite was fatal.

Their eyes silently conveyed a message of thanks; Jan's light went out, and the journey onward was resumed.

Coming at last onto the bare plateau Dick had spoken of, they sat down in silence and looked over the wonderful valley which lay at their feet.

After weeks of sojourning among barren hills, this fertile valley, clothed in soft verdure, was a paradise.

But Jan seemed to escape its influence, and he, rising to his feet, walked slowly up and down, examining the ground carefully.

Soon his uneasiness was conveyed to Dick and Crompton, who, joining him, questioned his fears.

"This is a bad place," the big negro said. "Look!"

Following his pointing finger to the edge of the plateau where the trail into the valley began, they could distinguish the spoor of several leopards.

"I do not like this place," repeated Jan. "Let us go before evil overtakes us."

Harding laughed uneasily.

"Afraid of leopards, Jan?"

"Of such leopards, yes, Baas."

"There's nothing to fear, Jan. Who ever heard of leopards attacking men? Look, see that place?" Crompton indicated a shady grove which seemed to nestle at the foot of the hill. "Let us build our camp there as soon as possible. We ought to get out of these wet things before the chill gets us."

Crompton started off as eagerly as a boy newly released from school, followed closely by the girl.

Jan looked at Dick, who shrugged his shoulders, heavily burdened with the packs, they, too, took the trail which led to the valley.

Dorothy and her father were already lost to sight in the thick undergrowth which fringed the base of the hill, but Dick could hear the girl's

voice raised in gleeful laughter.

Suddenly Dorothy's laughter changed to an agonized cry—then all was still.

Alarmed, the two men broke into a run, Jan hastily undoing the pack which contained the revolvers.

SOON they came to the place where the footprints of the girl and her father stopped abruptly. Yet the ground around was soft, and had they gone on to the right or to the left, or had they retraced their steps, they would surely have left a spoor.

But there was not a sign. They had apparently vanished into thin air.

Wild-eyed, Dick looked at Jan, hoping that he could give some explanation of the mystery.

"It is beyond my knowledge, Baas Dick."

"But they must be near here somewhere. They can't have vanished just like a burst bubble."

"If they are here, where, then, are they? Where is their spoor? No, they have gone to the Land of the Spirits. As Baas Burgess went, so have they gone."

Jan's voice sounded to Dick's ears like the voice of Fate.

"Yet here is no spoor of leopards, Jan."

"What then? It remains that Missy and the Old Baas have gone and, save that we go their way, we cannot find them."

"Do you know that way?"

Even as he spoke Dick sensed the folly of his question.

"Without doubt it is the road of the spirits. Only by the death of the body can we find them."

Even as Jan spoke there was a rustle in the branches of the tree under which they stood. Nooses were dropped down over their shoulders and they were drawn up into the tree.

"Have good cheer, Baas," Jan gasped. "We are going to the spirits. Soon we shall find Missy and the Old—"

Jan's voice ended in a gurgle as if the noose had slipped from his shoulders and was tightening about his neck.

WITHOUT a chance to see his captors Dick was blindfolded, bound securely hand and foot, then lowered to the ground. There he was

left for a little while, and he struggled furiously with the ropes which bound him, but finally, seeing the futility of such a course, gave up in despair and wondered what possible fate was in store for him.

He was not left long to his thoughts, for his captors soon returned and placing him, as he judged in a sort of litter, carried him along at a fast pace. He strained his ears to catch some clue as to what tribe his captors belonged. But they did not speak.

After a time the pace decreased, and Dick could tell by the tilt of the litter that they were going up hill.

A loud, thundering noise sounded in his ears. The air was moist, and occasional drops of spray dashed in his face. He guessed that they were ascending the rocks in close proximity to the waterfall!

The litter was lowered to the ground. He was taken from it and his hands and feet untied. He struggled violently, vainly. Then, holding him by the hands and feet, they carried him nearer and nearer to the sound of falling waters. He felt a sickening sensation as if he were standing at the edge of a bottomless pit.

Stopping, they swung him backward and forward between them, then, with a mighty heave, flung him from them.

He hurtled through the air—and down—down. A sudden shock of falling water struck him. He gasped for breath and a moment later landed with a dull thud.

All the breath seemed to be knocked from his body, and for a few minutes he was unable to move.

Gradually recovering, he tore the bandage from his eyes and gazed wonderingly about him.

He was in a large cavern hollowed out of the solid rock, the entrance to which was screened by the avalanche of water through which he had passed. He had actually passed through and was now behind the falls.

He watched the descending water for a time, half-hypnotized by the flickering beams of light which filtered through. Then he turned to examine the cavern itself.

He wondered if his landing there had been intended or if it was by luck that he had been saved from death. But a quick examination

convinced him that chance had played no part in this. The floor of the cavern was thickly covered with bundles of soft grass which had broken his fall.

A voice suddenly hailed him from the dark depths.

He stopped short in amazement, for coming toward him was the form of a man.

"Burgess, by all that's holy," he cried, "where are we? How did you get here?"

BUT Burgess was in no condition to answer then, as, sobbing hysterically, he fell down on his knees before Dick and groveled at his feet.

"Brace up, man," Dick said in disgust. "I'm in the same boat as you are. At least we're alive—that's something."

"But where are the others?"

"God knows," answered Harding solemnly. "But at least there's no reason to suppose that they were killed. Apparently our captors do not intend to kill us out of hand."

And Harding, electing to ignore the other's attempt to murder him, briefly told Burgess the adventures that had befallen him.

"Do you mean that we're in the valley the old prospector told about?"

"Yes."

"Why then probably the rest of the story is true, and there are diamonds here as he said."

"Without doubt. But a fat lot of good that will do us."

"You don't think they mean to kill us, do you? Old Tom got out alive, didn't he?"

"That's so," assented Dick hopefully. "I'd overlooked that. But how did you get here? Jan and I came back to look for you yesterday, but could find no trace of you."

Burgess shuddered.

"It was not long after Jan and Dorothy had started back to camp with you that I knew there was something in the bushes. I could not see anything and, save for a rustling noise, I could not hear anything. The strong, pungent odor of some beast came to me, and I tried to break loose from the ropes with which Jan had tied me. I couldn't. I tried to call for help, but Jan—the black—had gagged me.

"The rustling noises grew louder and the stench of the beast was overpowering. I thought

there must be a band of lions around me. I closed my eyes, and the next thing I knew I was being untied from the trees and a bandage was put over my eyes. I thought it was Jan, but my hands touched the hairy skin of an animal, and then—I must have fainted. The next thing I knew I was lashed to a pole, being carried down a steep hill. My head banged against a rock and again I fainted. The rest of the journey was like a nightmare.

Dick nodded sympathetically.

"It's damned funny," he said. "I wonder what their game is?"

"Perhaps they're saving us for some special feast?"

"Maybe. And you didn't hear them talk at all?"

"No. Except for the sound of the fall—and the screams—I haven't heard a thing."

"Screams? What do you mean?"

Burgess shook his head.

"I wish I knew—but you'll hear 'em tonight."

"How about food?"

Burgess pointed to a large platter and a pot near by.

"It wasn't there last night, but when I woke this morning I found the jug full of native beer and the plate heaped up with chicken and mealy meat. I ate all the food, but there's still some beer left."

Dick walked over to the pot and took a deep drink of the refreshing beverage.

A puzzled look passed over his face, and he drank again, slowly, so that he could taste the full flavor.

"That beer was not made by a Mashona," he said decidedly.

"Well, what of it?"

Dick drank again.

"It was brewed by a Zulu woman," he said flatly.

"How the hell can that be? A Zulu krall in the heart of Mashonaland. Bosh!"

"There's no doubt about it," Dick said positively.

As he spoke, the form of a woman seemed to materialize out of the black depths of the cavern.

In her hands she bore a platter of steaming food; on her head was balanced a large pot of

beer.

Silently she placed the food and beer before them.

"I thank you, mother," said Harding in the Zulu language.

She made no sign that she understood or even heard him.

"Without doubt you spoke truly," went on Harding, turning to Burgess, but still speaking the native dialect. "This woman is a slave. Her tongue has been cut out—she cannot speak."

The woman's face was wrathful—but she made no reply to the taunt Dick had leveled at her.

"It is a thing of shame," he went on, "that such a woman should have been condemned to silence. From such beauty should flow words of honey." Where the taunt had failed, the subtle flattery succeeded.

"**Y**OU do wrong, white man," the woman said in a soft, sweet voice, "to suppose that I am a slave. I am a head wife—aye, I am the head wife of the Keeper of the Beast."

"Your pardon, mother, but how should we know? What is this Beast you speak of?"

"That you will learn in time," the woman answered with an enigmatic smile.

With that she turned and fled from them as if fearing she had said too much.

Dick, quickly following her, ran headlong into the solid rock which formed the back wall of the cavern. He felt closely along the whole wall of the rock hoping to locate the exit he knew must be hidden there—but failed.

Crestfallen, he returned to Burgess.

"Let's eat," he said, and the men fell to, each engrossed with his thoughts.

Burgess' fear was for the moment smothered by the companionship of Harding and the realization that Dick had seen fit to ignore the shooting affair of yesterday.

As for Harding, he refused to be other than optimistic. That his life and Burgess' had so far been spared argued that the others were still alive.

With the setting of the sun the air in the cavern became perceptibly colder, and the two men huddled together for the sake of warmth.

The monotonous rumble of the falls acted as a soothing lullaby and, completely worn out, the two men were soon fast asleep.

How long he had slept Dick had no means of knowing when he was awakened by the voice of Burgess calling:

"Wake up, Harding. Wake up."

To men trained to the life of the veldt lands, as was Dick, the barrier between sleep and wakefulness is thin.

With every sense alert he sat up.

"What is it?"

"Listen!" Burgess was trembling with fear.

A long drawn out wail echoed weirdly through the cavern. Soft at first, it increased in volume until the fierce intensity of it threatened to rupture the eardrums of the listening men. The wail became a scream—but there was no hint of fear in it; rather it suggested a menace, a blood lust. The scream ended in harsh, hacking coughs and then—silence.

"What is it, Harding?"

Dick laughed, but did not fully succeed in concealing the fear which had clutched at his heart, as he answered:

"It is the hunting cry of a leopard."

CHAPTER IV THE LEOPARD'S BRIDE

WITH the coming of morning the two men awakened to find the woman, again bearing food, standing before them.

"You are sound sleepers," she said softly.

"Aye, mother. And would have slept even sounder had the Beast not cried."

She laughed.

"The Beast had pleasant dreams—he could smell your blood. How could he keep silent?"

Now for the first time, Dick noticed that the woman was gaily bedecked with flowers.

"There is to be a feast, mother?" he asked.

"Aye. A great feast. Today—" she stopped confusedly. "What magic is it that you use, white man, that makes my tongue wag like that of a foolish maiden? But see! I have brought you food.

"Eat well that you may be refreshed and ready when the messenger comes for you."

With that she walked quickly away. Nor did

Dick attempt to follow her.

"I wonder what she meant," he mused. "It can't be that they intend to kill us. What did she mean by the messenger?"

Burgess' eyes rolled in fear.

"Perhaps she meant the messengers were going to take us to the Beast. I'll throw myself in the waterfall rather than be eaten alive."

His voice ended in a shrill scream.

"Don't be a fool, Burgess," Dick said curtly.

An hour later a stalwart native entered the cavern.

"Greetings, white men," he said in a deep, booming voice.

"And to you, also."

"Will the white men come with me?"

Dick nudged Burgess.

"They're damned polite all at once," he said.

"Too damned polite," growled Burgess.

"Where do you take us—and to what end?" asked Dick.

"I take you to the hut of the king—may his shadow wax fat—what he intends to do with you is beyond my knowledge."

"It is well. We will come with you."

The messenger led the way to the rear of the cavern and at a certain place in the rock pressed lightly. A portion of the rock swung back as if on a pivot, closing again as the men passed through into a dark, narrow passage.

This passage turned abruptly to the right and Dick saw that it was really a cleft in the rock for, far above him, he could see the bright blue of the open sky.

Just past the turn of the passage they came to the caged entrance of what appeared to be another cavern. A strong animal smell came from it and as they were directly abreast of the cage, a magnificent leopard leaped at the bars and snarled wickedly at them.

"There's the Beast," said Dick, turning to Burgess. "I'm glad he's caged. I wouldn't like to face him unarmed."

A few yards beyond the cage the passage opened out into a large arena encircled by a high, stone wall on three of its sides; the fourth side was the solid rock of the cliff through which they had just passed and Dick noticed, with a feeling of foreboding, that built into the rock were many cages similar to the one they had just passed.

Beyond the arena was a large kraal consisting of at least five hundred large, well-built huts. Toward this kraal the messenger now led them.

It was a scene of bustling activity and the signs indicated that preparations for a big feast were under way.

They met large groups of people hastening out toward the arena. These, though they eyed the white men curiously, made no hostile demonstration.

Here and there among the crowd Dick noticed women wearing leopard skins about their shoulders.

COMING to a group of huts set apart from the rest of the kraal, and surrounded by a stout stockade, the messenger halted.

"Here I must leave you," he said. "Fear not. No harm shall come to you." Then he ran swiftly away toward the arena.

Not a little amazed the two white men, now apparently left to their own devices, entered the enclosure.

Dick's heart gave an exultant leap and he ran forward joyfully for, standing before one of the huts, were Dorothy and her father.

After the first greetings were over—and even Burgess was treated with kindness at this glad moment of reunion—they exchanged their experiences of the past night.

"So you see, Dick," concluded Crompton, "we have all been treated exactly the same, even to the manner of bringing us here."

"What do you make of it all, Doc? I suppose you've discovered that they belong to the Zulu tribe?"

Crompton nodded.

"They're probably the descendants of Chaka's people. He was a bloodthirsty brute and many headmen fled from his country to escape death at his hands."

"That's a good theory, Doc, and I believe it's the true one. But what do you think they'll do with us?"

"I haven't dared think. At any rate we're all alive, that's something to be thankful for."

"You forget poor old Jan, Daddy. Where's he?"

"Jan, he alive too, Missy."

At the sound of the voice they turned to

behold Jan emerging from the hut before which they stood. A plume of ostrich feathers was on his head, and a short kilt of the same gorgeous feathers hung from his waist. The copper head-ring he used to wear was replaced by one of gold.

As he walked toward them, armed warriors emerged from other huts and grouped themselves behind him. Picked men, these, for they were taller and more powerfully built than any Dick had seen in the journey from the cavern to the kraal. But, even so, the tallest and mightiest of them was dwarfed by Jan's massive form. There was a quiet dignity about him that was truly royal and Dick, almost involuntarily, threw up his right hand and gave Jan the Zulu royal salute:

"Bayete!"

Dorothy was the first to recover her composure at the sight of Jan in his new guise.

"Why, Jan, you old fraud, what does all this mean?"

Jan grinned broadly.

"I know not, Missy. These fool men here saying I king of this country." Jan delighted to air his knowledge of English. "They give me plenty food—treat me dam' well. I say. 'You bring Missy, Baas Dick, Baas Crompton and—'" Jan glowered at Burgess—"other white man, else I no be king.' You are here—therefore Jan king.

"O-he," Jan called loudly in the vernacular. "I am now ready for you, Oh, Macabe."

From yet another hut came a number of men and women, all wearing leopard skins about their shoulders.

At their head was a young woman of a fierce, savage beauty. Her eyes flashed arrogantly as she gazed about her, and the men of the bodyguard cringed as her glance fell upon them. Save that her skin was dark—the color of burnished copper—there was little of the negro about her. Her nose was slightly aquiline. The thick lips of her race in her became a provocative pout. Her figure was slight, graceful, strong—as leopards are strong.

"Are you content, Oh, man who shall be king?" she asked. A sibilant hiss seemed to run through her speech. "Your friends are safe."

"Aye, I am content," Jan answered. "Yet hear me. I have said that these are my friends and are under my protection. See you to it then that no harm comes to them—unless, perhaps, you would look upon death."

The woman's eyes flashed angrily but She answered softly:

"You are the king, my lord. Do not deal harshly with your servant."

From the arena beyond the kraal sounded the sullen murmur of many people.

"Come," said the woman Macabe. "They are tired of waiting."

WITH her satellites she led the way from the kraal, closely followed by Jan and his party. Before them ran one of the bodyguard shouting:

"Clear the way, Oh you people of the Valley. Clear the way for the servants of the beast and the man who shall be king."

As the party entered the arena the vast concourse of people burst into the song of the "King's Homecoming."

Our blood is thy blood.

Strongly it flows.

Art thirsty? Then drink.

Au-a!

Reaching a large mound in the center of the arena, the woman Macabe ascended it, bidding Jan accompany her. The others grouped themselves around the base of the hill.

The chanting ceased and all was still

"You do well, Oh people of the Valley," cried Macabe, "to sing that song. Never before have you sung it in the light of day. Long have we waited the coming of the Deliverer. But now the time of waiting is over.

"Remember you the prophecy?"

"Aye, we remember," answered the multitude and they chanted slowly:

"From the River Darkness,' said the Great Spirit, 'shall come the chosen one, the Deliverer. Thus shall you know him. Four Children of Light shall bear him company, and on his left arm will he carry the print of my hand.'"

The chanting ceased.

"It is well," cried Macabe pointing to Jan. "Here stands the Deliverer. Is it not so my sisters? Is it not so my brothers?"

"Aye, it is true, sister," answered the men and women who had come with Macabe to the arena.

"From the River Darkness he came," cried

Macabe. "We saw him. Did we not, my sisters?"

"Our eyes have seen," shouted the people. "But what of the hand print on his arm—the hand print of the Great Spirit?"

"It is there," screamed Macabe in a frenzy of exultation. "Did you not see it, my brothers?"

"Aye, we saw it, sister," replied the men at the foot of the mound.

"You have heard, you have seen. What remains then Oh people of the Valley?"

The response was a deep-throated roar.

"Bayete!" and thrice repeated, "Bayete!" then once again the people burst into the song of the King's Homecoming.

AND at the direction of Macabe, Jan, together with the "Four Children of Light" came to a huge platform overlooking the arena. Here certain elderly natives, wearing the head-ring of minor chiefs, came to pay him homage and each one before he gave way to make room for another gazed with awestruck eyes at Jan's massive upper arm.

"What is it, Daddy? What are they looking at?" whispered Dorothy.

Crompton shook with silent laughter.

"It's Jan's vaccination marks. Don't you remember I vaccinated him at the time of the smallpox scare? And what a job I had because it wouldn't take. I never thought then that I was establishing a proof of Jan's claim to kingship."

Meanwhile warriors were displaying their battle prowess in the arena below and the place resounded with their fierce yells.

Anon there sounded the loud beating of tomtoms and the warriors left the arena to make way for a bevy of maidens. These too, singing the Song of Marriage, passed out; but one of their number remained. She was covered from head to foot with scarlet flowers. A thunderous salute greeted the girl as she stood looking timidly from side to side.

"All hail to the Bride of the Beast!" the mob cried.

Hardly had the words died away when a tawny, shadow-spotted thing leaped out into the arena and crouching, gazed balefully at the terrified girl

"Stop it, Jan," Dorothy cried appealingly.

But Jan for once remained deaf to the voice

of Missy; for the moment he had reverted to the days and customs of his ancestors. His eyes filled with a savage light as he watched the tawny thing of death making ready to spring.

Dorothy turned round to Burgess who was standing behind her and shuddered at the malevolent sneer which clouded his face as he eagerly watched for the consummation of the drama.

"Dick!" she cried in an agonized appeal.

But Harding had already snatched an assegai from the hands of one of the guards and leaping into the arena was running toward the leopard, shouting as he ran.

The beast quickly shifted its attention from the panic-stricken girl to the on-rushing man. This was something new in its experience. It had been accustomed to taking its prey in his own good time—secure from any fear of interruption. A frenzy of rage possessed the beast; it was as if it sensed that this newcomer was a menace to the enjoyment of its meal.

Like an arrow from a bow it leaped full at the charging man.

Dick quickly dropped on one knee and as the leopard passed over his head thrust upward with his assegai.

The weapon entered the beast's belly but without inflicting a fatal wound, and the impetus of the leopard's charge carried the assegai out of Dick's hand.

Again the leopard crouched, its tail lashing savagely, and Dick, now weaponless, could do nothing but helplessly wait for death.

Then it was that Jan threw off the blood lust which had ensnared him.

"I'm coming, Baas Dick," he cried. "Keep still."

The leopard tensed its muscles, ready for its spring. In another moment—

Like a flash of living light an assegai sped from Jan's hand, then another, and another. Three assegais sped on their way in the drawing of a breath, and the people gasped at the marvel of it.

Straight to their marks went the weapons, piercing the leopard through and through. It rolled over, biting and clawing at the sharp things which gnawed at its vitals; its big body heaved convulsively—and then was still.

A sullen murmur arose from the people.

"He has killed the beast. Evil will come to us."

Jan held up his hand in a command for silence.

"It is true," he said, "that I have killed the beast and it is a thing well done. See a maiden torn to pieces by such a thing as that?"

He kicked the body of the dead leopard. "Would you have your daughters die that death? And you young men? Is it so that you treat maidens? No; the rule of the beast is done—no more shall such things be. You have called me Deliverer, and it is to my mind that it was to deliver you from such evil I was sent. If any of you question my will, I will put on one side the matter of kingship and, meeting him man to man, argue the matter out with him."

But they, remembering how he had killed the leopard, shouted:

"We hear and we obey."

"It is well," replied Jan. "Now I go to the hut that has been prepared for me. But for you—it has been whispered to me that there will be great feasting."

"Great feasting indeed, O Deliverer. The Feast of your Homecoming."

CHAPTER V

SERVANTS OF THE BEAST

AT the gate of the stockade which encircled the huts of the king, Jan dismissed the warriors who had acted as his bodyguard, bidding them to partake of the feasting. Joyfully they hurried away, accompanied by Burgess who had expressed a desire to witness the celebrations.

When they had departed Jan was conscious for the first time of the presence of the maiden who had been saved from the leopard.

"What do you want, maiden?" he asked.

"You saved me from death, Oh Deliverer. I am your slave."

"There is no room for women in my hut," Jan said irritably. "Go—before I kill you." He made a mock threat with an assegai.

"And where shall I go where death is not?" There was terror in the girl's voice. "I was marked to die by Macabe. While I live she will not rest."

"My order has gone out that there shall be no more bloodshed," Jan said pompously. "And I am king."

"Aye, thou art king and Macabe—she is the Mistress of the Beast."

"The Beast is dead."

"The Beast of the flesh is dead. But the Beast of the Spirit still lives."

"You speak like a foolish maiden. But if you fear death, become the slave of this white man," Jan indicated Harding, "for he saved you; he can protect you."

The girl looked at Dick, then shook her head.

"No! That is not the way of things. He is a man of single heart and that is already given. Ah! Woe is me!"

She turned away, sobbing softly.

Dorothy went up to her and asked her softly:

"What is your name, maiden?"

"Mamwe, I am called, Oh Daughter of Light."

"Then you shall come with me. Mamwe," said Dorothy and led the girl into the hut which Jan had set apart for her.

Jan turned to the two white men.

"What do you think of this place, Baas Dick? And you, Baas Crompton?" As he spoke Jan divested himself of the plumed head-dress and feathered kilt. "As for me," he continued, "this being king is a wearisome business."

Crompton laughed.

"It has saved all our lives, Jan."

"But to what end, Baas? Though I laughed at the fears of the maiden, Mamwe, there is no cause for laughter. What did she mean by her talk of the Beast of the Spirit?"

"It is only the talk of a frightened girl."

But Dick shook his head.

"I'm not so sure, Doc. Don't forget the way in which Burgess was carried off, and the fact that none of us saw who captured us. Even Jan—and they've made him king—is kept in ignorance of that."

"Well, you're surely not going to tell me that you believe in a supernatural Beast that comes and goes at the commands of Macabe?"

"No, not that, Doc. But don't forget that Macabe is a woman to be reckoned with and the head, as I take it, of some powerful secret society. She made Jan king for a purpose and she can 'unking' him if that purpose fails in its effect."

We've already incurred her enmity by stopping the sacrifice today."

"I thinking Baas Dick talks dam' true talk," said Jan. Then, entering his hut he beckoned the two men to follow him.

ON the floor of the hut were the packs which they had brought with them into the Valley. Jan untied them and taking out the rifles and revolvers handed them to the white men. "Missy's revolver is in her hut," said Jan. "These others," he indicated another rifle and revolver, "they belong to Baas Burgess."

"You take them, Jan. They are yours. We daren't trust Burgess with arms."

Well pleased—for he had long coveted the weapons of a white man—Jan buckled the revolver belt around his waist.

"I think," he said, "the Spirit of the Beast will bow before the Spirit of the Gun. Now what think you of these? I found them in the hut."

Jan opened a large bag made from the skin of a goat. It contained a quantity of pebbles of various shapes and sizes which he emptied out onto the ground.

Crompton paid them but a passing glance, not so Harding. He pounced on them eagerly, holding one after another up to the light.

"Don't you see what they are, Doc?" he cried exultantly.

"I don't see anything to get excited about. They look like bits of dirty glass."

"And what did you expect diamonds in the rough to look like?" Dick cried,

Crompton caught at the word.

"Diamonds," he said. "Diamonds? Are you sure, Dick?"

"Sure? Of course I'm sure. There's no need for us to stay here a day longer. We can start back tomorrow. There's enough here to—I'll go and tell Dorothy."

He rose to his feet, but at that moment a shadow fell across the opening of the hut and, a moment later, Macabe entered.

WHEN Burgess returned to the arena he, at the first opportunity, evaded the guards and mingled with the crowd of excited natives. Macabe, and one of her men attendants, was still on the raised dais and toward that Burgess slowly

thrust his way. He wanted to talk with the tigerish, commanding woman, hoping to enlist her aid in winning Dorothy.

Here and there in the crowd he noticed that the Servants of the Beast—the men and women who wore leopard skins—were being pelted with filth and beaten with sticks.

Smiling grimly, Burgess came to the dais and, standing behind Macabe, watched the milling crowd.

A group of old men passed close to the dais and shook their fists at Macabe. They were followed by a group of young men, one of whom spat at her.

"A man made a friend of a lion," Burgess said scoffingly, "and the lion killed him."

Macabe turned on him with a fierce gesture—she seemed to be conscious of his presence for the first time.

"What do you mean?" she asked imperiously. "What are you doing here?"

She looked at him disdainfully.

"And I mean," he continued, "that for some reason, hoping, I think to gain more power for yourself, you have made a king of a common dog—telling the people he came in fulfillment of a prophecy. What was...your purpose?"

Her eyes flashed.

"That is not for you to know."

"Yet I know that, in making a king, you have undone yourself."

"Think you so?" Her tone was arrogant.

"I know," answered Burgess complacently. "It is not your praises they are singing." He waved his hand toward a party of warriors. They were singing the song of the King's Homecoming.

A group of maidens passed by and hailed Macabe as "the woman whose sun has set."

"The fools," sneered Macabe. "Do they not know that the sun will rise again?"

"But what is all this to you?" She turned to Burgess. "The others, the men of skins like unto yours, and the maiden whose beauty is like that of the Morning Star,—are they not your friends?"

"No—they seek to kill me."

"But the girl? What of her? Nay, there is no need for you to answer. I can read your heart. You desire her, but she will have nothing to do with you."

"It is true. I thought that you could help me."

"Help you? And what shall be my reward?"

"Perhaps I can help you."

Macabe was silent for a moment.

"It is well," she said at length. "We two may accomplish much. Mopa," she turned to her companion, a thick-set man with the ungainly figure of a gorilla, "take this white man to the place of the Beast. There I will join you later."

Mopa led the way across the arena and up the passage which Burgess and Harding had traversed earlier in the day. Past the cage containing the leopard they went, coming to the dark tunnel which led to the cavern under the Falls. Here Mopa stopped, and stooping, pushed ever so slightly on a large boulder.

Burgess gave an exclamation of fear for the earth seemed to open at his feet, then as his eyes became more accustomed to the dim light of the place he saw that the boulder had swung aside, uncovering a flight of steps, cut in the rocks, leading to a large cavern.

"Hurry," said Mopa in a harsh voice, speaking for the first time.

As they descended the steps, Burgess noted that the boulder rolled back into place, seemingly of its own volition.

The cavern he soon discovered was a large one and lighted by torches which gave out a sickening, almost overpowering smell. At the end of the cavern, opposite the steps, was a sort of dais in the center of which stood a large leopard carved out of stone. Chained to it were several cubs playing like so many kittens.

"Welcome, Oh Mopa. What makes the white man here?"

Burgess was suddenly conscious that the cavern was full of people who were regarding him curiously.

"It was the order of Macabe that I bring him to this place," answered Mopa. "I did not question her reason."

CHAPTER VI THE BEAST WALKS

AS Macabe entered the hut Jan made an attempt to cover up the diamonds, but

Macabe had seen them.

"I see that you have already found the stones."

"What then?"

"It is nothing." She took one in her hand and toyed with it absently. "What is there in this that men should desire so strongly that they brave death for its possession?"

"It spells wealth to white men," said Crompton.

"And you think to gain riches?"

"Even so."

"Ten white men have entered the Valley seeking the stones. Yet only one lived to win his way back to the outside world." A cruel smile passed slowly over her face.

"Take care, woman," said Jan. "These are my friends and tomorrow they leave this place—with the stones. And I go with them."

Macabe's manner instantly changed.

"Nay, my Lord," she pleaded, "that cannot be. You are the king. You were near death, but I saved you and made you king. Have you not wondered the reason thereof?"

"Many times, and now I am tired of wondering and ask you to tell me."

"If you do not know," she said softly, "it ill becomes me to tell you. You did a foolish thing today, Lord."

"How say you?"

"In killing the leopard."

"Would you have me stand idly by and see my friend torn to pieces before my eyes? Also," Jan's voice softened—"some thought I had for the maiden."

"But you would not have saved the maiden. You were watching with the blood lust in your eyes."

"That is true," assented Jan.

"That is well. Tomorrow the sacrifice will be made."

"Nay, that cannot be, Macabe. I have given my word that such things must cease."

Macabe bridled.

"Do you think that you can set yourself against me? Against me—your fate is death. Tomorrow, therefore, you will say that the Spirits have ordered you to retract the words concerning the making of sacrifices to the Beast."

"That I will never do."

"Then kiss death."

A dagger flashed, but Jan caught Macabe's descending arm. With a cry of pain she let the weapon fall from her nerveless fingers, then turning she ran from the hut, pausing in the opening to say softly:

"I would not have killed you, Lord."

"It must be," said Jan in tones of disgust, "that I am becoming weak in mind as a woman. That I should have spared Baas Burgess that time I had him in my hands was folly; that I should have permitted that Macabe to leave here alive was the work of a madman."

"But you couldn't have killed her, Jan. Besides," Crompton turned to Harding, "I think she has a soft spot in her heart for Jan, don't you?"

Dick nodded.

"The Baas means?"

"That Macabe would like to be your head wife, Jan."

Jan swore, lustily denouncing the folly of women in general and Macabe in particular. He was interrupted in the middle of a particularly forceful and not quite delicate proverb by the entrance of Dorothy and Mamwe.

Jan broke off abashed, and for all his tirade looked at Mamwe with something akin to tenderness.

"What did Macabe want?" asked Dorothy.

"She wanted Jan here to give Mamwe up for sacrifice."

Mamwe threw herself down at Jan's feet and patted them with her hands.

"But you will not, Lord?"

He raised her up.

"Nay, maiden. You shall live to see your son's children marry."

"Thanks, Lord. If my son's children be your son's children I am well content."

Jan turned hastily to Dorothy.

"Baas Dick was coming for you. He has something to show you."

"What, Dick?"

"Look, Dorothy—diamonds." She gave a little exclamation of delight.

Jan turned to Mamwe.

"What know you of Macabe, maiden?" he asked.

"Little, Lord. Save that she is a woman of

mystery and that when she commands it is well to obey."

"And if a man does not obey?"

"That man would die, Lord."

"How?"

"No man knows. No man is with them when their time comes. They are taken away and no spoor is left save the mark of the Beast." The girl shivered.

"Has no man followed the Beast?"

"Some have tried, but met death."

"And that is all you know?"

She hesitated before answering.

"Aye, Lord, that is all."

"But what of the sacrifices to the Leopards?" interposed Harding who had been listening.

"In that way the servants of the Beast remove from their path those who have offended them. I cross the will of Macabe, and lo! the Beast needed a fresh bride."

"In what way did you offend Macabe?"

"I know not, white man."

AS Burgess noted the hostile glances of the men and women in the cavern, he wondered if he had been altogether wise in seeking the help of Macabe for the evil deed he had in mind. Had it been possible he would have left the place, but Mopa had disappeared and he did not know how to remove the boulder which covered the entrance to the cavern. So he waited, with an outward show of composure, for Macabe to appear.

An hour passed in silence, then suddenly he saw Macabe come forward with Mopa from behind the stone leopard.

"We have waited long for you, Macabe. What would you tell us?"

The speaker was a wizened old woman, whose voice sounded curiously like the croaking of a vulture. "It would seem," she went on, "that you have done a great thing for us this day."

"Do you mock me, Ekati? Do you desire to be fed to the Beasts?"

The woman broke into a shrill cackle of mirthless laughter.

"Ohe!" she cried, pointing a finger of derision at Macabe. "The king ordered that there should be no more blood sacrifices."

"It is true, Macabe," said yet another. "Your plan was a poor one. Let us kill this man, the

Deliverer, and all will be as it was before.”

“Nay,” Macabe exclaimed vehemently. “He is mine. I shall be his head wife and so rule the people of the Valley—through him. As you well know, certain Headmen have protested strongly against the rule of the Beast, planning to appoint one of their number king. And this they would have done had we not played one against the other.

“But now I have forestalled them. I have given them a king and they will be content to do all that he commands.”

“But where does all this lead? This king that you have set up, has publicly gone against us. From this time on our rule is at an end. He has the ear of the people and we have not.”

“That may be well but—gaze fully upon me. Am I not altogether desirable? Is there any maiden in this Valley whose beauty is comparable to mine?”

Macabe was not boasting. She stated bluntly a self-evident fact.

“We know that you are altogether desirable, Macabe. But what then?”

“Then think you that the Deliverer will cross my will when I sit in the shadow of his hut? Trust me, all will yet be well.”

Burgess rose to his feet.

“Is it permitted that I speak?”

Macabe inclined her head.

“You do desire to be the head wife of the Deliverer?”

“I have chosen him to be my mate,” she answered coldly.

“That he will never be.”

“What mean you?”

“He is under the spell of the white girl, she has bewitched him. Aye, he has no eyes for any woman, save only the moon flower—he has no eyes for you, whose beauty is as the glory of the sun.

“This then is my counsel. Take the white girl from his kraal and give her to me—she is rightly mine. That will break the spell she has over him and he will do all that you desire. The white men you can deal with afterward.

“Further, I would advise you to take many other maidens on the same day you take the white maiden. So will men go to the Deliverer saying that the Beast walks abroad and beg him to permit

the sacrifices you desire.”

“What say you, sisters?” Macabe appealed to the others. “Do not the words of the white man sound good to your ears, brothers.”

“Aye. They are words of wisdom, Macabe, if they are true words.”

“Do you think, white man,” another asked Burgess, “that the Deliverer will see our way when the maiden has been taken from him?”

“Truly. When the girl has gone, he will see eye to eye with you.”

“It is good,” said Macabe as one determined upon a course of action. “Heed me. Tonight shall be the appointed time. Now get you gone and carry the message of the Beast to the people of the Valley. Whisper in their ears of the Beast’s vengeance. Let death walk about the Valley—a maiden shall be taken in every kraal. The white girl you shall not harm but shall bring to the cavern under the falling water.”

Macabe turned to Mopa.

“Take the white man, Mopa, to that place. There he shall wait his reward. And there he shall stay with the girl until I become the Deliverer’s head wife.”

“That is no way to reward me, Macabe,” he stammered. “To keep me a prisoner—”

But she had no ears for him.

Mopa touched his arm and Burgess meekly followed his guide to the cavern under the falls. Even, so, he would have resisted had he been armed.

THAT night the valley resounded with the hunting cries of leopards. Next morning Jan was awakened by the murmuring of many voices outside his hut. Rising quickly he went outside and recognized, in the dim light of breaking day, many of the headmen.

At his appearance their murmuring ceased and they watched him in silence.

“What do you want, headmen?” Jan asked. “Your faces are sad. Has evil come upon you?”

“Aye, evil indeed. See here.” The speaker, one Tati by name, pointed to five deep scratches dangerously near to his jugular vein.

Jan laughed lightly.

“And is it to show me that that you come here before the rising of the sun? The wound is slight and you—I thought you were a man.”

“Judge us not too quickly, Deliverer. That I alone should be marked is nothing. But what if I tell you that all that you see here are so marked?”

“What has done this?” Jan asked uneasily. “Read me the riddle.”

“It is the Mark of the Beast,” they answered.

“What’s the trouble, Jan?”

Jan’s face lighted up as he saw Dick and Crompton emerge from their hut.

With a grave face Crompton examined the wounds of the men.

“They were made by an animal,” he said. “But how....?”

“That is what I was about to learn, Baas. Tell the story, Tati.”

“There is little to tell. In the night I was awakened from sleep. My hands and feet were bound, a gag was put into my mouth. A voice whispered in my ears, ‘I am the Spirit of the Beast. I am angry because you put me to scorn this day, because you have made a mock of my servants. Now go with speed to the hut of the Deliverer and tell him that the blood sacrifices must be made to me.’

“Then,” continued Tati, “I felt the claws of the Beast upon me and the blood spurted from the wound which he made. The hut was filled with the scent of the Beast and for a little while I knew no more.

“When I opened my eyes again I was surrounded by my wives. They were weeping bitterly. Rising to my feet—the women had loosened the bonds from my hands and feet, had taken the gag from my mouth—I asked what ailed them. Then they took me to the hut of my daughter. She was dead. The vein of the neck, that vein which contains the life blood, was opened.”

“Do you know, who did these things?” Dick asked as Tati concluded.

“Aye, white man. It was the spirit of the Beast. All these have suffered as I suffered.” Tati indicated the other headmen.

“The Beast punished us because no sacrifice was made.

“Therefore we have come to you, Oh Deliverer, praying that the sacrifice may be permitted today less a greater evil come upon us.”

“But if this is the work of the Spirits,” said Crompton, “why should they bind you, hand and foot? Why stop up your mouth?”

“It is not for us to question the work of the Spirits,” said Tati.

“But it is in my mind,” Dick put in, “that this deed is not of the Spirits, but of that crafty and evil woman Macabe.”

“Without doubt,” they agreed. “It is the work of Macabe. She is the Mistress of the Beast. What she commands, he performs.”

At that moment a muffled cry came from the hut which Dorothy shared with Mamwe.

Running, Jan and the two white men, came to the hut and discovered Mamwe bound securely. In her neck was a gaping wound.

Dorothy was nowhere to be seen, but on the floor of the hut were the footprints of a leopard.

QUICKLY they unbound the half-fainting Mamwe and Doc Crompton expertly bandaged the wound which, fortunately, just missed the jugular vein. As she showed signs of gaining strength, they questioned her regarding the affair.

“It is very little I know, Deliverer,” she said, “In the darkness it happened, and I could see no one. But *they* talked a little, thinking me dead. The white girl they have not harmed—they have taken her to the cavern under the falling water. Aye, I heard them say that they would do that. There the other white man awaits her.”

Dick hurried over to the hut which had been allotted to Burgess and returning reported that Burgess was not there.

“That is something gained,” said Crompton. “If Burgess has a hand in this, then, truly, we may be sure that it is not the work of the Spirits. And with men we can deal.”

“Why did Macabe chose you for the sacrifice yesterday?” Dick asked turning swiftly on Mamwe.

“Because I knew too much, white man.”

“What do you know?”

“My father, the Keeper of the Beasts,” said Mamwe, “has always had his abode among the caverns of the hills. It was because I knew the secret entrances into the caverns, and yet would not become one of the servants of the Beast, that Macabe was determined to put me to death.”

“And why would you not become a servant of the Beast?”

She made an expression indicative of disgust.

"They are dealers in bloodshed, Lord. They work in darkness, their hands are dyed with the blood of many of the people of the valley; old men and maidens, young women and children have fallen beneath them."

"How can they do these things and yet no man suspect them?" asked Crompton?

"They are many in number, white man; and crafty. Also, the people think it is the work of the Spirits and accept their fate without question."

"And you? You say it is not the work of the Spirits?"

"Have you looked well at the footprints that are in this hut?" she said simply.

Jan went down on his knees and followed the spoor. He traced it to the door, where it ended.

"The riddle grows harder," he said. "If this was the work of leopards then they walk on two legs. Only the footprints of the fore-feet of the beasts can I find."

"You will come with us, Mamwe," said Jan, "and guide us to the lair of the Beast. But first I would speak to the headmen who have gathered about my hut."

He went out, followed by the girl, Crompton and Harding.

"Headmen," Jan began, "this evil has not passed us by. The white maiden has been taken away, Mamwe has been marked."

"Then you will permit the sacrifice? Better that one die than that the whole valley should become a place of desolation."

"That is not my intention. I know that this is the work of men—not of Spirits. Macabe gave the order for the killings—this time and in times past. How it is done is not yet known to us, but we will know before the setting sun. We go to the place of the Beast. The death of his servants shall bring peace to the valley.

"Do the servants of the Beast live in your kraals?"

"Aye. In every kraal lives one or more."

"Then return to your huts and give orders to your young men to take prisoner all the servants of the Beast and keep them in safety."

"But what of the Beast?"

"That is not known to us yet. Soon we shall know. But—will you obey my commands?"

"Aye," they chorused, "but we are much afraid."

CHAPTER VII

THE BIG CATS

AN hour later the four—Crompton, Dick, Jan and the girl, Mamwe—came to the tunnel leading to the cavern under the falls. At the boulder which hid the entrance to the meeting place of the servants of the beast, Mamwe stopped.

"It is here," she said in a low voice, "that we enter the place of Macabe. Push lightly on the rock at this point, and it will roll away."

Jan was about to follow out the girl's instructions when he was stopped by Dick.

"We must get Missy, first," he said. "You and Baas Crompton stay here while I go to the cavern with Mamwe."

At the end of the tunnel Mamwe pressed at a projection in the wall. An opening appeared and through it Dick rushed into the cavern.

For a moment he could distinguish nothing in the dim light, then, as his eyes became more accustomed to the half-darkness he could see Dorothy, struggling in the arms of Burgess.

With a hoarse cry of rage he rushed toward them.

Snarling, Burgess flung the girl from him and waited for Dick with arms outstretched before him.

Coming to close quarters, Dick aimed a tremendous blow at Burgess' jaw. But Burgess quickly side-stepped and Dick, carried forward by the impetus of the blow, fell sprawlingly to the floor.

With the ferocity of a tiger Burgess was upon him, securing a choking grip on his throat. Confident that the victory was his, he laughed evilly and looked up triumphantly at Dorothy.

"If I spare him, will you come to me freely?" he asked.

Before she could reply, Dick, with a last desperate effort succeeded in releasing the strangling hold. A sudden heave threw Burgess from him and once again the two were on their feet. After exchanging a few ineffectual blows they again clinched. Backward and forward they wrestled over the floor of the cavern.

Simultaneously with a shout of warning from

Dorothy, Dick felt some drops of spray from the fall of water which closed the front of the cavern, and knew that another step or two backward would send him headlong to be dashed to death on the rocks below.

With a cry that Burgess took for fear, Dick took a quick step backward throwing Burgess momentarily off his guard. But only for a moment. He came on again with a rush, his one thought to crowd Dick over the edge. His very eagerness proved his undoing, for Dick quickly stepped to one side and before Burgess could recover rained blow after blow on his face.

Harding was fighting now with a very berserk fury and all Burgess' efforts to come to a clinch were in vain, nor could he break away from the pitiless rain of blows which Dick showered upon him. He could not go forward, or to the side. All his attempts to do so were met with punishing jabs which he seemed powerless to avoid. Neither could he stand up longer to the fury of Dick's attack.

He took a step backward. Dick pressed him hard. Another step and then another. Now they were fighting on the very brink of the precipice. The spray of the falling water drenched both the struggling men.

The end came very quickly. Dick suddenly shifted his attack from the face to the body and Burgess lowered his guard, leaving his jaw unprotected. Feinting with his left for the body, Dick brought his right, with all his power behind it, to the jaw. It was enough. Burgess' head went back with a snap—he tottered for a moment, hands outstretched before him as if searching purchase on the air. Then backward he fell and down into the rushing, falling waters.

TURNING slowly, Dick held out his arms to Dorothy.

"Thank God you came in time, Dick," she murmured as she kissed him and gently fingered his bruised face.

The voice of Mamwe interrupted the lovers.

"It is time that we go from here. Much remains to be done. But, au-a, never have I seen such a fight."

"Yes—we must go," and, as they left the cavern, Dick swiftly outlined the situation and their plan to Dorothy.

"Now, Mamwe," said Jan, "show us once again the trick of this thing."

Jan pushed aside the boulder as directed by Mamwe and then, revolvers in hand, the party descended into the place of the Beast.

Very few of the servants of the Beast were in the cavern, but those who were present were the leaders of the society.

"All has gone well," Macabe was saying. "There is nothing for us to fear. Through this night you have heard the reports of our brothers and sisters. From each kraal in the valley the wailing of women ascends. From each kraal a servant of the Beast has reported the performing of his allotted tasks and, having reported, departed to his own place. The white maiden is—"

Macabe stopped abruptly as she saw for the first time the approach of the avenging party.

"Kill them!" she shrieked. "Kill them or we are undone!"

In amazement the others turned and seeing the intruders, rushed on them with their assegais. Nor did they stop at the threat of the leveled revolvers—firearms were unknown to them.

The revolvers spat fire and three men dropped. The others wavered. The revolvers spoke again and the rush stopped abruptly—nor could the taunts of Macabe drive the men again to the attack.

"As you see, O Servants of the Beast," cried Dick, "the Spirit of the Gun is stronger than the Spirit of the Beast. Now stand you all against the wall, facing it. Put your hands behind you; move not unless you are ready to die."

Silently they obeyed his order.

Macabe turned on Mopa who was with her on the platform.

"You have betrayed me," she cried. "I ordered you to kill Mamwe, but see—she is alive. And she lived to lead these dogs to this place. Now take the reward of a faithless Servant of the Beast.

A dagger flashed in the air and Mopa made no effort to avoid the keen blade which, a moment later, plunged into his heart.

With a shrill laugh Macabe ran behind the stone figure of a leopard and disappeared.

"Guard these evil ones," shouted Jan, giving his revolver to Dorothy. "I will find the den of this she-devil."

Directly behind the stone figure Jan found a flight of steps leading to a dark passageway. Descending them, and hearing the pattering of footsteps ahead, he followed the fleeing Macabe.

Once he caught up with her, but she eluded him in the darkness and sped on with increased speed.

Suddenly the passage turned abruptly to the left and Jan was half-blinded by a sudden burst of light. Before him, and at the end of the passage, was a cage built into the rocks. On the other side of the cage was the arena.

Macabe was in the act of entering the cage by a small door, and Jan shuddered as he saw the spotted forms of six leopards within the cage.

"Follow me, if you dare," Macabe taunted.

She was now inside the cage and had closed the little door.

PERHAPS it was, the scent of the blood of the man whom she had murdered that enraged the leopards but, whatever the cause, they were uneasy and snarled furiously.

Macabe sensed their unrest and hastened to leave the cage by the exit leading to the arena. As she stooped to undo the lashing which held the door the big cats leaped upon her.

She screamed—horribly, and then all was silent, save the snarling purrs of the beasts as they crouched down to their meal.

"By blood she lived, by blood she died," Jan muttered and, much shaken, retraced his way to the cavern.

There he found that the white men had tied the hands of their prisoners and were at that moment examining Something with such interest that they did not notice his return for a moment

"Look, Jan!" Dick, exclaimed, "See what we have found."

He held in his hands a piece of metal shaped like a leopard's paw. It was so made that it could

be worn on the foot of a man who, thus wearing it, would make a spoor like a leopard's."

"There are many of them here," said Dick.

"That explains much, Baas. But what of the wounds? How were they made?"

"By these?" Crompton showed Jan some talon-like sheafs, also of metal, which fitted the fingers.

"It is well," said Jan. "It would seem that we have done a good deed this day. No more shall the people of the valley fear the vengeance of the Beast. I think that I was not called the Deliverer in vain. Yet I could have accomplished nothing without your help. Now let us go and give an account of things and mete out justice to the Servants of the Beast."

* * *

Three days later the little party came to the ford in the river and there Jan, having first carried Dorothy over to the other side, made ready to leave them.

"Then you will not come with us, Jan?"

"No, Baas Crompton, unless you order me to do so."

"But are you sure, Jan," asked Dick, "that you are wise when you choose to remain in the valley?"

"I am sure, Baas Dick. You have found the diamonds for which we came to this place. Wealth is yours and—Missy is yours. As for me, I have found a people who call me 'king.' Also"—Jan's voice softened—"a maiden, who is very desirable."

"Jan," said Dorothy as she raised her hand in a gesture of farewell, "I could find it in my heart, perhaps, to forgive you if you deserted your kingdom, but—" she looked up at Dick with a happy smile—"I'd scorn you forever if you deserted Mamwe."

THE END