

Shea Cornelius

**In the Depths of
the Dark Continent: or,
The Vengeance of Van...**



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Cornelius Shea

In the Depths of the Dark Continent; or, The Vengeance of Van Vincent

CHAPTER I.

MURDER!

The little village of Edgewater was covered by the inky pall of night.

The big clock on the steeple of the town hall had just tolled the hour of twelve.

Ever since night set in the clouds had been heavy and threatening, and as the midnight hour arrived the storm burst forth in all its fury.

The wind arose to a perfect hurricane, and the rain came down in torrents.

Van Vincent, a bright, handsome youth of eighteen years, who is to figure as the hero of this story, was awakened from his slumber by the creaking of the beams and timbers in the old-fashioned house he called his home.

Van was an orphan, as far as he knew, and lived with an uncle, who was reported as being very wealthy, though the house he lived in and his everyday appearance would not lead anyone to think so.

The last Van had ever heard of his father he had gone to Africa with an exploring party.

That was fifteen years before, and up to this time none of the party had ever returned.

Ralph Vincent, the uncle of Van, had given the boy a good education, and obtained for him the situation of bookkeeper in the largest store in Edgewater.

Consequently Van loved and respected his uncle, who had often declared that the boy should inherit what little he possessed in earthly goods.

As Van was awakened by the violence of the storm on the night upon which our story opens, he felt rather uneasy.

He had been aroused from a bad dream, and it took him several seconds to realize that he was home and in bed.

"My!" he exclaimed, leaping out of bed; "this is a fearful storm. I must close the window."

He started toward a window, the sash of which was lowered slightly, allowing the rain to dash into the room.

Just as he did so he heard a blood-curdling cry that nearly froze his soul with horror.

"Help! murder! mur – "

For the space of ten seconds Van stood as if transfixed.

The terrible cry came from his uncle's room, which was on the first floor, and almost directly beneath him.

The boy knew, too, that it was his uncle's voice that uttered the cries, and seizing a revolver from the drawer of the bureau in his room, he darted downstairs.

Reaching the door of the room whence the cries came, he found it locked.

Van Vincent was not the sort to be balked very easily when he started to do a thing. Taking a few steps backward, he let his whole weight go against the door and forced it from its hinges.

The next instant he was in the room.

Almost the first object he saw was a man clambering from an open window.

He raised his revolver, but too late! the intruder dropped to the ground below and was lost in the storm and darkness.

Van made a move to spring through the window after him, but a faint voice coming from the bed checked him.

"Van, c-c-come h-e-re!"

The next moment the boy was at the side of the bed, where his uncle lay in a pool of blood, breathing heavily.

"Van, I have been murdered!" exclaimed Ralph Vincent, faintly.

The look on his uncle's face told Van that what he said was true.

Just at that moment an old man called Ben, who was the only male servant about the house, came rushing in the room in a terrified manner.

"Oh, Lord!" he exclaimed, wildly. "Whatever has happened, Mr. Vincent?"

"Silence, Ben!" spoke up the dying man. "Van, hand me a glass of brandy and I will try and describe my murderer so that you may hunt him down and bring him to justice."

Half bewildered, Van did as he was directed, while the servant strove to quench the blood that was flowing from a ghastly wound in his employer's side.

Instead of making him rally, the glass of brandy set the dying man to coughing, and when the spell ceased he was so weak that he could not speak above a whisper.

He managed to articulate the words:

"Doc Clancy – an old enemy to our family – sandy mustache – thumb missing from right hand!"

These were the last words Ralph Vincent ever spoke, for the next moment he fell back and his soul fled to its Maker.

What lay upon the bed now was a heap of senseless clay.

"Heaven save us! but this is awful!" groaned Ben, the servant. "Who committed this terrible crime, Master Van?"

"A man named Doc Clancy; that is what uncle stated with his dying breath. Do you know or have you ever heard of such a person, Ben?"

Van turned his gaze full upon the servant as he spoke, but one glance in old Ben's eyes told him plainly that he knew nothing whatever about the murderer.

"You had better go and rouse some of the neighbors, Ben," spoke up Van, after a pause. "I will wait here till you come back."

"Yes, sir," and old Ben was off like a shot.

In less than half an hour a dozen or more people were gathered at the scene of the tragedy.

But no one touched the corpse until the coroner arrived, shortly after daylight.

An examination showed that Ralph Vincent had been stabbed through the right lung by some unknown person, and this was the verdict rendered by the coroner's jury.

All that day a crowd of the villagers thronged the house, and Van went about among them like one in a dream, hardly able to realize what had happened a few short hours before.

But his uncle's last words rang constantly in the boy's ears, and he made up his mind that as soon as the funeral was over he would start out to hunt down the villain called Doc Clancy, who had a thumb missing from his right hand.

The day of the funeral came, and the remains of Ralph Vincent were interred.

Then came the reading of the will, and, to Van's astonishment, a man whom he had never seen before was present.

Before the will was read the lawyer introduced the stranger to Van as an own cousin and a nephew of the murdered man, who had just returned from a foreign port the day following the crime.

Van was not a great deal surprised at this, as he knew he had cousins whom he had never seen.

But what was his astonishment when the will had been read and he found that he had been utterly ignored by his uncle, and that John Moreland, the stranger, came in for the entire property?

But there it was in black and white, with his uncle's signature and those of the witnesses.

The eyes of all those assembled in the room were turned upon Van when this startling fact came to light.

But the boy was not a bit more pale than he had been since the murder, and regarding the looks of the inmates of the room as a question put to him, he said in a clear, calm voice:

"I care not for the fact that my uncle left me out of his will. He has always been kind to me since I can remember, and I appreciated it and loved him. My mission now is to hunt down his murderer and bring him to justice, and I swear to do it. Cousin John Moreland, I congratulate you on being the heir to uncle's estate. Accept my hand on it."

As Van clasped the hand of John Moreland a sudden thrill shot through his frame, and he glanced downward.

The hand he held in his own was minus the thumb.

In the twinkling of an eye Van's whole manner changed.

With the force of an enraged lion he seized the man by the throat and hurled him back against the wall.

Then in a voice that rang out like a clarion note, he exclaimed:

"I accuse this man of being the murderer of my uncle!"

CHAPTER II. A PLUCKY CHASE

As Van Vincent's startling words rang out a low murmur of surprise came from the assemblage. Not one offered to make a move until the lawyer stepped quickly forward, and seizing the boy by the shoulder, pulled him away from John Moreland, whose face had turned the color of ashes.

Van pushed the lawyer away from him rather roughly.

"I registered a vow to hunt the murderer down," said he in the same clear voice, "but did not expect to find him so quick. There he stands before us all. What have you to say against the charge, Doc Clancy?"

The boy had no sooner uttered the name of Doc Clancy than, quick as a flash, John Moreland rushed from the room.

His action was so sudden no one could intercept him.

"That proves his guilt," cried Van, now in a high pitch of excitement. "I am going after him, and will not return until I have caught him and brought him to justice!"

Seizing his hat, Van left the room and dashed outside after the accused murderer.

He beheld him running across a field in the direction of the railway station.

Van glanced at his watch.

A train for New York was due in three minutes, and he knew full well that a good runner could just about reach the depot in that time.

And the villain had a good three hundred yards' start of him!

Van Vincent was an excellent runner, but, strive as he might, he could not gain upon the fleeing stranger.

Over fences and ditches went the pursued and pursuer, until the broad lane leading to the station was reached.

Van heard the shrill whistle of a locomotive, and his heart sank within him.

He knew that the train was coming.

It reached the depot just as John Moreland came to the track.

The villain knew that he would not have time enough to reach the platform to board the train, so he clambered upon the last car from the ground.

The train stopped about half a minute, which gave Van time to get within a hundred feet of it before it started.

But he was too late.

The bell rang, and away went the train, with John Moreland standing on the platform of the rear car, shaking his fist at Van in a derisive manner.

Van stood still in his tracks until the train had disappeared from sight, and then, without answering the station master's query as to what the matter was, started slowly back to the house where he had lived for so many years.

When he reached it he found no one there but Ben, the old servant, and to him he stated that he was going away.

Van had about four hundred dollars that he had saved, and he at once got this and placed it in a stanch, leather pocketbook, which he put in the inside pocket of his vest.

He next packed a few things in a satchel, and then set out slowly for the depot.

Another train would be along in about thirty-five minutes, which would bring him to New York one hour behind the man he was chasing.

As Van walked along thinking over the general appearance of Doc Clancy – for he was sure that John Moreland was no other than he – it occurred to him that the man had some of the characteristics of a seaman about him.

This gave the plucky boy an idea.

If Doc Clancy really was a follower of the sea, would he not most likely ship aboard some vessel to make his escape? He had been publicly branded as a murderer, and his action in fleeing from his accuser was pretty good proof that he was guilty of the charge.

This was the way Van reasoned, and he concluded to make his way to the shipping district as soon as he reached New York.

He reached the depot and purchased his ticket, and the train came along a few minutes later and whirled him toward his destination.

Van was not playing the part of an amateur detective because he had any particular hankering after that profession, but because he had made a solemn vow to hunt down the murderer of his uncle.

He would try and locate his man, and then call the New York police to his aid.

The distance by rail to New York was not great, and an hour later our hero was walking down West Street in the busy metropolis.

He had often been to the city, and consequently knew something about it.

The boy did not stop until he reached the South Ferry, and then, acting on an uncontrollable impulse, he boarded a South Street car and took up his position on the platform with the driver.

He had not rode over ten blocks when he gave such a start that the car driver made an involuntary movement to catch him, thinking he was going to fall from the platform.

But Van did not notice him. The boy's eyes were riveted upon the back of a man who was just entering the door of a saloon.

As he passed through the doorway the object of his gaze turned his head around for a single instant.

"That's the murderer!" exclaimed Van, and with a single bound he sprang from the car platform into the street, leaving the driver staring at his retreating form in blank amazement.

Van was satisfied that the man he saw was Doc Clancy, alias John Moreland. He had the features and general appearance of the villain stamped too deeply upon his mind to be deceived.

With a bound he dashed upon the sidewalk, nearly upsetting a passer-by, and then hurried into the saloon.

It was just after six in the evening, and the place was crowded with a set of laboring men who had stopped in to quench their thirst on their way home from work.

As the bar was but a small place, Van had great difficulty in squeezing through the motley gathering.

The boy did not notice the rough looks that were bestowed upon him as he elbowed his way through the crowd toward the rear of the saloon.

He was bent upon finding his man, and he forgot all else.

Van was young and impulsive, and he made a great mistake when he entered that saloon upon the errand he was bent, as he afterward found out.

Just as he came abreast of the lunch counter the place contained he saw Moreland enter a doorway in the rear and start up a flight of stairs.

Like a flash Van was after him, and a moment later he flung the door open and darted breathlessly up the stairs.

When he reached the top he found himself in a gloomy hallway of narrow dimensions.

It was too dark for him to discern the person he sought, but he could hear the sound of footsteps on the uncarpeted floor.

It was just at that moment that it occurred to Van for the first time that he had made a mistake.

"I ought to have brought a policeman with me," he thought. "But it is too late now. I will capture that man or die!"

Rash boy! He had not taken ten steps along the hallway when a figure suddenly confronted him; there was a dull thud, and Van Vincent sank to the floor with a thousand stars flashing before his eyes.

CHAPTER III. CARRIED TO SEA

When Van Vincent returned to consciousness he felt so stiff and sore that he was scarcely able to hold up his head.

His throat and tongue were dry and parched, and he was so badly dazed that it took him several minutes to recollect what had happened.

As it gradually came to him he opened his eyes, expecting to find himself in the hallway where he had lost his senses.

But imagine the boy's surprise when he beheld a dirty lantern swinging back and forth from the ceiling of a seven-by-nine room.

Then it occurred to Van that the building he was in appeared to be moving in a violent manner.

He rose to a sitting posture and found himself in a narrow bunk, instead of being upon the floor, as he expected.

"I must have been moved," he muttered. "Doc Clancy must certainly have had a hand in this. I wonder where I am, anyhow? This looks like a bunk on a ship. Great heavens! can it be possible that I have been drugged and shipped to sea?"

The thought no sooner struck our hero than he glanced at his clothes.

An exclamation of dismay escaped his lips.

His neat-fitting business suit had been removed and a dirty outfit, such as seamen wear, substituted in place of it.

Van no longer had any doubt as to his being aboard a ship.

He now saw plainly what caused the rocking motion.

But, instead of giving way to a fit of despair, as most boys of his age would have done in like circumstances, he calmly clambered from the bunk and proceeded to examine the costume he wore.

Unbuttoning a greasy, blue pea jacket, he found, to his great joy, that he still wore his own vest.

But on placing his hand in the inner pocket of the garment he found his pocket-book to be missing.

"I have been robbed and kidnaped!" he muttered in a tone of great vehemence; "and Doc Clancy is at the bottom of it – of that I am sure. But never mind! Though this vessel takes me to the very ends of the earth, I will yet get on the track of the villain who murdered my uncle, and then woe to him!"

Van uttered the last part of his thoughts in a rather loud voice, and he had scarcely done so when a gruff tone the other side of the partition sang out:

"What's ther matter there, ye cussed landlubber? Have ye come to yer senses yet?"

"Hello!" returned Van. "Who are you? Come in here; I would like to talk to you."

"All right, youngster; I'll obleege ye!"

The next moment a portion of the partition was removed and a rough-looking man came through.

Van assumed an air of boldness.

"Sit down," said he, "and tell me where I am."

"Well, you are a cool un!" observed the man. "But since ye have asked me, I'll tell you. Young man, you are on board ther *Mary Newman*, which are a tradin' schooner, bound for ther African coast. We are now jist outside of Sandy Hook, an' blowin' along afore a stiff breeze."

"Who brought me here?" questioned our hero, not affecting the least bit of surprise.

"I don't know, my boy. I suppose ther captain was short of hands, and collared ye while ye were drunk. Sich things are often done, yer know."

"Do you believe that is the way I came to be here?"

"Can't say whether I do or not, youngster. I am ther mate of ther vessel, an' I never asks ther captain anything about his private business. All that I knows is that you an' a feller a little older than you are were brought aboard together in a drunken state, an' I took it for granted that you were chums, an' had either shipped of yer own accord, or else been collared while ye were sleepin' off ther loads ye had on."

"What sort of a looking chap was it who came aboard with me?" asked Van.

"He is a rather homely feller, with a big, red beard, but is a good sailor, though."

"Well," resumed our hero, after a pause, "I suppose I will have to make the best of it, but I tell you plainly that I have been robbed and kidnaped."

"If that is so, young man, take my advice, an' say nothin' about it while ye are on board ther *Mary Newman*," returned the man, with a look that told plainly that he meant well toward the boy.

"I'll take your advice, sir," returned Van, promptly. "I suppose I will be used fairly well as long as I do the best I can, and attend to my duties aboard the ship?"

"Ye will if I have got anything ter say about it. Boy, put her there. I've taken a likin' ter ye. My name are Lank Edwards, an' as long as ye stick ter me I'll be your friend, even if everybody else on board goes back on ye!"

"Thank you for those words, Mr. Edwards," said Van, shaking the mate by the hand.

"Now, my boy, ye had better lay down for an hour or so, an' by that time it'll be daylight. I'll go an' report to ther captain that ye are gittin' along all right, an' ain't kickin' 'cause ye are goin' ter sea in his vessel."

With these words the mate crawled through the aperture in the partition, and carefully closed it after him.

When he had gone Van sat down on the edge of his bunk to think over his situation.

He was very much disappointed over what had befallen him, but something seemed to whisper in his ear that things would come out all right in the end, so he resolved to say nothing and make the best of it.

In about an hour and a half he noticed a faint gray light stealing through the grating overhead, and he knew that morning had arrived.

A few minutes later he heard some one in the adjoining room, and, almost immediately after, the sliding door in the partition opened.

Van saw the kindly face of the mate looking in at him, and he hailed it with a sigh of relief.

"It's all right, young feller; ther captain has put ye under my charge. Come on out of yer prison, an' take breakfast with me. After that you will have ter take up yer quarters in ther forecastle."

Glad enough to leave the dingy place, Van crawled through the hole, and found himself in a portion of the ship's cabin.

The mate showed him where the water was, and the boy took a good wash.

After this he felt much better.

A few minutes later the cook entered with a steaming breakfast, the sight of which made Van's mouth water.

He had not realized that he was hungry until now, and he ate as only a hungry mortal can.

Van's first meal aboard the *Mary Newman* was his best, as he found out afterward.

The table the captain and mates ate from was far different from that of the forecastle.

When breakfast was over the mate conducted our hero to the forecastle, and pointed out his bunk to him.

From that moment the rough part of Van Vincent's life began.

The crew, for the most part, were a grimy, villainous-looking set.

But Van was built of the sort of material that never flinches, and he took things as they came in a philosophical way.

Almost the first person he saw when he went on watch for the first time was a sailor with a heavy red beard that nearly concealed his face.

Van at once judged this to be the person who came aboard the vessel in such a mysterious manner, and when he got the opportunity, he broached the subject to him.

The sailor acknowledged such to be the case, but evaded all the questions the boy put to him.

Van sized him up pretty well, and made up his mind that the fellow was a villain of the first water.

About an hour after his brief conversation with the red-whiskered sailor, Van saw him coiling a length of rope.

To catch on to the way it was done so neatly, he watched him keenly.

Suddenly Van gave a start.

He noticed that the man was minus a thumb, and that, too, from his right hand.

He thought of Doc Clancy, his uncle's murderer, but said nothing.

What if this man was the scoundrel in disguise?

CHAPTER IV. ON THE CONGO RIVER

Van kept a good watch upon the red-whiskered sailor during the voyage, and every day he became more and more satisfied that he was no other than Doc Clancy, alias John Moreland.

At length the stormy Atlantic was crossed, and one day, when the sun was so hot that it fairly melted the pitch on her decks, the *Mary Newman* came to anchor at the mouth of the Congo River, on the African coast.

Lank Edwards, the mate, had been as good as his word, and had indeed been a friend to our hero during the voyage.

Though Van did not like the life of a sailor any too well, he got along fairly enough, thinking all the while that he would yet corner the murderer of his uncle, and be the means of having him conveyed to the United States to stand trial.

As it was past noon when the ship came to anchor, the captain concluded to wait till morning before he proceeded ten miles up the river to a trading station.

A canvas awning was stretched over the deck, and the crew of the *Mary Newman* lay under this in a listless manner, waiting for the sun to go down so they could get the cool breeze which invariably comes after nightfall in that latitude.

Van noticed that the red-whiskered sailor appeared to be very uneasy, and he concluded to watch him closely.

The afternoon passed and darkness came, and with it the cooling breeze they so much desired.

Van was in the second watch, and, consequently, he turned into his bunk soon after mess.

But it was so warm below decks that he could not sleep, and after tossing about for perhaps an hour, he went on deck and crawled into a fold of the main jib, which made a first-class hammock.

It was cool and refreshing, and the boy soon fell asleep.

He was awakened perhaps two hours later by a wild commotion on deck.

In the twinkling of an eye he dropped from the sail and gazed about him.

A heavy smoke completely blinded him for a moment, and then he knew what was the matter.

The ship was on fire!

Even as this fact occurred to him, a bright column of flame leaped from the forward hatch, and the tarred rigging catching fire, it seemed as if a hundred writhing, fiery serpents were shooting skyward.

Under the supervision of the captain and mates the sailors were trying manfully to subdue the flames, and Van rushed forward and joined them.

But the fire kept on increasing, and at the end of fifteen minutes the captain saw it was useless to attempt to save the ship.

Reluctantly he gave the order to lower the boats, and convey what could be saved of the cargo ashore.

Van ran into the forecabin to get the few things he possessed before the ship was abandoned.

As he reached his bunk a cry of horror escaped his lips.

By the light of the blazing rigging he saw the body of a man lying in a pool of blood in the bunk he had so lately occupied.

"Great heavens!" exclaimed the boy, "this is the work of the red-whiskered sailor, and I firmly believe he mistook this man for me. Poor fellow! he no doubt crawled in my bunk after I left it, thinking it was cooler there. I am now sure the man with the thumbless hand is Doc Clancy."

But there was no time for any further speculation, and Van knew this well.

Seizing his little bundle, he dashed up the companion way and ran to assist the crew in loading the boats.

One of these was missing, as well as two of the crew, and the captain was at a loss to understand it.

Van ran his eye over the group of sailors, and saw that the red-whiskered fellow was one of the missing ones.

He quickly informed the mate of what he knew.

"It was he who set ther ship afire, then!" exclaimed Lank Edwards. "We'll chase him up an' catch him yet, see if we don't."

The flames were now gaining rapid headway, and it behooved those on board the doomed vessel to be as expeditious as possible.

Two of the boats were loaded and sent to the shore, which was less than half a mile distant.

When these returned, the captain considered it no longer safe to stay aboard.

All hands tumbled into the boats and pushed off.

By the time they reached the shore the vessel was entirely enveloped in a pillar of flame, and though the sight was a truly grand one, the sailors did not relish it to any great degree.

"Well, boys," said the captain, sadly, "I have got enough money to pay you what wages are coming to you. I might as well do it right here, as we will never go aboard the good *Mary Newman* again."

He proceeded to count out the money, and each man was called up in his turn.

Van received seventeen dollars and fifty cents for the time he put in aboard the ship.

"Now, then," observed the captain, when all had been paid off, "I propose that we get in the boats and row up the river to a little town called Sonhow."

"To-night?" asked the mate.

"Yes; right away."

"How about hunting after the fellow who fired the ship?"

"There is no proof that anyone did do it. I believe the two who are missing were burned up before they could get out of the fore-castle."

"Well, I don't," returned the mate.

"All right, Mr. Edwards," spoke up the captain, a little testily, "every one is welcome to his own opinion. If you want to start out on a wild-goose chase, why, go on; I am going to Sonhow."

All save three sided with the captain, and they at once started for the boats.

Those who remained were our hero, the mate, and a young sailor named Gregory.

Van was determined to try and find the trail of Doc Clancy, and the mate was with him because he liked the boy for his pluck and earnestness in hunting down the murderer of his uncle.

Gregory wanted to find the red-whiskered man, because the sailor who had been murdered was his half-brother.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" called out the captain from the water's edge.

"We have decided to stay where we are till daylight," replied the mate.

"All right, then. Come down here and we will divide up the things, and as there are three boats, you may have one of them."

The three walked to the spot.

The main part of the burned vessel's cargo consisted of trinkets, calicoes, cheap jewelry, etc., to trade with the natives for various African products.

All that had been saved from the ship was four cases of these, a number of firearms, and a good supply of sea-biscuit and salt.

The three that decided to wait were given one of the cases, six rifles, a dozen revolvers, with ample ammunition for both, and a barrel of sea-biscuit and about one-fourth of a sack of salt.

"You might need the guns and pistols if you stay around this wild country very long," said the captain, as the two boats pushed off and headed up the river.

"Good-by!" cried Van. "We are going to find the man who burned the ship. Success to you all!"

The sailors gave a cheer, and in a few minutes the boats were lost in the darkness.

Our hero and his two companions then sat down in their boat and watched the still burning hull of the *Mary Newman*.

It must have been near midnight ere the hull sank from sight, and then the three lay down in the bottom of the boat and slept till sunrise.

Van, who was an excellent shot with the rifle, managed to shoot a couple of birds resembling partridges, and these made them a fair breakfast.

Then they pushed off their boat and started up the river.

They had not proceeded over a mile when they came upon the two boats which had left them the night before.

They seemed to be drifting down the river with not a soul in either of them, and curious to know what was the matter, they rowed toward them with all their might.

When they reached them, ejaculations of horror went up from all three.

In the boats were the dead bodies of the captain and those who had set out with him, literally hacked to pieces.

"Great God!" groaned Van. "Is this to be our fate, I wonder?"

Neither the mate or Gregory chose to answer his question, but pushed away from the horrible sight with all possible speed.

Just then a rifle shot rang out on the still morning air.

The mate threw up his arms and fell to the bottom of the boat.

Van seized his rifle and turned his gaze to the shore.

Standing at the edge of a clump of tall reeds was Doc Clancy!

CHAPTER V. THE EXPLORING PARTY

As soon as Van Vincent beheld Doc Clancy on the shore of the river he raised his rifle to shoot the villain in his tracks.

But before he could cover him a chorus of yells rang out, and half a dozen white men and a score of blacks burst from the cover of the reeds and fired a volley at those in the boat.

This so disconcerted our hero that he toppled over backward and landed in a heap in the bottom of the boat.

Doc Clancy took it for granted that the boy had been hit by a bullet, and a shout of triumph left his lips.

But none of the shots fired from the shore had harmed our three friends. The mate, who had fallen first, had only been grazed on the side of his head by the bullet from Clancy's rifle.

As Van attempted to rise to his feet again, the mate cautioned him to lie still, and Gregory, who had already sought seclusion behind the thwarts, seconded the motion.

"Lay low," said the sailor, in a whisper. "We'll make 'em believe we are dead."

"That's our only show," added the mate. "If they leave us alone for a few minutes we'll drift out of range; ther tide is runnin' out like a race horse!"

But Doc Clancy and his villainous allies were not yet satisfied. A minute or so later our friends heard the creaking of oars in the rowlocks, and peering over the thwart, he beheld the murderer of his uncle, and the white men he had seen on the shore, rowing toward them with all their might.

He quickly told his two companions what he saw.

"We've got ter fight it out," observed the mate, grimly. "Git that barrel of hard tack an' ther bag of salt together; we'll git behind 'em an' commence it right away afore they git any closer."

Van and Gregory followed the mate's advice, and a minute later they opened fire upon those in the approaching boat.

Of course their shots were returned, but the bullets could not penetrate the barrel and sack of salt, and the three remained unharmed.

Van had the satisfaction of seeing two of the men in the pursuing boat fall under the fire made by himself and companions.

But Doc Clancy, though continually exposed, had not been hit.

Though the villain seemed to bear a charmed life, he concluded to proceed a little more cautiously.

He gave orders to the men to make a circle and row around so as to get on the other side of the boat.

When Van saw this he began to grow very uneasy.

Our three friends were truly in a bad box. If they attempted to row the boat so as to get away from Clancy and his crowd, they would surely be shot down; and if they remained quietly where they were it would only be a question of time before they would be wiped out.

Before they had time to decide upon what action to take they were astonished to hear a number of rifle shots up the river.

They lifted their heads quickly and glanced at those who were pursuing them.

Doc Clancy and his gang were making for the shore with all their might.

And no wonder! for down the river a boat was being rapidly rowed by half a dozen stalwart blacks.

In the bow was a small swivel cannon, the muzzle of which pointed at the miscreants in the boat in a threatening manner.

Standing upright in the boat were three white men, who were armed to the teeth.

"Hurrah!" yelled Van, waving his hat. "You are just in time, friends."

An answering cheer came from the boat, and our friends breathed a sigh of relief.

As soon as Doc Clancy reached the shore he sprang into the tall reeds and disappeared, followed by his four surviving allies.

Five minutes more and the approaching boat reached our friends.

Van explained who he and his companions were in a very few words.

The three men who had come to their rescue at such an opportune moment shook hands with them in a cordial manner, and made the drifting boat fast to their own.

"Now," said the younger of the strangers, who was not over twenty-three years of age, "since you have told us who you are, I'll tell you who and what we are. We are three Englishmen, who have come to this continent to make explorations and endeavor to find some wonderful spot where the foot of civilized man has never trod. My name is Jack Howard; this gentleman on my right is Prof. Drearland, who intends to write a book on what we discover; and the other gentleman is Dr. Pestle, who came with us to keep us in good health by aid of the large stock of medicines and hard-earned experience he has with him."

"I am sure we are very glad to meet you all," returned Van, with a tone of deep sincerity. "But who are those men who attacked us? One of them we know, but the others are strangers."

"They are six men whom we hired to accompany us on our trip. Yesterday morning they struck for more wages, and because their demand was refused they attempted to kill us and take our outfit from us. We got the best of it, however, and they took to the forest and left us. This morning we heard rifle shots down the river, and thought we would come down and see what was in the wind."

"If there was six of 'em when they left you, there are only four now," remarked Lank Edwards, in a grim manner. "Two of ther villains have turned up their toes."

"Yes," put in Van; "but they have got Doc Clancy with them, and he is a match for any two ordinary men, as far as wickedness goes."

"Suppose you go up to our camp with us?" said Jack Howard, after a pause.

"Certainly," returned our hero. "We have got no other place to go just at present."

Howard gave the word, and the blacks began rowing the boat up the stream with long, steady strokes.

Though Van was some years his junior, Jack Howard took a strong notion to him, and as he was one of those blunt kind of fellows, he was not long in telling him so.

"It is mutual, I assure you," returned our hero; and the two from that moment became inseparable friends.

About a mile up the river the boats came to a stop on the left bank.

It was a very picturesque spot. The gorgeous African flowers of many hues, trailing vines, broad-leafed and giant cacti could be seen on every hand.

On a little knoll in the midst of these surroundings was the camp of the English explorers.

Two tents were pitched in the background, which served to keep off the dew while the men slept.

The negroes, who had been hired in place of the villainous whites, slept on the ground, close to burning fires, without any covering over them, unless it rained, and in that case Jack Howard told them they could haul the boat up and crawl under it.

After Van Vincent had announced his intention of hunting down Doc Clancy until he had been caught, Jack Howard offered to go in with him in the enterprise if he and his two companions would join the exploring party.

Van broached the subject to the mate and Gregory, and they readily agreed to it.

"Very well," said our hero to Howard, "your offer is accepted. We join your party and proceed with you in your explorations, so long as we do not turn from the trail of Doc Clancy."

"We will follow him, even if he goes to the very heart of this wild continent!" exclaimed Jack Howard, warmly.

The party remained in camp until slightly past noon, and they would not have left it then had it not been that an unforeseen circumstance took place.

While they were eating dinner one of the blacks came rushing up with the intelligence that the bad white men had just gone up the river in their boat.

The river was nearly straight at this point, and, rushing down to the water's edge, Van and Jack Howard saw Doc Clancy and his allies proceeding rapidly up the stream.

Already they were over half a mile away, and our friends did not deem it worth while to shoot at them.

But the camp was quickly broken up and all its belongings packed in the boat owned by the Englishmen, which was strong and commodious, and large enough for all hands.

Being aware of this fact, our hero concluded to leave their boat where it was.

When everything was in readiness all hands got into the boat, and the blacks started to row up the river in the wake of Doc Clancy.

CHAPTER VI. A SLIGHT ADVENTURE

The boat owned by the explorers was much heavier than that in which Doc Clancy and his villainous crowd had gone up the river.

Thus the latter could be rowed faster, and it did not take our friends long to see that they were gradually being left behind.

"Our intention was to follow this river until we reached the branch that flows northward," said Jack Howard. "We then would go up that as far as we could, and then make the rest of our travels on foot. The man you call Doc Clancy is leading us over the very course we want to take, so far."

"But he might change his course," spoke up Van.

"It doesn't matter whether he does or not," returned the young Englishman. "We will follow him wherever he goes. The professor, doctor and myself came to Africa principally for adventure, and I am sure we will get enough of it if we keep on the trail of a murderer and a number of scoundrels who are as bad as he is."

They continued on their way up the river, keeping a sharp lookout on either bank so as not to run in an ambush.

When night came they went ashore at a pleasant-looking spot and pitched their camp.

As soon as darkness set in the wild beasts of the forest began to make themselves heard.

The blacks promptly built a number of fires to keep them away.

The two tents were utilized by the six who constituted the party of whites.

The air was very warm and close, and the ceaseless hum of the insects made it almost impossible for Van to sleep during the first part of the night.

As he was to stand watch with Jack Howard the last four hours of the night, it behooved him to catch as much sleep as he could.

It was past midnight when he fell into a doze.

He was just dropping off into a sound slumber when he was awakened by the shrill cry of a female in the near vicinity.

Quick as a flash, he sprang to his feet and listened.

"Help – help! Oh, save me!"

Again the cry was repeated.

In the twinkling of an eye the whole camp was aroused.

Seizing their rifles, Van and Jack Howard sprang through the dense undergrowth in the direction the cries came from.

It was tedious work forcing their way through the thorns and dank weeds, but they accomplished it in short order.

As they emerged into an opening about two hundred yards from their camp they beheld a truly startling scene.

A young and beautiful girl was struggling in the midst of four men, who had seized her and were making efforts to stifle her cries.

Both Van and Jack were astonished beyond measure when they beheld the fair creature, who was as white and as civilized in appearance as they were, in those wild parts.

But neither lacked in coolness, and the next instant their rifles were leveled at the men, while the voice of Jack Howard rang out:

"Hands up, you cowards! Unhand that lady at once, or you die!"

Had a bombshell exploded in their midst the four villains could not have been more astonished.

With one accord they let go their hold upon their captive and turned their startled gaze upon the intruders.

As they did so, Van gave a low cry of astonishment.

One of the men was no other than Doc Clancy!

As his eyes rested upon the villain our hero forgot everything else, and, with a single bound, sprang forward and seized Clancy by the throat.

"I have got you at last, you murderous scoundrel!" he cried. "Down on your knees, or I will choke the life from you."

Again was Van Vincent too rash.

With a muttered oath Doc Clancy tore himself from the infuriated boy's clutch and struck him a fearful blow between the eyes.

Jack Howard was unable, at that moment, to render Van any assistance, as he had caught the girl in his arms to keep her from falling to the ground.

By the time he had gently deposited her upon the ground the four scoundrels were lost in the mazes of the forest, and Van was struggling to his feet in a dazed manner.

The whole thing took place in less than a minute, and by the time the mate and the rest of those belonging to the camp reached the scene, it was all over.

The mate and Prof. Drearland conducted Van back to camp, followed by Jack, who carried the unconscious girl in his arms.

They had scarcely reached it when they heard the hurried splashing of oars, which told them that Doc Clancy and his crowd had taken to their boat and were proceeding up the river.

By the aid of a little brandy Jack Howard managed to bring his fair charge out of her faint, and when her eyes rested upon the kindly faces about her a sigh of relief left the girl's lips.

She explained how she came to be in the clutches of the rascally men in a very few words.

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