

THE
GORILLA HUNTERS

A TALE OF THE WILDS OF AFRICA

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Contents.

CHAPTER I. IN WHICH THE HUNTERS ARE INTRODUCED.	4
CHAPTER II. LIFE IN THE WILD WOODS.....	11
CHAPTER III. WHEREIN I MOUNT GUARD, AND HOW I DID IT, ETC.....	16
CHAPTER IV. WHEREIN WILL BE FOUND MUCH THAT IS PHILOSOPHICAL.....	23
CHAPTER V. PREPARATIONS FOR A GRAND HUNT.	29
CHAPTER VI. DREAMING, AND FEEDING, AND BLOODY WORK ENLARGED UPON.	39
CHAPTER VII. WE CIRCUMVENT THE NATIVES.	45
CHAPTER VIII. PETERKIN DISTINGUISHES HIMSELF, AND OKANDAGA IS DISPOSED OF, ETC.	52
CHAPTER IX. I DISCOVER A CURIOUS INSECT, AND PETERKIN TAKES A STRANGE FLIGHT.	61
CHAPTER X. WATER APPRECIATED — DESTRUCTIVE FLIES, ETC.	68
CHAPTER XI. HOW WE MET WITH OUR FIRST GORILLA, AND HOW WE SERVED HIM.	72
CHAPTER XII. PETERKIN'S SCHOOL-DAY REMINISCENCES.....	76
CHAPTER XIII. WE GET INTO "THE THICK OF IT" — GREAT SUCCESS.....	81
CHAPTER XIV. OUR PLANS ARE SUDDENLY ALTERED — WICKED DESIGNS DISCOVERED.	86
CHAPTER XV. AN UNEXPECTED MEETING — WE FLY, AND I MAKE A NARROW ESCAPE FROM AN APPALLING FATE.	90
CHAPTER XVI. AN UNFORTUNATE DELAY, AND A TERRIBLE VISITOR.....	95
CHAPTER XVII. WE VISIT A NATURAL MENAGERIE, SEE WONDERFUL SIGHTS, AND MEET WITH STRANGE ADVENTURES.....	100
CHAPTER XVIII. STRANGE AND TERRIBLE DISCOVERIES — JACK IS MADE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF AN ARMY.	106
CHAPTER XIX. PREPARATIONS FOR WAR AND PECULIAR DRILL.....	112
CHAPTER XX. A WARLIKE EXPEDITION AND A VICTORY.....	118
CHAPTER XXI. ARRANGEMENTS FOR PURSUING THE ENEMY, AND SUDDEN CHANGE OF PLANS.....	122
CHAPTER XXII. WE MEET WITH A LUDICROUSLY AWFUL ADVENTURE.	126
CHAPTER XXIII. WE SEE STRANGE THINGS, AND GIVE OUR NEGRO FRIENDS THE SLIP.....	131
CHAPTER XXIV. A LONG CHASE, AND A HAPPY TERMINATION THEREOF.	136
CHAPTER XXV. I HAVE A DESPERATE ENCOUNTER AND A NARROW ESCAPE.	139

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CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH THE HUNTERS ARE INTRODUCED.

It was five o'clock in the afternoon. There can be no doubt whatever as to that. Old Agnes may say what she pleases, she has a habit of doing so; but I know for certain (because I looked at my watch not ten minutes before it happened) that it was exactly five o'clock in the afternoon, when I received a most singular and every way remarkable visit — a visit which has left an indelible impression on my memory, as well it might, for, independent of its singularity and unexpectedness, one of its results was the series of strange adventures which are faithfully detailed in this volume.

It happened thus:—

I was seated in an armchair in my private study in a small town on the west coast of England. It was a splendid afternoon, and it was exactly five o'clock. Mark that. Not that there is anything singular about the mere fact — neither is it in any way mixed up with the thread of this tale; but old Agnes is very obstinate — singularly positive — and I have a special desire that she should see it in print, that I have not given in on that point. Yes, it was five precisely, and a beautiful evening. I was ruminating, as I frequently do, on the pleasant memories of bygone days, especially the happy days that I spent long ago among the coral islands of the Pacific, when a tap at the door aroused me.

"Come in."

"A veesiter, sir," said old Agnes (my landlady), "an' he'll no gie his name."

Old Agnes, I may remark, is a Scotchwoman.

"Show him in," said I.

"Maybe he's a pick-pocket," suggested Agnes.

"I'll take my chance of that."

"Ay! that's like 'ee. Cares for naethin'. Losh, man, what if he cuts yer throat?"

"I'll take my chance of that too, only *do* show him in, my good woman," said I, with a gesture of impatience that caused the excellent (though obstinate) old creature to depart, grumbling.

In another moment a quick step was heard on the stair, and a stranger burst into the room, shut the door in my landlady's face as she followed him, and locked it.

I was naturally surprised, though not alarmed, by the abrupt and eccentric conduct of my visitor, who did not condescend to take off his hat, but stood with his arms folded on his breast, gazing at me and breathing hard.

"You are agitated, sir, pray be seated," said I, pointing to a chair.

The stranger, who was a little man, and evidently a gentleman, made no reply, but, seizing a chair, placed it exactly before me, sat down on it as he would have seated himself on a horse, rested his arms on the back, and stared me in the face.

"You are disposed to be facetious," said I, smiling, (for I never take offence without excessively good reason).

"Not at all, by no means," said he taking off his hat and throwing it recklessly on the floor.

"You are Mr. Rover, I presume?"

"The same, sir, at your service."

"Are you? oh, that's yet to be seen! Pray, is your Christian name Ralph?"

"It is," said I, in some surprise at the coolness of my visitor.

Ah! just so. Christian name Ralph — t'other name Rover — Ralph Rover. Very good. Age twenty-two yesterday, eh?"

"My birthday *was* yesterday, and my age *is* twenty-two. You appear to know more of my private history than I have the pleasure of knowing of yours. Pray, sir, may I — but, bless me! are you unwell?"

I asked this in some alarm because the little man was rolling about in his seat, holding his sides, and growing very red in the face.

"Oh no! not at all, perfectly well; never was better in my life," he said, becoming all at once preternaturally grave. "You were once in the Pacific — lived on a coral island —"

"I did."

"Oh, don't trouble yourself to answer. Just shut up for a minute or two. You were rather a soft green youth then, and you don't seem to be much harder or less verdant now."

"Sir!" I exclaimed, getting angry.

"Just so," continued he, "and you knew a young rascal there —"

"I know a rascal *here*," I exclaimed, starting up, "whom I'll kick —"

"What!" cried the little stranger, also starting up and capsizing the chair; "Ralph Rover, has time and sunburning and war so changed my visage that you cannot recognize Peterkin?"

I almost gasped for breath.

"Peterkin! Peterkin Gay!" I exclaimed.

I am not prone to indulge in effeminate demonstration, but I am not ashamed to confess that, when I gazed on the weather-beaten, though ruddy countenance of my old companion, and observed the eager glance of his bright blue eyes, I was quite overcome, and rushed violently into his arms. I may also add that, until that day, I had had no idea of Peterkin's physical strength, for during the next five minutes he twisted me about and spun me round and round my own room until my brain began to reel, and I was fain to cry him mercy.

"So, you're all right; the same jolly, young, old wise-acre in whiskers and long coat," cried Peterkin, "come now, Ralph, sit down if you can. I mean to stay with you all evening, and all night, and all to-morrow, and all next day, so we'll have lots of time to fight our battles o'er again. Meanwhile compose yourself, and I'll tell you what I've come about. Of course, my first and chief reason was to see your face, old boy; but I have another reason too — a very peculiar reason I've a proposal to make and a plan to unfold, both of 'em stunners, they'll shut you up and screw you down, and altogether flabberghast you when you hear 'em, so sit down and keep quiet — do."

I sat down accordingly and tried to compose myself, but to say truth I was so much overjoyed and excited by the sight of my old friend and companion that I had some difficulty at first in fixing my attention on what he said, the more especially that he spoke with extreme volubility, and interrupted his discourse very frequently in order to ask questions, or to explain.

"Now, old fellow," he began, "here goes, and mind you don't interrupt me. Well, I mean to go, and I mean you to go with me, to — but, I forgot, perhaps you won't be able to go — what are you?"

"What am I?"

"Ay, your profession — your calling — lawyer, — M.D. — scrivener — which?"

"I am a naturalist."

"A what?"

"A naturalist."

"Ralph," said Peterkin slowly, "have you been long troubled with that complaint?"

"Yes," I replied laughing, "I have suffered from it from my earliest infancy, more or less."

"I thought so," rejoined my companion, shaking his head gravely. "I fancied that I observed the

CHAPTER I

development of that disease when we lived together on the coral island. It don't bring you in many thousands a year, does it?"

"No," said I, "it does not. I am only an amateur, having a sufficiency of this world's goods to live on, without working for my bread. But, although my dear father at his death left me a small fortune, which yields me three hundred a year, I do not feel entitled to lead the life of an idler in this busy world, where so many are obliged to toil night and day for the bare necessities of life. I have therefore taken to my favourite studies as a sort of business, and flatter myself that I have made one or two not unimportant discoveries and added a few mites to the sum of human knowledge. A good deal of my time is spent in scientific roving expeditions throughout the country, and in contributing papers to several magazines."

While I was thus speaking I observed that Peterkin's face was undergoing the most remarkable series of changes of expression, which, as I concluded, merged into a smile of beaming delight as he said,—

"Ralph, you're a trump!"

"Possibly," said I, "you are right; but, setting that question aside for the present, let me remind you that you have not yet told me where you mean to go to."

"I mean," said Peterkin, slowly, placing both hands on his knees and looking me steadily in the face. "I mean to go a-hunting in — but I forgot. You don't know that I'm a hunter, a somewhat famous hunter?"

"Of course I don't. You are so full of your plans and proposals that you have not yet told me where you have been, or what doing these six years. And you've never written to me once all that time, shabby fellow. I thought you were dead."

"Did you go into mourning for me, Ralph?"

"No, of course not."

"A pretty fellow you are to find fault. You thought that I, your oldest and best friend, was dead, and you did not go into mourning. How could I write to you when you parted from me without giving me your address? It was a mere chance my finding you out even now. I was taking a quiet cup of coffee in the commercial room of a hotel not far distant when I overheard a stranger speaking of his friend 'Ralph Rover, the philosopher,' so I plunged at him promiscuously, and made him give me your address. But I've corresponded with Jack ever since we parted on the pier at Dover."

"What, Jack! Jack Martin?" I exclaimed as a warm gush of feeling filled my heart at the sound of his well-remembered name. "Is Jack alive?"

"Alive! I should think so. If possible he's more alive than ever, for I should suppose he must be full grown now, which he was not when we last met. He and I have corresponded regularly. He lives in the north of England, and by good luck happens to be just now within thirty miles of this town. You don't mean to say, Ralph, that you have never met!"

"Never. The very same mistake that happened with you, occurred between him and me. We parted vowing to correspond as long as we should live, and three hours after I remembered that we had neglected to exchange our addresses, so that we could not correspond. I have often, often made inquiries both for you and him, but have always failed. I never heard of Jack from the time we parted at Dover till to-day."

"Then, no doubt, you thought us both dead, and yet you did not go into mourning for either of us! O Ralph, Ralph, I had entertained too good an opinion of you."

"But tell me about Jack," said I, impatient to hear more concerning my dear old comrade.

"Not just now, my boy, more of him in a few minutes. First let us return to the point. What was it? oh! a — about my being a celebrated hunter. A very Nimrod — at least a miniature copy. Well, Ralph, since we last met I have been all over the world, right round and round it I'm a lieutenant in the navy now — at least I was a week ago. I've been fighting with the Caffirs, and the Chinamen, and been punishing the rascally sepoy in India, and been hunting elephants in Ceylon and tiger shooting in the