

UNDER AN AFRICAN SUN

BY GEORGE MANVILLE FENN.

CHAPTER VI.

Tom Digby's right hand clenched, and as Helen clung to his left, she felt his nerves and muscles quiver with rage. A curious sensation of faintness came over her, and she struggled to be firm, as she told herself that she might prevent some terrible encounter.

But there was nothing of the kind, for Ramon came forward eagerly. "Ah, there you are!" he exclaimed. "Had a pleasant day?—Why were the others?"

"Did you not hear them?" said Digby roughly. "No—Oh yes; I heard Senor Redgrave call. I missed them as I came through the trees. What a delightful evening! I passed three years in London, Mr. Digby; but I never saw such an evening as this." He chatted away, as he stepped to the other side of the mule, keeping on with out waiting for the other's reply. "You have had a splendid day, but very hot down by the town. You have felt it cold up the mountain, Mr. Digby?"

"Yes, very," said Digby shortly; and he felt Helen press his hand gently, as if she were imploring him not to be angry. "But you could not have had a clearer day for the view.—Did you feel the cold much, Miss Helen?"

"No—no," she said quietly. "I don't think it was very cold."

"Generally is,—I beg pardon, Mr Digby! Has a cigar?"

"If I refuse it, he'll take it for a declaration of war, and I don't want to fight.—Why should I?—poor wretch!"

"There you are," said Ramon, coming round by the back of the mule with his case open. "The smaller are the best."

"Thanks," said Digby, taking one. "Let me give you a light."

A match was struck, and by its light Digby caught a glimpse of the Spaniard's face, which was as calm and untroubled as could be.

Then they went on, and retook their places on either side of the mule.

"I've been very busy too," continued Ramon. "Tired; but was curious to hear how you had got on; and yet half afraid that the crater had given way and swallowed you all up."

Digby felt tongue tied; but Ramon chattered away.

"I wonder whether Senor Redgrave will let me throw myself upon his hospitality this evening? I called on my way up, and found that you had not returned. I left some fruit; and there was a fragrant dinner from the kitchen window that was maddening to a hungry man.—Ah! here we are." For they had come up to Redgrave and Fraser, who were standing beside the track.

"You, Ramon?" said Redgrave rather sternly.

"Yes, my dear sir. I thought I would go and meet them; but I missed you.—My dear Redgrave, I want you to give me a bit of dinner to-night."

"Certainly," replied Redgrave—and he told a polite lie: "I shall be very happy."

For the rest of the way Ramon did nearly all the talking; and during the evening his conversation was fluent and highly interesting as he engaged Fraser in conversation about the antiquities of the place: smoking cigars and sipping his chocolate in the most untroubled way.

"You are making quite a collection of our minerals, I hear," he said in the course of the conversation.

"Yes, I have a good many."

"Of course you examined the head of the barranco on the west side of the mountain?"

"No; we have not been there yet."

"Not been! Why, my dear sir, that is the most interesting place of the whole. You should go there.—By the way, Redgrave, I suppose the nearest way would be right across my plantation?"

"Decidedly," said Redgrave, who seemed pleased by his visitor's urbanity.

"Yes," said Ramon thoughtfully; "that is certainly the best way. There is an interesting mummy cave there, too, about half-way along; but you will certainly be delighted with the head of the barranco.—There; I must say good-night. Going now, gentlemen?"

"Yes," said Fraser, rising. "It is time we were back."

Digby rose reluctantly; but it was time they left; so the customary *adios* were said, Ramon making a point of going first, so that Digby had an opportunity to raise Helen's trembling hand to his lips. "Good-night—my darling," he whispered. "I shall tell Mr. Redgrave all."

"Heaven protect him!" muttered the girl devoutly; and she stood there at the door listening till her father returned; and then they lingered, each slightly uneasy, and ashamed to give their fears words, and being content to listen to the voices of the guests, as they came clearly up through the still night air.

Redgrave felt disposed to speak to his child before retiring for the night, but remained silent.

"Marriages are made in Heaven," he said to himself. "I feel helpless; and perhaps Nelly herself may find the way out of the difficulty, and, somehow, I begin to like young Digby."

The three guests of the villa went slowly down the track toward the little town, with Ramon chatting pleasantly about the island.

"I daresay you Englishmen are disappointed at the absence of sport," he said. "Very different from Norfolk, where I went on a visit when I was in England. Here we have partridges and rabbits—that is all."

"We find plenty to amuse us," said Fraser quietly.

"Oh yes; I have seen that. Why, you will have a boat-load of specimens.—But don't forget the head of the barranco beyond my place. It will repay a visit; and if I can assist you with guides or men, pray command me.—Good-night."

"Well, Tom," said Fraser, in a sad voice as soon as they were alone, "what next?"

They walked on in silence for some time, and then Fraser said sadly: "A boyish fancy.—Come, be a man. This must go no further, Tom. Let us pack up and go away."

Digby shook his head. "I am sure it would be better for all."

Digby drew a long breath, full of exaltation, for the pressure of Helen's little fingers seemed to cling to his hand.

"Do you not see," continued Fraser, "that you are intervening between two people whom Fate has evidently marked out for husband and wife?"

"Fate be hanged! What has Fate got to do with it?"

"Do you not see that you are making a powerful enemy of Ramon, who has the father at his mercy?"

"I'll pitch Ramon down one of the barrancos, if he doesn't mind what he is about," cried Digby warmly.

"Mind he does not pitch you down, Tom. But—about Helen Redgrave?"

"Well, what about her? I know what my dear old moralist is about to say: Marriage is a serious thing—I have my friends to study—I ought not to be rash—I ought to wait—I ought to write home."

"Yes; I should have said something of the kind, and also warned you to flee from danger—and temptation."

"Then here we are at the roost, and I am going to get on my perch at once, and my dear old model of wisdom; but before I do so, here are my answers to your warnings: I am well off; I am my own master; and I have neither father nor mother to consult. Greatest and most cogent answer of all—Helen."

Half an hour after, setting at defiance the insect plagues of the island, Tom Digby was sleeping peacefully and dreaming of his sweet young mistress; while Fraser was seated in his own room, with his arms folded, gazing out through the open window, with the darkness visible and mental ahead.

"He loves her, and—Yes," he added, after a painful sigh, "what wonder, poor boy—she loves him in return. Oh! I must have been mad—I must be mad.—And that man Ramon? Yes; he smiled and showed his white teeth. I would not trust him for a moment. The calm was too false and treacherous. If I could only get the poor boy away!"

CHAPTER VII.

A week of unalloyed happiness passed during which time every evening was spent at the villa. Digby grew more joyous; the saddened look was rapidly passing away from Helen's face, and that of her father grew puzzled, while Fraser's seemed more sombre and sad.

Ramon had fetched them to his place again and again, and had also begged leave to accompany them in two of their expeditions, finding horses and mules, and proving himself a polished and agreeable guide, taking them to various points, whose marvels made Fraser forget his own trouble in the excitement of discoveries dear to a naturalist's heart; while, after these journeys, Ramon always insisted upon the travellers accepting his hospitality.

They had just finished dinner, and Ramon had left them for a time, one of his servants having called him away, a summons which, after many apologies, he had obeyed, leaving the friends together, when, pushing the jug of excellent French claret towards his companion, Digby, who was slightly flushed, exclaimed: "Taste that, my boy, and confess that our host is a charming fellow and a polished gentleman."

"Yes, I confess to those," said Fraser gravely; and just then Ramon reappeared at the door, bearing a fresh box of cigars, which he handed to his guests and resumed his seat.

"One of the evils of possessing plantations," he said. "Your men are always coming with the news of some disaster."

"Nothing serious, I hope?" said Digby.

"No, no—a mere nothing—kind of blight appearing.—But, by the way, you two have never visited the head of that barranco yet. Don't forget it. When will you go?"

"When Fraser's ready.—What do you say to to-morrow?"

This was agreed to, and Digby rose as if to leave.

"There," said Ramon: "I will not keep you fidgeting to go; only leave friend Fraser to smoke another cigar."

"Really, I don't think"—began Digby, rather petulantly.

"Do not be angry, dear friend," said Ramon kindly. "I mean no harm. Apologise for me to my dear friend Redgrave.—You will stay, will you not, Fraser?"

"No; I will go with him," said the latter hastily. Then, in a hurried confused manner, as if he were mastering himself, "No," he added, "I will stay, and have a quiet smoke and chat with you about the head of the barranco and what we are likely to find."

"Poor boy!" said Ramon, with a gentle smile when Digby had gone. "Well, he has won a charming girl. You and I, Mr. Fraser, are getting old enough to put these things behind."

"Yes," said Fraser gravely; and he sat talking to his host till quite late.

According to what had grown into a custom, Digby found Helen and her father by the gate which commanded the steep track, and another delightful evening, all too short, was spent. Music, talk of England, the life there, all had their turn, and then came the time to go, Helen walking beneath the great mellow stars down with her visitor to the gate, for the last good-night—that farewell which takes so many times to say, and was here prolonged till Redgrave's voice was heard.

"Coming, papa," cried the girl, as she clung to Digby's hand. "Then you go," she whispered, "to the barranco to-morrow!"

"Yes; in good time."

"I shall see you at night?"

"Of course."

"And you will take care. I have heard that some of these places are very dangerous."

"Take care? Yes; for your sake," he whispered. "Once more, good night."

She cast away the foolish dread directly, and with good cause, for Digby reached the barranco about the same time as Fraser returned from his late stay with Ramon; and after a short chat over their morrow's plans, they both went to bed.

The sun was streaming into Digby's room when he awoke the next morning with the sensation upon him that it was very late; and on springing out of bed it was to find a piece of note paper lying on his dressing-table, on which was written:

"You were sleeping so soundly I would not disturb you. I have gone on. Eat your breakfast, and follow at your leisure."

Digby dressed under a feeling of annoyance at his friend's desertion. He did not particularly want to join in the trip, for he had seen enough of the island, and would rather have gone up to Redgrave's, but Fraser's start alone made him immediately feel an intense longing to be off; and consequently he quite upset his Spanish landlady by his hurried and scanty meal.

"Too bad of Horace," he grumbled to himself as he set off up the mountain track to where it diverged, and the path led to Ramon's plantations, with the house away to the left in a beautiful nook which commanded a view of the distant islands.

For a moment he hesitated as to whether he should walk down to Ramon's for a chat before starting; and he hesitated again after going a few yards; but finally he stepped out boldly with the hot sun pouring down; and as he went on, a careworn face was slowly raised from out of a clump of semi-tropical foliage, and Fraser stood well concealed, watching him till he passed out of sight. Then, after a cautious look round he sank back into his place of concealment, and the birds that had flitted away returned, the stillness around being unbroken, save when the low deep murmur of the surf arose from far below.

"Too bad of old Horace," said Digby, as he strode along, past Ramon's plantations, till the wild country began; and recognising various places he had passed before, the young explorer soon reached the spot where the track leading to the barranco commenced—a path growing fainter and fainter, and more obliterated by the abundant growth, till it gradually became a mere shelf on the mountain side. The dense tangle at first sloped down to his left, and up to his right; but grew more and more precipitous, till there was an almost perpendicular wall of volcanic rock, out of which the shrubby growth and ferns spread out, and formed a shadowy arch, which screened him from the sun; while a foot away on his left there was a profound drop, the rock again going perpendicularly down, and in places the shelf along which he passed quite overhung the verdant gorge.

And so it continued for quite a couple of hours, during which he went on along the shelf, whose abundant growth hid the danger of the way; for it was only at times that he obtained a glimpse of the depths below, where some avalanche of stones had crashed down from above and swept the trees away.

"He's right: it is a glorious walk," cried Digby enthusiastically; "only, it seems so stupid to be enjoying it all alone."

For another hour he went on, still wondering that he had seen no traces left by his friend, but soon forgetting this in the fresh glories of the overshadowed path, and the lovely glints of sunshine in the zigzagging tunnel of ferns and creepers, which literally seemed to flow down in cascades of growing leafage from the wall on his right.

"Nature must have made this path," he said to himself; "and it can only be seldom trod. Leads to nowhere, of course, and—Hillo! here's the end." For, at a sudden turn, after passing an angle of the rock, he found himself face to face with a huge mass of stone, which had evidently lately slipped from a few feet above the track, and completely blocked the way.

"That's awkward," he said thoughtfully. "Too steep to get over.—Ha! that's it." He smiled as he saw that to the left of the large block the green growth had been trampled down, the shelf being wide enough for any one to pass round, though the gorge seemed there to be almost dark, so filled up was it with the tops of the trees which bristled from its side.

"The old boy has been round here for one, this morning. First time I've seen his marks.—My word, he has been chipping away here," he added, as he looked at the broken fragments of stone in the newly made curve of the path.

Without a moment's hesitation he stepped down, then took another step, for the way descended apparently, to rise again beyond the block. Then another step on to some fatig like brushwood laid across to form a level way; and as he did so, he uttered a wild cry, and snatched at the rocky side to save himself. Vain effort, for everything had given way beneath him, and he dropped headlong, to fall after what seemed to be a terrible descent, heavily far below.

He was conscious of an agonising sensation of pain, then of a stifling dust, of a sickening stupefying dizziness, and then all was darkness.

How long he lay there stunned he could not tell; but he seemed to struggle into wakefulness out of a terrible feverish dream, to find that all was darkness and mental confusion. What it all meant was a mystery; for his head was thick and heavy, and memory refused to give him back the recollection of his walk and sudden fall.

But he realised at last that he was awake, and that he was lying upon what seemed to be fragments of sticks; and as he groped about, he touched something which set him wondering for the moment, before he could grasp what it was he held. Then he uttered a cry of horror and recoiled, for his finger and thumb had passed into two bony orbits, and he knew that the object he had grasped was a human skull!

CHAPTER VIII.

As Digby cast down the grisly relic of mortality, he clapped his hands to his throbbing brow, and shrank farther away, feeling as if his reason was tottering, and for a time the mastery of his sensation passed away quickly as it had come, and he stamped one of his feet with rage.

He shrank away, for his act had raised a cloud of pungent choking dust, which horrified him again. But this only served to make him recover his mental balance; and as he stood there in the utter darkness, he seemed to see once more the side of that other ravine they had skirted weeks back, when he had drawn Fraser's attention to the climbing figure which they had afterwards encountered as he crept up with his basket.

"I must have fallen, then, into one of the ancient mummy caves," he said, trying

to speak aloud and coolly, though his words came for the moment hurriedly and sounded excited and strange.

He paused again, and wiped the dank perspiration from his brow. "There," he said; "I'm better now; so—What's this?"

"—Yes, it must be: I'm bleeding." He felt the back of his head, and winced, for it was cut badly, and a tiny warm stream was trickling down his neck.

"That's soon doctored," he muttered as he folded and bound a handkerchief about his brow. "Now then: how far have I fallen, and how am I to get out?"

He began to look about cautiously, looking up the while in search of the opening through which he had come; but for some minutes he looked in vain. At last, though, he saw a dim light far above him, not the sky or the opening through which he had fallen, but a faintly reflected gleam, which feebly showed something black above his head; and at last he reached the conclusion that the opening down which he had dropped was not straight, but sloped to and fro in rough zigzags.

"How horrible!" he muttered. "Yet what a blessing!" he added. "If the fall had been sheer, I must have been killed."

By cautious progression he at last found the side, but not until he had gone in two other directions, which seemed to lead him farther into the bowels of the mountain.

This discovery did not seem to help him, for, as he passed his hands over the rough vesicular lava, which was in places as sharp as when it had cooled down after some eruption hundreds of years before, he found that it seemed to curve over like a dome above his head; and though he followed it for some distance he could find no place where there was the faintest possibility of his climbing up to the day.

"Ahoy! Fraser! Fraser!" he shouted aloud and then paused aghast, for his voice seemed to pass echoing hollowly away, giving him an idea of the vastness of the place in which he was confined.

And now for a few moments his former sensation of horror attacked him, as he felt that he might possibly never be able to extricate himself from the trap into which he had fallen, and that he might go on wandering amongst the horrors by which he was surrounded until he died of exhaustion—mad.

Again he mastered his wandering mind, and spoke aloud in a reassuring tone. "I am not surrounded by horrors," he said calmly. "That which is here ought to alarm no man of well-balanced intellect. It is known that I have come this way, by the people at the inn—No; I did not tell them. But Fraser knew I was coming, and he will search for me. Ramon knew I was coming here, and I have nothing to do but sit and wait till I hear voices; and then a shout will do the rest. Horace cannot be long."

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated after a pause, suppose the poor fellow should tread upon the broken place and fall!—No fear. It was covered when I came along. It is all open now."

He leaned against the side of the cave, thinking of his misfortune, and listening for step or voice to break the terrible silence around him; but all was perfectly still; and think how he would, he could not keep back an occasional shudder at the idea of passing a night where he was.

"Couldn't be darker than day," he said with a laugh to restore his courage; and then he began to think about Helen, a bright subject, which lasted him for long enough, till the increasing pain and stiffness of his injuries turned the current of his thoughts to his rival; and then like a flash, a suspicion came to him: "What did Horace say?—The man was treacherous and false! Great heaven, have I fallen into his trap?"

He tried to argue the thought away; but the idea was only strengthened. Ramon had been so anxious for him to come there—for both of them. The path had evidently been altered, by accident or design. Was it design, and the contriver's idea to rid himself of two men he detested at one stroke?—No; the thought was too horrible, and he would not harbour it.

Vain effort: it grew the stronger; and as the time sped on, and the hurt produced a feverish sensation of half-delirium, Digby found himself fully believing that Ramon had contrived this pitfall; that there was no escape; and that, freed from his presence, the treacherous Spaniard would renew his advances to Helen.

The agony increased, and with the mental suffering came a wild feverish horror which grew upon him till his brain throbbled; a sense of confusion, which he could not overcome, increased; and at last—long after he had fallen—he felt that he could bear no more, and all was blank.

TO BE CONTINUED.

About Women.

"A woman is worse with an imputed blame than a man with a convicted fault."

No woman, even the most intellectual, believes herself to be decidedly homely.

Man can better philosophize on the human heart, but woman can read it better.

—Rosseau.

We are apt to be kinder to the brutes that love us than to the women that love us.

—George Eliot.

Most of their faults women owe to us, whilst we are indebted to them for most of our better qualities.—Lemole.

A woman frequently resists the love she feels, but cannot resist the love she inspires.

—Madame de Staël.

It is universal rule, which, as far as I know, has no exception, that great men always resemble their mothers, who impress their mental and physical mark upon their sons.—Michelet.

In everything that women write there will be thousands of faults against grammar; but also to a certainty, always a charm never to be found in the letters of man.—Madame de Maintenon.

Why the Teeth Chatter.

It is through the skin, and only through the skin, that we receive sensations of temperature. The chattering of the teeth from the feeling of cold is caused by what is termed reflex action of the muscles of the jaw.

When an impression is made on the sensitive surface of the skin it is conveyed by an extensor nerve to the spinal cord, and is there reflected back on the muscles by a corresponding motor nerve, the action being involuntary, like that of any other mechanism. Chattering of the teeth, as well as shivering and sneezing, is nature's effort to restore the circulation of the blood which has accumulated in the larger veins near the heart.—[New York Telegram.

The Earth's Fiery Ordeal.

There are in the Scriptures and in the writings of most of the ancient races terrible prophecies of a fiery ordeal through which the earth and its people must some day pass. We wonder with more or less curiosity if such a fate be actually in reserve for our planet, and we interrogate science if, perchance, we may discover any evidence of such a possibility.

Science has no direct information to give us, but the astronomer exhibits a circle of the heavens filled with what he believes are the ponderous fragments of an enormous planet, which has been shattered by some violent convulsion. The geologist shows us vast continental areas of dry land which have, as he believes, once been deep down under the sea, and the historian presents us with traditions of lands and people that have been swallowed up in the abysses of the ocean. There are stories of stars that have flamed into brilliance and finally disappeared as if they had been consumed in a conflagration, while the earthquakes and volcanic eruptions which shake our planet announce the actual survival of forces and agencies that make possible the most terrible catastrophes, and seem to suggest for the future disturbances as profound and formidable as any that ever occurred in any past age.

It is in this connection that we are led to consider some recent utterances on the subject of the enormous volume of inflammable gas stored up in the crust of the earth and recently brought into use for the most important economical purposes. There is an area of country in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio and perhaps other States, embracing many thousand square miles, which is underlaid with the most extraordinary and extensive stores of coal oil and coal gas. In the past twenty-five years oil has been taken out to the extent of millions on millions of barrels, while gas is escaping at the rate, as it has been recently estimated, of 1,000,000,000 cubic feet each day. The flow of both oil and gas is so great that the belief is warranted that the supplies, notwithstanding the extraordinary daily depletion, are sufficient to last for centuries.

Beyond the existence of this gas and oil and of the coal beds, which also underlie the greater portion of the United States, we know actually nothing of subterranean conditions; but if we can assume the presence at great depths in the earth, of fire or of sufficient heat-making agencies to operate on the coal beds we may well imagine that by the action of such heat the petroleum is distilled from the coal and the gas is, at the same time, liberated, but both remain stored up in cavities or in the pores of the earth until extracted by the borings. As long as these accumulations of gas and oil remain sealed up in the depth of the earth, away from actual fire, there is no risk of a conflagration. The entire possibility of such danger is dependent upon the existence of fire and on its contact, under favorable conditions, with these inflammable compounds.

As the oil and gas are drawn out water and air will find their way into the cavities thus vacated, and the geologists have forecasted a possible period when by some such operation all the water now appearing upon the surface of the land will sink into the cavities of the earth. This necessary fluid will then only be attainable by drawing it from wells of extraordinary depth. It is even held that the moon is one of these dry planets, being destitute of surface water, which has sunk into the dry and honey-combed interior of that body. This water, coming in contact with the interior fires of the moon, produced terrific internal throes and volcanic eruptions which continued to wreck the moon until its fires were extinguished, and it became, as it is now believed to be, a dead, dry planet.

Coming back to our own prospects for a conflagration, it would be necessary for the gas in the earth to be sufficiently mixed with oxygen to make it inflammable. This could occur from the air which is supposed to enter the cavities of the earth to take the place of the escaped gas, or oxygen could be supplied by the decomposition of the water into its constituent elements through the action of heat. There is no certainty that the heart of the earth is a mass of fire, although it is so held to be by some of the theorists; but it would be easy enough to secure fire there by electrical or chemical action, or both. A powerful current of terrestrial electricity trying to pass through a formation of poor conducting power would easily burst into flame, or water poured upon a bed of quick lime would produce a like result.

Given fire in the body of the earth, so situated as to be able to distil oil and gas from bituminous coal, and we have conditions which might under favorable circumstances produce titanic intraterrestrial explosions, ripping open half a continent and setting fire to vast lakes of petroleum, which would be thus uncovered, while the escaping gas bursting into flame would wrap in a broad of conflagration enormous areas of sea and land. These speculations do not pass beyond the bounds of possibility. They need not alarm anyone unduly, but they are attracting attention. If it will benefit anybody to laugh at them then laugh, but ridicule is not safety. Full investigation would be interesting and might be useful, would be a catastrophe need not be confined to this continent. Similar conditions exist in China, where, some two centuries ago, such an explosion, it is claimed, actually occurred. The enormous deposits of oil and gas in Russia on the shores of the Caspian Sea also present like destructive facilities. Thus it is evident that if a cataclysmal planetary conflagration were in question there would be no difficulty in securing materials.

A Handsome Gift.

Herr Wolf, the violinist, recently told how he obtained the instrument on which he plays. "It was a present from the Duke of Cambronne. I was introduced to the Duke at his house in Paris one evening, and was asked to play. I told the Duke that, unfortunately, I had not my instrument with me. 'Never mind,' he replied, 'choose one of mine.' The Duke having a remarkably fine collection. I chose what I thought to be one of the best instruments and played several pieces. When I had finished the Duke rose and said, 'Monsieur Wolf, allow me to present you with the instrument on which you have played.' The Duke, I afterward learned, valued the instrument at 2,000 guineas, but I, added M. Wolf, lovingly handling the violin, 'value it almost as much as my life. It has the famous Cremona varnish, although its maker is unknown.'"