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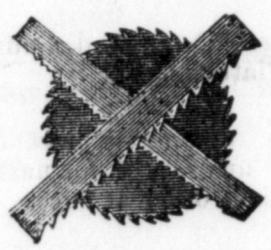
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BY

W. CLARKE RUSSELL.

(Condensed for THE REVIEW.)

CHAPTER XXVII.—Continued
I got up saying, "I'll just take another walk through those trees, Miss Grant. I want to satisfy myself that there is not a second bell hidden somewhere in the green thickness. It would be insupportable, you know, to be awakened by a new kind of chiming-to-night."

"Why should you imagine there is a second bell?" she asked, with her eyes seeming to enlarge to the very thought of it.

"I don't imagine there is," said I, "but no harm can follow another look around; besides," I added, smiling, "I might chance upon the fellow who has troubled us for the past two nights, so that even should we be unable to hang him before sundown we might be able to seize him up to one of those trees as Broadwater seized the half-blood to the foremast, and go to our rest without apprehension of being corked up."

I laughed out to let her suppose that I talked for talk's sake only, and fetching my pistols made for the forest, taking the road into it past the tree in which I had seen the real or imagined face, waving my hand to her as I strode into the shadow.

The direction I was unconsciously following brought me, with some painful thrusting of my legs—for in places the tangle was as hard and stubborn as a fence—to the spot where the gallows-looking frame from which I had unhooked the bell stood. It was scarce within view of me when I caught sight of a large hat placed exactly over the hook from which the bell had depended. I looked and looked, greatly amazed, and let me frankly own, with a mind for some minutes not a little disordered by consternation. I was of course as sure as that I lived that no hat was upon the frame when I had unhooked the bell. I stared nervously around me, mechanically drawing a pistol from my pocket and looking first into one twilight avenue and then into another, then gazing narrowly at the herbage round about, afterward staring overhead, listening meanwhile intently. I approached the hat by a step, and inspected it. It was such a piece of headgear as might have been washed up by the sea. I raised my hand and pulled it down, but instantly dropped it, for it was horribly clammy and cold, and made you think, from the sensation you got from it, of groping in the dark and stroking down a dead man's face.

It was apparently a felt hat that had once been black, but it was now green and bronzed with time and wet. It was old enough indeed both in fashion and aspect to have belonged to one of the people who had dug out and used the underground chambers. But who or what since the morning had placed it upon the bell-frame? It gave me a kind of shivering feeling. I can tell you, to think that there might be human eyes watching me out of some of those green dyes of shadow round about, and as I stood there I never knew from instant to instant but that the flame of a fire-arm might leap from behind a tree, or an arrow sling past my ear.

The sight of this hat convinced me that I was not mistaken in supposing the wild, grotesque face I had caught a glimpse of to be that of a man. Miss Grant was right. There must be one or more human creatures in hiding here. The bell could not ring itself; the hat had been brought from a distance—I must certainly have seen it when I first explored this place, and stood looking from the scaffold to the grass far as my sight could follow it; I say, the old hat had been brought here and placed upon the frame, and if this did not signify human agency, then it was not to be accounted for but by supposing the devil himself to be at large upon the island. I was startled, astonished, alarmed, as I believe any man would have been; but I was resolved, nevertheless, not to quit the wood without a further good hunt, and so pushed on, pausing incessantly to listen and to look, to kick at some suspicious bundle of huge blades of aloe-like growth to stare into the trees, or to fight my way to some trunk looming with a yawn in it in the twilight to make one suppose it hollow. But to no purpose.

"What have you seen, Mr. Musgrave?" asked Miss Grant, as I approached her.

"Just a parrot or two," said I.

"You have been a long while watching them," said she, eyeing me so attentively that I feared she would find in my face some small signs of the astonishment and misgivings which filled my mind.

"Oh," said I, carelessly, "the forest is dark, as you know, and a sheer maze in its way, with spots where the high guinea grass leans to you tough and piercing as a crop of bayonets. I was resolved to hunt the place through and through, a thing not to be done in ten minutes. Now, Miss Grant," I went on, with a glance at my watch, "suppose we go to tea, as I must call the meal—though a real homely cup of tea just now, served up with buttered toast and a new-laid egg, with a plateful of water-cresses, I'd part with every pinch of turtle-bisquit the shells I opened this morning. Heaven bless us all, to what weak desires will marooning reduce a man!"

The night came on very glorious, with the scaring of the moon, the stars thick strewn, just stir enough of night air to send the sweet smells of the dew-washed island flowers lazily floating to us in folds of aromatic atmosphere, and a delicate seething of the surf to blunt the edge of the shrillness of the inland concert. To kill time I proposed we should go and hunt for turtles' eggs, and we went together to the creek, keeping a bright lookout for the impress of the tread of the turtle. But though we saw marks in the sand which fairly resembled the tracks we sought, they led us to nothing.

"Perhaps," said I, "the turtle doesn't lay in this month. If I could have foreseen our adventure I should have read a little in the natural history of this part of the world."

We continued our search for some time, probing at the sand, but if there were any eggs about, they were too cleverly hid for us to come at, so we stepped down to the beach, facing the moon, where there was a clean, long, white walk, and a little less hard than a ship's deck, and we paced around for a long while. The hour came round at last when it was time we should endeavor to take some rest. Miss Grant reluctantly walked by my side to the entrance, looking down a little into the hatch as though her heart failed her.

"Indeed, there is nothing to fear," said I.

"Oh, but it is like being buried alive," she exclaimed, descending, nevertheless, but with a quicker breath. I lighted one of the wax candles and carried it into the inner room, where, wanting the convenience of a candlestick, I stuck it in the mouth of a bottle, earnestly looking round me to see that all was well. The skylight lay open. I asked if I should close it.

"No," she exclaimed, quickly.

"But supposing it should come on to rain in the night," said I, "an electric storm, say, with a West Indian shower pouring off the edge of it? Besides, the mosquitos will find their way in."

"I must take my chance," she exclaimed.

"If that glass were shut I should feel as if I were buried alive."

"Then good-night. May God bless you and send you refreshing sleep and sweet dreams," said I, bringing her cold white hand to my lips. "My bed will be here," I added, pointing to the threshold of her door, "so that literally nothing can enter this room without treading on my body."

She glanced at the skylight and looked at me wistfully, as though she would have me linger yet. I lifted my hat and quitted the strange chamber, carefully drawing the curtain after me.

I don't know that I should have felt nervous but for the memory of the face I had seen; but I confess I was more uneasy than I should have been willing to admit to Miss Grant, as I lay in the dim ash-tinted atmosphere of that underground department, running my eye from the grim memorial of sabre and musket on the wall to the old table over against my head, on to the short corridor going back to the square of faintness which overhung the extremity, thence to the skylight through which I could see a hundred soft and trembling stars.

However, after lying awake for a good long while, I fell into a vein of dozing, rambling thinking, the sure precursor of sleep, more like the shadows of dreams flitting before me than the presentments of waking thoughts; a sort of stupid confusion of pirates, mistily and soundlessly flitting about the chamber, with a few turtle mixed up among them, and God knows what else besides; saying that, though reason was faltering, I was sensible enough to know that I would presently be fast asleep.

I was in this condition of mind, my eyes fixed upon the skylight, though the lids were drooping fast and I was scarce conscious of what I viewed, when I saw a shadow of the hat I had met with in the forest, as it seemed to me, overhanging the open space. The posture was that of a man peering down. 'Twas unmistakable; I could not be deceived. The dark outline was clear against the stars, and it was the head of a man wearing just such a hat as I had encountered, bending over and gazing down.

I was instantly startled into broad wakefulness. Brave I should be sorry to call myself, though I think there is no man whose nose I should hesitate to pull who called me otherwise to my face; but at the sight of that hat and the motionless peering human shape revealed to a little past the shoulders, I must confess to having burst into a cold sweat. It was the being shocked perhaps out of the drowsiness into which I had sunk that made me think the thing a phantom for a minute or two. I lay still, softly sneaking my right hand to a pistol, by which time I had come to a sense of the reality of the vision; but before I could point the weapon, being resolved to fire, cost what it would, the hat vanished. Now, thought I, the fellow has been able to obtain a tolerable view of this interior and concludes I am sound asleep. His next move will be to come below!

I rose very lightly, being anxious not to disturb Miss Grant, and holding both pistols in my hands, I stepped in my stockings over the corner made by the projection of the furnace, where I crouched in the deep shadow that lay upon this part of the room, with my head lifted over the edge of the brickwork to enable me to

command the entrance. Hardly had two minutes elapsed when I spied the hat again overhanging the skylight, but it did not offer such a mark as I could hope to pot from the place I stood in; so I continued to wait and watch. I could hear no sound not the faintest crunch of a footfall upon the sand outside; but the quick breathing of the fellow was as audible as the beating of my heart in my ear, and as full a warrant as I could have asked that the thing was no ghost. The peering and meditative posture of the hat was preserved while I might have counted twenty; the shadow then disappeared. Now, thought I, will he return to the forest or will he descend? Is he alone, or is the second apparition that of a companion wearing such another hat as the first had on? Suddenly I saw the sort of film of light that came clouding a little way into the corridor out of the hatch die out, and in an instant, with the swiftness of a leap almost, the man was in the room. Softly as the footfall of a cat I got my pistol to bear upon him, but before I could pull the trigger he fell upon all fours, and the moment after I heard the clang of the bell grasped and overset. I sprung out of my hiding-place, took full aim and fired. The explosion made a thunder in the room. By the flash of the powder I saw the creature spring to the height of the ceiling, while he uttered the most piercing scream that ever burst from mortal lips. The wild cry was echoed by a shriek in Miss Grant's room. I was half crazy with rage and consternation, and flinging down the pistol I had fired, I levelled the other at the creature as he ran, dropping to the earth with one hand as he went in staggering leaps down the dark passage, and sent a second ball after him. The report was followed by another ear-splitting shriek horribly human. The curtain behind me was dashed aside, and Miss Grant stepped forth.

"What is it?" she cried.

The silver mounting of the pistol she held gleamed in her grasp as she raised her hand in addressing me.

"I have shot something," I exclaimed; "but whether man or beast, I know not. Be it what it will it has two bullets in its body. Let me have your pistol."

I took it from her and walked right to the steps that led above. There was nothing in the passage. I sprang into the open and looked around. The moonlight lay bright as day, the shadows of the trees sloping eastward as black as indigo where they rested on the sand. Within a stone's throw of me was a dark object that looked like a small tortoise at the distance when I viewed it. I approached, and found it to be the hat I had found in the forest. Miss Grant had followed me noiselessly, and I only knew she was at my side by her breathing, the sound of which was not a little startling to me, bending down as I was to examine the hat.

"Look, Mr. Musgrave?" she exclaimed, in one of her tragic whispers, "that must be the man you shot." She pointed with her white arm to the stretch of sand some distance past the opening that led to our cells, where I instantly observed a figure prone and motionless. In a moment I was making toward it, with increasing bewilderment as I advanced; for as the figure stole out clearer and clearer in the icy radiance to my steps, I witnessed features that gradually but surely changed my alarm into a conflict of quite other emotions. The body lay on its back; its eyes half-closed looked straight up at the stars out of a brown and puckered face ringed with white whiskers; its arms were stretched out in the posture of a crucified person.

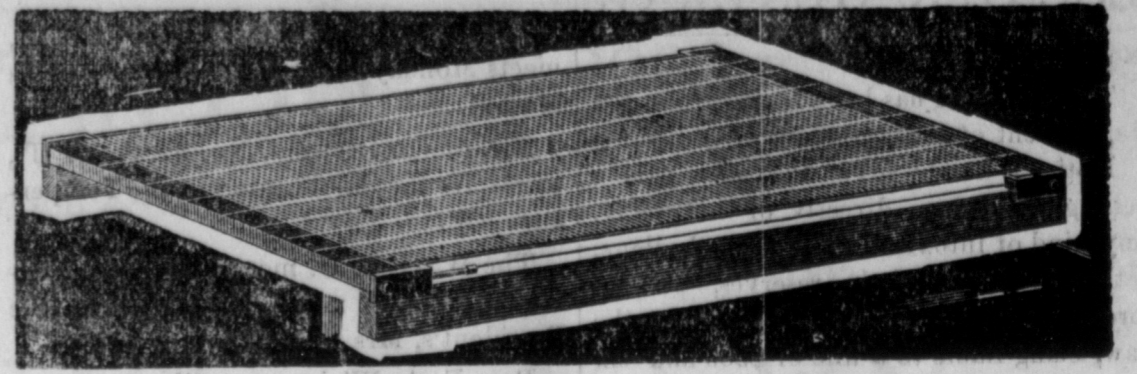
"It has three legs!" cried Miss Grant. "By thunder, no!" I exclaimed, bursting into a wild laugh; "that is no leg, but a great tail! As I hope to go to Heaven, 'tis a huge Madagascar ape!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A GALE OF WIND.

The murder was now out, the mystery made very plain indeed, and the solution, like most others that come to a man in this life looked so simple that one seemed half a fool for not having hit upon it at once. How this great monkey happened to be on the island who was to say? Not very likely, I think, that he was born here unless he happened to be an only son, and both his parents died. Most likely he belonged to a ship, and had been cast away with the crew many years before. I do not know how long monkeys live, but this fellow, as he lay in the moonlight with his teeth gleaming in the grin of death out of the wrinkled leather of his face, framed by a pair of long snow-white whiskers, seemed eighty years old. It was likely that he belonged to a ship because of the bell-ringing trick, and then his wearing that hat looked as if he had been bred in his youth to a knowledge of clothes.

Miss Grant and I talked late into the night, for tame as the issue proved, it was, I can tell you, hotly exciting while it lasted. But we got some rest toward the small hours, sleeping well into the morning and then my first business was to drag the monkey down to the creek where the sand was steep too, with a depth of three fathoms to the shelf of it; and with no further service than a few sea-blessings on its head for the worry and alarm it had caused me, I rolled the body overboard, guessing that it would presently float seaward, where John Sharkee lay in readiness to provide it with a sure tomb.



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