

THE CROWN JEWELS

By ROBERT CARLTON BROWN

An adventure in Africa, in which a chance hint to a monarch threatens to play havoc with a choice personal possession of the man who throws it out.

BOOBUB stretched his black, leathery face in a cavernous smile and dumped the dog in my lap.

"Thanks! Thanks!" said I, overwhelmed with the gift; for a dog is closer to an Igorrote's heart than anything—except his stomach.

Dog as a delicacy is all right, but an edible dog as a companion doesn't always answer the purpose. At least, that was the case with this cur.

I couldn't give him away, because the chief had presented him to me. I couldn't lose him, because he was a sticker. I couldn't eat him, because, well—I just couldn't.

Why Boobub had taken such a fancy to me I could not imagine. His country was not cannibalistic, so he couldn't have liked me for just myself, I pondered long over the thing.

It all dated from three weeks back. You see, I had landed in Africa with a cargo of silk hats, cuffs, colored pencils, collars, and other such evidences of civilization, intending to get rich quick on the natives, as they still allow that method over there.

I had a fairly good trade for a month or two, and then, three weeks before the gift of the dog, I had landed in Boobub's town. I won't say just what the name of the place was—it is unpronounceable, and therefore unmentionable. Suffice it to say, that Roosevelt has it on his itinerary, and there is some good dog hunting to be had there.

Boobub looked me over when I went to bow before him and ask permission to sell my wares to his people. He didn't seem to warm up to me right off the bat; there was a vague coldness that didn't set well in that hot country.

I feared that the permission would be denied me. Boobub was clearly a fop, and I'm sure he didn't want me to set up an impromptu gent's furnishing store in his community, for fear some other buck would outdo him in splendor.

He was a gorgeous thing, to be sure. A key-ring, with an address tag, in his nose; a glass-headed hat-pin, run diagonally through one ear; a circular typewriter eraser, worn as a pendant on his breast; and three nice blondine puffs in his top hair.

The remainder of his wool was done into a Psyche knot, and through it was thrust a shining, twenty-five cent fountain pen.

No wonder he was vainglorious and proud.

Surrounded by his court and concubines, he looked the cream of Igorrote aristocracy. When I made my humble bow he pointed at my bald head and laughed.

The court laughed, the wives giggled, I frowned. That made him laugh all the harder.

Realizing that I was making no headway, I changed my tactics, and let out a roar of merriment.

Then everybody laughed again. I opened my mouth to its widest and emitted a good, old-fashioned, stem-winder guffaw.

That killed them. But, at the same time, something very unfortunate happened.

My false teeth fell out.

The original ivories had been knocked down my throat in a game of football, and I had worn a set of store-teeth ever since I had been bounced from college. The missing teeth were in the upper row. and it was always with great difficulty that I managed to keep the plate in place.

Quickly stooping, I picked up the plate and replaced it in my mouth, regardless of the dried grass that went with it.

Then I looked at Boobub. He had suddenly stopped laughing, and a look of interest was on his face. I smiled genially. His gaze was riveted on my upper row of teeth.

It confused me. I was bothered. Suddenly an inspiration came, with Marcelline quickness.

I remembered some red silk hats that I had

brought along. Hurriedly pulling one from my portmanteau, I swooped low and dropped it at the feet of Boobub, signing to him that it was the only one of its kind in the world, although I had three more gross at the place where I kept my stores.

A cry of childish delight escaped him. He dropped his eyes from my teeth and picked up the shining, high top-piece. Like a cooing babe he played with the thing. Then he put it on, and surveyed himself in the court hand-mirror, on the celluloid back of which stood forth a breakfast-food advertisement.

I'd made my hit. The freedom of the city was mine.

They took me out and showed me their main street. Then they led me back and allowed me to kiss Boobub's foot. Oh, it was very nice—I mean the royal welcome.

So things had continued from day to day, and I was making a lot of money. Boobub came often and stood around watching me. Then he would grin, and I would be forced to do the same in return.

Each time I opened my mouth to let him see my good-nature he peered at those false teeth of mine in a fascinated manner that soon became annoying. He was almost vulgar in his rudeness.

Having the only red silk hat in town. Boobub was very choice of it. It was a sort of crown, and he brought it out only on state occasions, and allowed his people to drop at his feet in dismay.

The day before he gave me the dog I had signed to him that he ought to have some crown jewels to go with the hat, and at the same time had produced a string of white beads.

He looked at them for a few minutes, then shook his head disdainfully, as though to say: "Nothin' doin', old spud!"

I understood, and smiled to him as I replaced the beads.

Then I caught him looking at my teeth again. This time there was an undeniable envy in his eyes.

I felt so sorry for him I'd have taken them out and given them to him in a minute, if my plate hadn't been the only one in that half of Africa.

Next day came the dog. Before that

everything had been successful. After that—well, the ups and downs of life always have a downward tendency.

That night Pang swallowed two jack-knives and chewed the top from a thirty-five-cent silk hat. Pang was what I had called the dog—that being the word used by the natives when they wanted to express, "Too much is plenty."

Oh, Boobub was wily! Three weeks had passed, and he had never let me know what his horrible designing nature had conceived.

He had pampered me, had made me the court pet, and presented me with a dog. I had given my good looks credit for all this; I had said to myself that my geniality was responsible for his favor. I had said lots of things, but I lied.

What Boobub wanted was my false teeth. The day after Pang had taken up his abode with me Boobub had boldly high-signed for my upper row of ivories. It came like a Laura Jean Libbey "flash of lightning from a clear sky."

I imagined myself toothless. I conjured up pictures of drinking soup through a sieve for the remainder of my days.

It is not very pleasant to think that a king has his heart set on your teeth. Furthermore, Boobub was a determined character.

I took his request as lightly as possible after the first frightful shock, and laughed loud and long, as though it were a rare joke.

He frowned, and hurriedly dispatched a courier. I waited in breathless suspense. Would the page return with a meat-ax or a war-club?

When the messenger returned at last he bore only the high red silk hat.

Boobub put the crown on his head with dignity. Then he made a quick movement with his forefinger across the front of the sky-piece.

I sickened with the realization that he wanted to wear my false teeth for crown jewels. I had brought the whole thing on my own head. Had I never suggested crown jewels he would never have known what they were.

Trade was good, I needed the money; but, in spite of everything, I could not give up my teeth. I never liked elephant meat through a straw, anyway; and as to swallowing sea-biscuit without chewing, it was quite beyond me.

Deliberately I snapped my teeth together, determined that he should not have them.

He was very mad, and stood repeating his request for some time. Then he dispatched the courier again.

This time it *was* a war club with which the black Mercury returned. I stepped back to a respectful distance, while Boobub brandished the weapon about his head. Then he made a sign or two about the sun, and put it up to me rather clearly that if the teeth weren't in his hands by sunrise the next day the Igorrotes would have human hash for breakfast.

I was rather piqued by his whole manner. It was most savage and ungentlemanly. Firmly I shook my head. He hurled the club at me and departed in a towering rage.

It was already dusk, and I returned to my mud-house with a faint heart. Looking out an hour later I saw that two of Boobub's men were seated a yard in front of my door, with war-clubs in their hands.

It was very kind of their chief to put them there, so that I shouldn't be out late of nights. I appreciated it, and yet it rather sickened me.

Pang wagged his tail, and came up to sympathize with me. I threw him a rattle to quiet his canine anxiety, and he bolted it directly, as he did everything that came his way.

Then I fell to considering ways and means. It was very clear that I must get out before sunrise. Cautiously I packed up the strings of gold and silver that I had taken in as payment for my goods. Then I took the lighter and more valuable part of my stock and tied it into a compact bundle.

After that I considered the killing of Pang. I couldn't run the risk of taking him along with me. I didn't like the dog, anyway, and what was the use of depriving the chief of a good meal?

When it came to slaying him, though, I backed down. The guards in front would hear the noise, come in, be excited by the blood. I didn't like to run the risk.

So I tied Pang to a heavy stone jug in the corner, and began boring a hole through the hard mud at the back of my hut. My digging implements were primitive, and it must have been all of two o'clock before I had a hole big enough to force my shoulders through.

I looked out and reconnoitered. Peaceful snoring droned throughout the camp, and all was

safe. The hut would be between the guards and myself. They would never know.

Slipping back, I took up my bundle, found that Pang was still tightly tied, and then crept cautiously through the hole.

A startled "yip" came from Pang as I left. I cursed that dog mentally, and skulked past the low mud houses at high speed.

Once outside of the village I breathed freely, and began a spurt for the nearby jungle. In fifteen minutes I had reached it, and then I saw signal-fires burst out behind me and heard an uproar. The king had found that I had escaped.

I blamed it on Pang's barking, and wished that I had taken the little beast with me and killed him in some silent, lonesome spot.

The shouts behind urged me on, and I covered the next mile in something less than the world's record.

At length I came to a stone cave that was ideally situated for hiding. I rushed in and dropped on the bare stone floor.

At last I was safe. There was no chance of their finding me there. The entrance was well hidden. I had stumbled on it unexpectedly, and they would surely overlook it in the dark.

My joy expressed itself in a wide smile as I heard the pack of Igorrotes on my trail rush by my hiding-place. From their shouts I knew they had passed a mile away. I hugged myself with satisfaction at having saved my false teeth.

But the hug was a little premature. Just then something flashed through the opening of my cave.

It came to an abrupt stop. In a second I divined what it was. Pang had broken away and followed my scent. He set up a joyful barking on discovering me, and strained at his rope, for he had dragged the stone bottle after him, and it was now caught in the mouth of my cave.

I picked up a rock, and was about to crash his head in to stop the noise, when I heard a jabber outside.

Then there came a sudden tug at Pang's rope, and in place of the bottle a savage head appeared in the hole and thrust a torch through the gap.

At the same moment we recognized each other. It was Boobub. With a wild cry to his followers, he wriggled through the opening,

secured a good hold on me and pulled me back with him.

As I flew through the hole Pang yapped at me. I grasped a rock to hurl at him, when a sudden inspiration came to my aid. It was a great idea. If that flash had not come to me suddenly I certainly would not be here to relate the events.

When we reached the outside I was jerked to my feet, and Boobub caught me by the chin. He pulled my jaw open. Then a look of horror spread over his face. His hand dropped to his side, and he took a quick backward step.

I smiled. Boobub had been startled at finding that my false teeth had disappeared. I raised my lip and showed him the toothless cavity.

It was some minutes before he recovered from the shock. Then he held a pow-wow with his handful of followers who had been led to my hiding-place by Pang.

At length one of them darted into the cave with a torch. There was some exchange of shouts between him and those waiting outside. I realized that the man was explaining that the cave was hard, smooth rock, and that my plate could not be found.

Then I began overtures to the king. With a sweeping motion, I indicated the village, and told Boobub by signs that I had feared his wrath, and therefore had left my teeth behind, but so hidden that he never would be able to find them.

His determination to obtain crown jewels led him to believe my story, but he did not admit it until I had been rigidly searched and the ground for rods about had been inspected.

Then he became very gracious, and signed to me that he would give me my life if I explained just where the teeth had been left.

I laughed at this. He threatened. Knowing that I had the upper hand made me cool. Boobub made signs that he would kill me directly if I did not at once divulge the hiding-place.

Again I laughed in his face. He was furious, and yet he realized that my secret would die with me, and that could never be.

Suddenly he began to propose more liberal terms. The teeth were gone; I alone knew their hiding-place; he must have them.

Then I made a flat offer. He objected. We argued. At length he dispatched one of his men in

the direction of the main body of Igorrotes that had plunged on in the wrong course. Another man was sent back to the village.

I stood with arms calmly folded while they were gone. Boobub tried in every way to make me give up my secret, but I awaited the return of the men without a sign.

At length the man came back from the village and handed me twenty strings of gold. Then the other returned and signed to me that the hunters had been called off my trail, and that no one would molest me.

I had made signs agreeing to divulge the secret only on those conditions, with the provision that I be allowed to send back for my other goods, and depart immediately without being followed.

This was agreed to, and then I made elaborate motions, designating a certain corner of the hut where they were to dig until they came to a box containing the teeth.

Boobub understood the direction and with the happy smile of a boy, watched me as I departed with my strings of gold.

I looked back just once. One of the natives had severed the rope that held Pang to the jug, and the dog was following close to my heels.

Fifteen minutes later I stopped abruptly, stooped down and called Pang to me. I hated to do it, but it was absolutely necessary. I could not run the risk of having Pang give me away again.

I killed him. Then quickly I slit open his body and drew out my set of false teeth, which poor Pang had been trying to digest.

Placing them in my pocket, until I could reach a place where they could be cleaned, I looked down at the animal that had saved my life.

Poor Pang! It was a shame to have to kill him, but I could save the skin to remember him by.

How happy I was that the dog had a ravenous nature. What a lucky thing that the great idea had seized me just as I was being dragged from the cave.

I smiled as I thought of Boobub's gullibility. What if he found out that I had quickly jerked out my plate and thrown it to Pang, and that the dog had greedily snapped at it and swallowed it while the angry chief was pulling me out by the legs?

Poor Boobub! He would never think of that.

He would dig patiently for those crown jewels until half the village was rooted up. By that time I would be far away, bound for America, with my twenty strings of gold.

My forecast was correct. In a few months a good ship delivered me at Boston. I hurried at once to a taxidermist's and had Pang's skin well

mounted. It stands in a dark corner of my den, before me, as I write.

Then I ordered a new set of false teeth to carry about in case of emergency. If you don't believe the story I will show you the new plate. It is here in my pocket as I write. I am never without it.