

DWALA

A ROMANCE

By
George Calderon

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TO
KITTIE

DWALA

I

THE sun was sinking towards the Borneo mountains. The forest and the sea, inscrutable to the bullying noon, relented in this discreeter light, revealing secrets of green places. Birds began to rustle in the big trees; the shaking of broad leaves in the undergrowth betrayed the movement of beasts of prey going about their daily work. The stately innocence of Nature grew lovelier in a sudden trouble of virginal consciousness.

There was only one sign of human habitation in the landscape—a worn patch by the shore, like a tiny wilderness in a vast oasis. Battered meat-tins, empty bottles, and old newspapers littered the waterline; under the rock was a tumble-down hut and a shed; from a stable at the side a pony looked out patiently over the half-door; something rustled in a big cage. In the twilight under the shed a man lay sleeping in a low hammock, grizzled and battered, with one bare brown foot hanging over the edge. He yawned and opened his eyes.

‘Are ye thar, Colonel?’

Another figure, which had been crouching beside the hammock with a palm-leaf, watching the sleeper, slowly uprose. Hardly a human figure this, though dressed like a man; something rather akin to the surrounding forest; a thing of large majestic

motions, and melancholy eyes, deep-set under thick eyebrows. The man sat up and coughed for a little while.

'Whar's the dinner, Colonel? You've not lit the fire yet.'

'Fire crackles,' said the Colonel.

The man stretched and spat.

'Ah, you was afraid the noise'd wake me, sonny. Wahl, hurry up now, for I'm as peckish as a pea-hen.'

The man refilled his pipe from the big tin that lay in the hammock with him, while the Colonel, going hither and thither with large, deft movements, piled a fire, boiled a pot and spread the dinner. Dinner ready, he brought it to the man; crouching at his feet he watched him reverently as he handled knife and fork. At the smell of dinner a number of large monkeys came swinging down from the trees and collected outside the shed. A captive chimpanzee came out of a tub-kennel and began to ramble swiftly and silently to and fro on its chain, as if developing in movement some unwholesome purpose conceived in the hours of quiescence. The man threw them pieces from time to time, for which they scrambled and fought in a way that called for interference.

'Now, Chauncey, you leave pore Amélie's whiskers alone. That piece was meant for her.... Go slow, Marie! and you, William J. Bryan, get up off Talmage, unless you've a yearn for the far-end of my teacher's help.'

When the meal was over the American took out some sewing—some old clothes of his own, that he was patching up for the

Colonel—while the Colonel ate the scraps that remained, and cleared the things away. This done, the Colonel came and sat down once more by the man.

‘Whar’s your Word-makin’ and Word-takin’ gotten to, Colonel?’ said the American, looking up from his sewing. ‘Hev you bin hidin’ it up that teak tree agen?’

The Colonel looked uncomfortably about him, blinked once or twice, and scratched his thigh.

‘Burn my fingers,’ said the man, ‘but I think you’re as like a human b’y as any ape can get. Slip off yer boots. Mosey up and fetch ‘em back right now, you young hellion, and spell me out “Home, sweet home,” afore I get to the end of this seam.’

‘So I’m a scientific discoverer, am I?’ mused the American, left alone. ‘And I’ve foun’ the Missin’ Link at last, hev I? There’ll be a pile o’ money in that, I shouldn’t wonder. The Colonel’ll be mighty pleased when he hears he ain’t an or’nary ape; he’ll be as proud as a Bishop among the angels.’

The Colonel meanwhile came climbing with swift and solemn accuracy down the teak tree, the box of letters in his mouth. The chimpanzee growled and chattered with aimless fury as she roamed to and fro.

‘See here, Colonel, I’ve hed a letter from the Boss. I fotch it in along with that passel on last Toosday.... Squit that I-talian music, you dun-coloured Dago’—this to the chimpanzee—‘you unlicensed traveller in otto o’ roses; shet yer head, I say, and don’t show yer lunch-hooks at me.... I’ll hev to get rid o’ that dosh-burned critter; she’ll niver be a credit to the Show.... Whar

was I? Why, letter from the Boss; that's so. Wahl, thar was noos in that letter fur you an' me, Colonel, big noos.'

The Colonel turned his melancholy eyes on his master: their expression never varied, but his breath came quick and fast with an unspoken interrogation.

'I'd bin expeckin' it fur a lawng time; but I begin to feel sorter queer now it's nigh on comin' true.'

'Are they goin' to fetch us away?'

said the Colonel.

'This vurry next day that is, Colonel; one of his boats will put in here and fetch me away with the whole of my bag o' tricks to meet the Show in London.'

'You're mighty glad, eh?'

'I'm that, sonny. But I feel sorter queer too. I've grown kinder used to this life, bein' boss myself an' all that. And yet, if you come to think of it, ... by Jelly, it's the queerest thing of all. Me goin' inter pardnership, as you might say, with an ornary ape! Hand me the matches, sonny—by my foot thar; this blamey pipe's gone out agen.... Here was I an' pore old Jabez dumped down by the Boss, to train some monkeys for his show. Whin Jabez took the fever and went over the range I began to be kinder lonesome; got a sorter hungry feel in my teeth with not speakin'. So I slipped into a kinder habit o' talkin' to you all like humans, jest to ease my gums. An' all of a sudden, one fine day, Colonel, you bein' dissatisfied with yer dinner, you ups an' answers me back. I was tolerable astonished at the time, I remember, tho' I didn't let on, maybe, but jest caught you a clip on the ear for sassin' yer biggers, an' passed along. I'd niver

hed any back-talk from an anthropoid before. Of course, as you say, it came nateral-like to you; you was on'y addin' one more language to your vurry considerable stock, an' I reckon from what you tell me that the de-flections of the verb are much simpler in Amurrkan than in Chimpanzee for instance; but the fack remains that you're the first monkey I iver heard talkin' outside of his own dialeck. The Boss was considerable interessted in my re-port, an' he's worked up a theory of how your species got the bulge on the rest by larnin' their various lingoes, workin' trade relations, and pouchin' the difference of exchange on cokernuts an' bread-fruits. It's his idee to deliver himself of a lecture on the subject before the R'yal Institoot, an' make you sing some o' your folksongs whin we get to London.'

'Ah—what like's London, dad?'

'Wahl, sonny, it's not so fine a place as Bawston, but it has its p'int. The people are easier took in than in Bawston, an' we find it a better place for a Show. Then they hev a King in London, which we don't hev in Bawston; besides dooks and markises, which we on'y see in Amurrka in the pairin' season. An' Shakspere was born near there too, an' the original Miss Corelli. One city's much like another, whin you've bin three years in Borneo. What a man gits a yearn for is civalisation.'

'Ci-va-li-sation ... What's civalisation, dad?'

'It's a hard word, sonny; but it means purty well everything we don't hev here in Borneo. It means leadin' a higher life, hustlin' around, machinery, perlicemen, hevin' a good time, iced drinks, theaters, ringin' a bell fer yer boots, an' a hunderd other things. Gas lamps, an' electric light, an' beer, an' wine——'

'Like yonder?'

'That's it, sonny; like that lot I brought from Bilimano, on'y stronger. An' iverybody's in lovely close; all the women lookin' like picters outer "Puck"; all the men wi' creases down their pants; pavement down along all the streets——'

'Don't stop sewin', dad.'

'Ah, you young scamp, you're eager to git inter yer new pair, I can see. Gosh, but the women, they're hunky.'

'What like's the streets, dad?'

'It's a cur'ous thing, but you don't seem to take so much interest in the women as I'd hev expected, sonny ... I reckon you were in the habit, before I caught you, of sorter climbin' out with gals of your own species among the banyan-trees down away in Java; and you don't set much store by other kinds. That'll be another p'int for the lecture.... Think what a man I'll be over in England, sonny; I'll be top o' the tree over thar, you'll be proud to know me. I'll be flyin' around the town in a plug hat an' silver-topped cane, noddin' an' affable howdy to my multitudinous friends from the top of a tramcar. "Who's that?" people will say. "Why, don't you know? That's the scientific man who foun' the Missin' Link.'"

'Missin' ... Missin' what, dad?'

'The Missin' Link.'

'What's the ... Missin' Link?'

'Wahl, I should smile! Ef I hedn't clean forgotten to tell you. It's all in the Boss's letter. Why—you're the Missin' Link, sonny!'

'What's that, anyway?'

'Wahl, sonny, it means a sort o' monkey that isn't quite an ornary sort o' monkey ... kinder, sorter.... Wahl, as you might say, sonny, partly almost more like a man.'

'Like—like you, dad?'

'Wahl, not that exactly—a sorter lower creation altogether. But there's a lot o' scientific folks as says that men are descended from Missin' Links.'

The Colonel rose to his feet and looked out to sea with dilated nostrils.

'Missin' Links ... men ... civalisation ... and Colonel's a Missin' Link! Why, then....'

'Go slow, sonny. I on'y said you was a peg higher'n an ornary monkey. Jest sit down quiet an' figure out "anthropoid" with those letters o' yourn. You'd be mighty small potatoes in a civalised crowd; so you've no need to slop over that way.'

The Colonel sat down, obediently, to his letters, and they both worked in silence for some time.

'Yes,' continued the American, 'I shouldn't wonder ef they was to elect me a member of some of those larned societies of theirs. They'll be askin' me out to champagne dinners, too, no doubt. I shouldn't wonder now ef I was to be asked to go an' dine with the Prince of Wales—him I was tellin' you about;

distinguished furriners always go to dine with the Prince o' Wales.'

'Take Colonel too, dad?'

'Whar to, sonny?'

'The Prince o' Wales's.'

'Now that's downright foolish to be talkin' like that, Colonel. You'll hev to stay with the Show, of course.... You'll be pleased with the Show; it's the most fre-quented place in London; they'll be givin' you buns an' candy all day long. The Boss was thinkin' of puttin' you in the anamal department, but ef he's pleased with you I shouldn't wonder but what he'd promote you to the human monstrosities. I'll put in a good word for you. We've bin the best o' friends, Colonel; you kin hev the key o' my trunk any day; but I won't be able to see so much of you arter to-morrow. No. I've been thinkin' over the question keerfully, an' I've concluded you an' me'll not be able to travel over together.'

The Colonel listened with impassive attention. The American avoided his eye with some little embarrassment.

'There's all manner o' difficulties, sonny. In the first place, these ignorant Christian sailor-lads that'll come ashore to-morrow won't perhaps hardly grasp the situation ef they find me talkin' ornary sense with a hairy pagan ape; an' I think you'd best keep yer head shet until they've gotten used to the looks of you, an' I've hed time to explain matters. It might create some jealousies in the crew ef you was set up over their heads to consort with the captain an' the mate, as I'll be doin'.

At first sight it seemed to me as ef you'd hev to travel all alone in the steerage as a third-class passenger.'

'Steerage—what's the steerage?'

'That's down in the between decks. Not so bad, sonny: I've travelled that way often myself. But it's not high-class, like travellin' with the captain.... Yes, that's what I'd meant at first. But there's obstacles in the way o' that too, sonny. I've been thinkin' ef we enter you as a passenger there may be difficulties at the Custom House with the Alien Immigrants Act. They're mighty pertikler.... There, that's done!' he interjected, as he bit off the thread and held up the new trousers to view. 'Climb inter those pants, sonny, an' let's see how they look.'

The Colonel did as he was told, and the American continued:

'You an' me would be mightily put about to fill in the form of declaration as to famaly history an' religion an' what not, ef it's the same as in the States. An' on the whole I've concluded it will be best to put you back in your old hutch and take you over under the Large Wild Anamals Act.'

The Colonel seemed wholly absorbed in the adjustment of his clothes. The muscles of his big jaw worked backwards and forwards to a pressure of the teeth.

'They're a bit baggy behind,' continued his patron. 'I'll hev to take a reef in the seat. Slip 'em off again; you won't be needin' any close any more till we get over to London.'

Instead of obeying, the Colonel walked slowly forward out of the penthouse to the shade of a young tree where a big wooden

cage lay lumbering on its side. He looked at it and turned it thoughtfully over with a push of his powerful leg; then laid one hand on the thick bough above him, the other on the stem of the tree. A slow cracking and rustling ensued, splinters gaped white, the bough was in his hands, raised aloft, and descending furiously, smashing the old hutch to little pieces. The American rose astounded from his hammock.

‘Quit that foolin’, and come here!’

Bang! Bang! Bang!

‘Come here, you mule-headed monkey.’

The Colonel dropped breathless for one moment on all fours, rose to his full height swinging the monstrous branch over his head and sending forth a long loud yell like a man in a nightmare, then swept crashing away into the forest, his weapon thumping like a sledge-hammer as he went.

The monkeys in the trees about chattered applause or commentary, a cloud of sea-fowl flew up from the shore, and the American stood scratching the back of his head thoughtfully in the midst. Then he looked round at the trees and the sea and the pony, taking them all into his confidence with a discomfited smile; pulled himself together and shouted:

‘Colonel!’

He grew contemptuous at the want of an answer, thrust down the ashes in his pipe with a horny finger, and returned slowly to his rest under the shed, consoling his solitude with a slow-flowing murmur of scorn:

'All right, my child. You wait till you come back. Civalisation!
You! You ornary, popeyed, bobtailed, jimber-jawed, jerrybuilt
jackass....'

II

THE Colonel went through the virgin forest, spending his fury in motion, swinging forward from branch to branch, running, leaping, till the fury was lost in the recovered delight of liberty. Childhood continued, after an irrelevance.

Here was the old smell of forest earth, the inexhaustible plenty of bare elastic boughs, the cool feeling of fungus, the absence of articulate speech, the impossibility of anger. Night came, the grand and terrible night, with its old familiar fear, long lost in the neighbourhood of a confident human mind. He rejoiced in his fear as in a fine quality recovered, rousing it to an ecstasy after long silences, by murmuring his own name in the darkness in terrified tones: 'Colonel! Colonel!'

Then there came a rustling of leaves, a low chuck-chuck of prey warning prey, the sound of a vast retreat, and the slow padding of panther feet on the forest floor. The Colonel lay still on his bough, tingling with an unnatural calm, and the Panther breathed deep below him and looked up. And the Panther said:

'I am *the* Panther, all Panthers in one—a symbol, irresistible.'

Waves of strong life undulated down his spotted tail, as though life passed through him to and from all his tribe; and the Colonel lay in a pleasant fear and numbness on his bough. And the Panther said:

'I will climb slowly to you.'

'And leap suddenly!'

'The glory of my eye shall increase upon you.'

'Numbing my limbs!'

'We will fall and play together on the earth.'

'I shall die!'

'A noble death.'

'I shall be torn and eaten!'

'And your strength shall go into the strength of All the Panthers.'

But as the Panther reached the fork of the boughs his paw slipped, and the numbness left the Colonel, and he leaped upon the neck of the panther with fingers and teeth, crying:

'You are not All the Panthers, but a single creature like myself; and I will tear you as I tear a young tree when my limbs desire it.'

They fell together, a long distance, to the earth, and the Colonel grasped one mauling hind-paw of the panther with one foot and gripped him by the belly with the other, and rolled over and over with him, and strangled him, and tore his two jaws apart to the shoulder as an angry man might tear a glove. Then he licked his wounds and slung his boots over his shoulder again, and forgot all about the battle but the joy of unlimited ferocity.

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