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The Dog Star

BY
Coralie Stanton
AND
Heath Hosken.

"You are the maassa who came up with Maassa Boone?" persisted Sandy after a few more moments' converse with the Men of Onga.

"Of course I am, you fool," said Lorton impatiently. "Didn't you come up with me yourself?"

"Yes, maassa—yes. Only the men want to know. They have followed us."

"What have they followed us for?" asked Lorton.

"They want to know all about you. They want to know whether you are staying on here."

"Yes, I am; for a few days, at any rate."

"For tonight, maassa?"

"Certainly for tonight. What is the matter with these men? What do they want?"

"They want to greet you, maassa—only to greet you."

"I see. Tell them I am very much obliged."

Sandy spoke to the ten men, who immediately executed another procession accompanied by fearful cries.

"They're so pleased, maassa," said Sandy. "They want to know which is your hut—where you sleep; you savvy?"

Lorton pointed out his tent, which had been erected at a little distance from the hut of Napier and Peter, and away from the kitchen and the store huts.

The Men of Onga gave vent to another extraordinary cry when it was pointed out to them.

"They're glad to know," said Sandy in explanation. "They give greeting to great white man. They pray the good spirits to watch over his hut."

"Thank them, please," said Lorton. "And ask them how they know that we were here?"

"They have news from Onga," Sandy replied. "They find that white man lose his way."

"Yes, that is true enough," said Lorton.

At that moment the ten men suddenly sprang about a foot into the air, came down on their toes, turned round, and, without the least warning, suddenly dashed away into the forest.

Peter and Lorton shook their heads and went back to their respective huts. But before very long they were called out again by a repetition of the insane noise of a little while ago.

They found the Men of Onga ranged up in front of Lorton's tent, and on the earth they had placed some flat earthenware pans containing a kind of corn, some water, some mud, and some dry earth. They were sitting on their haunches, chanting their weird kind of dirge-like melody. On perceiving Lorton they rose to their feet and executed a few steps of a wild dance.

Lorton, who was feeling very ill, glanced indifferently at the curious sight and would have gone back into his tent. But Peter called to him.

"I say, they have evidently brought gifts. They think you did a very big gun, indeed. This is Moriarty's influence. You'd better say something to them. It's right in front of your tent; there's no mistake about it."

Lorton forced himself to make some sign of recognition. As he could not converse with the strange, forbidding-looking men, he smiled and bowed and spread out his arms.

The Men of Onga forthwith gave vent to their weird, mad cries. And from the forest they were echoed in an uncanny manner by the rest of the natives.

"I say, how queer that sounds," said Peter. "Not a bit nice, does it? What an extraordinary lot they are!"

The Men of Onga at that moment executed another extraordinary manœuvre. They jumped again into the air; then dived past the earthenware vessels, touched each with a forefinger, and then, with extraordinary suddenness dashed back into the forest again.

"Well, I'm hanged," exclaimed Peter. "They are a weird crowd. They evidently look upon you as something quite apart from the ordinary rank of humanity. Lorton, I should certainly call that a kind of yours and find out what it all means."

Sandy was summoned accordingly. He came very slowly, and gave the earthenware vessels a very wide berth indeed.

"He doesn't think he's fit to go near them, evidently," suggested Peter. "Ask him what they wanted."

"Men of Onga show maassa that maassa great man," explained Sandy. "I say, were they supposed to show us the way to Pataia?" asked Lorton.

"Yes, yes, maassa; Men of Onga show maassa anywhere."

"And where have they gone now?"

"Gone away. Maassa Boone had instructions. Maassa Boone dead. Men of Onga go away."

"I see. Oh, all right. I don't particularly want to see them again," said Lorton carelessly.

A little while afterwards Napier returned from the excavations. The others told him what had happened. He said that he had met no men answering to the description in the forest; in fact, he had met nobody at all. They must have gone away by another track. He thought the whole occurrence queer, but then, they could never understand a thousandth part of what went on among the natives. Their lives were as different from the lives of the white men as were those of the strange birds that flew about in the forests and the monkeys that swung themselves in the trees.

Towards evening Lorton grew rapidly worse. His temperature rose; he began to wander, and the other two put him to bed in his tent.

As they ate their evening meal they noticed that a storm was brewing. They set for a while outside their

huts. Presently the storm came nearer. The lightning clove the heavens, the thunder muttered, still in the distance, but ever louder and louder.

"It's going to be a bad 'un," said Peter. "He shivered. 'Good Lord, how cold it strikes!'"

"Yes, I'm afraid we're going to get it," replied Napier.

They sat on a little while longer. The storm became furious. The forks of the lightning flashed were blinding, the air as if the whole of the forest trees were coming tumbling to the earth, stricken down by the storm wind, bare of their branches, stripped to their bark.

"The storm became furious. The forks of the lightning flashed were blinding, the air as if the whole of the forest trees were coming tumbling to the earth, stricken down by the storm wind, bare of their branches, stripped to their bark."

"He can have my hut," said Napier. "Mine is the more sheltered," put in Peter. "We must think of that."

"Then you must have mine."

"No, I couldn't. I suppose it's rot, but I couldn't sleep where that poor chap died. I'll be all right in Lorton's tent. I'm perfectly fit now, and I don't mind storms in the least. But he's jolly seedy, and, besides, it's a good way off, if he should want anything. I shouldn't feel a bit easy in my mind; really, if he is not moved into my hut."

"All right," said Napier, but his voice was a little doubtful. "Are you sure you won't have mine?"

"No, thanks, really. I shall be quite all right. Let's get him changed before the rain comes."

They went outside and across the clearing, and every moment they had to hide their faces from a blinding flash. The thunder was like all the artillery of the world at practice. The sky, between the electric discharges, was so black that they couldn't see their hands before their faces. The air was hot and quivering, like some living creature in mortal pain.

"We're in for it, no doubt about that," said Peter. "The rain will be down in a moment. Let's hurry."

They woke Lorton rather abruptly. He was only half-conscious, and made so resistance to their suggestion that he should change his quarters for the night. His head and hands were burning; he was shivering violently; there was every sign that he was in for a sharp attack of fever.

They got him into Peter's hut just as the first huge raindrops fell that included the deluge of a tropical storm. They administered the usual remedies to him, settled him comfortably, and Napier went to call their own boy, Bobby, and gave him instructions to watch all night, in case Maassa Boone needed him, or the storm did any damage to the hut.

The last thing before they turned in they had a look at Lorton. To their surprise, he seemed to be sleeping peacefully enough. The storm was still raging violently.

Peter persisted in sleeping in Lorton's tent, although Napier tried again to dissuade him. It was about eleven o'clock when they bade each other good-night. Peter said he was fearfully sleepy, and he was sure that no storm could keep him awake that night.

Lorton heard extraordinary sounds in his dreams. They sounded like voices, very fierce, but muffled, and then there was a great shuffling of feet, and then a cry. Then all was still.

He was in a half-waking, half-dreaming state. He turned over restlessly, and dozed off again. The thunder was still growling in the distance, as the storm rolled away.

He awoke again, conscious of a fearful chill. The air was icy. He became vaguely conscious that the door of the hut was open, and a faint grey light was stealing in.

He felt that he did not know where he was; then he sat up, peering vaguely around him, and remembered that someone had come and hauled him out of his tent and taken him somewhere else.

He felt dreadfully weak, and was just about to fall back on his pillows when he was seized with an indescribable feeling that something had happened.

The sound that he had heard in his dream came back to him vividly—the voices, the shuffling of feet, the cry—the silence.

He struggled up. He did not know why, but he had to. For no earthly consideration would he have stayed in that bed.

He had to cling to the bedpost, and then to a piece of furniture, and then to the wall. His knees trembled under him; his head swam; there was a vague blur before his eyes.

It seemed hours before he reached the door of the hut. It was open.

At first Lorton could see nothing else. He had to grasp the side of the hut door with the frenzied grip of a drowning man. And the strange and intangible feeling—the feeling of horror, of calamity—grew upon him with every moment.

He reeled out into the clearing. Surely there was something black on the earth that had been ploughed up into deep ruts and furrows by the rain of the night. Surely there was something lying there. If he could only reach it. He went forward, away from side to side, with his arms outstretched to balance himself. It seemed as if he walked for hours before he reached the object he had seen.

It was a man—one of the natives. He lay stretched on his back, with his arms opened wide.

Lorton stooped and touched him. He was cold and stiff.

Then a sudden strength was instilled into Lorton's shaking limbs by some mysterious agency. The sense of calamity grew to panic. He turned and ran, stumbling blindly at every step, to the tent that had been pitched for him, and where he now remembered Peter Boone had said he would sleep that night.

He dashed the flap open and went in. The bed was empty; the clothes had been torn away. There were signs of a desperate struggle on the mud floor.

Lorton stumbled out and rushed across to Napier's hut. The door of that was open, too. Just inside, Napier lay across the threshold in his pyjamas. At first Lorton thought he was dead, too. There was blood on his face.

(Continued on Page 16.)



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(Continued from Page 14.)

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