

Flambeau, the Dog Postman

(5-6 классы)

Flambeau, the dog postman, was a famous dog belonging to the French Army. He lived in France in the town of Grenoble, which is at the foot of high mountains called the Alps.

It was Flambeau's duty to carry letters from Grenoble to some soldiers who were guarding a fort high up on one of the Alps. There was no road to the fort, only a very steep, rocky path. That was why Flambeau acted as postman.

One day each week the mail-bags were strapped to Flambeau's back, and off he set on his lonely, difficult climb. The soldiers in the fort looked forward eagerly to the visit of their postman, who brought news from the outside world to them.

What a welcome the soldiers gave to Flambeau when he reached the fort! They petted and fussed over him as they emptied the mail-bags. They gave him a huge dinner and saw that he had a well-earned rest before he set off on his return journey down the mountainside.

For eight years Flambeau faithfully carried out his difficult task, until the soldiers in the fort saw that the dog was becoming too old for the journey.

One day the officer in charge of the fort put his hand on the dog's head and said, 'Old boy, you will have to retire and live in the soldiers' barracks at the foot of the mountain. You will be well looked after there. We shall all miss you.'

Flambeau wagged his tail and licked the officer's hand.

So Flambeau went to live in the barracks. He soon became a great favourite there and everyone

treated him kindly, but the dog seemed less happy than before. He would often gaze up at the mountains as if longing to be off again to visit his friends in the fort.

One day about a year later, when no one was watching, Flambeau set out once more on the journey he knew so well.

Up and up he climbed, panting as he did so, because he was now much too old for such a steep climb. Would he ever reach the top? Flambeau plodded on, going slower and slower with each step. Though he carried no mail-bags, some of the old joy of his work came back to him. At last the fort was in sight!

One soldier had spotted him and with a shout of 'Flambeau!' dashed off to meet his old friend, the other soldiers following him. The men gathered round the dog, petting and fondling him.

Flambeau's strength was gone, but the brightness of his eye and the feeble wagging of his tail told the soldiers how happy he was to be back beside them once more.

As the dog lay panting beside them, the soldiers knew that the climb had been too much for him. They carried him into the fort and tended him carefully, but it was all in vain. In a short time their faithful friend was dead.

Flambeau's last climb was over.

African adventure

(7-8 классы)

The Frenchman was standing by the River Ogowe in Gabon, West Africa. For several minutes he had been watching a canoe fighting its way up river. He pulled out his telescope. The canoe was filled with boxes.

‘More work for me,’ thought the Frenchman.

He was the only white man for a hundred miles.

It was his job to check on any boats trading on the River Ogowe.

The Frenchman wiped the sweat from his face. He held the telescope steady and looked once again. He gasped with surprise. The paddlers were all African. There was nothing strange in that. But seated in the middle of the canoe was a whitewoman. She was the only passenger. It was difficult for him to believe his eyes. Women just didn’t travel on their own in the middle of the African jungle in the year 1894.

The Frenchman ran back to his office. Despite the midday heat he put on a tie and pulled on his best white jacket. He looked at himself in the mirror. He needed a shave but there wasn’t time for that. When he returned to the landing place on the river bank the canoe was pulling into the shore. The Frenchman waited while the canoe was tied up, then he helped the woman out.

‘Madame, may I ask the reason for your journey?’ said the Frenchman.

‘Certainly, I am fishing,’ replied the woman.

‘Fishing?’

‘Yes, I am collecting fish for the British Natural History Museum.’

‘But, you’re a woman!’

‘That is correct.’

‘But, but. . .’ stammered the Frenchman.

‘Can you tell me where I can buy food for my men? I want to carry on up river tomorrow,’ said the woman.

‘That is impossible! The Ogowe River is full of rapids.’ The Frenchman went into a long description of the dangers of the river. He became even more excited when he described the Fan people.

‘The Fans are a wild tribe. You will be travelling through their land. Madame, they are cannibals. They eat human flesh.’

‘I understand the meaning of the word cannibal, thank you. I would very much like to meet some of the Fan people,’ said the woman explorer.

After this last remark the Frenchman gave up. Clearly the woman could not be scared off. He told her where she could buy some stores for her boat.

The next morning Mary Kingsley helped load the supplies. She felt proud and excited. She was about to make a journey few men would attempt.

The paddlers took the canoe out into the middle of the river. Mary turned and waved to the Frenchman. He shook his head as he watched her go. He never expected to see her again. He felt sure that the English woman was crazy.

The paddlers had to fight against the strong current. They kept the canoe close to the left bank. Suddenly the canoe was swept into the middle of the river by a hidden current. Mary grabbed a paddle and pushed at the dangerous black rocks in the river. Her paddle was snapped in half and the canoe started to spin in the white foaming water.

Mary held on to the side and watched helplessly as the canoe was thrown against a rock. Crewmen and explorer were tipped out into the river. Mary went under. When she surfaced she was amazed to see the canoe resting on the rock above the water.

The supplies were still safe on board. A few seconds later the crew and Mary clambered up on to the rock. They pushed the canoe back into the water, climbed on board and paddled for the

safety of the bank.

'Miss, village close. We leave boat here. Village people friends, no harm us,' shouted one of the paddlers over the noise of the rapids.

'Good, M'bo. I agree,' answered Mary.

An hour later they arrived at the village. All the children stared at the strange white woman. They had seen several white-faced men, but never a white-faced woman.

Mary was taken to the chief of the village. He was wearing a ragged French uniform. Mary wondered how the chief had first got hold of the coat. Perhaps it was a present. Perhaps it had been taken. She didn't think it a good idea to ask. She handed him a Sheffield knife. The chief smiled and thanked her. Mary was led by one of the chief's wives to a large empty hut.

Once alone, she inspected her home for the night. The hut hadn't been lived in for a long time. In the doorway lay a large dog with a litter of pups.

After her tiring day Mary quickly fell into a deep sleep. Suddenly, a loud snarling woke her up. In the darkness she grabbed the nearest object. It was a three-legged stool. The moonlight was streaming through the doorway. She could see the dog fighting with what looked like an even bigger dog. Mary threw the stool at the snarling ball of fur and teeth.

The fighting stopped and the two animals leapt apart. Only then did Mary realize that the second animal was a leopard. It crouched, staring at her.

Its eyes were like two points of fire in the doorway. Mary tried not to move too quickly. She felt around her for something else to throw. Her fingers found a clay pot. She held it above her head and threw it with all her strength.

It was a perfect shot. The pot hit the leopard between its eyes and smashed. With a howl the animal turned and fled into the darkness. The dangers of the rapids seemed nothing after the adventure of that first night. Mary's crew became skilled at choosing the safest way up river and after a week of paddling, the last rapid was left behind.

The long journey was well worth while. Mary was able to collect examples of rare West African fish. Several of the fish were completely unknown to her. She was helped in her work by a Fan boy. He had asked to work as an extra paddler and Mary had agreed. She was pleased that her new friend was a member of the terrifying Fan tribe.

* When she wasn't collecting fish, insects and small animals, Mary spent many hours talking to the local witchdoctors. They told her about their people and the spirits of the jungle.

All too soon Mary had to begin the long journey back down river. Her crew sang as they dipped their paddles into the water. They had begun to admire the white woman in the long black dress. They even had a song about her.

Suddenly the crew's singing stopped. One of the paddlers jumped in fright and almost turned the canoe over. He pointed with a shaking hand over Mary's head. 'The Fan. The Fan are coming!', he yelled.

Mary couldn't see anybody on the river or along the river bank. She tried to remain calm. All her crew had dropped out of sight into the bottom of the boat.

Mary carefully moved to the back of the canoe and took charge of the steering. She ordered the crew to paddle. Soon the canoe was going faster than ever before.

'How many did you see?' Mary asked.

'Many thousands. Many, many thousands. They come with knives and guns. They kill us!' Mary then realized that her back was a good target for any Fan marksman. She turned and looked over her shoulder. One small canoe was chasing them. She smiled when she saw that it contained two old women and a few Fan warriors. One of the women was shouting, 'My son, my son!' Mary stopped smiling when three more canoes came round the bend in the river. These were packed with fully armed warriors. She looked at the young Fan paddler in her canoe. The boy saw her looking at him. Suddenly he turned round, jumped into the river and swam towards the Fan canoes. The chase was over. The boy had run away from home. The Fans only wanted

him back.

A few weeks later, Mary said farewell to her crew. She boarded a steamer and returned home.

In England Mary was surprised to discover that her travels had been reported in the British papers. She knew that her journeys in West Africa were not as amazing as those made by earlier explorers like Livingstone and Stanley. She knew that she was famous because she was the first woman to travel alone in Africa. But she was very happy when her scientific work was praised, too. She was asked to give several talks on her adventures. She wrote two long books about the life of the West African tribes. She had become an expert on the customs of the Fan people.

Just six years after her last African expedition, Mary Kingsley became a nurse. She went to South Africa to help the wounded in the Boer War. Because of overwork she fell ill and died in 1900, at the age of thirty-eight.

Queen Mary's Escape from Loch Leven Castle

(9-11 классы)

I never wanted to do the job in the first place, and it was my mother's fault that I was there at all. I'll tell you what happened. I suppose the story really started in the summer of 1567, last year. I think I was about fifteen or sixteen, though I'm not too sure about that. There are a lot of us in the family and my mother never bothers to remember birthdays. She wouldn't be able to buy us presents anyway, even if she did remember.

I'm the oldest son in the family. My father died some years ago and there's never much money for anything. We have a small farm and we manage to live off that, but it has been difficult.

We weren't always poor, because my father has proud and powerful relations. They are the Douglas family, and they own all the land where we live, by the side of Loch Leven. The castle on the island in the loch belongs to Sir William Douglas. I was named after him, but they don't call me Sir William, just plain Willy Douglas. Perhaps my father thought it would make Sir William do something to help me, but in the end it was my mother who spoke to Sir William.

It all happened because there had been fighting and trouble in the country for years. It was said that some of the lords in Edinburgh had raised an army against Queen Mary and were trying to take the throne from her.

Some of the lads from the village had gone to join the Queen's army. One of them came home last summer full of fine talk. The stories he had to tell about the Queen, and the Streets of Edinburgh and the fine lords around her! I begged my mother to let me go back with him, to join the Queen's army and fight for her. But mother would have none of it, she said that was the kind of nonsense my father used to talk, and that it was time I had an honest job.

We argued about it a lot, but in the end she went to Loch Leven Castle and begged Sir William to take me into his Service. He agreed to pay her enough money to help with the farm if I would promise to stay and work hard for him, so that was how I became a page in the household of Sir William Douglas.

I hated it. You would have thought living in the castle would be exciting. Well, it was anything but. I had to wait at table on Sir William and his wife and mother. I stood there for hours on end, handing round dishes and pouring wine for them. The food that I ate was never very good. There was never much left and I had to wait for it until after everyone else had eaten, so it was always cold.

The castle was cold too, cold and damp and grey, like the mists that came up from the loch. Nothing ever seemed to happen there. I sometimes thought I would have been better living in a prison, for it often seemed like that.

There were times, though, when Sir William's brother George came up from Edinburgh with his friends. They were a wild lot, drinking and laughing and joking. I liked waiting at table for them, pouring the wine all night and watching the fun. Sir William didn't like them, they made too much noise for him. So George came only rarely, and then only for one or two days to see his mother. After he went away things always seemed duller than ever, and I hated it even more.

And then, last June, everything changed. I remember it was one of those lovely clear summerdays, when it was almost warm in the castle. I was sitting fishing on the rocks below the gate when a boat came over from the shore. There was a man standing in it, shouting and waving. It was something about the Queen's army. It seemed that there had been a battle at a place called Carberry Hill, and she had been taken prisoner. Her army and the lords who had fought with her were scattered or imprisoned.

The messenger spent a long time that night talking with Sir William in his room. By sunrise the next morning the man had left, but for days afterwards there were people coming and going. The room at the top of the big tower was cleared out and I had to help carry in a bed and tables and chairs.

Three nights later the boat came over again, in the dark this time. There were a few soldiers, a big dark man who seemed to be in command, and some ladies. It was difficult to see in the dark, but

one of them, taller and thinner than the others, looked as if she was ill. They helped her up to the tower room and left her there with the other ladies.

That night I had to wait at table on Sir William and the big dark man. He was a fine lord, right enough, but there was something about him that frightened me. I know he was not a man I would have liked to work for. He was big and strong, with hard black eyes that seemed to watch everything at once. He drank very little, but he talked, and it was then I discovered who the lady was. The big dark man told Sir William that she must be kept safely imprisoned in the castle. He said that the future of Scotland lay in Sir William's hands and that no one must be allowed to even come near the Queen. I was pouring a glass of wine for him when he said it, and I almost dropped it in his lap. To think of Queen Mary a prisoner in Loch Leven Castle!

Of course I tried to catch a glimpse of her after that. I was curious to see what a queen looked like. I took food up to the tower room every day, but I was never allowed in. I had to give it to one of her ladies at the door, because they said the Queen herself was very ill. At first they hated us all and refused to talk to me, but I took them other things besides food. One day I picked a bunch of flowers from Lady Douglas's garden, and another time I took up one of the little white kittens from the kitchens. The lady said that the Queen liked that.

Gradually they spoke to me more and more, and then one day I was at last allowed into the room to meet the Queen herself. I don't really know what I was expecting her to look like, but I'll never forget that first meeting as long as I live. She was Standingby the window, looking out across the grey waters of the loch. It was late September by this time, and the weather was beginning to turn cold.

Queen Mary turned and looked at me and her face was as white as the snow on the hills. She seemed to glow in the dark corner of the room, like the pearls that Lady Douglas sometimes wore. She was tall, much taller than me and taller even than Sir William I think, with dark reddish-brown hair. She wasn't dressed like a queen, her clothes were plain and dark, but you would have known who she was for all that. She said she was tired and asked me to stay and talk to them, to amuse them, so I talked about my mother and the farm, and the things that happened in the castle.

I spent a lot of time with the Queen and her ladies after that. Sometimes I talked to them and made them laugh. Sometimes Queen Mary told me stories about her life as it was when she lived in France. She had lived at court with the French King and Queen, and had been married to the prince who would have become king. But he had died, and so she came back to Scotland. She said that was when all her troubles began. She loved France and talked a lot about the sunshine and the gardens full of fountains and flowers, and how much she wanted to go back there.

Loch Leven Castle was cold and damp, and she hated it just as much as I did.

All through the winter she talked to me about how she longed to go home to France, and of course I wanted to help her to get away from the place. By the time the spring came again we had decided what we must do. I knew that some of the women who worked in the kitchens lived on the other side of the loch and went ashore with the boatman every night. I stole two old cloaks, gave them to the Queen and one of her ladies, and helped them down to the castle gate as the kitchen women were going home for the night. Nobody stopped us or asked any questions and I chatted to them just as if they were serving-maids or laundry-women. I gave them each a bundle of dirty washing to carry ashore to make it look more real. But that was my mistake.

When the Queen was climbing into the boat she dropped her bundle, and when she reached out to pick it up again the boatman realised that she was no laundry-woman. She had beautiful hands, long and white, and he knew immediately who she was. She offered him money and a ring, but he was afraid for his life, and refused to take her ashore. He promised he wouldn't tell Sir William though, and for that she was very grateful.

We tried several times after that to think of some way to escape. One of the Queen's maids even tried jumping from a window, but she hurt her ankle. I had to find a rope to climb down and pull her back in again. We told Sir William she had fallen on the stairs, which would not have been difficult

because they are very old and worn.

It began to look as though Queen Mary would never escape, and she was becoming more and more unhappy, when George Douglas came back to the castle. The Queen had dinner that night with Sir William and all the family in the hall. She enjoyed herself. It was a long time since she had met so many people, and she laughed and talked happily. I could see George Douglas watching her all the time, and when she left to go back to her room, he stood and stared after her. Her dress and jewellery were not so fine as those that Lady Douglas wore, but she was so much more beautiful. I think George Douglas fell in love with her there and then.

Whatever happened, he stayed on much longer than he ever had before. He spent a lot of time sitting with the Queen and her ladies in the tower room. Sometimes I was with them, sometimes not. Sometimes I hated George Douglas for taking my Queen from me. Then one day they called me in.

George bolted the door behind me and they made me promise never to repeat to anyone what they were going to tell me. They had arranged between them how she would escape from the castle, but they couldn't do it without my help. Of course I promised to keep their secret and do what I could, and the Queen in turn promised that if she escaped she would take me with her. The castle would be no place for me to stay anyway after I had helped her to escape. They explained their plan to me. It was good, but it meant that we had to wait for the long weeks to pass until the first of May.

May is the beginning of summer - something special to celebrate after a long Scottish winter. In the castle they had the usual celebrations that we always used to have on the farm. The Queen and her ladies elected me as the 'Abbot of Unreason' for the day. That meant I had the right to go around playing jokes on anyone, and of course there was nothing they could do about it. The 'Abbot of Unreason' is king for the day. Even the soldiers joined in. Well, anything was a change from the long boring months of guarding that bleak, damp place. They enjoyed themselves, and by mid-morning most of them were laughing and joking and fairly drunk. We had arranged that once they were off guard I would slip out and knock holes in all the boats on the island. All but one, that is. We had to keep that for the escape.

Sir William never approved of these celebrations, and he began to wonder what was going on, but the Queen managed to keep him busy enough inside the castle, so he never found out what I was doing. We were all set to go ahead with the plan, there was only one thing wanting and that was a message from George Douglas to say that he was ready with men and horses.

The message came just as they sat down to dinner. A man came over with a pair of earrings for the Queen. She told Sir William that she had lost them some time before, and that the man had found them for her. She had actually given them to George, and he had sent them back as a signal that all was ready, and he was waiting.

Dinner that night seemed to go on for ever. They were still celebrating of course, becoming more and more drunk. Even Sir William joined in the fun at last, so it was not difficult to steal the keys of the castle from him.

I crept down to the courtyard as fast and as quietly as I could. But I needn't have bothered being quiet, there were guards lying snoring on the stairs by then, and the noise could have been heard across the loch.

Queen Mary and her ladies were waiting for me in the dark shadows by the castle gates. Together we pulled open the heavy door. There was no guard to stop or challenge us, and she stepped out to freedom.

We locked the gates behind us, climbed into the one safe boat, and I pulled the oars with all the strength I had to take us away from that dreary place. Halfway across the loch we threw the keys into the water. Sir William was going to have some trouble getting out of his own castle! The Queen laughed at that and clapped her hands in delight.

George Douglas was waiting for us just as he had promised, in the shadow of the trees by the bank. He had stolen some of Sir William's best horses, so we made good speed and were well away before anyone realised what had happened.

We have ridden all night, and have only stopped for a rest at a house that belongs to a friend of George's. We will eat and drink, take fresh horses and leave ours here. Then we will ride on.

The Queen says that we must go to England, where she believes she has friends who will help her. I don't know what will happen now, but I do know that I will stay with my Queen as long as I live, and as long as she needs me.