

The Riddle of the Riderless Horse

By JEAN & CYRIL CASALIS

"Oho him plenty fine, Baas. Him take the quest out of eyes of plenty big back foot, Baas. Maraka walk in the knoole like penny fine gentleman. Him big trees near the Baas. Him tree plenty easy for to climb. Him spook climb up him trees plenty easy, plenty quick, Baas; and when the Baas and Maraka him come along — what! — spooks all gone!"

"Well I'm blowed! I never thought of that. Of course they could get away quick like that. Those trees grow right against the rock—they'd just have to climb up and slip on to the top of the cave. It's a regular secret stairway! But where do they go once they are on top? And who are they? Haven't you found out?"

"No, Baas; Maraka him not know. Maybe him go by the trees to Brantford; maybe him go back to knoole; maybe him plenty dead spook, him fly up into him sky. Maraka him not know. Maybe him had native peepies work for kwena—him big river snake. Maybe him catch other peoples for kwena to eat. Maraka him not know. Maybe him peepies him plenty well in him plantlets and big hats. But Maraka him know him must be plenty, plenty quick—him Left-Hand, Baas. Left-Hand him catch Baas Mortimer, him catch Baas Japle, him catch the Missie Baas."

Maraka had spoken the last words with such vehemence and so sudden and dramatic had been the twist in his narrative by which he had brought in Left-Hand that Malcolm felt a shiver of apprehension. But Maraka had more to tell him. He explained that he had been keeping vigil over the cave with the trees not only of identifying the people who came out of it but of trying to find out where they hid and what they did, before they came out of the tunnel entrance but just as he was about to warn him he had heard the sound of movement in the cave below him.

"Oho, Baas," he said, "then Maraka him plenty frightened. But Maraka him plenty glad when him see the Baas jump so quickly into him hole, like him frightened meerkat. Him see the Baas go after him man, when him come out of the cave. But Maraka him know one more coming, so him wait and follow other man. Maraka him know the Baas him see other man and Maraka him see other one. Plenty safe, Baas."

"Why I didn't know at the time how plenty safe it was," observed Malcolm dryly. "However we seem to be getting to grips with Left-Hand. We know his frighted haunt, and we know that he goes about with only one satellite. So our next move is obvious. We must wait on top of the little cave, and snaffle them when they come up."

Maraka did not reply.

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"That's the thing to do, Maraka," Malcolm insisted. "But what will Baas do when him catch him people?"

"Run them in of course." "But what will Baas say him say him people him done?"

"It was Malcolm's turn to ponder in silence."

CHAPTER XXIV

KWENA THE SNAKE

The weeks passed without incident, and Maraka made no sign. And once more it was the period of the change of the moon, when all the old Free State farmers look for the signs that hold promise of the precious summer rains. Cynthia had just returned and, as once before, Cornelle came to Malcolm before breakfast and asked him to accompany him to Campsie. They found Channing as well as Cynthia at the house, rather than the brilliant figures to see his pigs. As they walked through the dew-drenched orchard they were passed by plough boys on their great platts of reims slung over their blanketed shoulders, and carrying their long bamboo whiplashes.

"Man, its getting dry again," said Channing, "and I'm starting the ploughs later now, to give the oxen a chance to fill up."

Then he called to one of the boys and told him to tell his herd boy to take his cattle to graze on the "far bit," that tract of landly value site on every Free State farm, on which native farm-labourers love to report the most sensational calamities.

After breakfast Malcolm, on his way to his rondavel to fill his pouch before setting out for the lands, found Maraka for once apparently quite idle, standing in the middle of the bare space which served as the Bon Espoir backyard, gazing vacantly into the far distance.

Already the heat haze was setting the horizon dancing in the west. The Bon Espoir cattle had long since left the milking byres, and the only signs of life in that sun-drenched country were the brilliant figures of native women hurrying along the bank of the river to cultivate their lands, Channing's cattle moving slowly toward the grazing ground on the low Campsie hill, and the little trails of dust where spans of oxen, leaning to their yokes, were ripping up the land slowly and inexorably as far as the eye could see.

"Baas," said Maraka in a low voice as if merely communing with himself, "we go river to-night."

He did not turn when he made the remark, and Malcolm stopped short.

"Speaking to me, Maraka?" he asked.

"The river to-night, Baas." Let the Baas not talk now, Baas."

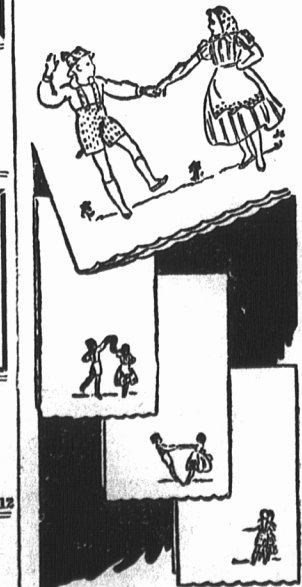
And with that he walked quickly into the kitchen.

It was past eleven o'clock that night when two figures, swathed native-fashion in blankets, stole through the Bon Espoir orchard, slipped down into the Campsie valley, and finally concealed themselves between big boulders on the river bank opposite the point where the boy Sam had been killed. Malcolm grinned at Maraka, who had insisted on the transformation when they met an hour earlier in Malcolm's rondavel; for although his glass had shown him that he made an excellent imitation of a native, he suspected that Maraka was not unaware of the humour of his disguise. But as they had agreed that the risk of conversation must be avoided, no word passed between them.

The sultry windless day had been followed by a hot close night, with a breath of air. And now, in the south, great masses of black cloud were piling up, with lightning flickering incessantly behind them, revealing the advance of the impending storm but making the darkness about them still more impenetrable, and even more eerie, through the muttered roll of thunder which went echoing up the deep river banks.

Malcolm's thoughts wandered. Try as he would to concentrate vision and hearing on the object of their vigil, which Maraka had persistently refused to divulge, he was con-

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scious of nothing but the approach of the storm. Then, in an instant, abstraction vanished. He was starting away upstream, where six flashes of light had pierced the darkness in quick succession. And with the flashing of the signals his warning excitement flared up, and tense and expectant, he stared into the darkness, alert for the first signal that would show that the signals had been seen by other expectant watchers, waiting there too, perhaps, unseen on the river bank.

Agas seemed to slip through the moment that ensued. Then without warning, just below, so close that Malcolm flinched instinctively, the tense silence was snapped by a resounding twang and the rocket-like hiss of something hurtling through the air. There was a dull thud on the opposite bank, and then his

straining ears were conscious that there, across the river, someone was moving.

"Then, on the water there, something took shape—a long black object, slipping out like a shadow from the deeper shadow of the bank. Malcolm clutched Maraka's arm and pointed; and in that moment he knew that what he and Cornelle had seen, a month earlier, had not been imagined, and that the astonishing cry which had sent them racing along the river bank had been the scream of a man in terror for his life, rather than his life—a native who thought that what he saw was the dread kwena, the great mythical snake of the Caledon River."

MALCOLM'S FALSE STEP

As if spellbound, he watched the

form disappear into the darkness of the opposite bank. The faint rustle of stealthy speedy movement reached his ears, and then, once more, the dark shape emerged, and swinging out into midstream, cut rapidly across the current towards them. So silent and swift had it all been, that Malcolm in his eagerness to see more, to know what it meant and by what agency it was operated, came forward. And at once he realized what he had done. Even as the hoof of the owl walked through the night, there was a quick scramble below them on the bank, and Maraka, with a peremptory whisper of "Run, Baas, follow Maraka," jumped to his feet, and screaming, fled upstream along the top of the bank.

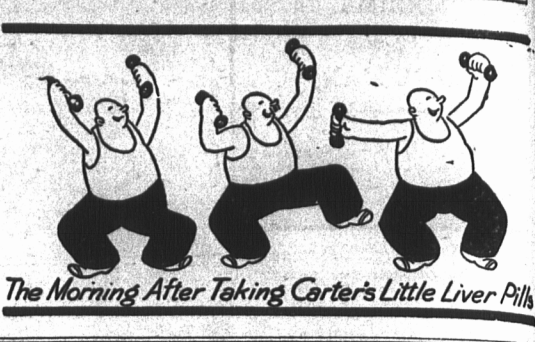
"Jo-wai . . . Jo-wai . . . Jo-wai . . ." he yelled as he ran, his

voice ringing with the terror of a native who has suddenly come face to face with the powers of evil.

Malcolm raced after him, and he soon realized that they wanted every inch of the start gained by Maraka's quickness. He could hear the drum of their pursuers' footsteps gaining on them, and that cursed blanket impeded every stride over the uneven ground. Maraka was leading him, not back to Bon Espoir, but straight upstream to the drift below the hill. They reached it at last, but relief at that welcome slight with the better going it promised, was short-lived.

(To be Continued)

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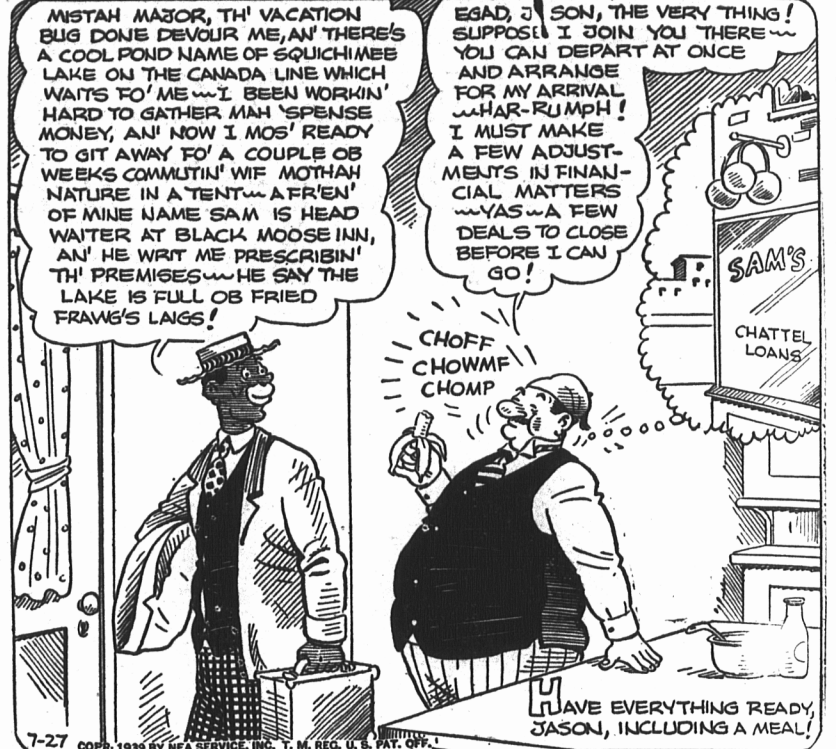
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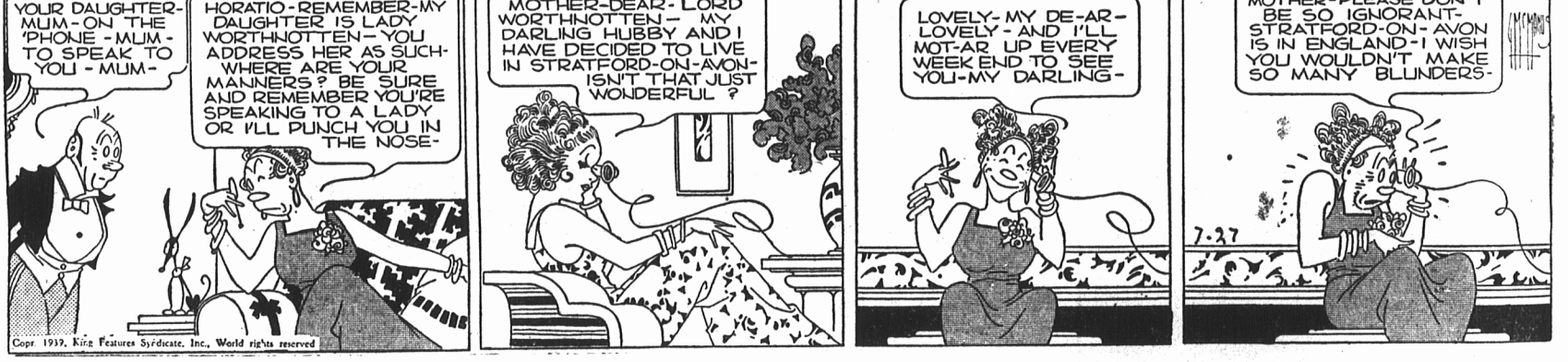
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