Renshaw Fanning's Quest

By
Bertram Mitford

Freeditorial

RENSHAW FANNING'S QUEST

Chapter One.

Thirst-Land.

The heat was terrible.

Terrible, even for the parched, burning steppes of the High Veldt, whose baked and crumbling surface lay gasping in cracks and fissures beneath the blazing fierceness of the African sun. Terrible for the stock, enfeebled and emaciated after months of bare subsistence on such miserable wiry blades of shrivelled grass as it could manage to pick up, and on the burnt and withered Karroo bushes. Doubly terrible for those to whom the wretched animals, all skin and bone, and dying off like flies, represented nothing more nor less than the means of livelihood itself.

Far away to the sky-line on every side, far as the eye could travel, stretched the dead, weary surface of the plain. Not a tree, not a bush to break the level. On the one hand a low range of flat-topped hills floated, mirage like, in mid-air, so distant that a day's journey would hardly seem to bring you any nearer; on the other, nothing—nothing but plain and sky, nothing but the hard red earth, shimmering like a furnace in the intolerable afternoon heat; nothing but a frightful desert, wherein, apparently, no human being could live—not even the ape-like Bushman or the wild Koranna. Yet, there stands a house.

A house thoroughly in keeping with its surroundings. A low one-storied building, with a thatched roof and walls of sun-baked brick. Just a plain parallelogram; no attempt at ornamentation, no verandah, not even a stoep. No trace of a garden either, for in this horrible desert of drought and aridity nothing will grow. Hard by stand the square stone kraals for the stock, and a little further on, where the level of the plain sinks into a slight depression, is an artificial dam, its liquid store at present reduced to a small patch of red and turgid water lying in the middle of a surrounding margin of dry flaky mud, baked into a criss-cross pattern of cracks, like a huge mosaic.

On a low, stony kopje, a few hundred yards distant from this uninviting homestead, sits its owner. Nobody but a Boer could dwell in such a place, would be the first thought succeeding that of wonder that any white man could be found to inhabit it at all. But a glance would suffice to show that he now sitting there is not a member of that dogged and pachydermatous race. The face is a fine—even a noble—one, whose features the bronzed and weatherworn results of a hard life have failed to roughen. A broad, lofty brow, and pensive dark eyes stamp their owner as a man of intellect and thought, while the peculiar curve of the well-formed nostrils betokens a sensitive and self-contained nature. The lower half of the face is hidden by a dark silky beard and moustache.

One brown, sinewy hand grasps a geologist's hammer, with which it chips away listlessly at the ground. But, although the action is now purely mechanical, it is not always so, as we shall see if we use our story-teller's privilege and dip into his inner thoughts. Briefly rendered, they run in this wise:

"Oh, this awful drought! When is it going to end? Not that it much matters, either way, now, for there's hardly a sound hoof left on the place; and, even if a good rain did come, it would only finish off the whole fever-stricken lot. Well, I'll have to clear out, that's one consolation. I've held on as long as any man could, and now I'll just have to go."

His gaze wanders over the arid plain. Far away through the shimmer it rests on a multitude of white specks—a flock of Angora goats, striving in desperation to pick up what miserable subsistence it may.

"There's nothing to be done with the place—nothing," he muses, bringing his hammer down upon a boulder with a despairing whack. "It won't sell even for an old song—no one will so much as touch land now, nor will they for a long time to come, and there isn't a 'stone' ('Diamond' in digger parlance) on the whole farm, for I've dug and fossicked in every likely place, and unlikely one, too. No; I'll shut up shop and get away. The few miserable brutes left are not worth looking after—not worth their brand ziek (Scab-affected) skins. Yet I'll have one more search, one more crazy fool's errand, after the 'Valley of the Eye,' before I trek. This 'll make the fifth—but, no matter. One may as well make an ass of oneself five times as four. I can't exactly believe old Greenway took all that trouble to dictate an infernal lie on his death-bed; and, if his yarn's true, I'm a rich man for life—if I can only find the place, that is," he adds bitterly. "And I've had four shies at it. Well, perhaps the fifth is going to be lucky."

With which consoling reflection the thinker rises from his stony resting-place, revealing as he does so a tall, straight figure, admirably proportioned. Suddenly he starts, and a sallow paleness comes over the bronzed, handsome features. For he is conscious of a strange giddiness. A mist seems to float before his eyes, shutting out completely the glare of the burning veldt.

"Never that cursed up-country fever again?" he murmurs, to himself, in real alarm.

And for the latter there is reason—reason in the abnormal and unhealthy heat of the terrible drought—reason in his utter isolation, the vast distance between himself and a fellow-countryman—let alone such considerations as medical aid.

Recovering himself with an effort, he strolls on towards the house. There is no sign of life about the place as he approaches, unless a couple of miserable, fever-stricken sheep, panting and wheezing in the shade of the kraal wall, constitute such. But, dead and tomb-like as it looks outside, there is something refreshing in the coolness of the inner room as he enters. A rough tablecloth is laid, and a knife and fork. The walls are papered with pictures from illustrated prints, and are hung with swinging shelves containing a goodly number of books of all sorts. A few chairs and a couch, the latter much the worse for wear, constitute the furniture; and, on the

whole, what with pipes, stray bits of saddlery, and miscellaneous odds and ends of every description, the place is about as untidy as the average bachelor abode is apt to be within the pale of civilisation, let alone away on the High Veldt. The floor is of hardened clay, and there is no ceiling—nothing between the inmate of the room and the bare and ragged thatch, one drawback to which arrangement being that a fine, lively tarantula will occasionally drop down upon the head or shoulder of the said inmate.

A call of "Kaatje. Dinner bring," is soon productive of that meal, in so far as the remnant of a half-starved and wholly unnutritious chicken, dressed up with so insipid an ingredient as some plain boiled rice, can be said to constitute dinner. It is productive, simultaneously, of an extraordinary specimen of humanity.

A creature of mahogany hue and parchment hide, the latter hanging in flaps around her perspiring and scantily-attired person. A creature of the hideosity of one of Bunyan's fiends—a frightful grin, horn-like ears, and a woolly skull—waddling on the abnormal hip-development of the native Bushman or Koranna. A nice sort of being to bring in one's dinner, not of itself over-inviting! But one gets used to queer things on the High Veldt, and this hideous and repulsive object is only a harmless Koranna woman, and according to her lights a good old soul enough; and she officiates as cook and general factotum to this rough and ready household of one.

The swarming flies buzz around. The windows are black with them; the table is black with them; the air is thick with them. In they sail through open windows and open doors, fresh from the foetid stew-pans of the kitchen; fresh from the acrid, pungent dust of the goat kraals; fresh from the latest garbage, which they have been sharing with carrion birds, in the veldt. They light on the diner's head, crawl about his face, crowd over plates and dishes and tablecloth—mix themselves up with the food, drown themselves in the drink. Everywhere flies.

The South African house-fly is identical with the British, but he is a far greater pest. He is more aggressive, and he brings to bear upon his victims the solid weight of numbers. Go where you will, you cannot shake him off. If you fit up a waggon, and dive into the far interior, there also will the common fly be with you—and with you in swarms.

Renshaw Fanning looks disgustedly at his uninviting meal, and plays with it rather than eats. Then he pushes back his chair. He has no appetite.

Again he seeks the open air. A restless mood is upon him, and broiling, stifling as the heat is outside, he cannot remain in the house. Suddenly a winged object appears fluttering in the sunlight. A quick exclamation escapes him, as he shades his eyes to watch it.

"Ha, of course! The last straw! Locusts. Here they come, by Jove! thicker and thicker to put the finishing touch on what the drought has begun. By this time to-morrow there won't be a blade of grass left on the place, nor a hoof either."

He stands watching the flying insects. Barely five minutes after the discovery of the first one, the air is thick with them. They seem to spring out of nowhere. Thicker and thicker they come, their

gauzy wings fluttering in the sunlight, blundering into the spectator's face, colliding with the walls, falling to the ground. It is an ill wind that blows nobody good. A few starved fowls at the back of the house perk up into new life as they rush forth to fill their emaciated carcases with this unlooked-for and abundant dainty. But the watcher withdraws indoors again, as if to shut out all sight and sound of these new and fatal intruders, and, as he does so, he is conscious of terrible shooting pains in his limbs.

Though of Irish parentage on one side, Renshaw Fanning is South African born. His life, so far—and he is now thirty-five—has been a hard one. Few, indeed, are the wilder, rougher phases of South African life of which he has not had more or less experience. He has farmed and has ridden transport (Carriage of goods by waggon), he has hunted and traded in the far interior, he has been a treasure-seeker, and has also fought in the border warfare which now and then breaks out between the colonists and their savage neighbours. But profitable as some of these avocations frequently are, somehow or other Renshaw Fanning has never seemed to make a success of anything, and this is mainly owing to the extraordinary unselfishness of the man. He will divest himself of his last shilling to help a friend in need, or even a mere acquaintance—indeed, he owes the possession of his arid and uninviting desert farm to this very failing, in that he has been forced to accept it in satisfaction of a bad debt which would otherwise completely have ruined him. As a matter of course, his friends and acquaintances vote him a fool, but deep down in their hearts lies a mine of respect for the only thoroughly unselfish man they have ever known; and even the unscrupulous ones who have traded upon and profited by his failing did so with compunction.

But with all his soft-heartedness and sensitive and retiring temperament, none who knew him have ever for a moment mistaken Renshaw Fanning for a muff. No cooler brain exists, no steadier hand or keener eye in times of danger or dangerous sport—whether at a critical moment, at the mercy of some treacherously disposed barbarian tribe in the far interior, or with finger on trigger awaiting the lightning-like charge of a wounded and infuriated lion. Or on treasure-seeking enterprise, when physical obstacles combined with failure of water and scarcity of provisions to render advance or retreat a work of almost superhuman difficulty, the post of hardship and privation was that which he unobtrusively assumed; and, indeed, there are men still living who, but for this, would long since have left their bones in the desert—occupants of unknown graves. No, assuredly none who know him can ever mistake Renshaw Fanning for a muff.

Such is the man whom we see, solitary, depressed, and in breaking health, contemplating, on his desert farm, the approach of ruin—which ruin all efforts on his part are powerless to avert.

Chapter Two.

A Friend in Need.

Down, down to the far horizon sinks the westering sun, the malignant fierceness of his blazing countenance abating somewhat, for he is within an hour of his rest. Yet the earth still gives forth its shimmering heat, and on every side the red surface of the parched-up plain assumes a hue of blood beneath the golden glow of sunset, which, contrasted with the vivid blue of the heavens, is productive of a strangely weird and unearthly effect.

So thinks, at any rate, a horseman, toilsomely making his way over its inhospitable expanse. His steed, suffering terribly from want of water, as well as from a lack of nutritious food, can hardly drag its limbs along, and more than once has the rider endeavoured to relieve the poor beast by undertaking long spells of walking. But who can indulge in protracted exercise under such difficulties? Consequently the horseman, though of fine and powerful build, is nearly as fagged and used up as his unfortunate steed. Now and again a flying locust raps him in the face as he rides.

"What an infernal country!" he exclaims aloud, wiping his dripping forehead. "Nearly sunset, no sort of habitation in sight, and not even a drop of water in this howling desert. By Jove! the situation is getting serious," he adds, in a tone bordering on alarm.

His alarm is not without reason. Since quitting last night's camp beside a nearly dry waterhole, containing a noisome mixture, and that of the consistency of pea-soup, he has found no trace of the indispensable fluid. And he is lost. A worn-out horse under him, foodless, waterless, in the midst of an apparently interminable desert, he has every excuse for beginning to feel excessively concerned.

He is a fine, tall, well set-up man, this stranger. No partiality could define him as handsome. His features have no regularity, and his light-blue eyes are a trifle too small and deep set; but there is a certain power about his countenance, whose square, resolute jaw the short, fair, pointed beard and heavy, sweeping moustache can only half hide. Though his face and hands are burnt red brown, there is a subtle something which tells at a glance he is not colonial born, and that, too, quite apart from the newness of his travelling dress prematurely worn by rough usage, and of the serviceable valise which is strapped in front of his saddle.

A stony kopje, the only eminence for five miles around, rises before the traveller. This he has been using as a landmark, and through its agency steering in a straight line. It, too, having reached, he now ascends, and immediately there escapes him a pretty forcible ejaculation of relief. Away in front, breaking the deadly monotony of this horrible plain, lies a house—a homestead.

It is still three or four miles distant, though apparently nearer. But the horse has espied it as soon as his rider, and, pricking forward his ears, he picks up his head and steps out with something of an approach to briskness.

The first elation—at the certainty of finding necessaries, such as food and drink—over, the traveller's thoughts turn to considerations of comfort. After all, the welcome haven is in all probability a mere rough Boer homestead, the abode of dirt and fleas, a place wherein comfort is an unknown quantity. And at such a prospect, hungry, thirsty, thoroughly wearied as he is, his spirits droop.

But his musings are interrupted in a sufficiently startling manner, by nothing less than the "whiz" of a bullet unpleasantly close to his head, simultaneously with the "bang" of the piece whence it was discharged.

Looking up, he finds that he has approached within a few hundred yards of the homestead. In the doorway of the same stands a tall man, clad in a shirt and trousers, with a gun in his hand, from which he is extracting the still smoking cartridge shell. Barely has he mastered these details than another bullet sings past his ear, this time nearer than the first, while the report rings out upon the evening air.

To say that the wayfarer begins to feel exceedingly uncomfortable is to express little. Here he is, a perfectly peaceable, unoffending person, about to seek the much-needed hospitality of yonder domicile, and suddenly, and without an iota of provocation, its owner proceeds to make a target of him in the most cold-blooded fashion. True, he has heard that many of the up-country Boers are a wild and lawless set, holding an Englishman in utter detestation. But this open and unprovoked "act of war" surpasses anything he may have been led to expect.

"Here, hallo! You, sir! What are you blazing away at me for?" he sings out, his tone betraying a degree of anger which prudence should have induced him to suppress.

His hand instinctively goes to the revolver slung round him in a holster under his coat. But of what use is a six-shooter against an enemy many hundred yards distant, and armed with a rifle? Therefore, it is with considerable relief that he beholds his unexpected adversary ground his piece, stare at him for a moment, then disappear indoors.

The feeling is but transitory, however, as it occurs to him that the fellow has probably gone in to get more cartridges, and that any moment he may find himself once more raked by the enemy's fire. He judges it prudent to try the effect of a parley before venturing any nearer.

"Hi! Hallo, friend!" he shouts, "just drop that target practice, will you? There isn't an ounce of harm about me. I'm nothing but a poor devil of a traveller lost in the veldt, and pretty well dead for want of a drink. D'you understand?"

Then it strikes him that if the inhospitable householder is, as he expects, a Boer, he will probably not understand.

"What is to be done?" exclaims the wayfarer in sheer despair. "Well, here goes. May as well be shot as starve in the veldt; and perhaps the fellow's only playing the fool—trying what I'm made

of—and, if I were only within fifty, or even a hundred yards of him, the 'trying' wouldn't be all on one side."

Thus musing, he continues his advance upon the homestead, walking his horse, and whistling in an attempt to appear thoroughly unconcerned, although, in point of actual fact, he feels pretty much as the Six Hundred must have done on receipt of the historic and idiotic order. But no more leaden greetings reach him, nor does the enemy appear. All is silent as the grave as he rides up to the house.

The front door stands wide open, exactly as the shooter had left it on retiring therefrom. There is not a sound of anybody moving inside. The place might have been uninhabited. Just then the sun, which all this time has gradually been sinking, and has already touched the horizon, disappears.

Something like a chill creeps over the traveller at the sudden gloom which falls upon the tenement just as he is about to cross its threshold. Standing at the door, he raps it, somewhat impatiently, with the handle of his whip. No answer.

Cautiously, and with hand on his pistol, he enters. There is no passage; the door opens straight into the sitting-room. At the sight which meets his eyes he starts, and involuntarily falls back.

In a corner of the room stands a tall figure. Leaning with one shoulder against the wall, its eyes are fixed upon the intruder, great hollow eyes, which seem to glitter strangely, and the deathly pallor of the face is enhanced by its framing of dark hair and beard. Though otherwise motionless, both hands and lips are working slightly, but no sound escapes the latter. The wayfarer, though not by any means a man of weak nerves, is conscious of something horribly uncanny about this ghostlike figure, so silent and immovable, glowering at him in the shades of the fast-gathering twilight.

But at the same time he recognises his recent assailant. No ghost this, but—a madman.

For a moment both stand staring at each other. Then the strange-looking figure speaks.

"Welcome, friend—welcome. Come in, come in. Make yourself at home. Have you brought any locusts with you? Lots of them—swarms, to eat up what little grass the drought has left. Have you brought them, I say? Aha—fine things, locusts! Don't know how we should get on without them. Grand things for this Country! Fine country this! Green as an emerald. Emeralds, no, diamonds. But there isn't a 'stone' on the place, devil a 'stone.'"

"Locusts! Emeralds! Diamonds!" echoes the stranger in amazement. "Scott, but the poor chap's clean off his chump—clean off it! What on earth am I to do with him, or with myself either for the matter of that?"

"Not a 'stone' on the place!" goes on the speaker, in a mournful tone. "I've fossicked high and low, and there isn't one—not one. Ah, but—the Valley of the Eye! Come, friend. We will start at

once. You shall make your fortune. Dirk! Dirk!" he shouts, passing the wondering stranger, and gaining the doorway.

A withered old Koranna, clad in a mangy sheep-skin kaross, who has just finished penning a flock of Angora goats in one of the kraals, comes running up at the summons. At sight of his master his parchment visage assumes a look of deep concern.

"Die Baas is reegte zick!" ("The master is properly ill.") he says, turning to the stranger.

"I should rather think he was," assents the latter, who, although his acquaintance with colonial Dutch is extremely limited, has no difficulty in grasping the old fellow's meaning. "Stones, locusts, Valley of the Eye! Pho! The sooner we get him to bed the better. I say, Old man," he breaks off persuasively, laying a hand on the shoulder of his unconscious host, "you're not quite the thing, you know. Come along and turn in. I'll give you a hand at getting your togs off."

The other looks at him vacantly, and seems to comprehend. He suffers himself to be led into the inner room quite docilely, and there and then to be assisted into bed. Once there, however, the blood rushes to his face, and he begins raving horribly, though his violence finds expression in speech rather than in action.

The stranger sits at his bedside carefully watching him.

"Not mad—only fever," he remarks to himself at the close of one of these paroxysms. "Bush fever, I suppose, and plenty of it. He's got a pulse like a steam hammer, by Jove!"

He has. Not for nothing has that unwonted giddiness, those shooting pains in the limbs, attacked him a few hours earlier. By nightfall Renshaw Fanning is in a burning fever, raving in the throes of delirium.

Chapter Three.

Renshaw Fanning's Secret.

The stranger's wants had been attended to by the old Koranna woman already described; which may be taken to mean that he had found time to snatch a hurried meal during one of the sick man's quiet intervals. Then he had returned to his post.

His inhospitable, not to say dangerous, reception stood now accounted for, and with a vivid recollection of the same he took an early opportunity of carefully hiding all the firearms he could lay hands on. Old Dirk and his wife kept coming in on tiptoe to see how their master was getting on, and, in fact, betrayed an amount of concern for his well-being hardly to be looked for in the scions of a wild and degraded race. But Renshaw Fanning was a man to command attachment, from untutored and degraded savages no less than from a dog.

The night wore on, and these humble and faithful retainers, seeing that their master was in better hands than theirs, had retired to roost. The stranger, having dragged a capacious armchair into the bedroom, sat and watched. Who could this man be, he wondered, dwelling alone in this desert place, stricken with mortal sickness, and no one to tend him save a couple of miserable specimens of a miserable race, were it not that providentially he himself, in the character of a lost and starving wayfarer, had chanced upon the scene? His gaze wandered round the room. Its white-washed walls were bare and cracked, and devoid of ornament, save for a small but massive silver crucifix hanging above the bed, and an artistically carved statuette of the Blessed Virgin on a bracket. These objects, at any rate, pointed to their owner's creed, a heritage received with his Irish descent, and the plainness, or roughness rather, of the domicile in general seemed to point to a hard and struggling existence.

The night brought with it but little respite from the broiling heat of the day. Not a breath stirred the air. Even with the house door and all the windows wide open the oppressive stuffiness of the room seemed wellnigh unbearable. Winged insects, attracted by the light, found their way in by swarms, and a huge tarantula, leaving his lair in the thatch, began to walk leisurely down the wall. With something like a shudder of disgust, the stranger picked up a slipper and shied it at the hairy monster, with the effect of making him scuttle back to the shelter of the friendly thatch as fast as his legs could carry him.

The sick man tossed restlessly from side to side, now moaning, now talking to himself. Listening intently, the watcher noted that the patient's wildly spoken thoughts seemed to run strongly in two grooves—diamond seeking, and a member of the other sex. As to the latter, his voice would assume a thrilling tenderness as he passionately and oft seemed to be abjuring somebody of the name of Violet. As to the former, he was alternately despondent and fiercely sanguine, as he alluded again and again to a certain "Valley of the Eye."

"The Valley of the Eye, by Jove!" muttered the watcher to himself. "Why, that's the very thing he began about directly I came in. Said it was going to make our fortunes. There must be something

in it—and—I'll bet a guinea that thing he wears round his neck holds the secret, or the clue, to it," he added, starting up in excitement over the idea.

He went softly over to the patient. The latter's left hand was clutching a flat pouch or bag of buckskin which lay upon his chest. It was suspended from his neck by a stout lanyard of raw hide.

The watcher stood for a few minutes, his eyes glittering with a strange excitement. A temptation, which was well-nigh irresistible, had come upon him. Why should he not obtain possession of the pouch, and thus share in the secret which might lead to boundless wealth? He need not retain it long, only long enough to master its contents. He could easily return it.

Then his instincts of good seemed to get the upper hand. He was not a blackguard, he told himself, and surely to take advantage of this man's helplessness to steal his secrets would be a blackguardly and dishonest act. But, alas and alas! When the possibility opens of acquiring wealth, a man's best instincts are sure to be heavily handicapped, and so it was here.

He took a cup of milk which stood by the bedside, and, raising the patient's head, put it to his lips. It was only goat's milk, and thin stuff at that, thanks to the parched state of the veldt; but poor Renshaw drank eagerly, then fell back quiet and composed. It seemed as though the delirium had departed.

Watching him thus for a moment the stranger left him and sought the house door. He seemed to feel an irresistible longing for the open air. But so close, so stifling was the night that, as he stood outside, he hardly realised the change into the outer air. Not a living thing was moving, not a sound was heard, save now and then the trumpet-like sneeze of a goat in the kraals. Overhead, the dark vault of heaven seemed literally to flash and grow with constellations. Shooting stars darted, rocket-like, across the zenith in numbers unknown to our colder skies; and, as he looked, a bright meteor shot athwart the velvety space, leaving a red sinuous trail. But in the dead still solitude a voice seemed to whisper to his now heated imagination, "The Valley of the Eye! The Valley of the Eye!"

Re-entering, he stole a glance at his patient. The latter was now slumbering peacefully. His hand had relaxed its convulsive grasp of the buckskin pouch, and was resting beside him. Now was the time.

The stranger bent over him; then the deft "snick" of a sharp knife. The pouch was in his hand.

For the moment he felt like a common footpad. His heart beat violently as he regained his seat near the window and the light. For some minutes he sat watching the sick man. But the latter slept on peacefully. Now for the secret!

He ripped open one side of the pouch in such wise that it could easily be sewn up again. Then came a waterproof wrapper which, being unrolled, disclosed a large sheet of parchment-like paper covered with writing.

Down this he hurriedly ran his eye prior to a more careful perusal of its contents. But even this cursory glance was enough to make his face flush and his eye glisten. His hand shook so that it could scarcely hold the paper. Here was the key to wealth illimitable.

And then a strange and startling thing happened. The paper was suddenly snatched from his grasp.

So quickly was this done, so absolutely terrifying was his abrupt and wholly unlooked-for turn in the state of affairs, that his glance was hardly quick enough to mark the paper disappearing through the open window beside which he was seated, or the black, claw-like hand which had seized it. Yet he did only just see both.

He fell back in his chair in a cold sweat. Such a thing to happen in the dead midnight, with not a soul but himself astir. Small wonder that, unnerved by the dastardly act of robbery he had just committed, his thoughts should revert straight to Satan himself. The sick man was still slumbering peacefully.

Recovering his nerve to some extent, he rushed to the door and gained the outer air. All was still as death. As his sight became used to the modified gloom of the starlight he went round to the back of the house—made the complete circuit of it. Not a living thing was astir. He went even further afield, peering here, there, and everywhere. In vain. Then, with nerve and system shaken as they had never been before in his life, he returned indoors.

For long he sat motionless, pondering over this extraordinary occurrence. The first shock of surprise, the first involuntary access of superstition past, two considerations obtruded themselves. The prospect of possible wealth had been snatched from his grasp, literally strangled at its birth, for the paper looked genuine, and was certainly lucid enough, but it required studying, and that carefully. For the rest, how should he eventually account to its owner for its disappearance? And at this thought he began to feel exceedingly uncomfortable.

Not for long, however. The bag could easily be replaced, and the chances were that its owner would take for granted the security of its contents, and not go to the trouble of opening it to ascertain. Or he himself might be far enough away by that time, but that he was loth to abandon a fellow-countryman on a lonely sick-bed in that frightful wilderness; and we must, in justice to the man, record that this consideration was genuine and wholly untinged by his own reluctance to turn his back on the place until every effort to recover the precious document had been tried. Should, however, the worst come to the worst, and Renshaw be moved to assure himself of the safety of his secret, what could be easier than to persuade him that he had himself insisted on destroying it in his delirium?

He rose softly to hunt for a needle and some twine. Having found them he re-stitched the pouch, carefully copying the mode of stitching which had held it together before. Then he went over to the bedside to re-fasten it to the sick man's neck.

This was no easy task. Poor Renshaw began to grow restless again, as though a glimmer of inspiration across his clouded and enfeebled brain warned him that his cherished secret had been tampered with. At last, however, through the exercise of consummate patience and care, the thing was done.

With a feeling of relief the stranger once more sought the outer air.

“What a fool the man must be!” he said to himself. “From the date of that paper he must have been in possession of the clue for at least two years, and yet he hasn’t turned it to account. The place should be easy to find, too; anyway, I’ll lay a guinea I’d have ferreted it out long before this. Rather! Long before!”

Thus he decided, overlooking the trifling probability that if Renshaw Fanning, with lifelong experience as a hunter, treasure-seeker, and adventurer in general, had failed to hit upon the mysterious locality, it was hardly to be supposed that he, Maurice Sellon, new arrival in South Africa, who, for instance, had been unable to travel across the Karroo plains without losing himself, would fare any better.

But then an under-estimate—either habitual or occasional—of his own merits or abilities did not rank among the failings of the said Maurice Sellon.

Chapter Four.

Sunningdale.

A wild, deep, romantic valley, winding between lofty bush-clad hills, their summits broken into many a rugged cliff, which echoes back the muffled roar of a mountain torrent foaming and hissing through its pent-up rocky channel. A lovely valley as travelled in the morning sunshine, melodious with the piping of birds from the cool shade of tangled brake and sylvan recesses on either side. Overhead a sky of the most brilliant blue; around a fresh, clear atmosphere, revivifying as wine; for it is mountain air and the day is yet young.

At its head the valley opens out into a wide basin, where the stream winds and curves through a green fertile bottom, whose rich soil for many acres is covered with growing crops of wheat and maize. Higher up still, in vivid contrast to the darker-hued foliage around, stands forth a group of tall willows, their trailing feathery boughs—affording a nesting-place to a perfect colony of noisy and chattering finks—shading the glassy surface of a large dam. Between this and an extensive orchard, whose well-cared-for trees are groaning beneath the weight of their ripening loads—peaches and apricots, the delicate nectarine, and the luscious pear—stands the homestead.

No bare, rough-and-ready shanty of sun-baked bricks this, but a good and substantial house, rendered picturesque by its surrounding of orange trees and pomegranates; of great red cactus, glowing prismatically, now crimson, now scarlet; of many-hued geraniums; of the royal passion flower twining up the pillars of the stoep, spreading over the roof of the verandah itself. No dead, drear, arid thirst-land this, but a veritable garden of Eden; the murmur of running water in the air, the fruits of the earth glowing and ripening around, the sunlight glinting in a network through the foliage, and a varying chorus of gladsome bird-voices echoing around from far and near. Such is Sunningdale—Christopher Selwood's farm in the Umtirara Mountains. Nor was it inappropriately named.

Seated on the stoep aforesaid, under the cool shade of the verandah, are two young women—one busily engaged on a piece of needlework, the other reading, or, to be more accurate, pretending to read. Not less dissimilar in appearance are these two than in their present occupation. One tall, fair, grave; the Other of smaller build, dark, espiègle. One deliberate of speech and movement; the other all mirth and vivacity upon any or no provocation.

"How much longer are you going on with that eternal stitch, stitch, stitch, Marian?" cries the latter, dropping her book for the twentieth time and yawning.

She addressed smiles slightly.

"Why? What would you rather I did?" she says. "You generally say it's too hot to stroll in the morning."

“Do I? Well, perhaps it is. But you were looking so preternaturally solemn, and so silent, that I believe you were thinking of—some one. Who was it? Come, out with it!”

“You shouldn’t judge everybody from your own standpoint, Violet,” is the good-humoured reply. “Now, my private opinion is you are developing quite a fidgety vein because we only get a post here once a week.”

A close observer, watching the countenance of her thus bantered, might have thought there was a hit underlying this perfectly innocent remark, but if so it escaped the speaker, for she never looked up from her sewing.

“Ha, ha, ha! Oh, wise Marian. The post, indeed! You should see the cartload of astonishing effusions I get. I believe I will let you see them one of these days. They’d astonish you considerably, if only as evidence of what a lot of idiots there are among men. No; your sagacity is at fault. You haven’t hit the right nail this time.”

“Don’t you get rather tired of that kind of fun?” said Marian, biting off the end of her thread. “I should have thought there was a great deal of sameness in it.”

“Sameness! So there is. But what is one to do? I can’t help it. I don’t ask them to come swarming round me. They do it. I see a man for the first time to-day, forget his very existence to-morrow, and the day after that he tells me he can’t live without me. It isn’t my fault. Now, is it?”

“Since you ask me, I tell you I firmly believe it is. You’re a hard-hearted little—wretch, and one of these days you’ll find your own wings singed—mark my words.”

“A truce to your platitudes,” laughed the other. “I’ve heard that said so often—and—sometimes I almost wish it would come true. It would be such a novel sensation.”

By the above it will be manifest to the reader that the enunciator of these sentiments could be nothing less than an arrant flirt; as, indeed, was the case. Violet Avory was as proud of her conquests, and the multifold trophies of a substantial nature which accompanied them, as a Cheyenne war-chief of his scalps, and she looked upon them in the same light—legitimate tributes to her own prowess. She had begun to flirt when she was fourteen, and had carried it on, seriously and without a break, up to date, and she was now twenty-two. And Nature had endowed her with bountiful facilities in that line. Her face conformed to the strictest canons of beauty—oval, high-bred, with regular and delicate features, melting dark eyes, and a winsome little mouth with a smile ever hovering around its corners; and her quick, vivacious manner was forcibly if unconventionally defined by a large section of her admirers, especially the younger ones, as “awfully fetching.” She was a sort of distant connection of the Selwoods, whose acquaintance she had made during their last visit to England. They had been immensely taken with her, and now she was fulfilling a long-standing invitation to visit them in their South African home.

But with all her dazzling beauty and winning arts some men would not have looked twice at Violet Avory when Marian Selwood was by. The fair sweet face of the latter, with its large sleepy eyes, its red, smiling lips, parting from a row of white regular teeth, could grow very lovely; indeed, it was one of those faces which gain upon the observer with its owner's further acquaintance. Nor was its normal gravity other than on the surface, for to cause the great blue eyes to sparkle with fun and mischief was no difficult matter. And Marian's disposition was as sweet as her face, her mind that of a refined gentlewoman. She was born in the colony, and had lived the greater part of her life where we now see her, helping to keep house for her brother and his wife.

"Hot or cool, I vote we stroll somewhere," cried Violet, starting up from her chair with a restlessness and energy she seldom displayed at that time of the day, when the sun made himself very definitely felt, even at that elevation.

"Very well," acquiesced the other, gathering up her work. Then she added, with a smile, "You had better get a sunshade, Violet, or you'll be taking back quite a stock of freckles. The now disconsolate ones will all cry off then."

"Will they! But—are you not going to take one?"

"No. I'm about burnt enough already. Besides, there are no disconsolate ones in my case to doom to disillusion, so it doesn't matter."

"Oh yes! Very likely! I'm sure to believe that."

"Go away, and get your hat on," interrupted Marian.

"Come now, Marian," said Violet, as the two girls wandered down the shady walk under the fruit-trees. "It's all very well for you to affect the solemn, and all that kind of thing; but I don't believe in it a bit, let me tell you. No—not one bit."

"Oh, don't you?"

"No, I don't. I believe, for all that quiet way of yours, you are just as dangerous as they pretend I am. You're deep; that's what you are. Now, there's that nice Mr Fanning. You flirted with him shockingly. You know you did!"

"I wasn't aware of it," was the calm response. And then came a pause. It was finally broken by Marian.

"Poor Renshaw! He and I were—well, not exactly children together, for he is about a dozen years my senior, but we have known each other all our lives. And, by the way, Violet, I hope you have not been intentionally adding him to the list of your captives; but I am tolerably certain he has fallen a victim. Whether it is your doing, or pure accident, I don't undertake to guess. But he is not the sort of man you ought to make a fool of."

Violet laughed—mockingly, maliciously.

“Why, Marian, you’re jealous. I’ve struck the right chord at last. Never mind; it isn’t too late now. I won’t stand in your light, I promise you.”

Most women under the circumstances would have fired up—repelled the insinuation angrily. But Marian Selwood was not of that sort.

“Poor Renshaw is quite unlucky enough, without having a—well—damaged heart thrown into the scale,” she went on. “His life is hard enough in all conscience, and is just now a well-nigh hopeless struggle, I don’t mind telling you in confidence. I dare say you think there isn’t much in him because he is reserved; but more than once his cool courage has been the means of saving not one life, but many. I have heard men say, not once, not yet twice, that in any undertaking involving peril or enterprise there is no man they would rather have at their side than Renshaw Fanning. And he is the most unselfish of men. His is a splendid character, and one not often met with in these days.”

“Well done! Well done, Marian!” cried Violet, mischievously. “The secret is out at last. I know where Mr Fanning’s trumpeter lives. But, joking apart, he is awfully nice, only a trifle too solemn, you know, like yourself; in fact, you would suit each other admirably. There now, don’t get huffy. I assure you I quite missed him for ever so long after he left. How long is it since he left?”

“Just over five weeks.”

“As long as that, is it? Well, I wish he’d come again; there, is that an adequate tribute to your Bayard? But I suppose he won’t be able to come all that distance again—hundreds of miles, isn’t it?—for ever so long—and then I shall be gone—Oh! Look there! Look, Marian, look!” she broke off, her voice rising to a scream, as she pointed, terror-stricken, to an object rising out of the grass some twenty yards distant.

Chapter Five.

A Suspicious Trek.

Marian, startled by the terrified shriek of her companion, followed the latter's gaze, and the object that met her own produced a qualm of repulsion mingled with involuntary alarm.

They had reached a secluded corner of the garden where the sunshine fell in a network of light through the overshadowing foliage of a group of tall fig-trees, which cast quite a semi-gloom in contrast to the glare without. On one side was a thick pomegranate hedge. The cause of Violet's terror became unpleasantly manifest in the shape of a hideous black head rearing itself up from the ground. It was followed by the gliding sinuous body of a huge snake.

Shriek after shriek arose from Violet's lips.

"It's coming straight at us!" she screamed, and mastering an impulse to faint, she turned and fled from the spot as hard as she could run.

It certainly was coming straight at them, and that with a velocity and determination abnormal to its kind. Another peculiarity was that it came on in a straight, smooth glide, without a writhe, without even a wrathful hiss. In fact, the reptile's behaviour, to anybody but a brace of badly frightened women, was singular to a degree.

"It's only a rinkhaals," cried Marian, bravely standing her ground. "Lend me your Sunshade, Violet."

But the latter was already a hundred yards off, where, half ashamed of her panic, half secure in the distance she had covered, she turned to see what would happen. Suddenly a sound of suppressed laughter reached Marian's ears. It seemed to come from the pomegranate hedge. Simultaneously the snake came to an abrupt standstill, and lay motionless.

Any misgivings Marian may have felt vanished on the instant. She knew that laugh, and recognising it became alive to something which in her not unnatural alarm had escaped her before. The snake was as dead as a pickled herring, and there was a noose of thin twine round its neck.

"Chris! How can you?" she cried. "You have nearly frightened Violet to death!"

"Have I?" laughed Christopher Selwood, emerging from his hiding-place. "No, no! That won't do. Why, wasn't it Miss Avory who was sticking out the other day that no snake in this country could scare her? Ho, ho, ho!"

The speaker was a well-built, good-looking man of middle age, with a heavy brown beard, just beginning to show a streak of grey here and there, and keen, fun-loving eyes. His face was tanned and burnt, likewise his hands, which latter were rough and horny through much hard

manual labour. He was dressed in cord trousers and a flannel shirt, and carried his jacket under his arm.

“Ho, ho, ho!” he roared again! picking up the dead snake by its late motive power—the twine to wit. “Where’s the young lady who isn’t afraid of snakes?”

“Really, Chris, what a great schoolboy you are!” said his sister. “If I were Violet, I should never forgive you. You had no business to frighten her like that!”

“No, you hadn’t,” said Violet, who now came up. “But I’ll forgive you, Mr Selwood, because—I’ll be even with you yet.”

“Hallo! That’s a rum sort of forgiveness. Well, Miss Avory, I won’t grumble; you shall work your wicked will, how, when, and where you please.”

“Ugh! What a hideous thing!” said Violet, contemplating the dead reptile with a shudder, “But—joking apart—they can’t be very plentiful, can they? Ever since I’ve been here I’ve only seen one, and it was dead.”

“There’s a proverb here, Miss Avory,” said Selwood, with a twinkle in his eye, “that if you come across one snake, you are dead certain to run against at least two more in the course of the day. So be careful.”

“Nonsense, Violet. Don’t believe a word of it,” said Marian. “Chris, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Where did you get that rinkhaals from?”

“This end wall of the land. He was coiled up, basking in the sun. Saw him before he saw me—slunk round t’other side of the wall, and dropped a stone bang on the top of him. Like to have the skin to hang up in your bedroom, Miss Avory?”

“Ugh! No, I wouldn’t. But wait a bit, Mr Selwood. You’ll live to wish you hadn’t played me this trick yet,” retorted Violet, mischievously.

Selwood laughed again.

“Hallo! What’s all this?” he exclaimed, as the lowing of cattle, mingled with the bleating of sheep and goats, together with a considerable cloud of pungent dust, announced the arrival of a trek of some sort.

They had reached the garden-gate and emerged close to the group of huts forming the quarters of the native farm servants. Before and around these were about twenty head of cattle, old and young, and quite a considerable number of sheep and goats, upon all of which Selwood’s experienced eye fell with no approving gaze.

Two Kafirs, arrayed in red blankets and tattered trousers, stepped forward.

"'Ndaag, Baas—'ndaag, missis!" (Abbreviation of "Good day") began one of the two, a tall, unprepossessing looking fellow, with one eye and pock-marked countenance; and speaking in Boer Dutch, he asked leave to rest his stock for a few hours.

Selwood ran his eye down the greasy, red-clay-smeared document (Kafirs travelling within the Cape Colony are compelled by law to provide themselves with passes), which set forth that Muntiwa and Booi—Hlambi Kafirs—were authorised to remove so many head of cattle and so many sheep and goats to Siwani's location in Kaffraria, travelling by such and such a road. It went on to enumerate particulars of the stock, the various earmarks, and sundry other details, and seemed perfectly in order. A glance or two having sufficed to effect a comparison between the said particulars and the animals themselves, Selwood replied—

"I can't let you stop here, Muntiwa. Your sheep are the most infernally scabby lot I ever saw in my life, and I don't half like the look of your cattle. See there," he went on, pointing to a particularly dejected-looking cow, whose miserable aspect and filmy eye denoted anything but rude health; "that looks uncommonly like a case of red-water. So you must trek on. I can't have my stock infected."

"Whau! Siya qoka!" ("Ah, you lie!") cried the Kafir, savagely, advancing within a couple of yards of Selwood, his kerries shaking in his grasp with his suppressed rage. "There is nothing the matter with the cattle, and you know it. We shall rest here whether you like it or not."

Things began to look pretty serious. Christopher Selwood was as good a man as most men of his age and training. But the Kafir, too, was of powerful build, and was evidently a turbulent, quarrelsome fellow; and an ugly customer all round. Moreover, he had a mate, rendering the odds two to one. Then Selwood was handicapped by the two girls, but for whose presence he would instantly have knocked the insolent native down. Yet for all these disadvantages he was not the sort of man to stand any nonsense; least of all from a native.

"Go indoors. I'll be with you in a minute," he said to the girls, by way of clearing the decks for action.

Violet, looking alarmed, made a step to obey. But Marian did not stir, and there was a dangerous gleam in her blue eyes. It was possible that in the event of a collision the Kafirs might not have found the odds so overwhelmingly in their favour as they expected.

"Look here," he went on: "if there's any more indaba you'll find yourself in the tronk to-night at Fort Lamport. Do you imagine for a moment I'm going to be bossed by a couple of Kafirs, and on my own place, too? You must be mad! Now, trek at once!"

The spokesman of the two, stung by the other's calmness, came closer, shaking his kerries unpleasantly near Selwood's nose. But the latter never moved.

The other native said something in a low, quick, warning tone. It was effective. Both Kafirs turned, and, walking away, began collecting their stock, aided by their women and children, who, laden with mats and cooking-pots, and other household gear, had, up till now, been squatting in the background.

“Hey, umlúngu!” (White man) cried the one-eyed savage, turning to fire a parting shot, “we shall meet one of these days. Take care of yourself!” he added, with significant irony.

“Ha! ha! So we shall, my friend. But it will be in the magistrate’s court. Bad hats both of them,” he added, turning to the girls. “Queer that they should own all that stock. But the pass was all right. Yet there are such things as forged passes. By Jove! I’ve a good mind to send over and warn the Mounted Police. Not worth the trouble, though. I’ll just ride down after dinner and make sure that they are clear off the place. Impudent dog, that wall-eyed chap. If you two hadn’t been there I’d have given him the best hammering he ever had in his life, or he’d have given me one.”

With which remark the speaker characteristically dismissed the affair from his mind altogether.

“I’ve had a letter from Renshaw,” said Mrs Selwood, as they sat down to dinner.

“A letter!” cried Violet, suddenly interested. “Why, it isn’t post-day! How did you get it?”

“Theunis Bezuidenhout brought it out from Fort Lamport. He says the drought up there is something fearful—”

“Who? Theunis Bezuidenhout?” struck in Christopher.

”—Something fearful,” went on his wife, clean ignoring this flippant remark. “There isn’t a blade of grass left on the place, and hardly a drop of water. All the sheep and goats have died except about five hundred.”

“Poor chap!” said Selwood. “What an unlucky dog he is! He’d better have cleared out of that dried-up Bushmanland place long ago, even if he had to give it away for a song. Well, he’ll have to now, anyhow. Write and ask him to come down here when he does, Hilda. He might hit on something about here to suit him.”

“Oh yes, mamma—do!” exclaimed Effie, aged twelve, with whom Renshaw was a prime favourite.

“But that isn’t all,” continued Mrs Selwood. “The poor fellow has been ill—fearfully ill—believes he would have died, but for a stranger who turned up quite unexpectedly, but just in the nick of time, and nursed him through it. It was a return of his old fever.”

“By Jove!” said Christopher, “that up-country fever is the very mischief once you get it on you. But, Hilda, write and tell him to come down here sharp—whether he leaves his few goats or not.

They're bound to die anyhow. This air will set him up on his legs again in no time—and meanwhile he can be looking around. Tell him to bring his friend too. By the way, what's the other man's name?"

"He doesn't say—only that he's a man from England. I'll write this very evening," she answered.

Violet Avory's prettily expressed concern was but the foreground to an instinctive inward conjecture as to what the stranger would be like. Poor Renshaw's illness was not an event to move her much, and poor Renshaw himself faded into background beside the possibilities opening out before her in the advent of a stranger—a stranger from England too. Truth to tell, she was becoming a trifle bored. The incense of male adoration, as essential to her as the very breath of life, had not floated much in her direction of late; for the Umtirara range, though scenically and climatically a comparative Eden, was yet to all purposes, as far as she was concerned, an Adamless one. A stranger—lately from England! There was something delightfully exciting in the potentialities here opening out.

"Tell him he must come, Hilda!" said Marian, with, for her, a strange eagerness. "Poor—poor Renshaw! He'll never shake off that horrible fever up there in such an awful drought-stricken desert. Tell him he must come, and come at once!"

And yet of these two it was for her who was moved to excitement over the possible arrival of a stranger, that the absent man would have given his very life—blindly, as with regard to the treasure for which he had been so blindly and so often seeking—hitherto in vain.

Chapter Six.

Relapse.

The sun was at least four hours high when the stranger awoke.

His night of watching coming upon the exhaustion and fatigue of his long and arduous journey of the previous day had gradually overpowered him, and towards dawn he had sunk into a series of dozes, troubled and uneasy; for the events of the night kept chasing each other in wild medley through his slumbers, assuming every form of weird and exaggerated monstrosity, till at last he had subsided into a heavy, dreamless sleep.

Now, however, he awoke with a start. The sick man's eyes were wide open, and were fixed upon him with an inquiring and puzzled expression. He felt horribly guilty beneath their searching gaze—horribly mean—in fact, he felt himself to be something next door to a thief.

Facts can assume a very cold and impartial aspect when they confront us at our waking hour. Maurice Sellon felt strongly akin to a thief.

He had stolen his host's secret—nay, more—he had robbed him of actual property. And it was beyond his power to make restitution, for he himself had been arbitrarily deprived of such power; and at the recollection of that ghostly, mysterious claw snatching the document from him in the dead midnight, he shuddered inwardly. The whole business smacked of witchcraft, and something abominably uncanny. He could not account for it, any more than he could account for the fact that he, Maurice Sellon, had crept on tiptoe to the bedside of the man who lay at his mercy—ill and helpless—and had there and then robbed him like a common thief.

All this time the two had been staring at each other, one from his sick-bed, the other from his armchair. Sellon was the first to break the silence.

"Well, old chap, how do you feel now?" he said, striving to throw into his tone a bluff heartiness he was far from feeling. "Had a bad night of it, I'm afraid?"

"Yes, I have rather," said Renshaw, slowly. "But—when did you come? Have they looked after your horse?" And with the instinctive hospitality characteristic of his class, he made a move as though to rise and personally look to the supplying of the stranger's wants.

"Don't move. Don't think of moving, I beg!" cried the latter, putting out his hand as if to arrest the attempt. "The fact is, I arrived last evening, and found you—er—well, not quite the thing; so I just thought I'd sit here in case you might want anything during the night."

"How very good of you! I must have had a touch of my old enemy—up-country fever. I picked it up years ago in the Lembombo Mountains, through staying on there too late at the end of a winter hunting trip, and the worse of that sort of infernal business is that you are always liable to a return of it. Yes, I remember now. I did feel most uncommonly queer yesterday. And then you

arrived and took care of me? It is more than probable you have saved my life, for I need hardly tell you that to be taken ill in a place like this is apt to turn out no joke."

"Well, you were in a baddish way, certainly," interrupted the other, rather hurriedly. "And now, look here. I'm not much of a doctor, but I seem to have a pretty strong notion that when a fellow's feverish the best thing he can do is to keep as quiet as possible. Which, done into plain English, means that you've talked quite enough, and you'd better turn over and try to go to sleep again."

"I believe you're right," said Renshaw, for he was beginning to feel bad again. "But first of all oblige me by going to the door and shouting 'Dirk!'"

Sellon complied, and, in obedience to the call, the old goatherd came trotting up. A grin of satisfaction puckered up his parchment visage as he saw his master so much better and able to talk rationally again.

"Dirk," said the latter, when the Koranna's cheery congratulations were exhausted, "you keep the goats near, round the house to-day, so as to be within call—it wouldn't make much difference if they stayed in the kraal for all the poor brutes find to eat in the veldt—however, I suppose they find something. What have you done with the stranger Baas' horse?"

"He's in the stable, Baas."

"All right. See that he's well fed—luckily we have plenty of mealies. And there are a few bundles of oat-hay left. Let him have them, Dirk."

"Ja, Baas. That shall be done."

"And tell Kaatje to see that the stranger Baas has everything he wants—as far as the resources of the establishment will permit," added Renshaw in English, turning to his guest with a rueful smile. "I've been telling old Dirk to see that you have everything you want, so be sure you keep him up to the mark, and see that you get it. He can grind out a few words of English, and his wife a few more, so you'll be able to make them understand. And now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll lie quiet a little, for I'm feeling most confoundedly played out."

"My dear fellow—certainly, certainly. I think you've been talking far too much already," answered Sellon, effusively. "It's awfully good of you to think about me, but don't bother yourself on my account."

His unfamiliarity with the Boer dialect—the habitual medium of speech between Cape colonists and natives—had left him necessarily ignorant of his host's solicitude on his behalf, as conveyed in the foregoing instructions. Renshaw Fanning, lying there miserably ill, had no thought—uttered no word—on behalf of his own interests during those directions to his servant. All his anxiety was for the comfort and well-being of the stranger within his gates. It was only a part of

that unselfishness which was characteristic of the man—which had become, in fact, second nature.

Presently he turned again to Sellon.

“I beg a thousand pardons,” he said. “How very thoughtless of me, but it never seems to have occurred to me all this time that you may have business of your own to attend to. If that is the case, even at the risk of appearing inhospitable, I beg you will not delay your journey here on my account. I shall be on my legs again in a day or two—one thing about this complaint, its attacks though sharp are frequently short—and apart from necessity it must be very tedious for you to feel yourself tied down in a rough and comfortless place such as this.”

“My dear fellow, don’t you bother yourself about me,” replied the other, decisively. “I’m going to see you through it before I move on. When a fellow’s ill in an out-of-the-way hole like this he wants a ‘man and a brother’ about him; and I’m going to stick to you like a leech until you’re yourself again. So don’t jaw any more, there’s a good chap, but just snooze off right away.”

In announcing this resolution the speaker was fully alive to what he had undertaken. It was the outcome of no mere passing impulse of generosity. And really, to make up one’s mind deliberately to dwell for an indefinite period in a very rough and uncomfortable tenement, in the midst of a burnt-up starving wilderness, destitute not only of the ordinary comforts of life, but almost of anything fit to eat or drink—this, too, alone with a perfect stranger in for a possibly long bout of severe fever—is something of an act of self-sacrifice, which we hope, virtuous reader, you will remember to set off against the man’s other failings and derelictions.

If circumstances had rendered Maurice Sellon a bit of a scamp—if a further combination of the same might conceivably render him a still greater one—yet he was, according to the definition of those who knew him, “not half a bad fellow in the main.” His resolution to see his newly found acquaintance through what would certainly prove a tedious if not a dangerous illness, was purely a generous one, dashed by no selfish motive. A subsequent idea, which flashed upon him like an inspiration, that even if the precious document relating to the mysterious treasure were lost beyond recovery, his newly made friend was almost sure to know its contents by heart, and might be brought to share the knowledge with him, was entirely an afterthought, and this we desire to emphasise. To slightly tamper with the proverb, “Want of money is the root of all evil,” and Maurice Sellon, in common with many worthier persons, stood sorely and habitually in need of that essential article.

But scamp or no scamp, his presence there was a very fortunate thing for his fever-stricken host. By nightfall poor Renshaw had a relapse; and for three days he lay, alternatively shivering and burning—intermittently raving withal in all the horrors of acute delirium. Then the presence of a strong, cheery, resourceful fellow-countryman was almost as that of a very angel of succour; and even then nothing but a fine constitution, hardened by a life of activity and abstemiousness, availed to snatch the patient from the jaws of Death himself.

Chapter Seven.

"Our Object is the Same."

"Do you know, Fanning, you gave me the very warmest reception hero I ever met with in my life?" said Sellon, one day, when his patient was fairly convalescent and able to talk freely.

Renshaw looked puzzled.

"It's very good of you to say so," he answered. "You know by this time what the resources of the place are—or, rather, are not. Still, you were warmly welcome, and—I can never thank you enough, Sellon, for the unselfish way in which you have stayed here doing the good Samaritan for a perfect stranger, I owe my life to you."

The other burst into a shout of laughter.

"That's not what I meant, old chap. Stop. I'll explain. But, first of all, where are your guns?"

Surprised at the question, Renshaw opened the Chest where the firearms were usually kept. It was empty.

"Now, look behind that big box under the sofa," said the other, with a laugh.

This was done, and lo! there were the missing weapons, carefully rolled in sacking. Choking with laughter over the recollection, Sellon proceeded to narrate the circumstances under which he had been made a target of, as we have seen.

"And I'll tell you what it is, old man," he concluded; "if you can make such good shooting at five hundred yards when you're off your chump, it's sorry I'd be to do target for you at six hundred when you're not."

Renshaw whistled, and shook his head.

"I must have been bad," he said. "Well, you saw how bad I was. But, I say, Sellon, did I—er—talk much—talk bosh, you know? Fellows often do when they're that way."

"Well, the fact is, you did, rather, You seemed to wander a good deal—talked a lot about 'stones,' and a certain 'Valley of the Eye,' which was going to make all out fortunes."

Renshaw started.

"Did I?" he said, passing his hand over his eyes, as if to clear his recollection. Then he was silent for a while, and seemed to be thinking deeply. The other, though affecting the greatest unconcern, watched him narrowly.

“Look here, Sellon,” he went on, “it isn’t in the least odd that I should have talked about that. I firmly believe in the existence of the place, though I’ve made no less than four careful attempts at finding it. It’s not so very far from here, I believe, and sooner or later I shall hit upon it.”

“Well, and what then?”

“What then?” repeated Renshaw, slowly. “Only that we are something near millionaires.”

But for the fact that his own eyes had rested on the clue to the mystery, Sellon would have suspected that his friend’s mind was wandering still, that from long dwelling upon this one idea it was following a chimera with all the blind faith which accompanies a self-wrought delusion. Now, however, as he listened, there was an intensity of eagerness in his face, which, try as he would, he could hardly suppress.

“We?” he said. “Do you want me to help you to hunt for this Golconda, then, old chap?”

“I do. You have saved my life, Sellon, and you may possibly find that it was the best day’s work you ever did in yours. You shall share the knowledge that will make rich men of us. We will search for the ‘Valley’ together.”

“I’m your man, Fanning. That sort of thing will suit me down to the ground. Now, look sharp and get strong on your pins again, and we’ll start.”

The other smiled.

“What a mercurial fellow you are, Sellon! No; that isn’t how to go to work. How, I ask you, are we going to set out expedition on foot, now? Look at that, for instance,”—pointing through the open door to the bare veldt. Shimmering in the fiery forenoon, “And it’s worse country over there than here. We must wait until the drought breaks up.”

“Must we? And, meanwhile, somebody else may hit upon the place.”

“Make your mind easy on that point. But for the clue I possess, it would never be found—never. Didn’t I tell you I had searched for it four times, and even with the key hadn’t managed to find it, and I’ve spent my life on the veldt, knocking about the Country on and off? But this time I believe I shall find it.”

“Do you? Now, why?”

“Look around. Whether the drought lasts or not, I’m practically a ruined man. Now it is time my luck turned. This will be, I repeat, the fifth search, and five is a lucky number. Like many fellows who have led a wandering and solitary life, I am a trifle superstitious in some things. This time we shall be successful.”

“Well, you seem to take the thing mighty coolly,” said Sellon, refilling his pipe. “I should be for starting at once. But what do you propose doing meanwhile?”

“Take my word for it, it’s a mistake to rush a thing of this sort,” answered Renshaw. “It’ll bear any amount of thinking out—the more the better.”

“Well, but you seem to have given it its full share of the last, anyhow. There’s one thing, though, that you haven’t mentioned all this time. If it is a fair question, how the deuce did you come to know of the existence of the place?”

“From the only man who has ever seen it. The only white man, that is.”

“Oh! But—he may have been lying.”

“A man doesn’t tell lies on his death-bed,” replied Renshaw. “My informant turned up here one night in a bad way. He was mortally wounded by a couple of Bushman arrows, which, I suppose you know, are steeped in the most deadly and virulent poison. The mystery is how he had managed to travel so far with it in his system, and the only explanation I can find is that the poison was stale, and therefore less operative. He died barely an hour after he got here, but not before he had left me the secret, with all necessary particulars. He had discovered it by chance, and had made three expeditions to the place, but had been obliged to give it up. There was a clan of Bushmen living in the krantzes there who seemed to watch the place as though it contained something sacred. They attacked him each time, the third with fatal effect, as I told you.”

“By Jove!” cried Sellon, ruefully, his treasure-seeking ardour considerably damped by the probability of having to run the gauntlet of a flight of poisoned arrows. “And did they ever attack you?”

“Once only—the attempt before last I made,” replied the other, tranquilly. “That made me think I was nearer hitting upon it than I had ever been.”

“By Jove!” cried Sellon again. “That’s just about enough to choke one off the whole thing. A fellow doesn’t mind a fair and square fight, even against long odds. But when it comes to poisoned arrows, certain death coming at you in the shape of a dirty little bit of stick, that otherwise couldn’t hurt a cat—faugh! I suppose these little devils sneak up behind, and let you have it before you so much as know they’re there?”

“Generally; yes. Well, you know, every prize worth winning involves a proportionate amount of risk. And there may be some about this business, it’s only fair to warn you, though, on the other hand, there may not.”

“All serene, old chap. I’ll chance it.”

“Right,” said Renshaw. “Now, my plan is this. It’s of no use sticking on here. I can do no good at present, or I’m afraid for some time to come. I propose that we go and look up some friends of

mine who live down Kafirland way. They've a lovely place in the Umtirara Mountains—a perfect paradise after this inferno. We'll go and have a good time—it'll set me on my legs again, and enable you to see an entirely different part of the country. Afterwards, we'll come back here, and start on our search."

"That's not half a bad plan of yours, Fanning. But, see here! old chap. These friends of yours don't know me. Isn't it slightly calm my rolling in upon them unasked?"

"Pooh! not at all. Chris Selwood's the best fellow in the world—except, perhaps, his wife, I was going to say. We were boys together. If we were brothers, I couldn't be more at home anywhere than at his place—and any friend of mine will be as welcome as a heavy rain would have been here a month ago."

"That's a good note, anyhow. But—to come back for a minute to the 'Valley of the Eye'—what are we going to find when we get there? You didn't happen to mention just now."

"There are only two things to be picked up in this country—and plenty of both, if only one knew exactly where to look for them—gold and 'stones.' And we shan't find gold."

"Diamonds! By Jove! Millionaires indeed—if we only find enough of them. Well, I don't mind telling you, Fanning, that I stand uncommonly in need of something realisable—and plenty of it. At present there exists a powerful reason for that necessity. And, I say, Fanning, I believe the same thing holds good as regards yourself."

"Do you?"

"Yes, when fellows get a bit off their chump, they are apt to talk. Eh, you dog? Own up, now. Who is she?"

"And that's your reason for wanting to make a pile, is it, Sellon?" said Renshaw, tranquilly.

"I didn't say so," laughed the other. "Perhaps our object is the same, for all that."

"Perhaps it is," was the good-humoured reply; "as you are bent on thinking so."

Chapter Eight.

Quits.

The days went by, and Renshaw steadily gained in health and strength. He was now able to walk about at will, to take short rides in the early morning, and towards sundown, carefully avoiding the heat of the day, and to begin looking after his stock again. Not that the state of the latter afforded him much encouragement, poor fellow, for each day witnessed an alarming decrease in the few hundred starving animals the drought had left him. Meanwhile, the burning, brassy heavens were without a cloud, save an occasional one springing suddenly from the horizon, as though to mock at the terrible anxiety of the dwellers in this desert waste, and as suddenly melting away, together with many an eager, unspoken hope for the longed-for rain. Not a breath of air, save now and again one of those strange whirlwinds which, heaving up bits of dried stick and dust from the baked and gasping earth, and spinning them round in its gyrating course, moves in a waterspoutlike column along the plain, to vanish into empty air as suddenly as it arose—sure sign of drought, or the continuance of the same, say the stock-growers, out of the plenitude of their experience. The veldt was studded with the shrivelled, rotting carcases of dead animals, scattered about here and there in little clumps of tens and twenties, to the advantage of clouds of great white vultures wheeling aloft ere settling down upon the plentiful repast. Even the very lizards peering forth from the cracks and crannies of the walls, or basking on the clay summit of old Kaatje's outdoor oven, seemed gasping for air, for moisture.

All this Renshaw contemplated with the recklessness of a player who has staked his last napoleon. Every day increased the unrest that was upon him, the feverish longing to get away. It was not the mere run-down feeling of one who desires a change, or the eagerness of a sensitive mind to see the last of a detested locality. There was more than this underlying it, and Maurice Sellon, watching him narrowly, though unobtrusively, noted the circumstance, shrewdly guessing, moreover, that anxiety on behalf of the mysterious Golconda was not the prevailing motive this time. But, whatever it was, Renshaw, habitually reserved, was closer than death itself.

Sellon, for his part, was as anxious to get away as his host. He was thoroughly sick of his present quarters, and of the daily occupation of seeing a few more wretched Angoras pay the debt of Nature—of staring at the glassy, shimmering horizon, and wondering when it was going to rain. Thoroughly sick, too, of swarming flies and of rough food none too appetisingly displayed—of a sofa-bed, and falling asleep to the accompaniment of the ticking rustle of the tarantulas hunting their prey in the thatch overhead, and occasionally running over his ear in the night. It was all very well for Fanning. He was used to that sort of thing—Sellon was not; therefore small wonder that he should begin to get sick of it. There wasn't even anything to shoot on the place, for the springbok had trekked in quest of more favoured regions.

Sellon, however, was blessed with a mercurial temperament, as his host had remarked, and the same now stood him in good stead, for, though bored to death, he did not wax quarrelsome—the usual development of that unenviable condition. But there was one matter which, haunting his mind day and night, bade fair even to drive him into that.

He was racked by an hourly dread lest his friend should discover the loss of the missing paper. Maurice Sellon was constitutionally as far from being a coward as the average Englishman, well endowed with thews, habitually is. But the consciousness that he had been guilty of a mean and dishonest action tended to demoralise his easy self-reliance. A man like Renshaw, the possessor of a secret of fabulous value, the clue to which he had cherished for years, and patiently; and at the cost of untold hardship and possible peril, had repeatedly attempted to solve, would, he reasoned, prove a desperate man when he should come to realise that his hopes were for ever shattered—a dangerous one, should he ever arrive at the conviction that he had been deliberately robbed. The idea of persuading him that he had himself insisted on destroying it during his delirium seemed the only way out of the difficulty; but that expedient now struck Sellon as a particularly thin one. Such a state of mental nervousness had he reached, that he felt sure the other would at once detect it as a lie. True, he had probably saved Fanning's life, as the latter had himself declared. But at the moment of his terrible discovery that consideration was not likely to count for much.

They were alone here together. Not a living soul had they seen during all these weeks, except the family of Korannas, who officiated as servants—both field and domestic—to the establishment. They were alone together—cut off from the outside world as thoroughly as though shut up on a desert island. What deadly, terrible penalty might not Fanning exact from the man who had so deeply injured him? He was no longer weak and tottering with illness; he had, in fact, nearly recovered his normal vigour. The more Sellon looked at the situation the less he liked it.

What a fool he had been to meddle with the thing! He would have given worlds to be able to replace it. But it was gone irrevocably.

At one time his suspicions had rested on the Koranna servants. But the narrow watch he had kept upon them, as also the immediate and careful search he had made around the house at the time of the occurrence, had forced him to abandon this idea. Dismissing the Satanic theory at first formed, he had hit upon another—to a dweller in Southern Africa, almost as wild and chimerical; but then it must be remembered that Sellon was not a dweller in that country—only a "raw Englishman," in fact, as the Boers define a recent importation. That black claw which had reft the paper from his hand in the dead midnight must have belonged to some huge baboon, who, attracted by the light, had approached the open window, and having accomplished his mischievous and monkey-like manoeuvre, had decamped forthwith to his native wilds. Anyhow, the precious clue had disappeared, and in all human probability would never again be lighted on by mortal eye.

Mingled with his apprehensions on the above counts, however, were the misgivings of cupidity, and there were times when he suspected Renshaw of regretting his offer. The latter, since first mentioning the subject of the treasure, had hardly reverted to it, and this reticence struck him (Sellon) in an unfavourable light, and the reason assigned for it as a mere excuse.

“Take my word for it,” Renshaw had said, one day, “we had better leave the subject entirely for a little longer—till we get down country, say. You see, the long and short is, it’s an exciting one to me, and my head is by no means clear yet. It’ll be better to put it off, and there’s plenty of time.”

And this answer, judging the speaker by himself, and, indeed, it is fair to say, by his knowledge of the world, struck Sellon as eminently unsatisfactory. At the risk of a rebuff, a rupture even, he had more than once adroitly tried to “draw” his host, but with so little success as to leave him ignorant as to whether the latter was sufficiently familiar with its contents as to render him independent of the document itself.

Outwardly, the intercourse between the two men was pleasant and friendly enough, and though they had little to do but smoke Boer tobacco and wonder whether it would ever rain again, they had not yet exhausted their subjects of conversation, Sellon was a lively talker, and full of shrewd worldly wisdom, and the other’s natural reserve admirably fitted him for the part of a good listener. Or, on the other hand, more than one strange wild incident, evolved out of the reticent, lonely man’s own experiences, was of vivid interest to the globe-trotting viveur.

Then it was that the latter came to impart snatches of his own history. He had migrated to South Africa as a pure speculation, and ready for any adventure that might come to hand—mining, treasure-seeking, a trip up country, anything that promised possible profit. He had half arranged an up-country trip, and it was while journeying to a distant township to interview the other partner in the scheme that he had lost himself, and accident had landed him so opportunely at Renshaw Fanning’s door.

One night they had been thus chatting, and retired to bed, having decided to make a start, at all risks, the day after the morrow. The heat was something fearful. A dead, sultry, boding stillness reigned over everything, productive of that strange nervous depression which is wont to afflict mankind prior to an approaching convulsion of Nature. Every door and window of the house stood open, as if to keep up the fiction that there was any air to come in.

“I believe there’s going to be an earthquake, at least,” said Sellon, as he turned in.

“Or a big thunderstorm, only—no such luck!” answered Renshaw.

It was not the night to bear the weight of a blanket, or even of a sheet, had the latter luxury been among the resources of the establishment. Sellon, after tossing uneasily for an hour, dropped off into a heavy sleep, and dreamed.

He was alone in a deep, craggy gorge. Beetling rocks reared high above his head, just discernible in the gloom, for it was night. It was the “Valley of the Eye.”

Yes; and there was the “Eye” itself—gleaming out of the darkness, seeming to transfix him with the cold stare of a basilisk. Somehow he felt no exaltation on having gained the place—no triumph over treasure trove. Instead of putting forth his efforts to reach the shining stone, his chief desire was to flee from the spot. But he could not—he was rooted to the ground, shivering,

trembling, with a chill shrinking of mortal dread. Nearer, nearer, drew that gleaming Eye, and, lo! beside it flashed forth another. There were two—a pair of eyes. Then before them came shadowy hands holding a bow. It was drawn. It was pointed full at him. Still he could not move. The poisoned arrows. Oh, Heaven!

The string twanged. With a shrill hiss the arrow sped—the poisoned arrow. A loud hiss, a deafening hiss, and, lo! the gloom of the valley was lighted up with a blinding glare, and—

"Close shave that, old chap!" said a voice.

The spell was broken—broken by that well-known voice. Starting up in his bed, bathed in the sweat of deadly horror, Sellon beheld a strange sight.

The room was lighted up with a blinding glare. In the middle of it stood Renshaw Fanning, holding up a huge snake by the tail. The reptile was quite dead, its head shattered by the hard oaken table, but its hideous length was still undulating with a convulsive writhe. The glare was the result of a continuous succession of vivid lightning flashes. Just then a mighty rolling peal of thunder shook the house, making the doors and windows rattle like castanets. Then followed pitch darkness.

"Strike a light, if you have any handy, but don't come too near me in the dark," said Renshaw. "This joker's fangs may still be of some account, albeit he's stone dead."

As though still dreaming, Sellon obeyed.

"What the very deuce is the meaning of it all?" he said, as by the light of the candle he sat surveying the situation.

"Only this—that you were as near passing on your checks as you ever will be," was the reply, "And you may thank this thunderstorm for it that you didn't. The thunder awoke me at once, though it didn't you, and of course I went outside to look at the weather. Then, by the glare of a flash of lightning, I spotted this brute. He was lying bang across both your legs, with his head against the wall. The flash lasted just long enough for me to lay hold of his tail, and I knew the geography of the room well enough to whirl him up and bring his head down upon the hardest part of the table."

Sellon stared at the speaker, then at the hideous, writhing body of the reptile, without a word. He seemed stupefied.

"Scott!" he burst forth at last. "Well, we are quits now, at any rate. But that's something like a nightmare."

This, then, was the interpretation of his bloodcurdling dream. The terrible eyes, the frightful riveting spell, the shrill hiss, the poisoned arrow. He felt clean knocked out of time.

“Green cobra—and a big un at that,” said Renshaw, throwing the carcase through the open house-door. “See how it was? The beggar knew a big rain was coming, and sneaked in here for shelter. It’s never altogether safe to sleep with open doors. And now, unless you can sleep through a shower-bath, it’s not much use turning in again. This old thatch will leak like a sieve after all these months of dry weather. Better have a ‘nip’ to steady your nerves.”

The storm broke in all its fury; every steel-blue dazzling flash, in unintermittent sequence, lit up the darkness with more than the brightness of noonday, while the thunderclaps followed in that series of staccato crashes so appalling in their deafening suddenness to one belated in the open during these storms on the High Veldt. Then came a lull, followed by the onrushing roar of the welcome rain. In less than five minutes the dry and shrunken thatch was leaking like a shower-bath, even as its owner had predicted, and having covered up everything worth so protecting, the two men lit their pipes and sat down philosophically to wait for the morning.

It came. But although the storm had long since passed on the rain continued. No mere thunder-shower this, but a steady, drenching downpour from a lowering and unbroken sky; a downpour to wet a man to the skin in five minutes. The drought had at length broken up.

Too late, however. The rain, as is frequently the case under the circumstances, turned out a cold rain. Throughout that day all hands worked manfully to save the lives of the remnant of the stock—for the Angora is a frail sort of beast under adverse conditions—and as it grew bitterly cold, packing the creatures into stables, outhouses, even the Koranna huts, for warmth. In vain! The wretched animals, enfeebled by the long, terrible drought, succumbed like flies to the sudden and inclement change. Save for about two score of the hardiest among the flock, by nightfall of the following day Renshaw Fanning was left without a hoof upon the farm.

Chapter Nine.

Two "Sells."

"Heard anything of Renshaw?" said Christopher Selwood, coming in hot and tired from his work, for a cup of tea late in the afternoon.

"Not a word," answered his wife, looking up from the last of a batch of letters that had just come in with the weekly post. "Why—you don't think—?" she began, alarmed at the grave look which had come over her husband's face.

"Well, I don't know," he replied. "I hope there's nothing seriously wrong. How long is it since you wrote?"

"More than a fortnight now."

"Ah, well. I dare say it's all right. Now I think of it, they've had big rains up that end of the country. Big rains mean big floods, and big floods mean all the drifts impassable. The post carts may have been delayed for days."

"You think that's it?" she said anxiously.

"Why, yes. At first, I own, I felt a bit of a scare. You see, the poor chap was desperately ill when he wrote—though, to be sure, he must have got over the worst even then—and I've been feeling a little anxious about him of late. Well, he'll come when he can, and bring his friend with him, I hope. It'll liven the girls up, too. Miss Avory must be getting properly tired of having no one to flirt with."

The soft afternoon air floated in through the open windows in balmy puffs, bringing with it a scent of flowers, of delicate jessamine twined round the pillars of the stoep, of rich roses now bursting into full bloom. A long-waisted hornet rocketed to and fro just beneath the ceiling, knocking his apparently idiotic head against the same, and the twittering of finks darting in and out of their pendulous nests above the dam in all their habitual fussiness, mingled with the melodious whistle of spreuws holding contraband revel among the fast-ripening figs in the garden.

For a few minutes Mrs Selwood plied her sewing-machine in silence, then—

"Talking of Violet, Chris, did it never occur to you that she had flung her net over poor Renshaw?"

"Flung her net—Renshaw! No, by Jove, it never did! Why, he's the most sober-going old chap in the world. Confound it, he must be past that sort of thing—if he ever went in for it. Why, he's only two or three years my junior."

“And what if he is?” was the reply of calm superiority. “He needn’t be Methuselah for all that. And then remember the hard, struggling, solitary life his has been. He’s just the man to fall over head and ears in love at middle age.”

“Pho! Not he! What matchmakers women are. Bryant and May are nothing to them. But, I say, Hilda, supposing it is as you say, why shouldn’t he go in and win, eh?”

“Do you think Violet is the sort of girl to go and end her days in a wattle-and-daub shanty away in the wilds of Bushmanland? Come now. Do you think for a moment she’s that sort?”

“N-o. Perhaps not. But there’s no reason why she should. Renshaw might find some farm to suit him somewhere else—down here, for instance. I don’t see why it shouldn’t be done. He’s a fellow who thoroughly understands things, and would get along first-rate at whatever he turned to. If he’s come into low water up there it’s more the fault of that infernal country than his own, I’ll bet fifty pounds. No, I don’t at all see why he shouldn’t go in and win, and, by Jove, he shall.”

“Who’s the matchmaker now?” retorted his wife with a smile of conscious superiority. “But there are several things to be got over. First of all, I believe he must be in very low water; in fact, pretty well at the end of his tether. That drought can’t have left him much to the good. And I am tolerably certain Violet has nothing—at least, nothing to speak of.”

“Well, that might be got over—living’s cheap enough,—and here we never get any downright bad seasons.”

“Then there’s the difference in their creeds.”

“Pho! That doesn’t count for much in these parts, where there’s precious little opportunity of running any creed in particular.”

“No, unfortunately; but there ought to be,” replied Woman, the born devotee. “But the most fatal obstacle of all you seem to overlook. It usually takes two to make a bargain.”

“What! Do you mean to say she wouldn’t have him? Well, that’s another story, of course. But Renshaw’s an uncommonly fine follow all round—and she might do worse.”

“That I won’t attempt to deny. But I’m afraid the impression left upon my mind is that she doesn’t care twopence about him.”

“Only making a fool of him, eh?”

“I won’t say that. Violet is a girl who has been accustomed to a great deal of admiration, and has an extremely fascinating manner. It is quite possible that poor Renshaw may have walked into the trap with his eyes open.”

“Not he. He isn’t such an ass. She must have been trying to make a fool of him,” growled Selwood, with whom Violet Avory was, nevertheless, a prime favourite. “Just like you women! You’re all alike, every one of you.”

His wife vouchsafed no reply, and the whirr of the sewing machine went blithely on. Soon the silence was broken by an unmistakable snore. The slumbrous warmth of the afternoon had told upon Selwood. His head had fallen back, his pipe had slipped on to the floor. He was fast asleep.

An hour went by. It was getting nearly time to go to the kraals and count in the sheep. Still he snored steadily on. His wife, drowsy with the continual whirr of the sewing machine, felt more than half inclined to follow his example.

Suddenly there was a sound of wheels on the grassy plot outside the front garden, then a voice exclaiming in dubious tone—

“Here’s a take in. I believe they’re all away from home.”

The voice proceeded from one of the two occupants of a very travel-worn buggy standing at the gate.

“No, they’re not!” cried Mrs Selwood, to whom that voice was well known. “Come—wake up, Chris. Here is Renshaw himself!”

“Eh—what! I believe I’ve been asleep!” cried Selwood, starting up—“Renshaw—is it! Hallo, old chap. This is first-rate,” he added, rushing out. And the two men’s hands wore locked in a close grip. “Allamaghtag! But you are looking pulled down—isn’t he, Hilda?—though not quite so much as I should have expected. How are you, sir? We are delighted to see you,” he went on as Renshaw duly introduced his friend.

(“Allamaghtag!” “Almighty!” A common ejaculation among the Boers. It and similar colloquialisms are almost equally frequent among their colonial brethren.)

Then Marian appeared—her sweet face lighting up with a glow of glad welcome for which many a man might have given his right hand—and then the children, who had been amusing themselves diversely after the manner of their kind, anywhere outside and around the house, came crowding noisily and gleefully around “Uncle Renshaw,” as they had always been in the habit of calling him. To the lonely man, fresh from his rough and comfortless sick-bed, this was indeed a home-coming—a welcome to stir the heart. Yet that organ was susceptible of a dire sinking as its owner missed one face from the group,—realised in one quick, eager glance that the presence he sought was not there.

Violet’s room was at the back of the house, consequently she had heard but faintly the sounds attendant on the arrival of the visitors. She instinctively guessed at the identity of the latter, but it was clean contrary to Violet Avory’s creed to hurry herself on account of any man. So having

sacrificed a few moments of curiosity to this principle, and, needless to say, taken the indispensable look at herself in the glass, she issued leisurely forth.

Now, as she did so, Selwood was ushering in his stranger guest—was, in fact, at that moment standing back to allow the latter to enter before him. Thus they met face to face.

Then was her self-possession tried in such wise as no member of that household had yet witnessed. She halted suddenly, her face deadly white. A quick ejaculation escaped the stranger's lips.

It died as quickly, and his half-outstretched hand dropped to his side in obedience to her warning glance; for her confusion was but a momentary flash. It entirely escaped Selwood, who was walking behind his guest, the broad shoulders and fine stature of the latter acting as an opportune screen, and all the others were still outside.

"Miss Avory," introduced honest Chris, becoming aware of her presence. "Mr—er—I really beg your pardon, but I'm afraid I didn't quite catch your name just now—and Renshaw didn't happen to mention it in his letter?"

"Sellon," supplied the other.

"By Jove! We hold half our names in common. We are both 'Sells,' but there we branch off—ho—ho! Sellon and Selwood, both 'Sells,'" repeated Chris, who was fond of a joke.

An unimportant, not to say trivial remark. But like many such, it was destined in the fulness of time to be brought back pretty vividly to the memory of its originator and his hearers.

Violet acknowledged the introduction with a queenly sort of bow, and turning preceded them into the sitting-room.

"Where's Mr Fanning?" she asked, rising almost as soon as she was seated. "I must go and say 'How do you do?' to him."

Sellon muttered an oath to himself as she slipped from the room, not loud enough to be heard by his host, however, who proceeded to ply him with questions as to his journey—and brandy-and-water.

Meanwhile Violet, in pursuance of her expressed intent, was greeting the other arrival with a pretty cordiality that was perfection itself, and when she tuned her voice to the requisite minor key as she asked all manner of questions and expressed all manner of sympathy with regard to his late illness, and whether he ought to have undertaken such a long journey so soon, and if he had taken great care of himself during the same, the effect on her victim was such a reaction from his first feeling of dismay at her non-appearance that he could have thrown up his hat and hoorayed aloud. Whereby we fear it is only too obvious that friend Renshaw was as big a fool as the general run of his fellow-men.

“Well, and what do you think of this country, Mr Sellon?” came the inevitable query, as they were gathered together after the first fuss and flurry of greeting.

“I think various things, Mrs Selwood,” was the ready reply. “Parts of it are lovely, and parts of it are grand, and one gets a fine opportunity of seeing it all during a fortnight’s journey behind three horses. But other parts, on the other hand, and notably the latitudes inhabited by friend Fanning here, reminded me forcibly of the Yankee’s reply to the same question.”

“And what was that?”

“Why, he was travelling in that awful Karroo during a drought, and somebody asked him what he thought of the country, ‘What do I think of your country?’ says he. ‘See here, stranger, if I owned a section of your country I guess I’d enclose that section well around, and send out for a paint-pot and paint it green.’”

This tickled Selwood amazingly, and he burst into a roar.

“Well, that wouldn’t hold good of our part,” he said when he had recovered.

“Oh no, no,” assented the stranger, hurriedly. “Let me clear myself of that charge of heresy without delay. Words are inadequate to describe the beauties of the road as soon as we got into these mountains. I’m serious, mind.”

“Well, we must contrive to show you more of them,” said his hostess. “Are you fond of shooting, Mr Sellon?”

“He just is,” put in Renshaw. “He kept us in game all along the road, and in chronic hot water with all the Dutchmen whose places we passed, by knocking over springboks under their very windows without so much as a ‘by your leave.’”

“Well, it’s better to be the shooter than the shootee, eh, Fanning? But that joke’ll keep,” laughed Sellon, significantly.

“We can show you plenty of fun in that line here,” said Christopher. “The mountains are swarming with rhybok, and there are any amount of partridges and quail. Plenty of bushbucks, too, in the kloofs, and guinea-fowl. Hallo, by Jove! it’s time to go and count in,” he added, jumping up from his chair.

Then the three men started off to do the regulation evening round of the kraals, while the ladies went their ways, either to give a supervising eye to the preparation of supper, or to while away an idle half-hour prior to that comfortable repast.

“Well, Violet, and what do you think of the stranger?” said Marian, when they were left to themselves.

“Oh, I think him rather a joke. Likely to turn out very good fun, I should say,” was the careless reply.

“Sure to, if you take him in hand, you abominable girl. But I’ve a sort of idea the ‘fun’ will be all on one side. I suppose you think you can reduce him to utter and insane subjection in less than a week.”

For response Violet only smiled. But the smile seemed to convey more plainly than words the conviction that she rather thought she could.

Chapter Ten.

On Thorns.

When Maurice Sellon awoke the next morning it took him some little while to remember exactly where he was.

The cool delicious air was wafting in at the open window—the murmur of leaves, and the plash of running water—the half-rasping, half-whistling call of the yellow thrush, and the endless chattering of finks—the lowing of cattle, and the deep bass hum of Kafir voices—all struck upon his ears as strange after the exhausting heat; the treeless, waterless wastes, the burnt-up silent plains so destitute of bird and animal life, which were the leading features of the scene of his late sojourn. Then with all the strong animal rejoicing of a mercurial temperament combined with a sound constitution, he leaped out of bed, and snatching up a towel, sallied forth in quest of a convenient place for a swim.

It was early yet, but the household was astir—seemed to have been for some time. Sellon spied his host in the cattle kraal, giving a supervising eye to the milking and other operations therein going forward.

"Want to swim, eh?" said the latter. "Well, follow that fence a couple of hundred yards till you come to a big tree-fern on the hedge of the bush; turn in there and you'll find a grand hole."

Away went Sellon, looking about him as he walked. What a fine place this was, he thought, and what a rattling good time of it he was going to have. The shooting must be splendid. It was a lovely morning, and the man's spirits rose over the prospect of present enjoyment, and a brightening future. And there was another cause at work tending to send up the mercury, as we shall see anon.

He had no difficulty in finding the water-hole—a fine 'reach' of the river about a hundred yards by twenty, thickly shaded with overhanging scrub. In he went with a header and a splash, and after a couple of vigorous swims up and down was just coming out when something caught his eye.

A long rakish narrow object lying along the almost horizontal trunk of a half-fallen tree, not more than a yard from the ground—so motionless that were it not for the scintillation of the eye you could hardly have told the creature was alive. The squab, clinging paws, the hideous crocodile head, the long tapering tail, seemed all exaggerated in the half-gloom of the thick scrub, and in the start which the sight inspired in the beholder.

Sellon stood transfixed, and a cold chill of horror and repugnance ran through him. In his newness to the country it occurred to him that the river might contain a fair population of alligators. Anyway, the beast looked hideous and repulsive enough—even formidable. And it lay almost between himself and the spot where he had left his clothes.

Just then he could have sworn he heard a smothered splutter of laughter. The reptile must have heard it too, for it raised its head to listen. Then a crack and a puff of smoke. The creature rolled from the trunk, and lay snapping and writhing, and making every effort to reach the water.

“Stop him, Mr Sellon. Don’t let him get into the water,” cried a shrill boy’s voice, and the youthful shooter came crashing through the brake, armed with a saloon rifle, and followed by another youngster about the same age.

“Stop him! How am I to stop him, you young dog?” growled Sellon, who was standing up to his middle in water.

But the boys had wrenched up a stout stick, and deftly avoiding alike snapping jaws and lashing tail, managed to hold the great lizard on the bank where he lay, until his struggles had entirely ceased.

“Gave you rather a schrek, didn’t it, Mr Sellon?” said the elder of the two, maliciously, with a wink at his brother, and there was a broad grin on each face that made Sellon long to cuff the pair. For the average colonial urchin has scant respect for his elders as such; scantier still if those elders happen to be “raw Englishmen.”

“An ugly brute, anyhow,” he answered, wading out to look at the carcase. “What is he, eh?”

“Only an iguana, Mr Sellon. My! but he’s a big un; five feet at least, I expect. I don’t wonder you took him for a crocodile.”

“Took him for—You cheeky young dog, how do you know what I took him for?”

“Come now, that’s good!” retorted the urchin, unabashed, “My! Mr Sellon, but if you could only have seen yourself standing there in the water in a blue funk!” and both cubs thereupon burst into shrill and undisguised laughter.

“I tell you what, youngster, that was an uncommonly good shot of yours,” said wily Sellon, on the principle of agreeing with his adversary quickly, for he guessed the young scamps would presently go in full of the story, and equally was conscious of having truly been in something of a funk, as they had said. “But how did you manage to get it in?”

“Oh, we spotted him long before you did; Fred cut back for the saloon gun while I waited here. My, though, but he’s about the biggest lygovaan (Iguana) I’ve ever seen.”

But although by the time they returned home Sellon and the boys had become great friends; a number of swimming dodges which he taught them having in a measure established him in their respect; yet when he appeared at the breakfast-table he found the joke public property already. But he was a man who could stand chaff—which was fortunate—for he was destined to hear enough of it on the subject of the iguana episode.

But he had matters to think of this morning beside which the above incident was the merest thistledown for triviality; an undertaking on hand, the key to which lay snug in his pocket in the shape of the tiniest of notes; slipped into his hand, deftly and surreptitiously, though under everybody's nose, during the process of exchanging good-nights the evening before. Thus it ran—

"To-morrow. The garden. Middle of the morning. Watch me.—V."

The barest outline, but sufficient for all purposes. It had come, too, just at the right time. He had felt nettled, annoyed, sore, at Violet's light-heartedness. She had treated him as the merest stranger, and when she talked to him, had rattled away at the veriest commonplaces. All her captivating glances, all her dangerous modulations of tones, he had kept for Fanning. Fanning it was who had engrossed the lion's share of her attention throughout the evening. He had mentally cursed Fanning. He could not make it out. He began to hate Fanning. Then, sore and angry, that tiny bit of paper had come in the nick of time, and he had slept soundly and risen in the best of spirits, as we have seen.

Yet as the time drew near his spirits sustained a check. That Violet would find her opportunity he had no sort of doubt. Let her alone for that. But would he be equally fortunate?

After breakfast he was taken possession of by his host. With accurate instinct he realised that at any rate during the earlier half of the morning, when the ladies were busy with household details, the presence of a man and a stranger whom they would feel more than half bound not to neglect, could be nothing other than an unmitigated nuisance. So he submitted to his host's "showing around" with the best grace he could muster, and the three men hindered forth, strolling around in that easy, pleasant, dawdling fashion, dear to the heart of the prosperous colonial farmer who can afford to take it easy from time to time when he has a congenial guest and an appreciative listener—and Christopher Selwood had both on his hands that morning.

Yes, it was pleasant enough wandering around in the sunshine, looking at this and looking at that, stopping every now and then for a lounge against a wall, or in some shady nook while fresh pipes were filled and lighted. It was all pleasant enough, but by the time they had inspected the stables and the kraals, the garden and the cultivated lands, and had visited certain traps and spring-guns placed along the fences of the latter for the benefit of invading bucks or porcupines, and had, moreover, talked stock and wild sport unlimited, it was uncommonly near the "middle of the morning," and they were some distance from the house. Sellon began to feel at his wits' end.

"The middle of the morning. Watch me. V." It was already the first, and as for the second, how could he watch her when he was nearly a mile away, pinned fast on the top of a stone wall, listening to an otherwise interesting disquisition from his host upon the habits of certain wild game? Renshaw it was who came to the rescue.

"I expect we are boring Sellon to death, with all the 'shop' we've been talking," he said, noting the "cornered" expression in the latter's face.

“Not a bit—not in the least,” was the hurried reply; “quite the contrary. Only—the fact is, though I don’t like owning to it, I’m a trifle headachy this morning.”

“Well, you were out rather early, which I dare say you’re not much used to,” said Christopher. “Look here, now, Sellon. If you’re tired cut off to the house and take it easy. You’ll find the drawing-room cool and quiet, and there’s a lot of stuff to read in the shelves.”

“Well, I think I will, if you don’t mind.”

“Mind—mind? No. Make yourself at home, man—make yourself at home. That’s what you’ve got to do here,” was the hearty reply.

Now, skirting the way our artful manoeuvrer has to travel is a high quince hedge, and in this hedge is a gate, and not very far inside this gate is a rustic bench, and upon this rustic bench is a cool, tasteful dress of light material, surmounted by a very broad-brimmed straw hat. There is also upon the said bench a book, but it is not altogether lying on it, for it is still held by a well-shaped little hand. But for the thoroughfare aforesaid the spot is a secluded one, as it certainly is a pleasant one, and shady withal; thanks to the foliage of the large, well-grown fruit trees. Now, what does our manoeuvring scamp do but steal softly up behind this attractive figure, and throw both arms around it, while with equal want of ceremony the scampish countenance is inserted beneath that very broad-brimmed straw hat, and there it remains during the few moments of faint, because feigned, scuffle in which its wearer sees fit to indulge.

“At last, my darling!” he exclaims gleefully, seating himself on the bench beside her. “At last!”

Chapter Eleven.

"Amoris Integratio."

"On, Maurice, how could you be so imprudent?"

"Imprudent be—somethinged! If you only knew the difficulty I've had to cut loose from the other fellows at all."

"Yes, imprudent," she went on, ignoring the last remark. "Supposing any of those wretched children had been about—and they're just like little savages, always jumping out upon you unexpectedly from nowhere. And we are quite by a pathway, too."

"Then the sooner we get away from it the better, for I intend repeating the operation with interest before we rejoin the merry crowd."

"How did you find me out, Maurice? How did you know where I was?"

"Aha, you couldn't hide from me, you see," he replied. "No good, was it?"

She made no answer. She seemed to be undergoing a struggle with herself. Then at last—

"Why did you break through our agreement? We were not to see each other for six months. It is not four yet."

"Violet! Do you mean to tell me you are sorry I have not kept that boshy arrangement of ours. Look me straight in the face and tell me you are—if you can."

He turned her face towards him. The dark soft eyes were brimming, the delicate features were working with a wild yearning, which its owner was in vain striving to suppress.

"Sorry to see you? Oh, Maurice, my darling, I have thought of late I should never see you again," she cried, breaking into a storm of sobs as she threw herself on his breast.

And this was the girl who, but a few days before, and almost on that very spot, had made an utter mock of all that savoured of real feeling. "I almost wish it would come true. It would be such a novel sensation," had been her words to Marian. Ah, but it had come true—and that long before she uttered them. Certain it is that none there at Sunningdale had ever seen this side of Violet Avory; had ever suspected this secret chapter in her history.

"Don't cry, little one," said Maurice, soothingly, drawing her further within the recesses of the garden, and away from the obnoxious quince hedge, which might shelter prying eyes. "We are going to have such a happy time together now."

"Now, yes," she answered. "But—after? Nothing but misery."

“Not a bit of it. We can go on waiting. Patience—that’s the word. When I used to get my ‘cast’ hung up or otherwise tangled while fishing, instead of blowing off a volley of cuss words, and tearing and tugging at the stuff, I made it a rule to remark aloud, ‘Pazienza!’ That answered, kept one in a cool and even mind, and saved further tangle and a lot of cussing. Well, that must be our watchword—‘Pazienza!’”

“I have got you now, at all events,” she murmured, pressing his arm. “But now, don’t you see why I met you as a perfect stranger last night?”

“Not altogether. It annoyed me a good bit—in fact, worried me all the evening. I should have thought it would have been better to have let them know we were old acquaintances, at any rate. They would have left us more to ourselves.”

“Not a bit of it. They would have set up a romance on the spot. As soon as a woman gets wind of a romance, she can’t for the life of her, with the best intentions in the world, help watching its progress. It would have been a case of every one hurrying to écarter themselves as soon as they saw as together, doing it, too, in the usual blundering and clumsy manner. I know it all so well—I’ve seen it so often, and, I may as well add, gone through it.”

“That was the reason, was it? Well, you do know a thing or two, little one,” he said admiringly. “But look here. We must snatch a little time together as often as we can. We’ll make Selwood get up rides and expeditions, and pair off, lose ourselves by accident, and all that sort of thing. But mind, I can’t go on talking to you day after day, only as one of a crowd. I can’t stand it. We must manage somehow.”

“Do you think I am a bit less anxious to than you? But, Maurice darling, do mind what I’m going to say. You must be on your guard before people, you always were such an awful old blunderer. You mustn’t go letting slip any ‘Violets,’ for instance, and you’re quite as likely to as not.”

“I’m not going to let one slip at the present moment, anyway,” he replied with a laugh. “And so you thought you were never going to see me again?”

“Ah, I have sometimes feared so. The agonies I have gone through! I know what you are going to say—that it was my own doing. I did it to test you, Maurice. Six months is not a long time, but ah, I have at times thought I should die long before it was over! Day after day, week after week, no news, not a word from you, or even of you. And every one here thinks I am utterly heartless. I never try to undeceive them; in fact, I rather encourage them in the idea.”

No one would have thought so could they but have seen her there that morning, slowly wending through the mimosa brake encircled by her lover’s arm; for they had left the somewhat precarious refuge of the garden. The restless, eager face, the quick, passionate tones, as though she were talking against time, and grudged every one of the too swiftly flying moments which were bringing this doubly sweet, because surreptitious, interview to its end.

They had reached the river-bank. The cool water bubbling along beneath the shade of the trees, the varying call of birds in the brake, the chirruping tree-crickets, the hum of bees dipping into the creamy cups of snow-white arums which grew in the moist shade, the melodious shout of the hoopoe echoing from the black kloofs that rent the mountain side—all made an appropriate framework, a fitting accompaniment of harmonious sounds to this sweet stolen interview. High overhead the hoary crest of a great mountain frowned down from the dazzling blue.

"You haven't told me yet how you managed to find me out," said Violet at length, after a good deal of talk that we feel under no special necessity to reproduce, because, given the circumstances, the reader should have no difficulty in guessing its nature.

"Oh, that was the most astonishing piece of luck that ever came about," he answered. "You had better call it a fatality. I had started to look for you in quite the wrong direction, and fell in with that queer fellow, Fanning. Came down here with him, as you know."

"Did Mr Fanning talk about—er—tell you about—me?" she said hesitatingly.

Maurice Sellon was not the man to betray poor Renshaw's involuntary and delirious confidences, even to Violet herself—at least, not unless some strong motive existed for doing so, which at present was not the case. So he answered—

"Talk about you? Not he! He's much too deep a dog. He just barely mentioned that you were here, which drove me pretty well wild, for it was long enough before I could get him to make a start, and of course I couldn't let him suspect the reason."

Strict veracity was not one of Sellon's strong points. He did not choose to let her into the fact that the wild surprise of their meeting in the hall on the occasion of his arrival was absolutely and impartially mutual.

"But look here, Violet," he went on. "Talking of Fanning, you were almost—well, carrying on with him last night. I began to get quite angry. You mustn't make a fool of the poor chap—if you haven't already, that's to say."

Violet laughed—her old, heartless, mocking laugh.

"Fancy being jealous of Mr Fanning!" she said scornfully.

"That be hanged!" cried Maurice, gaily, "But, darling, I grudge seeing you talking too much to any one."

Thus, womanlike, secure in the possession of her own heart's desire, she spoke contemptuously of one for whom she really entertained a great and deep-laid respect. Her own love, outside its special object, had not availed to render her more considerate, more tender, towards the man whose heart she had made a plaything of.

Returning through the garden they came upon Renshaw himself, who, with Marian and Effie, was strolling around. Now, the latter, for all her tender years, knew quite as much as was good for her, and in the present instance was prompt to recognise a case of "spoons," as her abominably precocious young mind did not hesitate to define it. It happened that she disliked Violet, so she fixed her eyes maliciously upon the pair, and her mouth expanded into a knowing grin—which made Violet ardently desire to box her ears soundly there and then—and resolved to store up the incident for future use; in fact, to improve upon the discovery.

"Hallo, Fanning," cried Sellon, as they met, "you're looking rather seedy, old chap. Been legging it around too much all the morning."

"Not I. I feel all right. You won't have to do doctor again, Sellon—no fear," was the genial reply.

Now, Sellon's words had caused Marian to steal a very quick and anxious glance at her companion's face, which at that moment was certainly destitute of its normal healthy colour.

"Renshaw, you have been overdoing it," she said warningly. "You have come here to be set up, not to be made ill again. So luckily it's just dinnertime, and we must all go in."

So the parties fused, and, merged into one, retraced their steps towards the house, chatting indifferently. But that glance of Marian's had drawn, as it were, a curtain from before Violet's eyes. She, too, thought she had made a discovery, and she, too, resolved to turn it to future account—should the necessity arise.

"I say, Renshaw," said Selwood, sotto voce, and with a characteristic nudge, as they entered the passage a little way behind the rest of the party, "that chum of yours is a knowing dog, eh? Miss Avory has soon managed to cure his headache. Ho—ho—ho!"

Thus did everybody combine to turn the steel, already sticking deep enough, in this unfortunate man's heart.

Dinner over, the heat of the afternoon was got through in delightfully easy and dawdling fashion. Christopher Selwood, in a big armchair, sat in a cool corner absorbed in the ill-printed columns of the local sheet, the Fort Lamport Courier, which set forth how brandziekte had broken out in one end of the district, and how a heavy hailstorm had peppered the other, and how "our esteemed townsman, Ezekiel Bung, Esquire, the genial landlord of the Flapdoodle Hotel," had, "we deeply regret to say, fallen off the stoep of his house and injured his leg," the fact being that the said Bung, Esquire, had walked straight into space while as drunk as a blind fiddler, and intent on kicking out a Fingo who had contumaciously reckoned on quenching his thirst at the public bar, instead of among his compatriots in the canteen. This and other news of a like interesting and intellectual nature, Selwood scanned. Suddenly an exclamation escaped him.

“By Jingo! This is good!” he cried. “I say, Marian, you remember those two black chaps who were round here with all that stock two or three weeks back? That one-eyed cuss who was inclined to be so cheeky?”

“Yes. What about them?”

“You remember the names on their pass?”

“Perfectly. Muntiwa and Booi.”

“All right. The whole of that stock was stolen, and they’ve been run in at Fort Lamport and committed for trial at the Circuit Court, which’ll be held in a week or two.”

“That’s good business,” said Renshaw. “How were they nobbled?”

“Why, a Dutchman spotted them just outside Fort Lamport, and recognised some of the cows as belonging to his uncle or somebody. He said nothing at the time, but just trotted up to the court and swore an affidavit, and they were all run in.”

“But didn’t you say they had a pass?” said Renshaw.

“Of course they had. But therein lies the cream of the whole situation. The pass turns out a forged one, cooked up by a mission-station Kafir, and well done it was, too. So much for educating the niggers. It turns out, too, that the police have discovered these chaps’ hiding-place, away up among the thick bush and caves in Slaagter’s Hoek. It was a regular vultures’ nest, chock full of bones of stolen stock. They must have been at it for years. And then to think of them marching openly through the country on the strength of that forged pass. Let’s hope they’ll get it stiff now they are quodded.”

“Who’s the circuit judge this time?” asked Renshaw.

“Van Reneen, I expect. Judge Sherrington was round on circuit last time, so we are sure to have the other man; and a good thing, too. Old Sherrington loves a black fellow as if he was his father, and lets him down about as lightly as he comfortably can, and that’s very lightly indeed.”

“You are sure to be subpoenaed to give evidence, Chris,” said Marian, mischievously.

“Eh! By Jingo, I never thought of that. I hope not, though!” cried Selwood, in dismay at the prospect of an enforced absence from home, involving, moreover, two long and tiresome journeys, and Heaven knew how many days of kicking up his heels in Fort Lamport, in hourly expectation of being called. “Well, likely enough they’ll have plenty of evidence without mine. Sellon—Renshaw—how about a stroll round? it’s turning cool now. But we’ll do a glass of grog first.”

Chapter Twelve.

"He does not Ring True."

Three weeks had gone by since the arrival of our two friends at Sunningdale, and yet, although he expected great things—everything—from the change, Renshaw seemed to find it impossible altogether to throw off the effects of his recent illness.

Now, to one member of the Sunningdale household this was a source of great, though secret anxiety. That one was Marian Selwood.

With growing concern she noticed an unwonted dejection settling over him—a kind of physical and mental languor and loss of appetite totally unlike his former self. Sometimes she ascribed it to the baleful witcheries of Violet Avory, at others to the consciousness of his hard, uphill struggle to make headway at all; sometimes, again, to both causes combined. Still there was no getting over the fact that he did not gain in convalescent strength, notwithstanding that his surroundings were in every way favourable and congenial to that end.

They had ever been great allies, these two. It is strange that they had not become greater—even for life; it is possible that this might eventually have come about but for two obstacles—Renshaw's poverty and—Violet.

We do not commit ourselves to the assertion that Marian was in love with Renshaw. But that, in her opinion, he was absolutely faultless, we do freely admit, and her remarks upon him to Violet Avory earlier in this narrative lifted merely a corner of the curtain which veiled her predilection. Wherefore now she was mightily exercised on his account.

He did too much. For instance, what earthly necessity was there for him to have turned out so early that morning and gone right away up the mountain to look for half a dozen wretched sheep left out overnight, riding back by the vij-kraal to count Umsapu's flock? Or what business had he toiling hard all day yesterday in the broiling sun, helping to pack a stone wall for a new "land" which was to be laid under cultivation, and he just through a return of a deadly malarial fever? It was too bad of Chris to allow it.

All this and more she took the opportunity of putting before Renshaw himself one hot morning as the two sat together in a delightfully cool and shady corner of the stoep.

"It won't kill me yet, Marian," he replied to her expostulations. "But do you seriously think I should get back my old form the sooner by just loafing around all day doing nothing?"

"Yes, I do," she rejoined decisively. "Yes, I do—even though you put it that way. You do far too much."

"Pooh! Not a bit of it. Why, it's quite a treat to be able to do something. Bless my life, on my dried-up old place it's a case of vegetating day after day—counting out—looking around—

counting in. I'm like the jolly nomad moving around with his flocks, except that, mine being stationary, I have less trouble even than he has."

"You certainly are nomadic in that you are wandering from the point, Renshaw, which is very crafty of you, but useless. As I am continually telling you—we feel bound to see that you get well and strong while you are with us, and how can you do either when day after day you are over-exerting yourself?"

There was just a soupçon of tenderness in her voice—and Marian Selwood had a beautiful voice—as she thus reasoned with him. Her head was partly bent down over her work, throwing into prominence the glorious masses of her golden hair, which, swept up into an artistic coronal, lent an additional dignity to her calm, sweet beauty. Renshaw lounged back in his cane chair, idly watching the supple, shapely fingers plying the needle in rhythmic regularity—every movement one of unconscious grace. The boom of bees floated upon the jessamine-laden air, varied by the shriller buzz of a long, rakish-looking hornet winging in and out of his absurd little clay nest, wedged, like that of a swallow, beneath the eaves of the verandah. Great butterflies flitted among the sunflowers, but warily and in terror of the lurking amantis—that arrant hypocrite, so devotional in his attitude, so treacherously voracious in his method of seizing and assimilating his prey—and a pair of tiny sugar-birds, in their delicate crimson and green vests, flashed fearlessly to and fro within a couple of yards of Renshaw's head, dipping their long needle-like bills into the waxen blossoms of the fragrant jessamine.

And here we frankly admit losing patience with our friend Renshaw. Had we been in his place, with that exquisitely modulated voice talking to us, and fraught with that tender solicitude for our well-being, we feel sure we should in our own mind have sent a certain outrageous little flirt to the right-about then and there, and have dismissed her from our thoughts outright. But then, after all, we must remember that these two had known each other intimately all their lives, had been almost like brother and sister, which, we suppose, counts for something.

"Well, I'm taking it easy enough this morning, in your sweet society, Marian," he rejoined, "so you mustn't be too rough upon me. And—it is Paradise."

"What is? My society?"

He laughed.

"That, of course. Understood. Didn't need specifying. But—all this," with a wave of the arm that caused the sugar-birds to dart away in terror and a couple of flashes of sheeny light, a result he certainly had not intended, "All this. To lounge here at ease like this, literally bathed in the scent of flowers, with a sound of running water in one's ears, and of bird life, animal life, every sort of life, after the dead, burnt-up, famine-stricken waste, watching day after day, month after month, for the rain that doesn't come—seeing one's stock snuffing out like flies with daily increasing regularity. Bah! It's enough to drive a man mad."

“Why don’t you give it up, Renshaw? Sell off your place and come and try this part? Chris is always saying you could do much better somewhere down here.”

“And Chris is right. But selling off is easier said than done, let me tell you. No one will so much as look at land investment up there—and—I’m about cleaned out. As soon as I’ve picked up a little more in form I’m off up country again. The interior. It’s the only thing left.”

Marian’s head bent down lower over her work, for her eyes were brimming. Renshaw, busily engaged at that moment knocking the ashes out of his pipe against the post of the verandah, was half turned away from her, and, for good or for ill, the teardrop which fell upon her work escaped him altogether. When he turned round again she had entirely recovered her self-control.

“If that is your idea, you had better follow my advice and do all you can to get strong again,” she said. “For you cannot think of launching out into an undertaking of that sort for some time to come. But—are you going to make another attempt to find ‘The Valley’?”

Renshaw nodded.

“That’s it!” he said. “By the way, you haven’t let drop anything about it to any one, Marian.”

She felt hurt.

“I should have thought you knew me better than that. Ah, I see. Only a woman, after all!” she added, with a smile. “That’s what you were thinking?”

“No. It came out instinctively. You must forgive me, Marian. I really believe I’m half crazed on the subject of that confoundedly elusive Golconda. Well, we shall find it this time.”

“We?”

“Yes. I’m going to cut Sellon into the scheme. It’s an undertaking that’ll carry two. Besides, he’s a good fellow, and I owe him a turn for pulling me through that fever.”

“I’m sorry to tread upon your quixotic susceptibilities, Renshaw,” said Marian, after a brief pause, “but if you were not as astoundingly unselfish as most of us are the other way, it might strike you that if Mr Sellon has done you one good turn, you have done him several. If he saved your life by nursing you through that fever, as you say—though it is by no means certain you would not have pulled through it without him—you have saved his on another occasion. Where would he have been with that snake crawling over him, for instance?—Ugh!”

“I say, Marian. It isn’t like you to be so ungenerous,” was the astonished reply. “Wasn’t it awfully good of the chap to stick there in my hovel all those weeks, boring himself to death just for the sake of looking after me? Come now!”

“Where would he have been if your ‘hovel’ had not come so opportunely in sight when he was lost in the veldt, exhausted and without food or water?” came the calm, ready rejoinder.

“Oh, I say, come now. We can’t count that. It wouldn’t be fair. But—look here, Marian. You don’t like Sellon? Now, why not?”

“There you’re wrong,” she answered after a pause. “Within the ordinary meaning of the word, I do ‘like’ him. I think him a very pleasant, well-informed man, and good company. But he is not a man I should trust.”

“Not, eh? But, in the name of all conscience, why not?”

“That I can’t tell you, Renshaw. I don’t quite know myself, except that somehow or other he doesn’t seem to ring true. It’s a question of ear, like a false note. There, though, this is shameful. Here I am taking away a person’s character in the most reckless way, with nothing more definite to go upon but my woman’s instinct. I wouldn’t mention such a thing to any one else in the world—not even to Chris or Hilda. But I always did make a father-confessor of you,” she added, with a smile.

“And I hope you always will. Still, Marian, with all due deference to your woman’s instinct, it’s just on the cards it may in this instance be erroneous.”

“Perhaps so. I hope so. I mean it sincerely, not ironically. But, Renshaw—how much do you know of this Mr Sellon? Who is he?”

“Well, the fact is, I don’t know much—beyond that he’s knocking around here on the look-out for anything that may turn up trumps—like a good many of us. He’s a man who seems to have seen a good deal of the world—and, as you say, he’s good company. Seems well bred, too.”

“Oh yes,” acquiesced Marian, half absently. “But we had better forget that I ventured an unfavourable opinion on him.” And as at that moment they were invaded by twelve-year-old Effie, the subject perforce dropped.

“Is Violet inside, Effie?” asked Marian.

“Inside? Not she. Not when somebody else is outside. She’s spooning away somewhere—as usual.”

“That’s a nice way for little girls to talk,” said Marion, severely.

“Well, so she is,” went on Precocity, with the abominable straightforwardness of her tender years. “Wasn’t it always too hot to move, if any one suggested going out in the morning, until ‘somebody’ came? Now—ahem!”

“You’re talking nonsense, you naughty child,” said Marian, angrily. “In fact, you don’t know yourself what you’re talking about.”

“Eh? Don’t I? If you had seen what I saw—only the day before yesterday—”

“But we didn’t see it, and we don’t want to know anything about it,” struck in Renshaw, sternly. “I never expected you to turn into a little mischief-maker, Effie.”

“You needn’t be so cross, Uncle Renshaw,” whimpered Miss Precocity, in whose affections the speaker held a prime place. “I only thought it rather good fun.” (Boo-hoo-hoo!)

“I didn’t mean to be hard upon you, dear—but spreading stories is generally anything but fun—not unusually least of all to those who spread them. Never repeat anything, Effie. Half the mischief in life comes out of tittle-tattle.”

But at that very moment, as though to turn the edge of the above highly salutary and not uncalled-for precept, who should heave in sight but the very pair under discussion, though in fact Christopher Selwood made up a third. The sight seemed to dry up Effie’s snivelling as if by magic.

“There! Didn’t I say so?” she muttered maliciously, and judiciously fled indoors.

“Still at work, Marian?” cried Violet, as the trio came up. “Why, what a regular Darby and Joan you two look,” she added, with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes. For although she laid herself out to keep well in with Marian, yet it was characteristic of her that she could not refrain from launching such a shaft as this—no, not even though her life depended on it.

And to her quick eye it seemed that there was ever so faint an indication that the bolt had struck home.

Chapter Thirteen.

A Tale of Blood.

The town of Port Lamport was picturesquely situated on a wide bend of the Umtirara River. It contained a population of about fifteen hundred—whites, that is—and was the seat of magistracy for the surrounding district.

In former times Fort Lamport had been one of the more important of a chain of military posts extending along what was then the Kafir frontier, but after a series of long and harassing wars, resulting in the removal of those troublesome neighbours further eastward, Fort Lamport, in common with other military posts, was abandoned as such. A town, however, had sprung up around it, and this, as a centre of commerce, and also of native trade—for there were still large native locations in the surrounding district—throve apace.

It was not much of a place to look at; and in its main features differed little, if at all, from any other up-country township. The houses, mostly one-storied, were all squat and ugly. There were half a dozen churches and chapels, also squat and ugly. There were several hotels, and four or five native canteens. There were the public offices and gaol, these being the old fort buildings, converted to that use. There were the usual half-dozen streets—long, straggling, and very dusty—and the usual market square, also very dusty; the average number of general stores—dealing in anything, from a pianoforte to a pot of blacking—and the average number of waggons and spans of oxen standing half the day in front of them. As for the good citizens—well, of course, they considered their town the foremost in the Colony, and, on the whole, were not much more given to strife and litigation among themselves than the inhabitants of a small community generally are.

But if the town itself was unattractive, its environment was not, with its background of rounded hills, their slopes covered with dense forest, while above and beyond rose the higher peaks of the Umtirara range.

In the smoking-room of one of the hotels above mentioned lounged Renshaw Fanning. It was the hot and drowsy hour immediately succeeding luncheon, and he was nodding over the Fort Lamport Courier, a typical sheet, which managed to supply news to its constituent world a week or so after the said news had become public property through other mediums.

Small wonder, then, that Renshaw felt drowsy, and that the paper should slip from his relaxing grasp. Instinctively he made a clutch at it, and the action roused him. His eye fell upon a paragraph which he had overlooked—

“Horrible Murder by Escaped Convicts.”

With the fascination which a sensational subject never altogether fails to inspire, drowsy as he felt, he ran his eye down the paragraph.

“No less than seven desperadoes succeeded in making their escape from the Kowie convict station last Monday under circumstances of considerable daring. While the gang was on its way to the scene of its labours in charge of one white and two native constables armed with loaded rifles, these scoundrels, evidently acting in concert, managed to overpower and disarm their guardians at one stroke. Leaving the latter terribly beaten about the head, and half dead, and taking their rifles and cartridges, they made off into the bush. The remainder of the gang, though they rendered no assistance, seemed not eager to re-taste the sweets of liberty, for instead of following the example of their comrades they returned quietly to the town and reported the incident. Next morning early, the runaways visited an outlying vij-kraal belonging to a Dutch farmer named Van Wyk, and there perpetrated a peculiarly atrocious murder. The vij-kraal was in charge of a Hottentot herd, who, hearing a noise in the kraal, ran out of his hut just as the scoundrels were making off with two sheep. He gave chase, when suddenly, and without any warning, one of them turned round and shot him through the chest. The whole gang then returned, dragged out the unfortunate man’s wife and three children, and deliberately butchered them one after the other in cold blood. The bodies were found during the day by the owner of the place, who came upon them quite unexpectedly. They were lying side by side, with their throats cut from ear to ear; and he describes it as the most horrible and sickening sight he ever beheld. The herd himself, though mortally wounded, had lived long enough to make a statement, which places the identity of the atrocious miscreants beyond all doubt. It may interest our readers to learn that among the runaways were the two Kafirs, Muntiwa and Booi, who were tried at the Circuit Court recently held here, and sentenced to seven years’ hard labour each for stock-stealing. The rest were Hottentots and Bastards. (Half-bloods are thus termed in Cape Colony parlance.) At the same time we feel it a duty to warn our readers, and especially those occupying isolated farms in the Umtirara range, to keep a sharp look-out, as it is by no means unlikely that these two scoundrels may hark back to their old retreat, and with their gang perhaps do considerable mischief before they are finally run to earth.”

Not one atom of drowsiness in Renshaw now. The sting of the above paragraph, like that of the scorpion, lay in the tail. His blood ran cold. Heavens! That household of unprotected women! For Christopher Selwood was away from home on a week’s absence, visiting a distant property of his, and Sellon, by way of a change and seeing the country, had accompanied him. Renshaw himself had ridden into Fort Lamport the previous day on urgent business of his own—nothing less than to interview a possible purchaser of his far-away desert farm. Under ordinary circumstances, it was no uncommon thing to leave the household without male protection for a day or two, or even longer. But now—good heavens!

He glanced at the date of the newspaper. There should be a later one, he said to himself. Feverishly he hunted about for it, trying to hope that it might contain intelligence of the recapture of the runaways. Ah, there it was! With trembling hands he tore open the double sheet, and glanced down the columns.

“The Escaped Convicts.

“Our surmise has proved correct. The runaways have taken refuge in the Umtirara range, from whose dense and rugged fastnesses they will, we fear, long be able to defy the best efforts of the

wholly inadequate police force at present at the disposal of the district. They entered a farmer's house on the lower drift, yesterday, during the owner's absence, and by dint of threats induced his wife and daughters to give them up all the firearms in the house. They got possession of two guns and a revolver, and a quantity of ammunition, and decamped in the direction of the mountains. It is a mercy they did not maltreat the inmates."

The cold perspiration started forth in beads upon the reader's forehead. The event recorded had occurred yesterday; the newspaper was of to-day's date. He might yet be in time. But would he be? It was three o'clock. Sunningdale was distant thirty-five miles. By the hardest riding he could not arrive before dark, for the road was bad in parts, and his horse was but an indifferent one.

In exactly five minutes he was in the saddle and riding rapidly down the street. It crossed his mind that he was totally unarmed, for in the settled parts of the Colony it is quite an exceptional thing to carry weapons. He could not even turn into the nearest store and purchase a six-shooter, for no such transaction can take place without a magistrate's permit—to obtain which would mean going out of his way, possibly delay at the office, should that functionary chance to be engaged at the time. No, he could not afford to lose a minute.

It was a hot afternoon. The sun glared fiercely down as he rode over the dozen miles of open undulating country which lay between the town and the first line of wooded hills. A quarter of an hour's off-saddle at a roadside inn—a feverish quarter of an hour, spent with his watch in his hand. Then on again.

Soon he was among the hills. Away up a diverging kloof lay a Boer homestead, about a mile distant. Should he turn off to it and try and borrow a weapon, or, at any rate, a fresh horse, and warn the inmates? Prudence answered No. Two miles out of his road, delay in the middle, and all on the purest chance. On, on!

Chapter Fourteen.

Against Time.

By sundown Renshaw was in the heart of the mountains. And now, as his steed's gait warned him, it was time to off-saddle again. The river lay below, about a hundred yards from the road. Dismounting, he led his horse down through the thick bush, and removing the saddle, but not the bridle, which latter he held in his hand, allowed the animal to graze and get somewhat cooler before drinking. Then, saddling up again, he regained the road.

The latter was in most parts very bad, as it wound its rugged length through a savage and desolate poort or defile, which in itself was one long ambuscade, for thick bush grew up to the very roadside, in places overhanging it. The sun had set, but a lurid afterglow was still reflected upon the iron face of a tall krantz, which, rising from the steep forest-clad slope, cleft the sky. Great baboons, squatted on high among the rocks, sent forth their deep-chested, far-sounding bark, in half-startled, half-angry recognition of the presence of their natural enemy—man; and, wheeling above the tree-tops, ascending higher and higher in airy circles to their roost among the crags, floated a pair of lammervangers (A species of black eagle) whose raucous voices rang out in croaking scream over the glooming depths of the lone defile like the weird wailing of a demoniac.

Darkness fell, for there is no twilight to speak of beneath the Southern Cross, and the dull, dead silence of the mighty solitude was unbroken, save for the hoarse roar of the river surging through its rocky channel, and the measured hoof-beats of the horse. And as he urged the animal on through the gloom all Renshaw's apprehensions seemed to renew themselves with tenfold intensity. The appalling details of the gruesome tragedy chased each other through his mind in all their red horror, and his overwrought brain would conjure up the most grisly forebodings. What if he should arrive too late! Those unprotected women helpless at the mercy of these fiends, red-handed from the scene of their last ruthless crime, devils incarnate let loose upon the earth, their lives forfeit, the noose ready for their necks, their only object to perpetrate as many hideous infamies as possible before meeting the doom that would sooner or later be theirs! No wonder the man's brain seemed on fire.

The road took a sudden trend downwards. The river must be crossed here. The drift was a bad one in the daytime, at night a dangerous one. But the latter consideration, far from daunting him, rather tended to brace Renshaw's nerves. Warily he urged his horse on.

The water was up to the saddle-flaps—then a step deeper. The horse, now almost swimming, snorted wildly as the roaring whirling flood creamed around him in the starlight. But the rider kept him well by the head, and in a trice he emerged panting and dripping on the other side.

Suddenly in front from the bush fringing the road there flashed forth a faint spark, as of a man blowing on a burnt stick to light his pipe. All Renshaw's coolness returned, and gathering up his reins, he prepared to make a dash for it. Then the spark floated straight towards him, and—he

laughed at his fears. It was only a firefly. On still. He would soon be there now. Another drift in the river—splash—splash—out again—still onward.

Suddenly the horse pricked forward his ears and began to snort uneasily. Now for it! Still it might be only a leopard or a snake. But all doubt was speedily nipped in the bud by a harsh voice, in Dutch, calling upon him to stop.

Peering forward into the darkness, he made out two figures—one tall, the other short. They were about a dozen yards in front, and were standing in the middle of the road as though to bar his passage. There was no leaving the road, by reason of the bush which lined it on either side in a dense, impenetrable thicket.

This was by no means Renshaw Fanning's first experience of more or less deadly peril, as we have already shown, and his unswerving coolness under such circumstances was never so consummately in hand as now, when not merely his own life, but the lives of others dearer to him still, were in the balance. His mind was made up in a flash.

"Clear out, or I'll shoot you dead," he answered, in the same language, whipping out his pipe-case, and presenting it pistol fashion at the shorter of the two men, who was advancing as if to seize his bridle.

The resolute attitude, the quick, decisive tone, above all perhaps the click, strongly suggestive of cocking, which Renshaw managed to produce from the spring of the implement, caused the fellow instinctively to jump aside. At the same time came a flash and a stunning report. Something hummed overhead, and most unpleasantly near. The other man had deliberately fired at him.

Then Renshaw did the best thing he could under the circumstances. He took the bull by the horns.

He put his horse straight at his assailant, at the same time wrenching off his stirrup—no mean weapon at a push. But the fellow, losing nerve, tried to dodge. In vain. The horse's shoulder hit him fair and sent him floundering to earth; indeed, but for the fact that the animal, frenzied with fright, swerved and tried to hang back, he would have been trampled underfoot.

Again Renshaw did the best thing he could. Mastering a desire to turn and brain the ruffian before he could rise, he rammed the spurs into his horse's flanks and set off down the road at a hard gallop; not, however, before he was able to recognise in his assailants a Hottentot and a Bastard. Luckily, too, for three more flashes belched forth from the hillside a little way above the scene of the conflict, but the bullets came nowhere near him. Then upon the still silence of the night he could hear other and deeper tones mingling with the harsh chatter of his late assailants. There was no mistaking those tones. They issued from Kafir lips. He had walked into the very midst of the cut-throat gang itself—had come right through it.

Then the question arose in his mind, would they pursue him? He was certain they had no horses, but he had still about four miles to go, and his own steed was beginning to show signs of distress. The fleet-footed barbarians could travel almost as fast on two legs as he could on four. They might pursue him under cover of the bush and converge upon his line of flight at any moment. And then his heart sank within him as he thought of a certain steep and very stony hill which still lay between him and his journey's end.

How his ears were strained; how every faculty was on the alert to almost agonising pitch as, peering back into the silence of the gloom, he strove to catch the faintest sound which should tell of pursuit.

"Up, old horse! Nearly home now!"

The dreaded hill was reached. Minutes seemed hours to the rider, till at length its crest was gained. Then far below in front there twinkled forth a light, and then another. The sight sent a surging rush of relief through Renshaw's heart.

"Thanks be to God and all the blessed and glorious company of heaven," he murmured reverently, raising his hat.

For he knew that those lighted windows would not have shone so peacefully had any red horrific tragedy been there enacted.

He was yet in time.

Chapter Fifteen.

The Midnight Foe.

"Why, it's Renshaw!" cried Mrs Selwood, who, hearing the sound of hoofs mingling with the barking of the dogs, had come to the door. "We didn't expect you till to-morrow. Well, you're just in time. A few minutes more and we should all have gone to bed. Call Windvogel to take your horse, and come in."

"I'll let him run; he's about done up," he answered, removing saddle, bridle, and headstall, and turning the animal adrift.

"Has your business fallen through?" she asked, as he followed her into the passage and closed the door.

"It has had to stand over. Come in here, Hilda"—leading the way into an empty room. "I have something to tell you. No—never mind the light. The fewer lights shown the better."

Then in as few words as possible he told her of the danger which hovered over them.

Hilda Selwood came of a good old colonial stock, and was not lacking in nerve. Still she would not have been a woman had she realised the frightful peril which threatened herself and her children without a shudder.

"We must do what we can, Renshaw," she said. "Perhaps they will not attack us."

"'Perhaps' is a sorry word to start campaigning upon. What we've got to do is to ensure them as warm a reception as possible if they do. My opinion is that they will, if only that they seem to have been watching the road. I believe they have ascertained by some means or other that Chris is away. What people have you on the place just now?"

"Very few. There's Windvogel and old Jacob and Gomfana. That's all."

"Windvogel I don't trust. Shouldn't wonder, indeed, if the yellow scoundrel was in league with them. Old Jacob has more than one foot in the grave—he's no good. But Gomfana, though he couldn't hit a haystack with a gun, might make useful play with a chopper if it came to close quarters. And now, look here," he went on, after a moment's hesitation; "the situation may be desperate. These seven cut-throats are fighting with a noose round their necks. Every one of their lives is forfeited, and they are all well armed. Now, is there no suggestion you can make towards strengthening the garrison?"

"Why, of course. Marian and I both know how to shoot. That makes three of us. And then we are under cover."

“Well spoken. But I can improve on that idea—if you can bring yourself to agree. Little chaps as they are, Fred and Basil are better shots than either of you, and game to the core.”

Hilda Selwood gave a gasp. Her two little ones! Why, they were mere babies but yesterday! And now she was to be called upon to sacrifice them—to expose them to the peril of a desperate conflict which would fully tax the courage of grown men.

“I’d rather not, if it could possibly be avoided,” she said, at last.

“Very well. But I’m much mistaken if the young scamps won’t take the matter into their own hands directly they hear a shot fired. Now, how many guns have we? There’s mine—two of Chris’s—that makes six barrels; the boys’ muzzle-loaders, ten barrels. Then Chris has a five-shooter—”

“He took that with him.”

“Did he? Well, I have a six. Altogether we shan’t do badly. And now you had better break the news to Marian and Miss Avory, while I slip down to the hut to rout out Gomfana. And lose no time barricading the windows. Mattresses are the thing for that—almost bullet-proof.”

Arming himself with a gun and revolver, Renshaw slipped out quietly, and made his way to the huts. Gomfana, like most natives, slept heavily, and took a deal of waking; and by the time the situation was brought home to his obtuse brain some minutes had been lost. He was a sturdy youngster of about twenty—a “raw” Kafir—that is to say, one who had never been out of his native kraal, and was stupid and ignorant of European ways. But at the prospect of a fight he grinned and brightened up.

Just as they regained the house a glow suffused the sky against the mountain-top, and a few minutes later a broad half-moon was sailing high in the heavens. Renshaw hailed its appearance with unbounded satisfaction.

The two girls had already lit their candles for bed when Mrs Selwood brought the unwelcome news, judiciously omitting the ghastly tragedy, which could only horrify without encouraging the hearers. Their method of receiving it was as divergent as their characters. Marian, though she slightly changed colour, remained perfectly cool and collected. Violet, on the other hand, turned white as a sheet, and fairly shook with terror. It was all they could do to keep her from going into wild hysterics.

“This sort of thing won’t do at all, Miss Avory,” said Renshaw, entering at that moment; his sable recruit hanging back in the doorway. “Why, all you’ve got to do is to lie down and go to sleep in perfect safety. If we exchange a shot or two that’s all it will amount to. Come, now, I should have thought you would have enjoyed the excitement of a real adventure.”

Violet tried to smile, but it was the mere ghost of a smile. She still shivered and shook. And Renshaw himself seemed changed. None of the diffident lover about him now. He seemed in his

element at the prospect of peril. In the midst of her fears Violet remembered Marian's eulogies on his coolness and resource in an emergency. The recollection quieted her, and she looked upon him with unbounded respect. Then she noted Marian's calm and resolute demeanour, and even fancied that the look of the latter was expressive of something like contempt—wherein she was mistaken, but the idea acted as a tonic to brace her nerves.

Having seen to the firearms and ammunition, and cautioned the women to remain where they were and allow no more light to be seen than they could help, Renshaw went the round of the house. Effie and the two little ones were sleeping soundly, so also were the two boys. Opening the door, he looked cautiously out. All was still.

He had decided that the four corner rooms should be the points of defence, and the windows accordingly were not barricaded. The others were rendered secure by fixing against each a couple of mattresses. Then he went back to the ladies.

The house was now all in darkness, but the moonlight streaming in above the protecting mattresses gave sufficient light for all purposes.

"Now, good people," he said cheerily, "you may all go to bed. I'll call you when I want you. I'm going to watch at one corner, and Gomfana will take the other. There'll be no catching us napping. Besides, the dogs will raise the most awful shillaloo if any one heaves in sight."

Shakedowns had been improvised on the floor with rugs and pillows. In great measure reassured by Marian's unconcern, Violet consented to lie down. Mrs Selwood betook herself to her children's room.

The moon mounted higher and higher to the zenith, flooding the land with an eerie and chastened half-light. The monotonous chirrup of the tree-frog, the shrill baying of a pair of hunting jackals, the occasional cry of a nightbird mournfully echoing from the mountain side, floated to the watcher's ear. Unremitting in his vigilance, Renshaw moved silently from room to room, his unerring eye scanning the ground at every point, and keeping his sable lieutenant up to the mark, lest that worthy should be tempted to doze. But Gomfana, who was armed with an axe and some assegais taken from a wall trophy, was rather thirsting for the encounter than otherwise.

Some hundred and fifty yards from the main dwelling was a large outhouse block, comprising stables, waggon shed, shearing house, etc. On this point Renshaw's attention was mainly concentrated. He felt sure that the miscreants would take advantage of the shadow of this building to creep up as near as they could. Another point that needed watching was the thick quince hedge which skirted the garden, and which now afforded a shade congenial to the assailants' movements.

Nothing is more trying to the nerves than a lonely nocturnal vigil. Most men, brave enough in actual danger, would have felt the "creepy" effect of those silent hours as they strained their eyes upon the surrounding veldt, now construing a shadow into an enemy—now hearing a whisper of

voices, the tread of a stealthy footstep—in the varying and spectral sounds of the night. But Renshaw's solitary and wandering life had inured him to these things. His chief considerations now were, firstly lest the drowsy feeling, which he was doing his utmost to combat, should tend to dim his vigilance; secondly, the stilling of his cravings for just one carefully guarded pipe.

Suddenly the faintest possible creak of a footfall on the floor behind him. He turned like lightning.

"It's only me," whispered a soft voice. And a tall figure approached in the gloom.

"Marian! Why are you not lying down with the rest?"

"They're all asleep now, even Violet, Look, I've brought you some sandwiches. You hardly ate anything when you came in. You set to work upon them at once, and I'll mount sentry while you are having supper."

"How good of you!" he said, taking the plate from her, and also the glass of brandy-and-water which she had mixed for him, "Why, what have you there? A shooting iron?"

"Of course. You don't suppose I was going to leave my gun behind when we are in a state of siege, do you?"

She carried a double-barrelled breech-loader—rifle and shot cartridge—and there was a warrior flash in her eyes visible in the moonlight, which told that she meant to use it, too, if occasion required.

"It is very lonely for you, watching all by yourself," she continued. "I thought I would come and keep you company."

"So like you again. But look here, Marian dear. You must not be exposed to danger. Single-handed I can make such an example of the schepsels that they'll probably turn and run. Still, they might let fly a shot or two. You will go back to the others if I ask you—will you not?"

Her heart thrilled tumultuously within her. In the darkness she need be at no pains to conceal the tell-tale expression of her face. Ah, but—his tones, though affectionate, were merely brotherly. That might be, but still, whatever peril he might undergo, it should be her privilege to share it—her sweet privilege—and she would share it.

"No; I will not," she answered decisively. "I can be as cool as any one living, man or woman. Feel my hand; there is not a tremble in it." And her fingers closed round his in a firm, steady clasp, in which there was nothing nervous, nothing spasmodic.

"I believe you can," he answered, "but I was thinking of your safety."

“My safety!” she interrupted. Then in a different tone, “How do you suppose they’ll come, Renshaw? Walk openly to the house or try to creep up in the shadow?”

“The last. You see they showed their hand by tackling me upon the road. Yet they may think I’ve turned in and bothered no more about it. Hallo!”

“What is it?”

“I could have sworn I heard something. I’ve got long ears—like a donkey, you will say.”

Both listened intently, the woman with less eagerness, less anxiety, than the man. There was a kind of exaltation about Marian to-night. Her nerves were as firm as those of her male companion himself; and the certainty of a bloody conflict was to her, in her then frame of mind, a mere matter of detail.

“Ah! I thought I was right,” he went on, as a premonitory “woof” from one of the dogs lying around the house was followed by a general uprising and clamour on the part of the whole lot. Then, baying savagely, they started off in fall charge in the direction of the dark line of shade thrown by the willows fringing the dam, and on the opposite side to that watched by Renshaw and his companion.

“Marian, just go to the other side and look if you can see anything. You won’t, I know, but still there’s no harm in making sure.”

She obeyed. From that side of the house nothing was visible except a long stretch of sickly moonlight and the line of trees. But the dogs had disappeared within the shade of the latter and were raising a clamour that was truly infernal. They seemed to be holding something or somebody in check. Then she returned to her former post.

“There’s nothing there,” she said, “at present. Ah!”

Three shadowy figures were flitting round the angle of the outhouse block above mentioned. They gained the shade thrown by the front of it—crouched and waited.

“Here they are,” whispered Renshaw, under his breath. “I was up to that dodge. One fellow was told off to draw off the dogs, while these jokers sneaked up in the opposite direction. Look—here come the rest.”

Two more figures followed the first—then another. All were now crouching in the shadow of the outhouses. Still the yelling clamour of the dogs sounded distant on the other side, kept up with unabated fury.

Chapter Sixteen.

Catching a Tartar.

“Now, Marian,” whispered Renshaw. “This is going to be a life-and-death business, remember. It’s them or ourselves. You are sure you have no womanish qualms in favour of ‘giving them a chance,’ or any madness of that kind?”

“You will see!” was the curt reply, and the tone was sufficient.

“All right. When I say ‘Now,’ you must let into the fellow I’ll point out to you. Use your shot-barrel, remember. I’m going to let them get quite close, and we’ll give them a heavy charge of loepers apiece. Then if we get a show we’ll follow it up with rifle practice.”

She whispered assent, and for some moments they strained their eyes upon the shade of the outbuildings. Suddenly one dark figure flitted noiselessly out, followed by another and another, till the whole gang were full in sight, advancing in a diagonal line.

“Keep cool, Marian, keep cool,” warned Renshaw. “Wait for the word. They are not nearly close enough yet.”

On came the six cut-throats. Two black men led—then a bestial-looking, undersized Bushman Hottentot; his hideous yellow face, repulsive in the moonlight, cruel, ape-like; his eyes rolling in eager, ferocious expectation of the sanguinary orgy which awaited. The other three were half-bloods. Five of them carried guns, the sixth a pistol. Again Renshaw had done the very best thing he could, in shaping the plan we have heard him lay down.

On they came. Once the leader raised his hand, and all stopped, listening intently. The wild clamour of the dogs still arose in the distance. Reassured, the scoundrels advanced, swiftly, noiselessly. Seventy—sixty—fifty—forty yards.

“Ready, Marian! Take the third fellow. Now!”

Crash! Crash!

The double report bellowed forth into the midnight stillness. Mingling with it came a horrid scream. Marian’s aim had been true and deadly. The leader of the gang, a stalwart Kafir—had made one leap into the air and had fallen forward on his face. He lay motionless. Again Renshaw drew trigger, bringing a third man to the grass, his knee-bone shattered.

Then the unexpected took place. Instead of seeking safety in headlong flight, as the defenders had reckoned, the surviving three rushed madly round to the other side of the house, a bullet from Renshaw’s six-shooter failing to stop them.

“Stay here, Marian,” whispered the latter hurriedly. “Draw on the first fellow who shows himself.” And in a trice he was round to meet the new attack.

What was this? No sign of the enemy. Had they fled?

Suddenly a crash of glass—a scuffle and a torrent of Dutch curses. Quickly the position stood revealed.

There stood Gomfana, holding on to a human figure which was half in and half out of the window—head and shoulders through the shattered sash. He had got the fellow firmly by the neck with one hand, while with the other he was striving all he knew to drag him in by his clothing. But the villain—a stalwart half-breed—was almost too much for the sturdy young Kafir. The latter would have assegaied him in a moment had he owned three hands. Having but two, however, and these two being required to hold on to his enemy, it was out of the question—but hold on he did.

“Stop struggling or I’ll shoot you dead!” said Renshaw, in Dutch, placing the muzzle of his pistol against the man’s body. The fellow, thoroughly cowed, obeyed, and Gomfana, with a final effort, hauled him bodily into the room amid a terrific shatter of falling glass.

“What on earth’s the row, Uncle Renshaw?” said a boy’s voice.

“Fred, cut away and find a reim” Rope is little used in South Africa, its place being supplied by raw hide-thongs termed as above. “Sharp’s the word—mind.”

In a twinkling the youngster was back with the required article, and almost as quickly Renshaw’s ready hand had strapped up the midnight robber so that the latter could not move a limb. Now, all this had happened in far less time than it has taken to narrate.

But there were still two of the scoundrels unaccounted for. That they had not fled Renshaw was certain. And now the dogs, hearing the firing and shouting, and judging the bulk of the fun lay in that direction, abandoned their mysterious quarry and came tearing up open-mouthed. Then the secret stood explained. The remaining two were crouching beneath some rockwork at one corner of the verandah, presumably following the tactics of the large veldt-spider who when suddenly surprised is apt to run straight in upon the intruder, judging, rightly in the main, that in this position the latter will not be able to crush him.

“Throw down your arms or you are dead men!” cried Renshaw, covering the pair with his barrels.

The fellows, who had just emptied their guns—with small effect, however—among the snarling, leaping, savage pack which had at once assailed them, did not hesitate a moment. They were the least desperate of the gang, and the fearful execution done among their comrades had struck wholesome terror into themselves. Begging piteously for mercy, they shambled forth and submitted to being duly secured.

No sooner was this effected than a sharp report rang out in the room where Marian had been posted. Promptly gaining the spot, Renshaw found that the shot had not been fired by her, but by small Basil Selwood.

“Why, what are you blazing at, Basil? Those chaps are safely winged, if they’re not dead.”

“Are they? That black chap was trying to cut away on two hands and a leg,” answered the youngster. “I thought I’d stop that. But I didn’t hit him,” he added candidly.

“I must go and see to them. You and Fred must mount guard over the prisoners, and send Gomfana to me.”

Accompanied by the young Kafir, Renshaw sallied forth. The dogs had already pounced upon the wounded Bushman, and in another minute would have worried him to death. Game to the last, however, the ferocious ruffian had fired among them, killing one, and but for the fact that his gun was empty would have fired upon his human rescuers. Investigation showed that he was badly wounded in both legs, notwithstanding which, well knowing the desperate hardihood of the race, Renshaw deemed it necessary to bind his hands. The other wounded man, a Kafir, had also a broken leg. He, however, realising how thoroughly the odds were against him, submitted sullenly to the inevitable. The sixth and last, he who had led the gang, was stone dead, shot through the heart. Renshaw turned the body over. The empty eye-socket and the brutal pock-marked features seemed distorted in a fiend-like leer beneath the moonlight. Renshaw had no difficulty in recognising the description of the Kafir, Muntiwa.

Meanwhile, how had the non-combatants been faring? Mrs Selwood, having armed herself with a double gun, had retired to her children’s room, resolved that her post was there. She had taken Violet with her, and the latter had fallen into a fit of terror that was simply uncontrollable. The crash of the firearms, the dread lull intervening, the subdued anxious voices of the defenders, the terrible suspense, had all been too much for her; nor could the reassurances of her hostess, or even the example of pluck shown by the child Effie, avail to allay her fears. Finally, she went off into a dead swoon.

As for the two youngsters, Fred and Basil, the prevailing idea in their minds was one of unqualified disgust at not having been allowed to take part in the fight from the very beginning.

“Why didn’t you call us, Uncle Renshaw?” was their continual cry. “We’d have knocked fits out of those schelms. Wouldn’t we just!”

“You bloodthirsty young ruffians! You have plenty of time before you for that sort of thing, and you’ll have plenty of opportunities for getting and giving hard knocks by the time you get to my age,” he would reply good-humouredly. But the youngsters only shook their heads with expressions of the most intense disappointment and disgust.

Not much sleep for the household during the remainder of that night. Renshaw found his time and his vigilance fully occupied in attending to the security of his prisoners, and doing what he could for the wounded. The fellows, for their part, were disposed to accept the inevitable, and make the best of the situation. They were bound to be hanged anyhow, though in his secret heart each man hoped that his life might be spared. Meanwhile, it was better to enjoy good rations than bad ones, and to that end it was as well to conciliate the Baas; and Renshaw had no difficulty, accordingly, in getting at the story of the attack.

Of course, each swore he was not the instigator; of course, each laid the blame on the dead man, Muntiwa. He was the prime mover in the enterprise. He had a grudge against the Baas who lived there, and as they all stood and fell together they had been obliged to help him in his scheme of plunder. Of course, too, each and all were ready to swear that plunder was their only object. They would not have harmed anybody, not they; no, not for all the world. Thus the three half-breeds. But Booi, the Kafir, volunteered no statement whatever, and Klaas Baartman, the Bushman Hottentot, savagely declared that he had intended to cut the throat of every woman and child on the place. The seventh of the gang, who was still at large, having no firearm, had been posted under the willows to draw off the dogs—even as Renshaw had conjectured.

Asked whether they knew the Baas of the place was absent, they replied that one of them had been watching and had seen unmistakable signs that this was the case. The rest of the gang had watched the main road, and when Renshaw had passed they had intended to let him go by unmolested, so as to render more complete their projected surprise, and would have, but for the indiscretion of one of their number—of course the man who had not been captured.

In the morning, opportunely enough, a posse of Mounted Police arrived—a sergeant and three troopers. They had been patrolling the mountains on the lookout for this very gang, and had fallen in with some natives who declared they had heard distant firing in the direction of Sunningdale. Thither therefore they had ridden with all possible speed.

“Well, Mr Fanning—I wish I had had your luck—that’s all,” said the sergeant—while doing soldier’s justice to the succulent breakfast set before them. “You’ve captured the whole gang, single-handed, all but one, that is, and we are sure to have him soon.”

“I wish you had, sergeant, if it would hurry on your sub-inspectorship,” said Renshaw, heartily—“But I must take exception to your word ‘single-handed,’ I don’t know what I should have done without Miss Selwood.”

Whereat the sergeant, who, like many another man serving in the Mounted Police in those days, was a gentleman by birth, and who moreover had been casting many an admiring glance at Marian, turned to the latter with the most gracefully worded compliment he could muster. But, Marian herself was somewhat unresponsive. She could shoot people, if put to it, but her preferences were all the other way. As it was she was heartily thankful she had not killed the man, and that his wounds were not mortal.

“I’m afraid he’ll only recover for Jack Ketch, then, Miss Selwood,” rejoined the sergeant. “They’re all booked for the ‘drop,’ to a dead certainty, for that other affair. What? Hadn’t you heard of it?”

And then came out the story of the wholesale butchery in which these miscreants had been concerned. There was no difficulty whatever as to providing their identity. The Government rifles, stolen from the convict guards when these were overpowered, spoke for themselves. And with the horror of the recital vanished the reactionary glow of pity which had begun to agitate the feminine breast on behalf of the prisoners. Hanging was too good for such a set of fiends.

Breakfast over, the police troopers set out with their prisoners, handcuffed, and extra well secured with reims; for the bush bordering the road was thick, as we have seen, and the men in desperate case. The two wounded ruffians were left behind until such time as they should be in a condition to travel—to recover, as the police sergeant had truly put it, for Jack Ketch; and the dead body of Muntiwa was taken to a distance, and built up in a kind of impromptu morgue of stones to protect it against wild animals and carrion birds. For the district surgeon would have to make a post-mortem, and a report, as by law required; a duty which that functionary might, or might not, hurry himself to fulfil.

We may as well anticipate a few months, and finally dismiss the surviving scoundrels from our narrative. The wounded ones being sufficiently convalescent, the whole lot—for the man who escaped at Sunningdale was eventually taken—were put upon their trial for the murder of the Hottentot family. Two were accepted as Queen’s evidence, and their testimony, as confirmed by the murdered man’s dying deposition, established that Muntiwa and Klaas Baartman, the Bushman Hottentot, were the principal actors in the diabolical business—though there was not much difference in degree between the guilt of any of them, except that Booi, the other Kafir, had endeavoured strenuously to dissuade his fellow-scoundrels from the murder of the woman and children. Accordingly, the two men who had saved their lives by turning Queen’s evidence, were put back to take their trial for escaping from durance, and further acts of robbery committed or attempted, including their attack upon Sunningdale; while the remaining four were sentenced to death. Which sentence was carried out in the town of the district wherein the murder had taken place, and the cutthroats were duly hanged—all except the Kafir, Booi, that is, who being recommended to mercy on the consideration above given, his capital sentence was commuted to one of hard labour for life.

Chapter Seventeen.

After the Storm.

Several days went by before things at Sunningdale settled down into their normal calm. The excitement of the night attack had left its mark upon all concerned; moreover, the presence of the two prisoners was productive of an uneasy feeling among the weaker members of the household, for apart from it being a continual reminder of a scene they would fain forget, there was always a haunting fear lest the desperate scoundrels might once more effect their escape. To Violet especially did this apply, and she would wake in the night screaming wildly, and declaring she could see the savage faces of the prisoners glaring in at the window. In fact, for some days she lay in a complete state of nervous prostration.

A policeman had been sent out from Fort Lamport at Renshaw's request, to take charge of the two convicts. Their wounds had been attended to by the district surgeon. Those received by the Bushman were of a shocking nature, and would probably have proved fatal to a white man, while it was found necessary to amputate the Kafir's leg. The rope, however, was not to be cheated of its prey, as we have already shown.

Now Sunningdale, though a charming spot, was a decidedly out-of-the-way one, notwithstanding which, however, as soon as the news of the conflict got wind, it was beset with visitors from far and near, all eager to hear the story at first hand; all fired with curiosity to see two such desperate and now notorious villains as Klaas Baartman and his confederate. We fear the latter emotion was productive of transient advantage to the two scoundrels, in the shape of chunks of tobacco, for apart from an involuntary feeling of compunction for a human creature, however hardened a criminal, whose days are as surely numbered as those of a sheep in a slaughterhouse pen, there was the idea that these two wretches being on show, it was only fair that they should derive some small benefit therefrom. Hence the chunks of tobacco.

There was one to whom this sudden influx of visitors was distasteful in the highest degree. That one was Marian Selwood. To find herself exalted by them into a heroine, to be repeatedly congratulated on her splendid nerve, and complimented on her wonderful pluck and so forth, was absolutely sickening to her. As she remarked bitterly to Renshaw, "What was there to brag about, in that she, securely concealed—lurking ambushed, in fact—did shoot down a wretched man advancing in the open? It was a repulsive necessity, but not a thing to be proud of, and for her part the sooner she could forget it the better."

To which he had replied that, while agreeing with her on the main principle, the way in which to look at the matter was this. She had been called upon unexpectedly to fill a critical position, one demanding both courage and judgment—and inasmuch as she had displayed both those qualities, and had shown herself abundantly equal to the situation, she had every reason to feel satisfied with herself. Which judicious reassurance, coming from the quarter it did, tended not a little to soothe poor Marian's troubled mind.

For a strange depression had come upon her since the occurrence—a strange reaction in no wise due to the lurid incidents of the tragedy itself. The very firmness and resolution she had displayed were as gall and wormwood to her recollections. What a figure she must have cut! A mere fighting Amazon, a masculine virago, endowed with a modicum of brute courage and healthy nerves! Was it her fault? Thus would she lash her mind into an agony, what time people were showering congratulations and compliments upon her.

Ah, but then the exquisite sweetness of that lonely midnight vigil—alone with him, in momentary expectation of impending peril, their faculties of vision strained to the uttermost—gazing forth into the sickly moonlight watching for the coming of the murderous foe. A reminiscence which would haunt most women for the rest of their lives, causing them to start appalled from their dreams. Not so this one. That weird midnight hour, the hush of expectancy, their common peril, her fears on his account; ah, that was something to look back upon, something that should make her heart thrill—but not with terror—for many and many a day.

Yet the iron was in her soul. Nothing could blot out the repellent mental photograph she had taken of herself. It might fade in time, but could never be effaced. Why had she not screamed and fainted like Violet Avory? That, at any rate, was "womanly", she supposed. And what was more repellent than the opposite quality in one of her own sex?

At the thought of Violet she was conscious of a bitter pang. What was the talisman by which the latter was empowered to win all hearts—and then to trample them underfoot in pretty scorn? Well, Violet had every advantage. Her bright, piquant beauty and fascinating manner, her consummate savoir vivre, her abundant and perfect taste, her knowledge of society, of England and the Continent—all these things counted, she supposed. Violet was born and bred in England, and had had the advantages of society and travel; whereas she, Marian, had never been outside the Colony, and had spent most of her life on a frontier farm. Be it remembered, nevertheless, that she who thus secretly ruminated, to her own disparagement, was no mere shy, awkward, diffident school-girl, but a peculiarly winsome, refined, and gracious-mannered woman. And then she would awake to a consciousness that the very fact of indulging in such comparisons between herself and Violet was not a little contemptible. For the broad, reflective mind of Marian Selwood, though possessing its proper share of pride, held no corner wherein might lurk the meaner vice of envy. Whereby she stood confessed an anomaly among her sex.

When Sellon and his host returned from their temporary absence, the former displayed more feeling at the thought of the horrible peril incurred by Violet than those among whom his lines were at present cast would have given him credit for, and in pursuance of this vein he could not sufficiently extol the promptness of resource and cool bravery displayed by Renshaw. And again and again he found himself wondering at the extraordinary coincidence involved in his being brought to this place by Fanning of all men in the world. It was pretty rough on poor Fanning that he should be the means of cutting his own throat. But he had certainly behaved splendidly since, thought Maurice. He had evidently recognised, and that unmistakably, who had the prior claim, and the perfect good taste with which he had withdrawn was worthy of all praise. And in a fit of generous self-complacency the holder of the winning cards felt inclined to blame Violet for having given any encouragement to his now discomfited rival.

What, however, did not occur to him was to blame himself. Maurice Sellon was not built that way. His memory went back to the time of their first meeting—a clear case of love at first sight—to many a tryst since, stolen, and therefore doubly sweet; their awakening to the hopelessness of it all; then their mutual compact to part, to hold no sort of communication by word or pen for six months—which arrangement, though heroic, had broken down ignominiously, as we have seen. He was a great mixture, this unprincipled man of the world. But, with all his faults, his heart was a very soft one, and around it Violet Avory had entwined herself with a firmness, an inextricability, which she could hardly have compassed with a man of stronger mind and clearer head.

It did not occur to him to blame himself. He held her heart, but dog-in-the-manger like. They could never be anything closer to each other; but, dog-in-the-manger like, he had no idea of surrendering her to one who might freely occupy a closer place. Conscience suggested that had he himself not turned up Renshaw Fanning's suit might in time have prospered. Well, what was that to him? He would give up Violet to no man living; and he felt sore and angry at the bare suggestion sometimes aroused by mind and conscience that she could at any time bring herself or be brought to give him up.

Then his thoughts took a turn; went back to Fanning and his tormenting secret. He remembered the banter that had passed between them, when projecting their treasure-seeking expedition. "Perhaps after all our object is the same," he had said. "Perhaps it is," had been the off-hand reply. And it was with a vengeance. He had not intended to be so literal in making the remark! yet he had been startlingly so, though unconsciously. And this suggested another misgiving. What if Fanning should now refuse to share the secret with him—make some excuse—invent some pretext for "climbing down"? He knew that he himself would be more than tempted so to act were the positions reversed. In fact, it was of no use disguising from himself that he would so act. But Fanning was a good fellow—a thoroughly conscientious fellow. He would never go back on his word—would never play him, Maurice, such a shady trick.

Wherein is one of those paradoxes in human nature which will now and again crop up—for no matter to how great an extent hard experience may teach us to put no trust in our fellow-men, do we not every now and again catch ourselves expecting somebody else to act far better under given circumstances than we should ourselves?

Chapter Eighteen.

In the Long Kloof.

“How am I this morning? Oh yes, it’s all very well. But you don’t care a straw how I am, or what becomes of me—now!”

Thus Violet Avory, in the softest, most plaintive tone, at the same time lifting her eyelashes in just one quick, reproachful glance. The shaft was effective. It brought down the bird at once. Renshaw stopped.

“I don’t think it’s quite kind of you to say that, Miss Avory,” he answered, a trifle nettled, for all that killing glance; for all that beseeching, cooing tone. “You know you do not believe what you are saying.”

She had been leaning over the gate which led out of the flower garden in front of the house. He was passing out to set off on his numerous self-imposed duties, having for their object the keeping everything straight during his friend’s absence. The morning was young still—not quite ten o’clock. He was hurrying by with a pleasant inquiry as to her well-being, when arrested by her speech as above.

“Thank you,” she answered, “I do happen to believe it, though. You never come near me now—in fact, you avoid me like the plague. We have not had one talk together since you came back. However, you don’t care—now, as I said before.”

To an unprejudiced hearer conversant with the state of affairs, this was pretty thick. For by that time it was manifest to all that the only person who had any chance of a “talk together” with the speaker—as she euphemistically put it—was Sellon; and long before it was to all thus manifest the fact was painfully evident to Renshaw Fanning.

“If it is as you say, I don’t think you can blame me,” he answered. “I thought my leaving you alone was exactly what you would wish. And that idea you yourself seemed to bear out both by word and act.”

“Do you think I have so many—friends, that I can bear to part with one, Renshaw?”

Her tone was soft, pleading—suggestive of a tinge of despair. The velvety eyes seemed on the point of brimming, as her glance reproachfully met his, and a delicate flush came into her cheeks. She was standing beneath a cactus, whose great prismatic blossoms in the background hung like a shower of crimson stars, one of them just touching her dark hair. To the unprejudiced witness again, conversant with the facts, Violet Avory, standing there amid the sensuous falling of gorgeous blossoms, would have recalled some graceful, purring, treacherous feline, beautiful in its satin-skinned curves, yet withal none the less deadly of intent towards the foolish creatures who should constitute its prey. In this man, however, in spite of the sharp awakening which the last couple of weeks had brought with them, her arts begat no repulsion.

There was no breaking away from the old spell so easily. A mist floated before his eyes, and the old tremble came into his voice, as he replied—

“Friends! I should have thought you had plenty. For instance—”

“For instance what?”

“Well, I was going to say, look how anxious we have all been to see you become your old self again; but it struck me that after what you begun by saying I had better not.”

“Will you do something if I ask you?” she said suddenly.

“Certainly, if it is anything within my power.”

“I want you to take me for a ride—now, this morning. Will you?”

“With pleasure,” he answered, brightening up—all prudent resolves scattered to the winds.

“I think it will do me good. Besides—I want to talk to you. Now, I’ll go and get ready. But mind—don’t let’s have any of the others, or it will be no use. Make some excuse about there being no horses or something.”

And she started off indoors, while he went round to see about getting the horses up from the large paddock, wherein a certain supply of the noble animal was always kept for home use.

Violet was not much of a rider; in fact, she was rather timid in the saddle. But she had a good seat for all show purposes, and being one of those girls who do everything gracefully, she looked as well on horseback as anywhere else.

In the eyes of her present escort, this lovely sunshiny morning, she looked more than bewitching; which being so, it is not surprising that all his strongly formed and salutary resolutions should rapidly ooze out at his finger-ends. For he had half-unconsciously formed many resolutions, not the least of which was that he would think no more of Violet Avory—at any rate, except as a friend.

Though his strong, self-contained nature had rendered him an easy prey to her wiles—easier because so thorough, once he had succumbed—yet it supplied a wholesome counterbalance. Which counterbalance lay in an unswerving sense of self-respect.

Try as she would, Violet had not been able to conceal altogether her partiality for Sellon. All her sage precepts to the latter notwithstanding, she had more than once allowed her prudence to lull. The sharp precocity of the children had discovered their secret in no time, and, disliking her as they did, they had, we may be sure, been at no pains to hold their prying, chattering little tongues. Then the whole thing had become common property to all around.

That she should prefer Sellon seemed to Renshaw quite a natural thing. In his single-heartedness, his utter freedom from egotism, he was sublimely unconscious of any advantages which he himself might possess over the other. She had rejected him unequivocally, for he had once put his fate to the test. She was therefore perfectly free to show preference for whosoever she pleased. The one consideration which caused him to feel sore at times—and he would not have been human had it been otherwise—was the consciousness that he himself was the agency through which the two had been thrown together. Many a man would have reflected rather bitterly on the strange freak of fortune which had once appointed him the preserver of his successful rival's life. But Renshaw Fanning's nature was too noble to entertain any such reflection. If it occurred to him, he would cast forth the idea in horror, as something beyond all words contemptible.

This being so, he had made up his mind to accept the inevitable, and had succeeded so well—outwardly, at least—as to give his tormentor some colour for the opening words of our present chapter. But he little knew Violet Avory. That insatiable little heart-breaker fully believed in eating her cake and having it, too. She was not going to let it be said that any man had given her up, least of all this one. The giving up must come from her own side.

"How glum you are, Renshaw," she began, at last. "You have said nothing but 'yes' or 'no' ever since we left the house. And that was at least half an hour ago."

He started guiltily. The use of his Christian name was an artfully directed red-hot shot from her battery. In public it was always "Mr Fanning." And they had not met otherwise than in public since his return.

"Am I?" he echoed. "I really beg your pardon, but I am afraid I must be."

"First of all, where are you going to take me?"

"We had better ride up to the head of the Long Kloof. It is only a gradual ascent, and an easier ride for you."

This was agreed to, and presently they were winding between the forest-clad spurs of the hills; on, leisurely, at a foot's-pace; the great rolling seas of verdure, spangled with many a fantastic-hued blossom, sweeping down to the path itself; the wild black-mouthed gorges echoing the piping call of birds in the brake, and the sullen deep-throated bark of the sentinel baboon, squatted high overhead.

But the ride, so far from doing her good, seemed, judging from results, to be exercising a still further damping effect upon Violet's spirits. It had become her turn now to answer in monosyllables, as her companion tried to interest her in the scenery and surroundings. All of a sudden she wildly burst into tears.

Down went Renshaw's wise resolutions, the result of a painful and severe course of self-striving, like a house of cards. The sight of her grief seemed more than he could bear.

“Good heavens! Violet—darling—what is it? Why are you unhappy?”

The tone was enough. The old tremor of passion struggling to repress itself. Had she forged this weapon deliberately, Violet must have rejoiced over its success. But this time the outburst was genuine.

“Oh, I sometimes wish I could die!” she answered, as soon as she could control her voice. “Then there would be a peaceful ending to it all, at any rate.”

“Ending to what? You have been very much shaken, dear—since that unfortunate skirmish the other night. But you must try and forget that and become your own bright self again. It cannot be that you have any real trouble on your mind?”

“Oh, Renshaw—you have been so hard to me of late—so cold and silent, as if you didn’t care so much as to speak to me—and I have felt it so—so much. Ah, but you don’t believe me.”

The man’s face grew white. What did this mean? Had he been deceiving himself all this time? While he had thought she was trying once more to whistle him back to her lure, to amuse herself with him and his most sacred feelings as a mere pastime during the other’s absence—could it be after all that she had merely been playing off the other against him—piqued at the outward cooling of his attentions? A tumultuous rush of feeling went through his heart and brain. But like a douche of cold water upon the fainting patient came her next words, bringing him to with a kind of mental gasp.

“You have felt it so much?” he echoed, quickly.

“Yes. I could not bear the thought of losing such a staunch, true-hearted friend as you would be—as you are. You don’t know how I value the idea of your sympathy.”

Crash went the newly born resuscitation of his hopes—scattered to fragments—shivered into empty nothingness by just one word. “Friend!” Hateful word in such conjunction! His voice seemed numbed and strained as he rejoined—

“I am sorry you should think of regarding me as anything less than a friend—and you must know that you could never lack my sympathy. Then there is something troubling you?”

“Now you are angry with me. Oh, Renshaw—and I am so miserable. You speak in such a cold, severe tone. And I thought you would have been so different.”

“God forgive me if I should have seemed to be angry with you,” he replied. “But—how can I help you? You have not told me what your trouble is.”

“Renshaw, I believe you can be as secret as the grave. It concerns myself—and another. But nothing that you can do can remove it. Nothing but misery can come of it, if I do not die myself, that is.”

“One word, Violet. You are sure nothing I can do will help you? I do not wish to force your confidence, remember.”

“Nothing,” was the despairing answer. “Only this, Renshaw. Promise that you will stand my friend—Heaven knows I may need it and do need it—whatever others may say or do. Promise that if ever you can help me you will.”

Their eyes met—then their hands.

“I promise both things,” he answered gravely.

But, as they turned their horses’ heads to ride homewards, there was a heavy heart within Renshaw Fanning’s breast; a heart full of sad and heavy despair. His love for this girl was no mere fleeting passion, but the terribly earnest and concentrated abandonment of a man of mature years and strong feelings. Now there was an end of everything. He had as good as heard from her own lips that her affections were bound up with another, and who that other was his perceptions left him no room for doubt. But why, then, should all the misery ensue at which she had hinted? Could it be that her preference was but inadequately returned? Or was there some obstacle in the way—lack of means, opposition of parents, or similar difficulties, which are apt to seem to those most closely concerned so insurmountable under the circumstances? In his own mind, he had no doubt but that things would all come right sooner or later, and said as much.

But then, you see, they were at cross purposes, as people who deal in veiled hints and half-confidences well-nigh invariably are.

And the promise thus deliberately uttered during that sunny morning’s ride in the Long Kloof, will he ever be called upon to take it up?

We shall see.

Chapter Nineteen.

A Good Offer.

Time went by, and weeks slipped into months. Amid congenial surroundings and magnificent air, Renshaw had completely shaken off all lingering remnants of his fever attack. He began to think seriously of starting in quest of "The Valley of the Eye."

Sellon, too, had begun to wax impatient, though with any less tempting object in view he would have been loth to exchange this delightfully easygoing life for a toilsome and nebulous quest, involving possible risks and certain hardship and privations. Moreover, a still lingering misgiving that the other might cry off the bargain acted like a spur.

"It's all very well for you, Fanning," he said one day, "but, for my part, I don't much care about wearing out my welcome. Here I've been a couple of months, if not more, and I shouldn't wonder if Selwood was beginning to think I intended quartering myself on him for life. I know what you're going to say. Whenever I mention leaving, he won't hear of it. Still, there's a limit to everything."

"Well, I don't mind making a start, say, next week," Renshaw had answered. "I've got to go over to Fort Lamport on Saturday. If it'll suit you, we'll leave here about the middle of the week. We shall have roughish times before us once we get across the river, mind."

"Right you are, and hurrah for the diamonds!" was the other's hearty response; and then he turned away to seek a favourable opportunity of breaking the news to Violet.

If Renshaw had succeeded in shaking off the effects of his fever attack, no such complete success had attended his efforts with regard to that other attack. There was not much healing for his wounds in the sight of the more than ordinarily good understanding existing between Violet and Sellon, and being, in common with the remainder of the household, ignorant of their former acquaintanceship, the thought that he himself had been instrumental in bringing them together, was indeed a bitter pill. And then his disciplined nature would seek for an antidote and find it—find it in the promise Violet had extracted from him to befriend her to the utmost of his power. Well, he was going to do this. He was going to be the means of enriching the man who had, though not unfairly, yet no less certainly, supplanted him. His sacrifice on her account would be complete. Through his instrumentality the pair would obtain the means of happiness. And in this reflection his mind found a degree of consolation.

"Cold consolation this—very much the reverse of consolation!" cries the ordinary mind. Yes, but Renshaw Fanning's was not an ordinary mind.

Christmas had come and gone—bringing with it much festivity—the visits of friends and relatives, till the house was crammed to the extent of holding no more by any means short of "shaking down" the excess members in the verandah, even as many were already "shaken down" on the floors of the bedrooms. There had been dances and riding parties, and a buck-hunt or

two, though the time of year was unfavourable to venatorial pursuits—the sweltering midsummer heat being ill-conducive to scent in the matter of rousing the quarry, though very much conducive to the same, after the slaying of the said quarry, which indeed would hardly keep two hours. There had been much fun and flirtation among the younger section and much jollity among all. Jovial Chris Selwood was never so much in his element as with a crowd of friends about him, and the more the merrier, he would say.

Then as the corner of the year turned, the party had broken up and gone its respective ways—one to his farm, another to his merchandise—the bulk of it, however, literally to the former. And Renshaw began to think a great deal about "The Valley of the Eye."

"So your faith in this Sindbad valley is as strong as ever, is it, Renshaw?" said Selwood, in comment on a remark of the other's as they were returning homeward together after a day of riding around the veldt, looking after the flocks and their keepers, and giving an eye to things in general.

"Well, yes, it is. I'm as convinced the place exists as I am that I exist myself. But it's weariful work, hunting a will-o'-the-wisp."

"Rather. Throw it up, old man. Now, why on earth don't you make up your mind to come and settle near us? There are good enough farms around here to be had."

"For those who have the means," supplied the other, gaily. "And I'm not one of them. That last drought 'busted' me—lock, stock, and barrel. All the greater necessity to find the 'Eye.'"

Selwood made no immediate reply. He flicked the heads of the grasses with his whip as he rode, in a meditative and embarrassed manner wholly foreign to his genial open nature.

"See here, Renshaw," he burst forth at last; "we were boys together, and ought to know each other pretty well by this time. Now, I think you're a touchy fellow on some subjects—but, hang it all, what I want to say is this—you've been cursed by ill-luck of late; why not try fresh ground? Now, if a thousand pounds would—er—pull your train back on to the rails again, why, there it is, and you've only got to say so. Eh? What? Obligation, did you say?"—the other having said nothing at all. "That be hanged! The boot's all on the other foot!"

Renshaw was a sensitive man and a proud one, and Selwood knew it—hence the latter's embarrassment.

"Chris, you are indeed a friend!" he answered. "I don't know what to say—"

"Say? Say? Say—'Done with you,' and consider the matter settled," fumed Selwood, cutting him short.

"I can't say that, Chris. Just think what a run of ill-luck I have had. It would be robbing you to borrow on absolutely no security—"

“Ill-luck! Of course you have. So would any fellow who tried to farm Angoras in Great Bushmanland; and I was nearly saying—he’d deserve it,” cried Selwood, testily. “It would be different down here, with decent land and decent seasons. And there isn’t a better farmer in this colony than yourself!”

“Don’t think me ungracious,” said Renshaw, deprecatorily. “As you were saying, Chris, we have known each other all our lives, and ought to be able to speak out to each other. What I was going to say is this: Your offer is that of a true and generous friend; but were I to accept it, I should be robbing you, for I can’t give you a hundred pounds’ worth of security.”

“But I do think you ungracious,” fumed the other. “Robbing me! Security! Tut-tut-tut! Why, old fellow, you needn’t be so punctilious. Remember, you would probably have effected the sale of your place to that speculator chap in Fort Lamport the other day, but for starting off home on the spur of the moment, to protect Hilda and the rest of them against those cut-throats. And one doesn’t like to think what might have happened to them but for you,” he added, very gravely.

Now, this was a most unfortunate allusion, for, needless to say wholly unwittingly, Selwood had thereby imported a “compensation” element into his generous offer—at least, so it seemed to the other’s sensitive pride. And while acquitting his friend entirely of any such idea, Renshaw’s mind was there and then made up that by no possibility, under the circumstances, could he entertain it, and he said as much.

Selwood was deeply disappointed.

A silence fell between the two men.

“By Jove!” said Christopher, suddenly, as they came in sight of the homestead, “your chum there is making the most of his last day.”

Two figures came in sight, strolling by the dam in the sunset glow—Violet Avory and Sellon. Renshaw, recognising them, made no reply. But the dagger within his heart gave one more turn.

“I suppose they’ll make a match of it directly,” went on Selwood. “It won’t be the first that’s been made up at old Sunningdale by any means—ha! ha!”

It was the last day at Sunningdale. Early on the morrow Renshaw and Sellon would start upon their expedition. And what strange, wild experiences would be theirs before they should again rejoin this pleasant home circle. Would they return, rewarded with success, or only to bear record of another failure? Or would they, perchance, not return at all?

This was the reflection that would recur with more or less haunting reiteration to every member of the household that evening. There were serious and saddened faces in that circle; eyes, too, that would turn away to conceal a sudden brimming that it was not wholly possible to suppress.

For what if, perchance, they should never return at all?

Chapter Twenty.

Old Dirk in Default.

“Well, Sellon, here we are—or, rather, here am I—at home again.”

The buggy, running lightly over the hard level ground, looked as dusty and travel-worn as the three horses that drew it, or as its two inmates. The red ball of the sun was already half behind the treeless sky line, and away over the plain the brown and weather-beaten walls of Renshaw’s uninviting homestead had just come into view.

Very different now, however, was the aspect of affairs to when we first saw this out-of-the-world desert farm. With the marvellous recuperativeness of the Karroo plains the veldt was now carpeted with the richest grass, spangled with a hundred varying species of delicate wild flowers. Yet, as the two men alighted at the door, there was something in the desolate roughness of the empty house that struck them both, after the comforts and cheery associations of Sunningdale.

“Home, sweet home; eh, Sellon?” continued Renshaw, grimly. “Well, it won’t be for long. One day’s rest for ourselves and horses, and the day after to-morrow we’ll start. Hallo, Kaatje, where’s old Dirk, by the way?”

The Koranna woman’s voluble and effusive greeting seemed damped by the question. She answered, guiltily—

“Old Dirk, Baas? He went away to visit his brother at Bruintjes Kraal—and bring back half a dozen goats which he sent over there before the drought. I expect him back this evening—any evening.”

“That’s what comes of putting these wretched people into a position of trust,” said Renshaw, bitterly. “How long has he been away, Kaatje?”

“Only a week, Baas. Don’t be kwaai with Dirk, Baas. My nephew Marthinus has been taking his place right well—right well. Don’t be kwaai with Dirk, myn lieve Baas!”

But Renshaw was very much disgusted. The old man had been with him for years, and he had always found him honest and trustworthy far beyond his people. Yet no sooner was his back turned than the fellow abandoned his post forthwith.

“This is rather annoying, Sellon,” he said. “Here old Dirk has gone spreeing around somewhere, and goodness only knows when he’ll be back. I meant to have taken him with us this time. He might have been useful.”

“Ever taken him before?”

“No. I didn’t want too many people in the secret. This time it wouldn’t matter, because we shall find the place.”

“You seem strangely confident, Fanning,” said Sellon, thinking of the missing document.

“I am. I’ve a sort of superstition I shall hit upon it this time. However, come in, and we’ll make ourselves as comfortable as we can, with the trapful of luxuries from more civilised parts. It’ll be canned goods to-night, I’m afraid. It’s too late to order the execution of a goat.”

Having seen Marthinus, above alluded to, and who was a smartish Hottentot lad, outspan the buggy and stow away the harness, Renshaw strolled round to the kraals. Alas! the remnant of his flocks—now a mere handful—huddled away in a corner, spoke volumes as to the recent devastation. But the animals, though few, were quite in condition again.

The gloaming fell, and still he lingered on there alone. Sellon, who never favoured unnecessary exertion, had established himself indoors with a cigar and some brandy-and-water. The darkling plain in its solemn silence was favourable to meditation, and the return to his solitary home aroused in Renshaw a keen sense of despondency. What if this new expedition should prove a failure? If so, it should be the last. Come what might, nothing in the world should induce him further to inhabit this woefully depressing and thoroughly unprofitable place. Rather would he gather together his little all, and resume the wild wandering hunter life away in the far interior, and hand in hand with this resolve Christopher Selwood’s offer stood forth alluringly. Dear old Sunningdale! Life near there might be worth living after all—Violet Avory apart. But then arose the absurd scruples of a sensitive nature. Quick, to the verge of folly, in benefiting others, when it became a question of himself the recipient of a good turn Renshaw’s pride rose up in an effective barrier. And although the tie of friendship between them was closer than might have been that of brotherhood, he could recognise, or thought he could, in Selwood’s offer—a disguised method of conferring a favour upon himself. Not that he failed to appreciate it, but he could not bring himself to lie under an obligation even to his dearest friend. A strange character that of this man, so self-sacrificing and so single-hearted; so sensitive, so scrupulous in the most delicate fibres of the mind and conscience, yet adamant in the face of peril; strong, resourceful when confronted with privation. A character formed of a life of solitude and hardship, a character that would be an anachronism—an anomaly—in the whirring clatter of old world and money-grubbing life.

“Hallo, Fanning! What has become of you?”

The loud, jovial hail of his mercurial friend recalled him to himself and the duties of hospitality. Sell on, tired of his own company, had lounged to the door.

“I thought you had concluded to go on the hunt for your runaway nigger, old chap,” he said, as the other came up.

“Only been looking round the kraals, and, I’m afraid, ‘mooning’ a little,” answered Renshaw, with a laugh. But there were times when his friend’s inexhaustible easiness of spirits jarred upon him.

The next day was spent in making preparations for the trip. Crowbars and long coils of raw-hide rope for climbing purposes—provisions and other necessaries to be loaded up were carefully sorted and packed—nor were firearms and a plentiful supply of cartridges overlooked. By nightfall everything was in thorough readiness for an early start.

Only, the missing Dirk did not appear, a fact which had the effect of strangely annoying, not to say angering, Dirk’s normally philosophical and easy-going master.

Chapter Twenty One.

The First Camp.

“Any alligators in this river, Fanning?”

“Plenty. They won’t interfere with us, though.”

Splash! splash! The horses plunged on, deeper and deeper into the wide drift. Soon the water was up to the saddle-girths.

Renshaw, leading the way—and a pack-horse—tucked up his feet over the saddle behind, an example his companion was not slow to follow. An expanse of yellow, turgid water, at least a hundred and fifty yards wide, lay before them. Below, a labyrinth of green eyots picturesquely studded the surface of the stream. Above, the river flowed round an abrupt bend of red rock wall, sweeping silently and majestically down to the drift which our two adventurers were fording. In front, a high craggy ridge, sheering up in a steep slope, dotted with aloes and a sparse growth of mimosa bush. Behind, a similar ridge, down whose rugged face the two had spent the best part of the afternoon finding a practicable path.

And now it was evening. The setting sun dipped nearer and nearer to the same rocky heights in the west, shedding a scarlet glow upon the smooth surface of the great river, tingeing with fiery effulgence many a bold krantz whose smooth walls rose sheer to the heavens. An indescribably wild and desolate spot, redeemed from absolute savagery by the soft cooing of innumerable doves flitting among the fringe of trees which skirted the bank of the stream.

The drift, though wide, was shallow, and the water came no higher than the saddle-girths. A few minutes more of splashing, and they emerged upon a hard, firm sand-bank.

“The river’s low now, and has been some time,” said Renshaw, looking around. “The time before last I crossed this way, I lost a good horse in a quicksand a little lower down. I dare say it’s a firm bank now, like this one.”

“By Jove! did you really?” said Sellon. “Were you alone, then?” His respect for the other had already gone up fifty per cent. They were in a seldom-trodden wilderness now, a forbidding, horrible-looking solitude, at that, shut in as it was by great, grim mountain walls, and the eternal silence of a desert world. Yet this man, whom he, Sellon, in all the superiority of his old-world knowledge, had held in light account, was perfectly at home here. There was no doubt as to which was the better man, here, at any rate.

“Yes; I was alone,” answered Renshaw. “I’ve always come on this undertaking alone. And I came mighty near losing my life, as well as the horse.”

“By Jove, what a fellow you are, Fanning! I believe if I were to knock around here in this infernal desert by myself for a week it would about drive me mad.”

The other smiled slightly.

“Would it? Well, I suppose I’m used to it. But, wait a bit. You call this an infernal desert. It’s nothing to what we shall find ourselves in further on. And now, I think we’ll camp here. You don’t want to go out shooting, I suppose? We have enough to last us for a day or two; in fact, as much as will keep.”

Three guinea-fowl and a brace of red koorhaan, also three brace of partridges, were slung across the pack-horse. Sellon replied with an emphatic negative. The heat of the day’s journey had knocked the bottom out of even his sportsmanlike tendencies, he said.

They offsaddled the horses, and having led them down to the river to drink, knee-haltered them more closely than usual, and turned them loose to graze. Then, taking a hatchet, Renshaw proceeded to cut a number of mimosa boughs—large, spreading, and thorny. These, in an incredibly short space of time, he had beaten up into a most effective kraal.

“What’s all that about, old man?” said Sellon, who, characteristically, was taking it easy, and lay on the ground at full length, blowing out clouds of tobacco. “There are no lions here, surely!”

“There used to be one or two. I’ve heard them on former occasions. But they’re mighty scarce—almost extinct. Still, it’s as well to be on the safe side.”

As the last faint kiss of after-glow faded from the iron-bound peaks, merging into the pearly grey of night, the horses were driven in and securely picketed within the impromptu enclosure. Then blazed forth the ruddy flames of a cheery camp-fire, over which some of the birds were promptly hissing and sputtering. The small keg of Cango brandy which they had brought with them was broached, and under the influence of a good supper, washed down with good liquor, Sellon’s mercurial spirits revived.

“By Jove, but this is what I call real jolly!” he cried, throwing himself back on a rug, and proceeding to fill and light his pipe. “Hallo! What the deuce was that?”

“Not a lion this time,” said the other, tranquilly, as a long-drawn howl arose upon the night. It echoed weirdly among the great cliffs, dying away in a wild wail. “Only a wolf (Hyaena). Plenty of them around here.”

“They make a most infernal row, at all events. How the deuce is a fellow going to sleep?” said Sellon, as the sound was taken up in a sudden chorus of dismal howls, whose gruesome echoes, floating among the krantzes, seemed to deepen the surrounding darkness, to enhance the utter wildness of this desolate valley.

The camp was pitched in the entrance of a narrow gorge which wound right up into the heart of the great ridge overhanging the river. It lay in a grassy hollow, snugly sheltered on all sides. In

the background some hundred yards distant, and about eighty feet in height, rose a perpendicular wall of rock, being one of the spurs of the main ridge.

"Oh, you'll sleep soundly enough once you're off, never fear," laughed Renshaw. "And now, as we are fairly embarked upon our undertaking, we may as well go over old Greenway's yarn together. Two heads are better than one, they say, and a fresh mind brought to bear upon the story may bring into it a fresh idea or two."

Putting his hand inside his shirt, he produced the buckskin pouch. At last had come the moment Sellon had long dreaded. How he wished he had refrained from meddling with the thing. Certainly he believed that his friend could get along almost, if not quite as well without the paper, as with it. Its contents must be stamped indelibly in his memory. Yet how would he take the discovery of its loss?

"I've never gone into it with you before, Sellon," went on Renshaw, holding the pouch in his hand, little thinking what tantalising suspense his friend was undergoing. "You see, when a man holds a secret of this kind—has been treasuring it up for years—he's apt to keep it mighty close. But now that we are fairly in the swim together things are different."

He undid the outer bag, then leisurely unrolled the waterproof wrapper, Sellon meanwhile staring at the proceeding with a nervous fascination, which, had his friend noticed, he would have put down to intense excitement due to the importance of the disclosure. Still deliberately, Renshaw unrolled the last fold of the wrapper, and produced—a scroll of frayed and yellow paper.

Heavens and earth! It was the identical document! In his wild amazement Sellon could not refrain from a violent start.

"What's the row?" said the other, quietly. "Keep cool. We want steady nerves over this undertaking."

"You're right, old man. I own that mine are a little too high-strung," answered Maurice, with something of a stammer. "By Jove, what if we should go back practically millionaires! Only think of it, old chap! Isn't it enough to turn any man's head? And when you got out that bit of paper, it seemed almost like producing the key of the bullion safe itself."

But this was said in a hurried, random fashion. How in the name of all that was wonderful had the missing paper come to light? Again Sellon dismissed the idea of the Koranna servants having any agency in the matter, and no other theory was compatible with its almost miraculous reappearance. Stay! Had Fanning a duplicate, perhaps, which he had quietly replaced in the receptacle for the lost document? No, by Jove; that was the identical paper itself. He could swear to it a hundred times over, there in the red light of the camp-fire, even to the pear-shaped blot near the right-hand corner. There it was; no mistake about that. Then he wondered when it had been recovered—when Fanning had discovered its loss—and whether he had entertained any suspicion of himself. If so, it was marvellous that all this time he should have let drop no word,

no hint, either of the incident or his suspicions regarding it. The enhanced respect which his tranquil, self-contained companion had begun to inspire in Sellon, now turned to something like awe. “You’ll never make an adventurer, Sellon,” said Renshaw, with his quiet smile, “until you chuck overboard such inconvenient luggage as nerves. And I’m afraid you’re too old to learn that trick now.”

“You’re right there, old chap. I wish I had some of your long-headedness, I know. But now, I’m all impatience. Supposing you read out old stick-in-the-mud, what’s-his-name’s, queer legacy.”

“All right. Now listen attentively, and see how it strikes you.”

And by the red light of the camp fire Renshaw began to read the dying adventurer’s last statement.

Chapter Twenty Two.

A Voice from the Dead.

"My name is Amos Greenway," it began. "It was some years ago now—no matter how many—since I first saw what I am going to tell you. That time I'd been up with a hunting and trading party into the Kalihari. I'd split off from the rest—no matter why—perhaps we'd fallen out.

"What I didn't know about the country in those days didn't seem much worth knowing—at least, so I thought. Well, I got down into the Bechuana country, and after a bit of a rest struck off alone in a southerly direction. I counted on hitting off the big river that way, and at the same time I'd often longed to do a little prospecting on the ground I was going to cross. But this time, as it happened, I got out of my reckoning. I'd got into a waterless desert—and foodless too. I had biltong enough to last for any time, but water is a thing you can't carry much of—and if you could it would all turn bad in that awful heat. First my pack-horse gave out—then the nag I was riding—and there I was dying of thirst in the middle of the most awful dried-up country you can imagine. There were mountains far away on the sky-line—must have been at least a hundred miles away, for they were hull down on the horizon. There might or might not be water there; but if so I should never reach it, because I couldn't crawl ten miles in a day, and was about played out even then. Nothing to kill either—no game of any kind—or the blood might have quenched thirst. Nothing except aasvogels, and they were too slim to come within shot. You see, they knew I was booked for them sooner or later, and whenever I looked up there was a crowd of the great white carrion birds wheeling overhead ever so high up, waiting for me.

"Well, at last I was for giving in; was looking for a place to sit down comfortably, and put the muzzle of my piece to my ear and finish off; for I couldn't stand the idea of being eaten alive by those filthy devils, as would have happened when I got too weak to beat them off—when I came plump into a gang of wandering Bushmen. They were resting at the foot of a stony kopje, and as soon as I hove in sight they started up it like monkeys, screeching and jabbering all the time. They'd never seen a white man nor yet a gun, and when I fired a shot I reckon they thought the devil had got among them. I managed to make friends with them at last, and it was the saving of my life. They'd got some kind of liquid, which must have come out of a plant or root, but it did for drink at a pinch until we found water.

"Well, after some days we reached the mountains I had seen. Awful part it was too; seemed to consist of nothing but great iron-bound krantzes and holes and caves—sort of place where nothing in the world could live but aasvogels and Bushmen and baboons. Some of the caves had skulls and bones in them, and were covered with Bushmen drawings, and I tell you I saw queer things done while I was with those fellows—things you'd never believe. But I feel like getting near the end of my tether, so I must hurry up.

"Well, one day we'd been out collecting grasshoppers and lizards and all that kind of beastliness which those fellows eat, and stayed out too late. We were looking about for a hole or a cave to sleep in—for it was coldish up there of nights—and it was already dusk. I noticed my Bushman friends were getting mighty uneasy, and supposed they were afraid of bogies or something of

that kind. There was a half-moon shining brightly overhead, and I saw we were skirting a deep valley—though it was more like a hole than a valley, for there seemed no way in or out. All of a sudden one of the chaps grabbed me by the arm and pointed downwards. I shan't forget that moment in a hurry. There, ever so far down it seemed, glowering up through the darkness, shone an Eye. Yes, an Eye; greenish, but brilliant as a star. I rubbed my eyes and looked again and again. There it was, each time brighter than ever. What could the thing be? I own I was puzzled.

"The Bushmen were getting more and more scared, and began to lug me away. But I took one more look round first. The thing was gone.

"There was no staying to investigate further. They began to threaten me then—I gathered at last that I was committing a sort of sacrilege, that it was a demon-haunted place to them, and that it was a devil's eye that would scorch up whoever looked at it too long—in fact, they called it the Valley of the Eye—that if I bothered about it I should be killed for raising their devil. But I puzzled over the thing to myself day and night, and determined to look into it further.

"At last the opportunity came. I was out on the berg with one of the fellows one day, trying to get a shot at something, and gradually worked round to the place. Directly I got near it, he began to show the same signs of scare, but I paid no heed to him and just began to clamber down. It was an awful place to get at, though. After a good deal of dangerous climbing I got to a kind of sloping terrace, all stones and dry dusty earth. While I was resting I stooped down to pick up a stone, and at the same time lifted a little bit of carbonised-looking stuff. Heavens, how I jumped! It was a diamond.

"Didn't I look about for more! I only found one, though; and after a lot of fossicking round I began to think of going further down, when a most infernal row overhead altered my mind. There were all my Bushmen friends, the whole lot of them, jabbering in the most threatening manner; and, worse still, they'd all got their bows and were about to take pot shots at me. Sore enough, I had only just time to get under a rock when a perfect shower of their little poison sticks came rattling about my ears.

"Things now looked desperate. I daren't go up among them, and I couldn't move out of my shelter. They seemed afraid to come down and that was my only chance. I must wait until night.

"All at once, as I lay crouching there, under cover from their deadly little arrows, a thought struck across my brain that made every drop of blood in my body tingle. That green, staring Eye which I had seen shining down there in the depths was nothing less than a diamond, and a diamond of enormous size. If only I could get at it.

"But this is just what I couldn't do. To cut the tale short I waited until night and then descended further. There gleamed the Eye, brighter, more dazzling than ever. But between it and me was a big krantz, and I pulled up on the very brink, just in time to escape going over. And the place seemed edged in all round by krantzes.

“My mind was made up. I’d come again. No use staying on now to be starved out and killed by those miserable little yellow devils. So I crept up to the top again, and, as I expected, the coast was clear. It doesn’t matter how long I took to work my way down into civilised parts again.

“No rest for me after that. The idea of that huge stone—worth, maybe, tens of thousands of pounds, lying there to be had for the picking up—left me no rest night or day. In six months I was back there again, me and a mate. But when we reached the spot where I first sighted the Eye it was not there. Nothing but pitch darkness. We felt pretty blank then, I can tell you. We waited t ll nearly dawn. Suddenly Jim gave a shout.

“There it is!

“There it was, too, glittering as before. Then it faded. And at that moment we had to ‘fade’ too, for a volley of arrows came whistling among us, and poor Jim fell with a dozen in him.

“I don’t know how I got away, but I did, and that’s all about it. The furious little devils came swarming from rock to rock, and I couldn’t get in a fair shot at them. I had to run for my life, and if I hadn’t known those awful mountains almost as well as they did I shouldn’t have escaped either. I’m getting mortal weak, friend—stay—another drink of brandy.

“What were you saying? The thing couldn’t have been a diamond ’cause a diamond can’t shine till it’s cut? I know that. But I believe this one is cut—split by some convulsion of Nature, polished, so to say, on one side. And there are ‘stones’ there, for we found two or three more, but of no size.

“This last time—never mind it, I’m getting weaker. I’d better tell you how to get there while I can. Ride a full day due north beyond the great river where you cross it from here—thirty miles maybe—two kloofs—one long poort. (A poort is a pass or defile as distinct from a kloof, which is a mere terminable ravine.) Take the long poort, and follow it to the end. There are—two mountains—turret-headed—and a smaller one. Straight from—the smaller one—facing the setting sun—within—day’s ride—and—beware—the schelm Bushmen. How dark—it is—good night, friend. Don’t forget—The Valley of the Eye—you’re a rich man—”

Thus closed the record of the dying adventurer. Commencing with all the verve of a darling topic, it ended in disjointed, fragmentary sentences, as the flickering life-spark burned fainter and fainter. Yet there was something pathetic in the generosity of this man, a mere rough adventurer, gasping forth in the stupor of approaching death the history of, and clue to, his alluring, if somewhat dangerous, secret—his last breaths husbanded and strained, that he might benefit one who was a perfect stranger to himself, but under whose roof he had found a refuge—a place wherein he might die in peace, tended by kindly and sympathetic hands.

To the two men, there in their lonely camp, it was as a voice from the dead speaking to them. Even Maurice Sellon, hard, reckless, selfish as he was, felt something of this among the varied emotions evolved by the almost miraculous reappearance of the lost document.

Overhead, in the dark vault, myriads of stars twinkled and burned, one every now and again falling in a silent, ghostly streak. The creatures of the night, now fairly abroad, sent forth their wild voices far and near, and ever and anon the horses picketed close at hand would prick up their ears and snort, as they snuffed inquiringly the cool breaths of the darkness.

“And you think that near enough, eh, Fanning?”

“I do. This time we shall find it—that is, if we are given half a show. We may have to fight, and we may have to run—in which case we must try again another time. But the great thing is to find it. I have never been able to do so yet. Find it. The fighting is a secondary consideration.”

“Then you really think these Bushmen are still knocking about the spot?” said Sellon, uneasily, with a furtive glance around, as if he expected a flight of poisoned arrows to come pouring into the camp then and there.

“Undoubtedly. But they are a wandering crew. They may be there, or they may be a hundred miles off. However, the fact that they have only interfered with me once out of the four attempts I have made is proof that the chances in our favour are three to one. That’s pretty fair odds, isn’t it?”

“Yes; I suppose so. But, I say, Fanning, humbug apart, do you really mean to say you’ve made four trips all by yourself into that infernal country? All by yourself, too?”

“Certainly. It’s odd, by the way, what money will do—or the want of it. If I had a comfortable sufficiency, even, I’d let the thing go hang—make it over to you or any other fellow, and welcome. But here I am, desperately hard up—stone-broke, in fact. And I have a good few years more to live in this world, and one can’t live on air. So one must risk something. But, mind you, I don’t care for inordinate wealth. I only want enough to be able to steer clear of pinching—perhaps help other fellows along a bit—at any rate, to move on equal terms with the rest of mankind.”

“Well, you’re moderate enough, anyhow,” said Sellon. “Now, I could never have too much. By Jove! if we do succeed, eh? Only think of it!”

“I’ve thought of it so often, Sellon. I must be used to the idea. But, as I said, it’s only a case of rolling on tranquilly—no more pinching or scraping, with the ghastly alternative of borrowing. That’s all I care about.”

The quiet, unimpassioned tone, so different to the suppressed excitement which he had brought to bear on the subject when it was first mentioned, struck the other all of a sudden. But for himself and his own presence, Fanning would likely enough have been as keen on this treasure hunt as he used to be—keener perhaps. And like a glimmer upon Maurice Sellon’s selfish soul came the idea. What if Fanning were trying to enrich him for Violet’s sake? Yet could it be? Such a stupendous act of self-abnegation was clean outside his own experience of the world and human nature—which experience was not small.

The night was wearing on. Suddenly a loud and frightful sound—so near that it caused both men to raise themselves on their elbows, Renshaw leisurely, Sellon quickly and with a start—echoed forth upon the night. The horses pricked up their ears and snorted and tugged violently at their (luckily for themselves) restraining reims, trembling in every limb.

A dull red glow threw forward the razor-like edge of the cliff overhanging the camp. Silhouetted against this, looming blackly as though sculptured in bronze, stood the mighty form of a huge lion.

Again that terrible roar pealed forth, booming and rumbling away in sullen echoes among the krantzes. Then the red moon arose over the head of the majestic beast, the grim Monarch of the Night roaring defiance against those who dared invade his desert domain. For a moment he stood there fully outlined, then vanished as though melting into empty air.

“Lucky, I took the precaution of building a schanz—eh?” said Renshaw, quietly heaping fresh logs on to the fire.

“By Jove! it is,” acquiesced Sellon, a little overawed.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Following the Clue.

It takes a little time to get used to sleeping out in the open, and on the hard ground. The latter the novice is apt to find hard indeed. There is always that refractory lump or stone just under his hip-bone, and by the time he has removed this, or shifted his position, he only settles down to find two similar sources of affliction where there was but one before. If timid, he will think of snakes; if nervous, he will be momentarily imagining some cold creeping thing crawling over his ear or sneaking inside the legs of his trousers. Add to this the novelty of the situation and the hundred and one varying voices of the night, which combine to keep him awake, and it follows that however alluring to the embryo traveller may be the prospect of "camping out," the reality is less pleasant—till he gets used to it.

Renshaw, remarking that their late formidable visitant needn't have wished them good night quite so loudly, rolled himself in a blanket, and in ten minutes was fast asleep. But Sellon, being new to this kind of thing, speedily fell a victim to each and all of the little inconveniences above detailed, and passed a most uncomfortable and restless night. The howling of the hyaenas, mingling with the shriller "yap" of the hunting jackal, sounded continuous—then just as he was dropping off into a doze, the loud "baugh! baugh!" of a troop of baboons on the mountain-side started him wide awake again, his first impression being that their late visitor was prowling around, intent on cultivating a closer acquaintance. Twice, indeed, he did hear that thundrous, muffled roar, which once heard is so unmistakable, but it was in the far distance. On the whole, therefore, all unrested as he was, he felt anything but sorry when his companion, looking out from under his blanket, stared at the stars, then leisurely sat up.

"By Jove! I've been envying you," growled Sellon. "You've been sleeping like a log, and I've hardly closed my eyes all night."

"Not, eh? Ah, I forgot you're not used to this sort of thing. You soon will be, though. Turn in again a little longer, while I brew the coffee."

"Coffee! Why, man, it isn't daylight yet!"

"No, but in a few minutes it will be. However, you lie still. Try and snatch another hour's snooze. I'll see to everything."

He was as good as his word. When Sellon awoke—not in another hour, but rather more than two—the sun was already up, but his comrade was nowhere to be seen, nor were the horses. There was the coffee-kettle, however, handy by the fire, and some biscuit. Having absorbed a steaming cup or two, Sellon lighted his pipe and felt better.

A double report sounded from some way along the river-bank then and there. In about twenty minutes Renshaw returned.

“I’ve been marketing,” he said, turning half a dozen ring-doves out of his pocket. “These little jokers are not half bad when grilled on the coals, and they don’t take long to cook. To-night will be the last time we can make a fire, until we find ourselves here again—that is, if we come back this way.”

“Well, I shall go and get a swim,” said Maurice, jumping up and stretching himself.

“A swim? Hold hard. Where will you get it?”

“In the river, of course,” was the astonished answer. But Renshaw shook his head.

“You’d better not try it, Sellon. It isn’t safe.”

“Why? Alligators?”

“Yes. You can’t go into deep water. But there’s a shallow a little way up, where you can have a good splash. It’s only a matter of a few inches if you keep close to the bank—and you must keep close to it too. I’ve been in myself this morning—and by the same token it’s the last chance of tubbing we shall get. I’ll go as far as the rise and point you out the place.”

Half an hour later Sellon returned, reinvigorated by his bath and clamouring for breakfast.

The birds had been plucked and spread upon the embers, split open, spatchcock fashion, and when ready afforded our travellers a toothsome breakfast. Then they saddled up.

“We shan’t do our thirty miles to-day,” said Renshaw, as they rode along. “We started too late. But that won’t greatly matter. We have plenty of time, and it’s better to keep the horses fresh than to rush them through.”

“So it is. But, I say, this place is like the Umtirara Valley, minus the bush and the greenness.”

It was. As they rode on, the desolate wildness of the defile increased. Rocky slopes sparsely grown with stunted bush, the usual cliff formation cleaving the sky-line. Boulders large and small studded the valley, lying like so many houses on the hillsides or piled up in unpleasantly obstructive profusion, right along the line of march. Of animal life there was little enough. Here and there an armour-plated tortoise stalking solemnly among the stones, or a large bird of prey circling overhead—but of game, no sign. As the sun mounted higher and higher, pouring his rays into the defile as though focussed through a burning glass, the heat tried Sellon severely.

“This is awful,” he growled, for the fiftieth time, mopping his steaming face. “Is it going to be like this all the way?”

“It may be. But we shall have to do most of our moving about at night. We can take it easy now and off-saddle, and trek on again towards sundown. Until we actually begin our search, I know

the ground by heart. Come now, Sellon, you must keep up your determination. It's beastly trying, I know, for an unseasoned chap; but think of the end."

"I believe I'll get a sunstroke first," was the dejected reply, as the speaker flung himself wearily on the ground.

"Not a bit of it. Here, have a drop of liquor—but you'd better take it weak, or it'll do more harm than good." And getting out a pannikin Renshaw poured in a little of the contents of his flask, judiciously diluting it from the water-skin slung across the pack-horse.

This water-skin, by the way, was an ingenious contrivance of his own, and of which he was not a little proud. Like its Eastern prototype—upon which it was modelled—it consisted of the dressed skin of a good-sized Angora kid—one of the legs serving for the spout.

"Not a bad dodge, eh?" acquiesced Renshaw, in response to his companion's remark. "The water has a leathery taste, I admit, but it's better than none at all. I hit upon the idea when I first began these expeditions. Something of the kind was absolutely essential. Trekking with waggons you carry the ordinary vaatje—a small drum-shaped keg—slung between the wheels, but it's an inconvenient thing to load up on a horse—in fact, the second attempt I made the concern got loose and rolled the whole way down a mountain-side—of course, splintering to atoms. Besides, this thing holds more and keeps the water cooler. I came near dying of thirst that time, being three nights and two days without a drop of anything; for this is a mighty dry country, I needn't tell you."

"What if the whole yarn should turn out moonshine after all?" said Sellon, with the despondency of a thoroughly exhausted man. "There's one thing about it that looks fishy. How could what's his name—Greenway—wounded as he was, fetch your place in two or three days? Why, it'll take us nearly a week to do it—if not quite."

"That very thing struck me at first," said Renshaw, quietly, shredding up a piece of Boer tobacco. "My impression is, he didn't come back the same way he went. You see, he knew the country thoroughly. He may have taken a short cut and come straight over the mountains. For I'm pretty sure the way we are taking is an altogether roundabout one."

"Then why couldn't the fellow have told you the shorter one, instead of sending us round three sides of a square?"

"That's soon explained. In the first place, this way is easier to find, the landmarks more unmistakable, and the travelling better. In the second, you must remember the poor old chap was at his last gasp. It's a good thing for you, Sellon, that he was, for if he had only lived half an hour longer—even a quarter—he'd have given fuller details and I should have found the place long ago. Look how disjointed the last part of his story is, just the main outlines, trusting to me to fill in detail. I tell you, it was quite pitiable to see the manful effort he made to keep up until he had said his say."

Later in the afternoon, the heat having somewhat abated, they resumed their way, which grew at every mile more rough and toilsome, between those lofty walls, winding round a spur, only to find a succession of similar spurs further on. Then the sun went off the defile, and a coolness truly refreshing succeeded. Renshaw, leading the way, held steadily on, for there was light enough from the great sparkling canopy above to enable them to more than distinguish outline. At length the moon rose.

"Look ahead, Sellon, and tell me if you see anything," said Renshaw at last.

"See anything? Why, no. Stop a bit, though"—shading his eyes. "Yes. This infernal valley has come to an end. There's a big precipice bang ahead of us. We can't get any further."

"Not, eh? Well, now, look to the left."

Sellon obeyed. At right angles to the valley they had been ascending, and which here opened out into a wide basin barred in front by the cliff referred to, ran another similar defile.

"There it is," continued Renshaw, in a satisfied tone. "That's the 'long poort' mentioned by Greenway—and"—pointing to the right—"there are the 'two kloofs.'"

It was even as he said. The situation corresponded exactly.

"We'll go into camp now," said Renshaw. "Let's see what you'll think of my 'hotel.'"

Turning off the track they had been pursuing, Renshaw led the way up a slight acclivity. A number of boulders lay strewn around in a kind of natural Stonehenge. In the midst was a circular depression, containing a little water, the remnant of the last rainfall.

"Look there," he went on, pointing out a smoke-blackened patch against the rock. "That's my old fireplace. Our blaze will be quite hidden, as much as it can be anywhere, that is. So now we'll set to work and make ourselves snug."

Until he became too fatigued to suffer his mind to dwell upon anything but his own discomfort, Sellon had been cudgelling his brains to solve the mystery of the resuscitated document, but in vain. He was almost inclined at last to attribute its abstraction and recovery to the agency of the dead adventurer's ghost.

But the solution of the mystery was a very simple one, and if Sellon deserves to be left in the darkness of perplexity by reason of the part he played in the matter, the reader does not. So we may briefly refer to an incident which, unknown to the former, had occurred on the evening of Renshaw's return to his most uninviting home.

He had been very vexed over the French leave taken by his retainer, as we have seen. But, when his anger against old Dirk was at its highest, the latter's consort, reckoning the time had come

for playing the trump card, produced a dirty roll of paper. Handing it to her master, she recommended him to take care of it in future.

Renshaw's surprise as he recognised its identity was something to witness—almost as great as Sellon's. He had been going about all these weeks, thinking the record of his precious secret as secure as ever, and all the while it was in the dubious care of a slovenly old Koranna woman.

But on the subject of how it came into her possession old Kaatje was reticent. She had taken care of it while the Baas was sick—and, but for her, it might have been lost beyond recovery. More than this he could not extract—except an earnest recommendation to look after it better in the future. However, its propitiatory object was accomplished, and he could not do otherwise than pardon the defaulting Dirk, on the spot.

The fact was, she had witnessed the stranger's doubtful proceedings, and having her suspicions had determined to watch him. When she saw him deliberately steal her master's cherished "charm," she thought it was time to interfere. She had accordingly crept up to the open window and reft the paper out of Sellon's hand—as we have seen.

So poor old Greenway's ghost may rest absolved in the matter, likewise the Enemy of mankind and the preternaturally accomplished baboon. And, although she did not state as much, the fact was that the Koranna woman had intended to return the document upon Renshaw's recovery, but had refrained, on seeing him about to take his departure in company with the strange Baas, whom she distrusted, and not without good reason.

Chapter Twenty Four.

The Two Turret-Heads.

“Hurrah! The scent is getting warm,” cried Sellon, as winding round a spur they came into full view of a huge coffee-canister-shaped mountain.

It was the end of the third day’s trek. Making an early start from the snug camping-place where we last saw them they had pushed steadily on until the heat of the day became too oppressive. Then after a long rest they had resumed their march, and now it was evening.

“Yes, but it’ll have to get warmer still to be of much use,” replied Renshaw. “Look! There’s the other turret-head.”

High aloft, rising from behind the slope of the first, a great “elbow” of cliff started into view. Then a turn of their road once more hid it from sight.

“There are the two referred to by poor old Greenway,” said Renshaw. “The third, the smaller one, lies beyond them to the north-west.”

“Eh? Then why on earth are we going in slap the opposite direction?”

For the “poort” they had been threading here came to an abrupt termination, splitting off into a gradually ascending kloof on each side of the first of the two great mountains. Without a moment’s hesitation Renshaw had taken the left-hand one—heading indeed south-westerly.

“You can’t get anywhere by the other way, Sellon. Nothing but blind alleys ending in a krantz.”

Half an hour or so of rough uphill travelling, and they halted on a grassy nek. And now the two great mountains stood forth right against their line of march. Rising up, each in a steep, unbroken grassy slope, they could not have been less than three thousand feet from the valley which girdled their base like the trench of an old Roman encampment. The crest of each was belted around by a smooth perpendicular wall of cliff of about a third of the height of the mountain itself, gleaming bronze red in the shimmering glow, barred here and there with livid perpendicular streaks, showing where a colony of aasvogels had found a nesting-place, possibly from time immemorial, among the ledges and crannies upon its inaccessible face.

“By Jove!” cried Sellon, as, after a few minutes’ halt, they rode along the hillside opposite to and beneath the two majestic giants. “By Jove, but I never saw such an extraordinary formation! Some of those turret-heads we passed on our way down to Selwood’s were quaint enough—but these beat anything. Why, they’re as like as two peas. And—the size of them. I say, though, what a view of the country we should get from the top.”

“Should! Yes, if we could only reach it. But we can’t. The krantz is just as impracticable all round as on this side. I tried the only place that looked like a way, once. It’s round at the back of the

second one. There's a narrow rocky fissure all trailing with maidenhair-fern—masses and masses of it. Well, I suppose I climbed a couple of hundred feet, and had to give up. Moreover, it took me the best part of the day to come down again, for if I hadn't called all my nerve into play, and patience too, it would only have taken a fraction of a second—and—the fraction of every bone in my anatomy. No. Those summits will never be trodden by mortal foot—unless some fellow lands there in a balloon, that is."

An hour of further riding and they had reached the extreme end of the second gigantic turret. Here again was a grassy nek, connecting the base of the latter with the rugged and broken ridges on the left. Hitherto they had been ascending by an easy gradient. Now Renshaw, striking off abruptly to the right, led the way obliquely down a steep rocky declivity. Steeper and steeper it became, till the riders deemed it advisable to dismount and lead. Slipping, scrambling, sliding among the loose stones, the staunch steeds stumbled on. Even the pack-horse, a game little Basuto pony, appointed to that office by reason of his extra sure-footedness, was within an ace of coming to grief more than once, while Sellon's larger steed actually did turn a complete somersault, luckily without sustaining any injury, but causing his owner to bless his stars he was on his own feet at the time. The second great turret-head, foreshortened against the sky, now disappeared, shut back from view by the steep fall of the ground.

"We have touched bottom at last," said Renshaw, as, to the unspeakable relief of the residue of the party—equine no less than human—comparatively level ground was reached. But the place they were now in looked like nothing so much as a dry stony river-bed. Barely a hundred yards in width, it was shut in on either side by gloomy krantzes, sheering up almost from the level itself.

"What a ghastly hole!" said Maurice, whom the dismal aspect of the gorge depressed. "How much further are these tunnel-like infernos going to last, Fanning? I swear it felt like a glimpse of daylight again, when we were riding up there past the two canister-headed gentry just now."

"I shouldn't have thought you were such an imaginative chap, Sellon."

"Well, you see, this everlasting feeling of being shut in is dismal work. Beastly depressing, don't you know."

"You must make up your mind to it a little longer. There's a water-hole about an hour from here, and there we'll off-saddle and lie by for a snooze. By the way, it's dry here, isn't it?"

"Ghastly! It looks like a place where a stream should be running, too."

"Well, I've seen such a roaring, racing, mountainous torrent galloping down here, that there wasn't foothold for man or beast anywhere between these krantzes. By-the-by, you may devoutly pray that there's no rain during the next few days. A thunder-storm in the mountains higher up would set the whole of this place humming with water."

The sun had left them, and the grey dead silence of the savage defile seemed to echo back the tones of their voices and the clink of the horses' hoofs, with abnormal clearness. Sellon eyed the grim rock walls towering over their heads, and growled.

"Well, it's a beastly place, as I said before. And talking about water, that's the worst of this country—you always have either not enough or else too much of it. All the same, I'm glad to hear we shall soon have some to dilute our grog with tonight. This rattling over stones is dry and throaty work, and the water in your leathern thing must have touched boiling point by now. What's the row?"

The last came in a quick, startled tone. Renshaw had suddenly slid from his saddle, and was picking up some of the large stones which lay in such plentiful profusion. As he arose from this occupation a great rolling, writhing shape became apparent upon a sandspit barely a dozen yards off. Up went the hideous head into the air, waving to and fro above the great heaving coil, and the cruel eyes scintillated with a baleful fire. The horses backed and shied in alarm, snorting violently. Shorter and shorter became the movements of the head, and the forking tongue protruded as the formidable reptile emitted a bloodcurdling hiss. Maurice Sellon felt himself shuddering with horror and repulsion as he gazed for the first time upon the glistening, check-patterned coils of a large python.

Whizz! Whack! The stone launched from Renshaw's practised hand just grazed the waving neck, knocking splinters from the rock behind. With another appalling hiss, the creature, its head still aloft, began to uncoil, as if with the object of rushing upon its antagonist.

Whack! With unerring aim, with the velocity of a catapult, the second stone came full in contact with the muscular writhing neck. The frightful head dropped as if by magic, and the great scaly coils heaved and sprawled about on the sand in a dying agony.

"Broken his neck," said Renshaw, cautiously approaching the expiring reptile, and letting into him with the remaining stones he held in his left hand. "Python. Twelve feet if he's an inch."

"Good old shot! First-rate!" cried Maurice, enthusiastically. "I say, old chap, I envy you. A great wriggling brute like that makes me sick only to look at him. Pah!" he added, with a shudder.

"Look out for his mate," said Renshaw, remounting. "Pythons often go in couples. And I am sorry to say there are a good many snakes about here."

"Baugh! Bau—augh!"

The loud sonorous bark echoed forth in startling suddenness among the overhanging cliffs. But it didn't seem to come from high overhead. It sounded almost in their path.

"Baboons!" said Renshaw. "They must be all round our water-hole. There they are. No—on no account fire."

The poort here widened out. Grassy slopes arose to the base of the cliffs. In the centre lay a rocky pool, whose placid surface glittered mirror-like in the gloaming. But between this and the horsemen was a crowd of dark, uncouth shapes. Again that loud warning bark sounded forth—this time overhead, but so near that it struck upon the human ear as almost menacing.

"Baboons, eh?" said Sellon, catching sight of the brutes. "I'm going to charge them."

Renshaw smiled quietly to himself.

"Charge away," he said. "But whatever you do, don't fire a shot. It may bring down upon us a very different sort of obstructive than a clompje of baviaans, and then this undertaking is one more added to the list of failures, even if we get out with whole skins."

But Maurice hardly heard him to the end, as, spurring up his horse, he dashed straight at the troop of baboons. The latter, for their kind, were abnormally large. There might have been about threescore of the great ungainly brutes, squatting around on the rocks which overhung the pool.

As the horseman galloped up they could be seen baring their great tusks, grinning angrily. But they did not move.

Sellon had not bargained for this. The great apes, squatted together, showing an unmoved front to the aggressor, looked sufficiently formidable, not to say threatening. Sellon's pace slowed down to a walk before he got within sixty yards of them. Then he halted and sat staring irresolutely at the hideous beasts. Still they showed no sort of disposition to give way. For a few moments both parties stood thus eyeing each other.

All of a sudden, led by about a dozen of the largest, the whole troop of hairy monsters came shambling forward—gibbering and gnashing their great tusks in unpleasantly suggestive fashion. A second more, and Sellon would have turned tail and fled ignominiously, when—

Whizz! Whack-whack! whack! A perfect shower of sharp stones came pelting into the thick of the ugly crowd with the swiftness and accuracy of a Winchester rifle, knocking out eyes, battering hairy limbs, playing havoc among them, like a charge of grape-shot. With yells of pain and terror, the brutes turned and fled, scampering up the rocks in all directions.

Renshaw, guessing the turn events were likely to take, had quietly dismounted, and, filling his hands and pockets with stones, had advanced to the support of his now discomfited friend.

"Those brutes don't understand us quite," he said, after the roar of laughter evoked by this sudden turn in the tide of affairs had subsided. "One shot would have sent them scampering, but we dared not fire it. They are not used to the human form divine in this wilderness, but they won't forget that bombardment in a hurry."

"By Jingo! no. Fancy being obstructed by a herd of monkeys. All the same, old chap, they did look ugly sitting there champing their tusks at one like that."

“So they did. Now we’ll let our horses drink, and then adjourn to our sleeping-place. We mustn’t camp too near the water, because the krantzes swarm with tigers (leopards), to say nothing of worse cattle, who might interfere with us if we kept them from their nightly drink. And we can’t light a fire to-night.”

Chapter Twenty Five.

"A Region of Emptiness, Howling and Drear."

Right up under the cliff—the beetling rock overhead, the slope of the hillside falling away into the basin above described—did our adventurers make their fireless camp. But though fireless they were under no lack of ingredients for a substantial meal, nor of the wherewithal to wash it down satisfactorily; which latter fact was perhaps the better appreciated from the certainty of this being the last water they should find until their return.

"Queer thing this sort of contrast, Fanning," said Sellon, who with his back against the rock was blowing tobacco clouds with post-prandial contentment. "I suppose some of these evenings, when one gets back into dress clothes and heavy dinner-parties again, one will look back to this crouch under a big cliff as a kind of dream."

"I suppose so. Yet man is a would-be adaptable animal, after all. I remember a chap, an Englishman, who was with me sea-cow shooting up on the Tonga border. He had an idea of doing at Rome as Romans do, so he got hold of a Zulu mútya (A kind of apron—pretty scanty in dimensions. It is usually made of cat-tails and bullock-hide), and cut about in nothing but that and a pair of canvas shoes. We were after the hippos in a boat, and it was risky, too—for the river was full of crocodiles—in case a hippo should tilt us over. Well, before we had pushed off an hour, the joker was burnt red, and in less than two was literally skinned alive. He didn't kill any sea-cows that day."

"Battling sport, that sea-cow shooting must be. What do you say, Fanning, when we've found our Golconda, to starting a shooting-trip bang into the interior? Hallo! What's that giving tongue? Sounds for all the world like a pack of foxhounds."

A shrill, long-drawn, baying chorus came floating upon the night-air, but very distant. Then it drew nearer, then faded again, then plainer still, then seemed to die away fainter and fainter in the distance. The chorus, borne upon the night in fluctuating waves of sound, blended in wild harmony with the frowning heights and untrodden desolation of this out-of-the-world gorge.

"Wild dogs," said Renshaw, listening intently. "They're hunting something—running it pretty closely, too, or they wouldn't be tonguing like that. By the way, talking of wild dogs, I had an experience with them once which was very much akin to that one of yours with the baboons a little while ago. I was returning from a trip into the Gaza country, with a waggon, and knocking around to shoot something, I fell in with a clump of giraffes. They were shyer than usual, and led me a long chevy. I only managed to wound one—not badly enough—and then it got dark. My horse was rather done up, and I didn't quite know where I was. Then it became obvious I shouldn't fetch the waggon again that night.

"Just as I was casting about for a good place to camp, I heard a whimper close at hand. The veldt was sprinkled about with clumps of mimosa and other thorns—in parts thickish—and all of a sudden the horse threw up his ears and began to snort. I looked up. There, right in front,

squatted on their haunches in a semicircle, not a hundred yards off, were a lot of wild dogs. Couldn't have been less than forty of them. I just gave a shout and rushed at them. But they didn't move until I got within twenty yards, and then they got up, cantered away the same distance, and squatted down again. Then I lost patience, and picking out a big one, just bowled the brute over as he sat. He stiffened out without a yelp, but the rest didn't seem to care. So I stuck in another cartridge, and stretched out another, and rushed at them at the same time. They scattered then, but in no hurry. Now, I thought, I'll ride on. But I happened to look back to see if they had dropped off. Not a bit of it. The brutes were quietly trotting along in my wake. Again I turned back. They just stopped, and squatted down as before.

"Now I had never known wild dogs act like this, the difficulty being, as a rule, to get within shot of them at all, and I own to a kind of eerie feeling as I marked the persistency of these ordinarily sneaking and cowardly brutes, sitting on their haunches there in the dusk, licking their lips as if they knew I was for them. You see it wasn't so much on their account I felt shivery, but it looked as if they knew what I didn't—like the old superstition, if it be a superstition, of a shark following a ship, pointing to an approaching death on board, or the actual fact of a lot of aasvogels watching a wounded buck, or a wounded anything.

"All of a sudden, I became conscious of a most sickening and overpowering stench. By that time it was almost dark—but not too dark to make out objects indistinctly—and the objects that caught my eye at that moment were sufficiently hideous and appalling. All around, the veldt was strewn with human corpses—swollen and decomposed, torn and mangled by wild animals, or ripped and hacked by the assegais of their slayers. They were natives, and of all ages and sexes, lying about in contorted attitudes, some heaped upon each other, the frightfully distorted countenances staring up at the sky. Pah! it was sickening, I tell you, coming upon this in the dusk. There seemed no end of them, and they were scattered as if cut down while fleeing. I learned afterwards it was the result of a Matabili raid. Well, this find accounted in a measure for the boldness of the wild dogs. They had been largely feeding on the human form divine, and had acquired a proportionate contempt for the same."

"What an experience!" said Sellon, whom this story, told amid the dark and savage surroundings of their fireless camp, considerably impressed. "You must have seen some uncommonly queer things in your time, Fanning?"

The other smiled slightly.

"Well, yes, I have. This is a land of strange experiences, although prosaic enough on the surface. I hope none will befall us before we get home again—always excepting the strange experience of finding ourselves rich men in the shape of what we are looking for."

"By the way, whereabouts was it you were attacked that time? Anywhere near here?"

"About half an hour's ride further on. The poort narrows very much, and the cliffs are not nearly so high. It was just sundown, and I was jogging quietly along homewards very much down on my luck over the third failure, when bang came a shower of assegais and arrows and kerries,

hurtling about the rocks like a young hailstorm. I spurred up then, you bet; but the ground is beastly rough, as you've seen, and the enemy could get along as fast as I could—besides, I had a brute of a pack-horse that wouldn't lead properly. They chased me down to where we first entered this defile, and by that time it was dark—luckily for me. As it was, I only shook them off by sacrificing the pack-horse."

"Now, how the deuce did you manage that?"

"Why, I knew they'd reckon on me taking the shortest cut for the river. So when I got out of the poort at the bottom of the turret-head mountain—you remember that steep little slope where your horse turned a somersault—I put on pace a little so as to get a start. Then I stuck a burr under the pack-horse's tail and cast him loose. Away he went, slanting off into the other poort, which seems to lead towards the river, while I lay low. I could see the devils skipping down the poort on his heels, in high old glee. In the night I moved on again, striking due north, and after making nearly a week's cast—and nearly dying of hunger and thirst—I fetched up at the drift we came through day before yesterday. And, by the way, I think old Greenway was wrong in saying, 'Beware the schelm Bushmen.' Those chaps struck me as more like Korannas. There were some quite big fellows among them."

The time and place were singularly appropriate to the narration of wild and perilous experiences. But this latest in no wise tended to raise the listener's spirits. Sellon was not of the stuff of which adventurers are made. He was keen enough on this expedition and the dazzling possibilities it held out. But he didn't want to be killed or wounded if he could help it. No such thing as going into danger out of pure love of excitement found a place in his philosophy. He was not imaginative, yet the idea of being struck down by an unseen enemy, or worse still, perhaps, dragging himself away mortally wounded to die like an animal in a hole or cave, in the heart of this frightful desert, a multitude of foul and loathsome beasts howling for his blood, per adventure waiting till mortal weakness should embolden them to pounce on him before life was extinct—these considerations struck home to him now, and fairly made him shiver.

"By-the-by, Sellon," said the careless voice of his companion, "do you think you'd be able to find your way back to the river again?"

"Now, why the deuce should you ask that, Fanning?" was the testy rejoinder.

"Oh, naturally enough. I wanted to know!" said Renshaw, astonished somewhat. "Besides, supposing anything happened to me—and a hundred things might happen—could you find your way out?"

"Well, it's certainly an infernal labyrinth so far, and I suppose likely to get worse. Still, I'll take extra notice of the landmarks," growled Sellon.

Then he rolled himself up in his blanket to turn in, characteristically leaving his companion to do whatever watching was necessary. And there was some of the latter to be done, for ever and anon the scream of a leopard away among the crags, or the growling snuffle of some beast,

unseen in the darkness, slaking his thirst at the waterhole just below, would cause the horses to snort wildly, and tug and strain at their picket reims in alarm. It needed the sound of a human voice, the touch of a human hand, and that frequently, to allay their fears—peradventure to prevent them from breaking loose and galloping madly off into the night; and however his less inured companion may have been able to revert to more congenial scenes in the blissful illusions of dreams, there was little sleep that night for Renshaw Fanning.

Chapter Twenty Six.

Selwood's Dilemma.

The post at Sunningdale was a weekly, not a daily event. Happy Sunningdale!

It was conveyed from the nearest Field Cornet's, by a ragged native, bestriding a still more ragged pony, and who was "run" by general contribution on the part of those residents whose letters he delivered.

We have said that the postal delivery at Sunningdale was a weekly event. After rainy weather, when the Umtirara and other rivers were down, it was a fortnightly business; sometimes even three weeks would go by without postal communication with the outer world. Happy, happy Sunningdale!

To-day, however, the courier was up to time, and Christopher Selwood, unlocking the weather-beaten leather bag, began to sort and distribute its contents.

"Miss Avory—Miss Avory—Miss Avory—heavens! There's no end to them. We shall have the postboy striking for double pay if Miss Avory's correspondents don't hold their hand."

Violet—devouring with her eyes the contents of the bag as they came forth—laughed at her host's remark, but the laugh was a hollow one. The missive she hungered for was not there. True, she had expected this contingency sooner or later—yet now that it had come it did not seem any the less poignant. Every post hitherto had brought letters from her lover, each with a different postmark. Now his silence meant that he was beyond the reach of any such civilised institutions. She would see no more of his handwriting until she should again have heard the sound of his voice. But—what if it were fated that never again should she hear that voice?

"That's all the 'hopes and fears' this week," said Selwood, holding the leather bag upside down. Then gathering up the bundle of his own correspondence he crammed it carelessly into his pocket and went out.

There was some irrigating to be attended to down at the "lands," and for the next two hours Christopher was very busy. Then as he returned to the house, he suddenly remembered his unopened correspondence. It was near sundown, but there was half an hour to spare before counting-in time.

Looking around, he espied a seat—the same rustic bench where we first witnessed Violet's stolen interview. The place was shady, and cool and inviting withal. Selwood sat down, and dragging the letters out of his pocket and having laid them out, face downwards, along the bench, proceeded to open them one by one.

They were mostly of the ordinary kind—business letters relating to the sale of stock or corn—an official notification or two—soon disposed of. But one he had opened near the last must have been of a different nature. First a puzzled look came into his eyes—then he guffawed aloud.

"Pray do not flatter yourself," began the missive, dispensing entirely with the regulation formality of opening—"pray do not flatter yourself in the idea that I am in ignorance of your whereabouts. Clever as you may imagine yourself, not one of your disreputable movements takes place unknown to me. I know where you are now, and who is with you. But it is of no use. If you exercise your influence over that abandoned creature to the utmost she can never be anything but your mistress. For mark my words, Maurice Sellon, whatever you may do I will never set you free. You are bound to me by a tie that nothing but my own will or my death can sever. But I will never consent to play into your villainous hands or into those of your creature Violet Avory—"

"Oh, good God in heaven," cried Selwood, horror-stricken. "What in the world have I gone and done now! 'Maurice Sellon! Violet Avory!' Good Lord, what does it all mean?" Then, instinctively he did what he should have done at first, turned the sheet to glance at the signature. There it was.

"Your shamefully injured wife,

"Adela Sellon."

"Oh, good Lord, I've done it now!" he cried again, the horrible truth dawning upon him that he had not only opened and read another man's letter, but had surprised another man's secret, and that a secret of a peculiarly awkward nature. How he anathematised his carelessness. He snatched up the envelope, which he had thrown down among the others. There was the address—plain as a pikestaff. Yet, stay, not so very plain after all. It was directed "M. Sellon, Esq." But the long letters were dwarfed and the short extended. The "M" at a casual glance looked not unlike "Ch," a common abbreviation on envelopes of Selwood's longish Christian name. Then like lightning, his memory sped back to the day of his guest's arrival and his own joke relative to each of them holding half their names in common. "We are both 'Sells,'" he had said with a laugh, and now into what a cursed mistake had that coincidence led him.

Poor Chris groaned aloud as he thought of the awkward position in which his carelessness had placed him. It would have been bad enough had the letter been of an ordinary nature. But being such as it was, the probabilities that its real owner would believe in accident having anything to do with the matter were infinitesimal. No. He would certainly suspect him of a deliberate intention to pry into his affairs. And what made things worse was the fact of the other man being his guest.

But only momentarily did this idea serve to divert his thoughts from the extreme awkwardness of his own position. Violet Avory was his guest, too; and with far greater claim on his consideration than this stranger—for was she not under his care? And as the full force of the disclosure with which he had so involuntarily become acquainted—and its consequences—struck

home to his mind, honest Chris felt fired with hot anger against the absent Sellon. What business had the latter—a married man—laying himself out to win poor Violet's heart? That he had succeeded—and thoroughly succeeded—had been only too obvious to every member of the Sunningdale household—and that for some time past. No, no. Sellon had abused his hospitality in a shameful manner, and in so doing had almost forfeited any claim to consideration. Had he learned the ugly secret in the ordinary way Christopher would not have hesitated for a moment. He would have forbidden Sellon the house in terms which should leave no sort of margin for dispute. But then—the manner of his information. There lay the rub. Never in the whole course of his life had Christopher Selwood found himself in so difficult—so perplexing a situation.

Then he did the very worst thing he could have done. He resolved to take his wife into confidence in the matter at once. Bundling the whole heap of correspondence into his pocket again, he rose, and took his way to the sheep-kraals for the evening count-in. But it is to be feared that if Gomfana or old Jacob had carelessly left a sheep or two in the veldt that evening pro bono the jackals, their master was too uncertain in his count to be sure of it.

Mrs Selwood's indignation at the disclosure was as great as that of her husband, but the method by which that disclosure had come about, womanlike, she dismissed as a comparative trifle. Indeed, had she been the one to open the letter, it is pretty safe to assert that so far from resting content with the fragment which Christopher had found more than enough, she would have read it through to the bitter end. For to the feminine mind the axiom that "the end justifies the means" is a thoroughly sound one. Not one woman in fifty can resist the temptation of reading a letter which she is not meant to read when it is safe to do so, and not one in ten thousand if she suspects any particular reason why she should be left in ignorance of its contents.

"Well, now, Hilda, what's to be done?" said Selwood, when he had told her—for with scrupulous honour he had refused to let her see one word of the letter itself. It was only intended for one person's eyes. It was horribly unfortunate that two had seen it, but it would be worse still to extend the privilege to a third.

"What's to be done?" she echoed. "It's a shocking business, and the man must be an arrant scoundrel. The only thing to be done is, in the first place, to request him not to return here; in the next, to sound Violet herself. Things may not have gone so far as we think, but I'm very much afraid they have. Why, latterly the girl has become quite changed, and for a week or so before he left she could hardly bear him out of her sight."

"Yes, that'll be the best plan, I suppose," acquiesced Chris, ruefully.

"I hope Violet will show a proper amount of sense and self-respect," concluded Mrs Selwood, in a tone which seemed to convey that the hope was but a forlorn one. "But remember, Chris, we must take up a firm position and stand to it. The girl is very young, and we are responsible for her until she returns home, and indeed I begin to think the sooner she does that the better, now. She is very young, as I said, but she has turned one and twenty, and there's no knowing what mad suicidal act of folly a girl of her temperament, and legally her own mistress, may be capable of under these circumstances."

“It’ll be a difficult thing for me to explain matters about the letter,” said Selwood, ruefully. “The fellow is sure to scout the idea of a mistake. However, there’s no help for it. I must explain, and that, too, at the earliest opportunity.”

Tact is not, as a rule, a feminine characteristic, but Hilda Selwood possessed a larger share of it than many women with considerably the advantage over herself in training and general knowledge of the world. She began as she had said by literally “sounding” Violet. But there was something in the latter’s manner which seemed to show that the news of Sellon’s previous appropriation was no news to her at all—in fact, that she had known it all along. Finally she admitted as much, and rather gloried in it.

Then ensued a tolerably lively scene. What if he was chained to a fiend of a woman whose sole end and object had always been to make life a burden to him? burst forth Violet, with livid face and flashing eyes. The creature would die some day, it was to be hoped, and then ten thousand heavens were as nothing to the happiness before them both. Give him up? Not she! She would rather die a thousand times over, and would do so first. She was his real wife in the sight of God, she declared, as the stock blasphemous balderdash runs, whatever the other woman was in name, and so forth. Rebuke, reason, appeals to pride, to self-respect were all alike in vain before this furious outburst of uncontrollable passion. The girl seemed possessed of a very demon. She hurled reproaches at her hostess and friend, taxing her with playing the spy upon her—conspiracy, amateur detective business, everything—and declared she would sooner sleep in the veldt than pass another night under that roof. Finally she went off into a fit of shrieking, violent hysterics, and in this condition articulated things that set Hilda Selwood’s ears tingling with outraged disgust.

“The most painfully shocking scene I ever witnessed in my life, and I hope and trust I never may again,” was the latter’s comment to her husband some time afterwards.

“And the curious part of it is I can’t for the life of me make out what the deuce she can see in the fellow,” had been Christopher’s rejoinder. “He’s not much to look at, and although he’s good company in a general way, I don’t think his brain-box holds a very close fit.”

A common enough speculation, and one which must ever remain in the category of things speculative. “What the deuce can she see in the fellow?” Who is to say?

Chapter Twenty Seven.

The Key at Last.

“Well, Fanning, I guess this time it’s all U.P.”

Renshaw made no reply. He gazed wearily at the great iron-bound hills, whose cliffs were now beginning to reflect the glow of the declining sun—and chipped mechanically at the rocks with the geological hammer in his hand. His mind upon the subject was much the same as that of his companion; but in actual fact his despondency was far greater. Still with the desperate tenacity born of the habits of a lifetime, he was unwilling to give in.

Four days have gone by since we last saw our two adventurers bivouacking under the cliff—four days of threading mazy defiles and climbing the roof-like sides of mountains—four days of burning, sweltering exhaustion, ever eager, ever energetic with the tenfold vigour of a fierce hunt for riches. Three out of the four have been devoted to nothing but prospecting for their quest, for they passed the third beacon—the third turret-headed mountain of the clue—early on the day following that on which we last saw them—and now, worn out with toil and disappointment! they are resting in the sweltering afternoon heat deep down in a rock-bound valley where not a breath of air can come—not a whisper of a stir to relieve the oven-like glow which is rendering Sellon, at any rate, almost light-headed.

“A blank draw this time,” growled the latter, wearily. “And what an awful business it has been to get here! I wouldn’t go through it again for a thousand pounds. And then, just think what a brace of fools we shall look to the people at Sunningdale.”

Then as if the thought of Sunningdale—and what he had left there—put the crowning stone upon his misery, Sellon proceeded to curse most vehemently.

With weariness and disappointment, misfortune had overtaken our two friends since we saw them last. While riding along the burning sandy bottom of a dreary defile towards evening, the led horse had inadvertently trodden on a puff-adder—which, sluggish brute that it is, rarely gets out of the way. Blowing himself out with rage, this hideous reptile had flung up his squat bloated length, fastening his fangs in the leg of the unfortunate horse. The animal was doomed, and, indeed, in less than an hour was in its expiring throes.

Now, this was a terrible misfortune, for not only was the climbing and digging gear among the pack-load, but also the water-skin, and by far the greater part of their provisions; nearly the whole of the latter had to be abandoned, and loading up all that was indispensable upon their riding horses—already fast losing their former freshness—the two adventurers had pushed on. But by now the contents of the water-skin had run very low indeed; were it not for the lucky find of a tiny pool of slimy fetid water standing in a cavity of a rock, the horses would have given out already. As it was, they drank it up every drop, and felt the better for it.

“I doubt whether that bag of bones will carry me back, as it is,” said Sellon, gloomily, eyeing his dejected steed, now too weary to graze.

“Sellon,” said Renshaw, earnestly, still gazing around and completely ignoring his companion’s last remark—“Sellon, I can’t make it out now any more than the first time I was here. We have followed out the clue most minutely: ‘Straight from the smaller turret-head, facing the setting sun. Within a day’s ride.’ Now, we have explored and surveyed every point westerly between north and south, and within a good deal more than a day’s ride, thoroughly and exhaustively. There isn’t the shadow of a trace of any such valley, or rather crater, as old Greenway describes. But let’s go over the thing carefully again.”

Suddenly Maurice sat up from his weary lounging attitude.

“By Jove, Fanning, but you’ve given me an idea,” he said, speaking eagerly and quickly.

“One moment,” said Renshaw, holding up his hand. “I have an idea, too, and indeed it’s astonishing it should never have struck me before. You must remember old Greenway was talking very disjointedly at the end of his yarn—poor old chap. He was nearly played out. Well, I tried to take down his words exactly as he uttered them. Look at this ‘Straight from—the smaller one—facing the setting sun. Within—day’s ride.’ Does nothing strike you now?”

“Can’t say it does,” growled Sellon, “except that the old sinner must have been telling a most infernal lie. We’ve spent the last four days fossicking around within a day’s ride of his turret-top mountain, and devil a valley of the kind he describes exists.”

“Well, what strikes me is this. He may have meant to say ‘Within two days’, or three days’, or four days’ ride.’ See?”

“Yes. If that’s so he might as well have told us there was plenty of gold to be found between this and Morocco. It would have helped us about as much. But now I’ll give you my idea. It sounds ‘tall,’ and I dare say you’ll laugh.”

“Never mind. Drive on,” rejoined Renshaw, looking up from the paper which he had been studying intently.

“Well, you mentioned the word ‘crater’ just now. If this ‘valley’ of old Stick-in-the-mud’s really exists, it is, as you say, a crater-shaped concern. Now we’ve fooled away days in hunting for this place at the bottom of each and every mountain around. What if, after all, we ought to be looking for it at the top?”

An eager flash leaped from the other’s eyes.

“By Jove! That is an idea!” he burst forth.

“Eh! Not a bad one, I think?” said Sellon, complacently.

“No. It just isn’t.”

For a few moments both sat staring at each other. Sellon was the first to speak.

“How about that queer cock’s-comb-looking peak we came round this morning?” he said. But Renshaw shook his head.

“Not that. There’s no room for any such place on top of it.”

“Not, eh? Look here, Fanning. Have you ever been up it?”

“No. But I’ve been to the top of every blessed berg of any considerable height around. I never went up that because it commands no range of ground that the others don’t.”

“Very well. My theory is that the best thing we can do is to make the ascent forthwith. Let me look at the yarn for a moment. Ah, here it is,” he went on, pointing out a place on the soiled and weather-beaten document. “‘We were looking about for a hole in a cave to sleep in, for it was coldish up there of nights.’ ‘Up there’ you notice. Now, from its conformation, that cock’s-comb is about the only mountain top around here where they would be likely to find ‘a hole or a cave,’ for ‘up there’ points to the top of the mountain or near it. Do you follow?”

Renshaw nodded.

“All right. ‘I saw we were skirting a deep valley—though it was more like a hole than a valley, for there was no way in or out,’” quoted Sellon again. “Now, you would hardly find such a formation at the bottom of a mountain—though you very conceivably might at the top.”

“But I tell you there can’t be room for such a thing at the top of that cock’s-comb,” objected Renshaw, dubiously. “I’ve been all round the mountain more than once, and it’s narrow at the top.”

“Maybe. On the other hand, it may not be so narrow as you think. A mountain is the devil for changing its shape from whatever point you look at it—almost in whatever light or shade. Then, again, Greenway may have exaggerated the size of the hole. I tell you what it is, Fanning old chap. I believe I’ve solved the riddle that has been besting you all these years. As you said when we first talked the affair over, ‘two heads are better than one—even donkeys’ heads,’ There’s a third head, and that’s the head of the ‘right nail,’ and I believe we’ve hit it. Saddle up.”

“Don’t be too sanguine, Sellon. You’ll be doubly sold if your idea ends in smoke.”

They were not long in reaching the mountain referred to. It was of conical formation and flat-topped. But from one end of its table-like summit rose a precipitous, razor-backed ridge—serrated and on its broader side taking the shape of a cock’s-comb.

Though steep and in parts rugged, the ascent was easy; indeed, it seemed likely they could ride to the very summit. Renshaw eyeing the towering slope, shook his head.

“It’s rough on the horses,” he said. “They haven’t got any superfluous energy at this stage of the proceedings, and that berg can’t stand much under three thousand feet. Still they’ve got to go with us. If we left them down here they might be jumped; and then, again, if your idea should be the right one, we might be days up there. I only hope we shall find water, anyhow.”

Chapter Twenty Eight.

"It is a White Man's Skull."

It was, as Renshaw had put it, "rough on the horses." But the colonial horse, in contrast to his English brother, is pre-eminently an animal for use, and not for show and the primary object of supporting a crowd of stable hands. So puffing and panting, stumbling a little here and there, the poor beasts gallantly breasted the grassy steep in the wake of their masters, who had elected to spare their steeds by leading instead of riding them.

"The mountain certainly is built on a larger scale than one would think from below," pronounced Renshaw, as he surveyed the summit which they were now very near. "We shall have to make a cast round to the left and look for a gully. The horses will never be able to climb over these rocks."

The said rocks lay strewn thickly around; remnants of a cliff at one time guarding this side of the summit, but which in past ages must have fallen away into fragments. From below they had seemed mere pebbles.

"Right you are," acquiesced Sellon, "Lead on."

A détour of a couple of hundred yards and they rounded the spur, which had ended abruptly in a precipice. They were now on the western angle of the mountain. Immediately above rose a lofty wall of rock, the nearer end of the cock's-comb ridge. It continued in unbroken fall some hundreds of feet from where they stood. They had reached the extremity of the slope, and halting for a moment paused in admiration of the stately grandeur of the great cliff sweeping down into giddy depths.

"Let's take a look over," said Maurice, advancing cautiously to the angle formed by the projection whereon they stood, and lying flat to peer over the brink.

"Yes; only be careful," warned his companion.

As he peered over there was a "flap—flap—flap" echoing from the face of the cliff, like so many pistol-shots, as a cloud of great aasvogels, startled from their roosting places beneath, soared away over the abyss. So near were the gigantic birds that the spectator could see the glitter of their eyes.

"By Jove, but I'd like to go down and have a look at the beggars' nests," said Sellon, trying to peer still further over the brink, but in vain, for the aasvogel is among the most suspicious of birds, and, wherever possible, selects his home beneath a jutting projection, and thus out of eyeshot from above.

"They don't make any, only lay one egg apiece on the bare rock," said Renshaw, impatiently. "But come on. Man alive, we've no time for bird's-nesting. In half an hour it'll be dark."

The sun had gone off the lower world, though here, on high, he still touched with a golden splendour the red burnished face of the giant cliff. And now from their lofty elevation they were able to gaze forth upon a scene of unsurpassable wildness and grandeur. Mountains upon mountains, the embattled walls of a cliff-girdled summit standing in contrast beside a smooth, hog-backed hump; here and there a lofty peak sheering up defiant above its fellows, but everywhere a billowy sea of giant heads towering over the darkling grey of desolate valleys and gloomy rifts now merging into night. But all is utter lifelessness in the complete silence of its desolation—not a sound breaks upon the now fresh and cooling air—not a sight to tell of life and animation—save the ghostly wings of the great vultures floating away into space. Then the sun sinks down behind the further ridge in ruddy sea, leaving the impression that, the whole world is on fire, until the lustrous afterglow fades into the grey shades of gloaming.

"No time for the beauties of Nature," went on Renshaw, as his companion, rising from his prostrate posture, rejoined him. "Look. There is our way up, if we are to get up at all. And a precious cranky staircase it is, too."

It was. A steep, stony gully, looking as if, in past ages, it had served for a water-shoot round the extremity of the razor-backed ridge. It ran right down to the brink of the projection whereon they were standing, and, in fact, to reach it, at any rate with the horses, was a very risky feat indeed. Sellon suggested leaving them below—but this his companion would not hear of.

"Stick to the horses, wherever possible," he said. "Once lose them, we are like a man in mid-ocean with oars but no sail. Besides, we may find another way down—a much better one than this."

A dozen yards of steep slope, right on the brink of the abyss, covered with loose shingle, had to be crossed prior to gaining the secure foothold of the gully itself. A false step, a jerk back of the bridle on the part of the led horse, might send steed, or rider, or both, into space.

"Up, old horse!" said Renshaw, encouragingly, as he took the lead. His steady old roadster, however, fully took in the situation. He gave one snort, a scramble or two, and he was safe within the gully.

But Sellon's steed was disposed to show less gumption. At first he refused to try the place at all; then nearly hurled his master over the brink by rucking at the bridle when half-way across; and the hideously suggestive sound of a shower of loosened rubble sliding into the abyss fairly made his said master's blood curdle. However, with much snorting and scrambling, he ultimately suffered himself to be led into safety.

The ascent was now comparatively easy, though with horses it was a tedious and tiresome business. The gully itself formed a huge natural staircase, seemingly about a couple of hundred feet in height. Up they went, stumbling, scrambling—the ring of the horses' hoofs upon the stones waking the echoes in the dead silence of the spot. The grey shades of briefest twilight had already enshrouded the passage in gathering gloom.

“Well, Fanning, what’s the betting on my shot being the right one?” cried Sellon, whose mercurial spirits had gone up sky-high under the influence of a new excitement. “We must be more than halfway up this beastly water-pipe. A few minutes more will decide it. What’s the betting?”

“I still say, don’t make too sure, Sellon. I’m sorry to say it occurs to me that the expression ‘up there,’ on which this new idea of yours turns, may mean nothing more than when a man talks of ‘up country’. It may not mean on top of a mountain, don’t you know.”

“The devil it mayn’t! What an old wet blanket you are, Fanning. Well, we shall soon see now. Hallo! What have you got there?”

For the other was gazing attentively at something. Then without a word he dropped the end of his bridle, and clambering over a couple of boulders, was stooping over the object which had caught his eye.

It was something round and white. Maurice could see that much before following his companion, which, however, he hastened to do. Then both men stood staring down at the object.

The latter was embedded in a hole in the ground, firmly wedged between two rocks, half of it projecting. At first sight it might have been mistaken for an ostrich egg.

Renshaw bent down and picked up the object. Something of a tug was necessary to loosen it from the imprisoning rock. He held in his hand a human skull.

“What’s the matter, old chap?” said Sellon, wonderingly, noticing his companion’s face go deadly white, while the hand that held the skull trembled violently. “You seem rather knocked out of time, eh? A thing like that is a queerish sort of find in this God-forsaken corner; but surely your nerves are proof against such a trifle.”

“Trifle, do you call it?” replied Renshaw, speaking quickly and eagerly. “Look at the thing, man—look at it.”

“Well, I see it. What then?” said Maurice, wondering if his friend had gone clean off his head, and uncomfortably speculating on the extreme awkwardness of such an occurrence away here in the wilds.

“What then? Why, it is a white man’s skull.”

“How do you know that?” said Sellon, more curiously, bending down to examine the poor relic which seemed to grin piteously at them in the falling gloom. One side of the lower part was battered in—giving to the bony face and eyeless sockets a most grisly and leering expression.

“By the formation, of course. But, man alive, don’t you see what this find means—don’t you see what it means?”

“I suppose it means that some other fellow has been fool enough to scramble up here before us, and has come to mortal grief for his pains. Wait, though—hold on—by Jove, yes—I do see! Greenway’s mate; what does he call him? Jim. That’s it, of course. It means that we are on the right track, Fanning, old man. Hooroosh!”

“That’s just what it does mean. Observe. This skull is alone—no bones or remnants of bones—no relics of clothing. Now, the absence of anything of the kind points to the fact that the poor chap wasn’t killed here. He must have been killed up top, and the skull eventually have been brought here by some wild animal—or possibly lugged to the edge and rolled down of its own accord. Greenway’s story points that way too. He says they were attacked while looking down into the valley, for if you remember they had just watched the ‘Eye’ fade away. Yes, ‘Jim,’ poor chap, was killed on top of the mountain, and there lies the ‘Valley of the Eye.’ How does that pan out, eh?”

“Five ounces to the ton at least,” replied Sellon. “Well, we’ve, as you say, panned out the whole thing to a nicety. There’s one ingredient left, though. How about ‘the schelm Bushmen’?”

“Oh, we must take our chances of them. The great thing is to have found the place at all. And now, excelsior! It’ll be pitch dark directly.”

Replacing the skull where he had found it, Renshaw led the way back to the horses, and the upward climb was resumed. But Sellon, following in his wake, was conscious of an unaccountable reaction from his eager burst of spirits, and not all the dazzling prospects of wealth untold to be had for the mere picking up—which awaited him up yonder—could altogether avail to dispel the fit of apprehensive depression which had seized upon him. The discovery of that grisly relic of poor humanity in that savage spot, there amid the gathering shades of night—eloquent of the miserable fate of the unfortunate adventurer done to death on the lonely mountain top, his very bones scattered to the four winds of heaven—inspired in Sellon a brooding apprehension which he could not shake off. What if they themselves were walking straight into an ambush? In the shadowy gloom his imagination, run riot, peopled every rock with lurking stealthy enemies—in every sound he seemed to hear the hiss of the deadly missiles. Then there came upon him a strange consciousness of having been over that spot before. The turret-like craggy gorge, the beetling rocks high overhead in the gloom, all seemed familiar. Ha! His dream! He remembered it now, and shivered. Was it prophetic? It was frightful at the time, and now the horror of it all came back upon him, as, leading his horse, he scrambled on in the track of his companion. He could have sworn that something brushed past him in the darkness. Could it be the spirit of the dead adventurer, destined to haunt this grisly place, this remote cleft on the wild mountainside? A weird wailing cry rang out overhead. Sellon’s hair seemed to rise, and a profuse perspiration, not the result of his climbing exertions, started coldly from every pore. What a fool he was! he decided. It could only be a bird.

“Up at last!” cried the cheery voice of his companion, a score of yards distant, through the darkness. “Up at last. Come along!”

The voice seemed to break the spell which was upon him. It was something, too, to be out of that dismal gully. A final scramble, and Sellon stood beside his companion on the level, grassy summit of the mountain.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Renshaw's Discovery.

The summit seemed quite flat and level as far as they could judge, for the night had now fully set in. But at the side of it on which they stood the great cock's-comb ridge rose high in the air, the loom of its precipitous sides sheering up against the starry zenith, showing indistinct and shadowy in the darkness. The night wind, cool and refreshing, sang in tuneful puffs through the grasses, and aloft in the gold-spangled sky the Southern Cross and many a flashing constellation glowed forth with that clear incandescence never so vivid as when gazed upon from desert solitudes.

"We can do nothing until the moon rises," pronounced Renshaw. "There are some lively krantzes around here, I reckon, and it would never do to take a five-hundred foot header, for want of a little patience. We'll make for the foot of the ridge, and lie by until the moon gets up."

Proceeding cautiously, he led the way up the slope which culminated in the precipitous cliffs of the ridge. He was close under the latter, when his horse suddenly swerved aside, snuffing the air.

"What is it, old horse?" he murmured soothingly, reining in, and peering eagerly into the gloom. Was there a deep cleft in front—or did the rocks shelter a lurking enemy? Both these speculations flashed through his mind, as he whispered back a caution to his companion.

But the horse didn't seem inclined to stand still either. He gently sidled away at an angle, and his rider, curious to fathom the mystery, let him have his head. A few steps more and they were right under the cliff. Then something flashed in the starlight. The horse came to a standstill—down went his head, and a long continuous gurgle told of the nature of his find. He drank in the grateful fluid as if he was never going to stop.

"Well done, old horse!" said his master, dismounting to investigate this inexpressibly welcome phenomenon. It was a deep cleft in the rock about six feet long by three wide, full to the brim of delicious water, in which a great festoon of maidenhair fern trailing from above, was daintily dripping. "Sellon, this is a find, and no mistake. We'll camp down here, and wait for the moon."

"And won't we have a jolly good sluice in the morning. We'll fill that goat-skin of ours, and pour it over each other. I believe it's a week since I had a good wash—not since we left the river. The fellow who laid down the axiom that you're never thoroughly comfortable until you're thoroughly dirty must have been born in a pigsty himself. I know that for the last few days I've been wondering whether I've been looking a greater brute than I felt—or the other way about. Hooray for a good sluice to-morrow, anyhow."

Both were too excited to sleep. Even the consolation of tobacco they denied themselves lest the glimmer of a spark of light should betray their whereabouts to hostile eyes. And they were on short commons, too; the death of the packhorse and the necessity of jettisoning a portion of his load having narrowed down their stock of provisions to that which was the most portable, viz.

biltong and ship-biscuit; which comestibles, as Renshaw declared, besides containing a vast amount of compressed nutriment, had the additional advantage of being so hard that a very little of them went a long way. So they lay under the cliffs munching their ration of this very hard tack, and speculating eagerly over the chances the next day might bring forth.

The night wore on. Save for the tuneful sighing of the wind in the grass, no sound broke through the calm of that wild and elevated solitude. Meteors and falling stars flashed ever and anon in the spangled vault. A whole world seemed to slumber.

Soon Renshaw began to notice an incoherency in his companion's replies. Fatigue versus excitement had carried the day. Sellon, who was of a full-blooded habit, and uninured to such calls as had of late been made upon his energies, had succumbed. He was fast asleep.

Left alone in the midst of a dead world, while the whole wilderness slumbered around, Renshaw strove to attune his faculties to the prevailing calm—to try and gain a few hours of much-needed jest. But his nerves were strung to their utmost tension. The speculation of years, the object of his thoughts sleeping and waking, were about to be attained. Sleep utterly refused to visit him.

He could not even rest. At last he rose. Taking up his trusty double gun—rifle and shot-barrel—he wandered forth from the fireless camp.

By the light of the burning stars he picked his way cautiously along the base of the rocky ridge, keeping a careful eye in front of him, above, around, everywhere. Yes, the object of years of anxious thought, of more than one lonely and perilous expedition into the heart of these arid and forbidding wilds, was within reach at last. It must be. Did not that gruesome find down there in the gully point unmistakably to that?

The cool night wind fanned his brow. All the influences of the dead, solemn wilderness were upon him, and his thoughts reverted to another object, but to one upon which he had schooled himself to think no more.

In vain. There on that lonely mountain-top at midnight, in his utter solitude, the man's heart melted within him at the thought of his hopeless love—at the recollection of that anguished face, that broken voice pleading for his forgiveness; for his sympathy in her own dire extremity. What was she doing at that moment, he idly speculated? Ah! her regrets, her longings, her prayers were not for him, were all for the other; for the man who shared his present undertaking, who slumbered so peacefully but a few hundred yards away.

Why had he brought this man to Sunningdale, to steal away that which should have been his? Why had he brought him here now, to enrich him in order that nothing might be wanting to complete his own utter self-sacrifice? He owed him nothing, for had he not twice paid the debt in full? Why had he stepped between him and certain death? But for his ready promptitude Maurice Sellon would now be almost as sad a relic of humanity as that upon which they had gazed but a few hours back. But the solemn eyes of the stars looking down upon him, the very grandeur of the mountain solitude, seemed to chide him for such thoughts. What was the puny

fate of a few human beings compared with the immensity of ages upon which those stars had looked down—the roll of centuries during which those silent mountains had stood there ever the same?

A perceptible lightening suffused the velvety vault above. The horned moon rose higher over the drear sea of peaks. The crags stood forth silvery in the new-born light—and then, as his glance wandered downwards, Renshaw felt every drop of blood flow back to his heart.

Far below shone a tiny glimmer—the glimmer of a mere spark. But withal so powerful that it pierced the darkness of the far depths as the flash of a ray of fire.

He stood as one turned to stone, holding his very breath. He rubbed his eyes, and looked again. There it was still. Again he averted his gaze, and again he looked. The distant spark was glittering more brilliantly than ever. It seemed to gain in size and power as he looked. It held him spellbound with its green incandescence flashing forth from the darkness down there in the far depths.

He tore out the white lining of his soft hat, and bending down, nailed it to the ground with his pocket knife. Then he walked away a few yards and looked again. The spark had disappeared.

Feverishly he returned to the mark which he had set, now almost fearing to look. He need not have feared. There shone the “Eye”—more dazzling than ever.

Maurice Sellon, sleeping the dreamless slumber of a thoroughly exhausted man, started up with a smothered imprecation, as a hand gently shook him by the shoulder. But his deadened faculties sprang into quick life at the low impressive voice.

“At last! Come and look. The ‘Eye’ is shining like a star.”

Chapter Thirty.

"Like a Star."

"Like a star!"

The two men stood gazing in silence not untinged with awe, upon this wonderful, this beautiful phenomenon. For how many ages—for how many generations of the human race had that marvellous Eye shone forth in the gloom of its untrodden solitude. The heart of the earth was unfolding a glimpse of its treasure-house.

Like a star! Yet that Eye, flashing, scintillating in its mysterious bed—was it not in a measure diabolical, luring men to destruction? Of the two who had sought to meddle with it, one had returned only to die; the other—had they not but a few days since handled his bleached and unburied skull?

These thoughts passing through Renshaw's mind could not but temper the degree of wild exultation which he felt now that he had conquered at last. Sellon, on the other hand, could hardly restrain the wild hurrahs wherewith, but for the consciousness of probable peril, he would fain have given vent to his feelings.

"How far down is it, old chap?" said the latter, eagerly.

"Impossible to say. We can go forward a little now, and explore. It's not much of a moon, but there's light enough. But, for Heaven's sake, Sellon, restrain that excitable temperament of yours, or we shall have you plunging over one of these krantzes before you know where you are."

"All right, old boss. I'll keep cool. You can take the lead, if you like."

The light was misty and uncertain. The ground here took an abrupt fall. Proceeding cautiously for a little distance down, they halted. The Eye had disappeared.

"Come on. We shall see it again directly," said Sellon, starting forward again.

But the other's hand dropped on his shoulder like a vice.

"Stop—for your life!"

"Eh? What's up?—Oh, Lord!"

He stood still enough then. Three or four steps further and he would have plunged into space. In the faint illusive light of the spent moon, the treacherous cliff brow was well-nigh indistinguishable even to Renshaw's tried vision. But the unerring instincts of the latter were quick to interpret the sudden puff of cold air sweeping upwards, and well for the other that it was so.

“Pheugh!” shuddered Sellon, turning pale as he awoke to the awful peril he had escaped. “What a blundering ass I am, to be sure. But—look! There’s the Eye again—larger—brighter than ever—by Jove!”

“Yes; and I don’t believe it’s a couple of hundred feet below us either. Let’s see what sort of a drop there is here.”

Lying full length on the edge of the cliff, he peered over. Then loosening two or three stones, he let them fall—one after the other. A single clink as each struck the bottom.

“We can’t get down this side, Sellon. It’s sheer—as I thought, even if it doesn’t overhang. The stones never hit the side once. But now, to mark the Eye. It won’t shine in the daylight.”

He proceeded to untie what looked like a bundle of sticks. In reality it contained a short bow and several arrows. Next he produced some lumps of chalk rolled up in rags.

“What an ingenious dodger you are, Fanning!” cried Sellon, admiringly, watching his companion carefully fitting the lumps of chalk on the heads of several of the arrows. “So that’s what you brought along that bundle of sticks for. I thought you had an eye to the possibility of our ammunition giving out.”

Renshaw smiled. Then stringing the bow, he bent it once or twice, tentatively.

“That’ll do, I think. It’s pretty strong is this little weapon of war. Old Dirk made it for me after the most approved method of his people. You know Korannas and Bushmen are archers in contra-distinction to the assegai-throwing Kafir tribes. Now for a shot.”

Drawing out one of the chalk-tipped arrows to its head, he took a careful aim and let fly. The bow twanged, and immediately a faint thud told the expectant listeners that the shaft had struck very near the mark.

“That’ll make a good splash of chalk wherever it has struck,” said the marksman approvingly, fitting another arrow. But on the twang of the bow there followed a metallic clink instead of the softer thud of the first missile.

“That bit of chalk’s come off,” said Renshaw. “However, let’s try again.”

This time the result seemed satisfactory. Again and again was it repeated until half a dozen arrows had been shot away.

“That’ll put half a dozen chalk splashes round the Eye, or as near it as possible, for our guidance at daybreak,” said Renshaw, approvingly. “Now we’ll drop a white flag or two about.”

Fixing small strips of rag, well chalked, to the butt-ends of several more arrows, he shot them away, one after another, in the direction of the first.

“We’ll go back now, and get out our gear. We can’t do anything before daybreak. The place may be easy to get down into on one side, or it may be well-nigh impossible. But, hang it all, Sellon, there ought to be no such word for us as impossible with that in front of us.”

Once more they turned to look back, as though unwilling to go out of sight of the marvel, lest it should elude them altogether. Opposite, the misty loom of cliffs was now discernible, and between it and them, down in the shadowy depths, that flashing star still shone clear in its green scintillations.

Dawn rose, chill and clear, upon the endless tossing mountain waste. But before the night silvered into that pearly shade which should preface the golden flush of the sunrise, our two adventurers, loaded with all the implements of their enterprise, stood waiting on the spot where Renshaw had left his mark on first making the discovery.

Then as the lightening earth began to unfold its mysteries, they took in the whole situation at a glance. Standing with their backs to the precipitous cock’s-comb ridge, they looked down upon the terraced second summit of the mountain. But between this and where they stood yawned a crater-like rift. An ejaculation escaped Renshaw.

“By Jove! Just look. Why, the crater itself is the exact shape of an eye!”

It was. Widening outward at the centre and terminating in an acute angle at each extremity, it was indeed a wonderful formation. Shaped like an eye-socket, and shut in on every side by precipitous rock walls, the gulf looked at first sight inaccessible. It seemed about half a mile in length, by four hundred yards at the widest point, and although this extraordinary hollow extended nearly the whole width of the mountain, dividing the flat table summit from the sheering ridge—yet there was no outlet at either end. Both stood gazing in amazement upon this marvellous freak of Nature.

“What did I tell you, old chap?” cried Sellon, triumphantly. “There’s more room on the top of this old berg than you’d think. Who’d have thought of finding a place like that up here? I believe it’s an extinct volcano, when all’s said and done.”

“Likely. Now let’s get to work.”

They descended the steep slope to the spot whence the arrow experiment had been made, and where Sellon had so narrowly escaped a grisly death. It was near the widest part of the rift. As they had expected, the cliff fell away in a sheer, unbroken wall at least two hundred feet. Nor did the opposite sides seem to offer any greater facility. Whichever way they looked, the rock fell sheer, or nearly so.

“We can do nothing here!” said Renshaw, surveying every point with a fairly powerful field-glass. “There are our chalk-marks all right—flags and all. We had better make a cast round to the right. According to Greenway’s story, the krantzes must be in a sort of terrace formation somewhere. That will be at the point where he was dodging the Bushmen.”

Skirting the edge of the gulf, they soon rounded the spur. It was even as Renshaw had conjectured. The ground became more broken. By dint of a not very difficult climb, they soon descended about a hundred feet. But here they were pulled up by a cliff—not sheer indeed, but apparently unnegotiable. It dropped a matter of thirty feet on to a grassy ledge some six yards wide, thence without a break about twice that depth to the bottom of the crater.

“We can negotiate that, I guess!” cried Renshaw, joyously, as he unwound a long coil of raw-hide rope. “I came prepared for a far greater drop, but we can do it well here. I don’t see any other place that seems more promising. And now I look at it, this must be the very point Greenway himself tried from. Look! That must be the identical rock he squatted under while the Bushmen were peppering him. Yes, by Jove, it must!” pointing to a great overhanging mass of stone which rose behind them. “Why, he had already found a diamond or two even here. What shan’t we find down yonder?”

There was a boyish light-heartedness about Renshaw now, even surpassing the spirits of his companion. The latter stared. But the consciousness of being within touch of fabulous wealth is a wonderful incentive to light-heartedness.

He measured off a length of the rope for the shorter drop. Then they drove in a crowbar, and, securing the rope, a very few minutes sufficed to let themselves down to the grassy ledge.

“Pheugh! that’s something of a job!” cried Sellon, panting with the exertion of the descent. “Something of a job, with all this gear to carry as well. I could have sworn once the whole thing was giving way with me. I say, couldn’t we leave our shooting irons here, and pick them up on the way back?”

“H’m! Better not. Never get a yard away from your arms in an enemy’s country!”

The reply was unpleasantly suggestive. To Sellon it recalled all his former apprehensions. What a trap they would be in, by the way, in the event of a hostile appearance on the scene.

“You’re right,” he said. “Let’s get on.”

The second crowbar was driven in. This time they had some difficulty in fixing it. The turf covering the ledge was only a few inches thick. Then came the hard rock. At length a crevice was struck, and the staunch iron firmly wedged to within a few inches of its head.

“Our string is more than long enough,” said Renshaw, flinging the raw-hide rope down the face of the rock. The end trailed on the ground more than a dozen feet. “This krantz is on a greater

slant than the smaller one. Don't throw more of your weight on the reim than you can help. More climbing than hanging, you understand. I'll go down first."

Slant or no slant, however, this descent was a ticklish business. To find yourself hanging by a single rope against the smooth face of a precipice with a fifty-foot drop or so beneath is not a delightful sensation, whatever way you look at it. The crowbar might give. There might be a flaw in the iron—all sorts of things might happen. Besides, to go down a sixty-foot rope almost hand under hand is something of a feat even for a man in good training. However, taking advantage of every excrescence in the rock likely to afford passing foothold, Renshaw accomplished the descent in safety.

Then came Sellon's turn. Of powerful and athletic build, he was a heavy man, and in no particular training withal. It was a serious ordeal for him, and once launched in mid-air the chances were about even in favour of a quicker and more disastrous descent than either cared to think of. The rope jammed his unwary knuckles against the hard rock, excoriating them and causing him most excruciating agony, nearly forcing him to let go in his pain and bewilderment. The instinct of self-preservation prevailed, however, and eventually he landed safely beside his companion—where the first thing he did on recovering his breath was to break forth into a tremendous imprecation. Then, forgetting his pain and exertion, he, following the latter's example, glanced round curiously and a little awed, upon the remarkable place wherein they found themselves—a place whose soil had probably never before been trodden by human foot.

And the situation had its awesome side. The great rock walls sheering up around had shut in this place for ages and ages, even from the degraded and superstitious barbarians whose fears invested it and its guardian Eye with all the terrors of the dread unknown. While the history of civilisation—possibly of the world itself—was in its infancy, this gulf had yawned there unexplored, and now they two were the first to tread its virgin soil. The man who could accept such a situation without some feeling of awe must be strangely devoid of imagination—strangely deficient in ideas.

Chapter Thirty One.

The "Valley of the Eye."

The floor of the crater was nearly level, though somewhat depressed in the centre. Great masses of rock spar protruded here and there from the soil, which latter was gravelly. On turning up the surface, however, a formation of whitey-blue clay lay revealed.

"This is the place for the 'stones,'" said Renshaw, exultantly, making a tentative dig or two with his pick. "The Eye apart, we ought to find something here worth having. Ah, I thought so."

He picked up a small, dingy-looking crystal about the size of a pea. It was of perfect symmetry even in the rough, the facets being wonderfully even.

"You'd better put that aside, Sellon, and stick to it as the first stone—apart from our division of the swag. Knock it into a pin or something."

It was a small act. But it was thoroughly characteristic of the man's open-souled unselfishness. The first instalment of the treasure, attained at the cost of so much anxious thought—of so much hardship and lonely peril—he offered to his companion. And the latter accepted it without hesitation—equally characteristically.

"We'd better get on to the big thing now, though," he continued, "and leave the fossicking until afterwards."

In a few minutes they crossed the crater. Then carefully scanning the opposite cliff they made their way along the base of the same.

"There's one of our 'flags,'" cried Renshaw, suddenly. "And by Jove—there are our chalk splashes! Not bad archery in the dark, eh? Look. They are all within half a dozen yards of each other."

A great boulder some dozen feet in height and in shape like a tooth, rose out of the soil about twenty yards from the base of the cliff. It was riven obliquely from top to bottom as if split by a wedge; a curious boulder, banded with strata of quartz like the stripes of an agate.

On the face of it were four white marks—all, as the speaker had said, within a few yards of each other, and bearing the relative formation of the stars composing the Southern Cross. Two of the arrows with the strips of rag attached, lay a little further off, while the shafts which had so faithfully left their mark lay at the foot of the boulder, the chalk shattered to pieces.

The intense excitement of the moment was apparent in both men, and it took widely different phases. Sellon advanced hurriedly to the face of the boulder, and began scrutinising it, eagerly, fiercely, from top to base. Renshaw, on the other hand, deliberately sat down, and, producing his pipe, proceeded leisurely to fill and light it.

“It isn’t on the face of the rock we’ve got to look, Sellon,” he said, when this operation was completed. “It’s here.”

He rose, advanced to the cleft, and gazed eagerly inside. It was just wide enough to admit a man’s body. Just then the first arrowy gleams of the risen sun shot over the frowning rock walls, glowing athwart the grey chill atmosphere of the crater. They swept round the searcher’s head, darting into the shaded cleft.

And then one swift reflected beam from the shadow of that rocky recess, one dart of fire into his eyes, and Renshaw started back. There, not two yards in front of his face, protruded from the rough surface of the quartz, a dull hard pyramid; but from the point of that pyramid darted the ray which had for the moment blinded him.

“HERE IT IS! THE EYE!”

The other was at his side in a moment. And thus they stood side by side, speechless, gazing upon a truly magnificent diamond.

Well might they be struck speechless. To one the retrospect of a hard, lonely life, sacrificed in detail to the good of others, a struggling against wind and tide, a constant battle against the very stars in their courses—rose up and passed before his eyes in a lightning flash at that moment. To the other what experience of soured hopes, of reckless shifts, of a so far marred life, of failure, and confidence misplaced and unrequited—of gradual cutting loose from all principle—a confusion between the sense of right and wrong, and, following immediately upon all, a golden glow of hope no longer deferred, a sunny ideal of abundant consolation; of love and happiness! But to both comfort, ease, wealth.

Wealth. The riches lying waste for ages in this remote solitude must at length yield to the grasping hand of their predestined owner—Man. With the first human footfall in this solemn untrodden recess rushed in the jarring cares and considerations of the busy world in all its whirling haste—its feverish strivings. Wealth!

With the point of his geological hammer Renshaw next proceeded to chip a circle around the great diamond. Clink, clink! The hammer bit its way slowly but surely into the face of the hard rock. Clink, clink! The circle deepened. The chips flew into their eager faces. No thought of pausing to rest.

It was a long job and a tedious one. At length the quartz cracked, then split. The superb stone rolled into Renshaw’s hand.

“Seven or eight hundred carats, if it’s one,” he said, holding it up to the light, and then passing it to his companion. “Look what a shine it has, even in the rough. It must have been partially ‘cut’ by the splitting of the quartz, even as old Greenway conjectured. Directly I saw this boulder, split

in half like that, I knew that it was in the cleft that we had to search. Yet the thing is a perfect marvel, well-nigh outside all experience."

"I wonder what the schelm Bushmen will think when they find that their 'devil's eye' has knocked off shining," said Sellon. "By Jove, we should look precious fools if they were to drop down and quietly sneak our rope!"

"We should," assented Renshaw, gravely. "We should be pinned in a trap for all time."

"Pho! The very thought of it makes one's blood run cold. But, I say, let's hunt for some more stones, and then clear out as soon as possible."

A careful search having convinced Renshaw that such a freak of Nature was not likely to repeat itself, and that neither the cleft nor the sides of the great boulder offered any more of its marvellous treasures to be had for the taking, they turned away to search the gravelly soil of the crater, with what intensity of eagerness only those who have experienced the truly gambling passion involved in treasure-seeking can form an idea. No food had passed their lips since the previous evening, yet not a moment could be spared from the fierce, feverish quest for wealth. They ate their dry and scanty rations with one hand while wielding pick and shovel with the other. Even the torments of thirst, for the contents of their pocket flasks were as a mere drop to the ocean in the torrid, focussed heat now pouring down into this iron-bound hollow, they hardly felt. Each and every energy was merged in that intense and craving treasure hunt.

"Well, this can't go on for ever," said Renshaw at last, pausing to wipe his streaming brow. "What do you say to knocking off now, and leaving this for another day? Remember, we are not out of the wood yet. There is such a thing as leaving well alone. And we have done more than well."

They had. It wanted about two hours to sunset. In the course of this long day's work they had found upwards of sixty diamonds—besides the superb Eye. All were good stones, some of them indeed really magnificent. This long-sealed-up treasure-house of the earth, now that its doors were opened, yielded its riches in no niggardly fashion.

"Perhaps we had better clear out while we can," assented Sellon, looking around regretfully, and making a final dig with his pick. There hung the good rope, safe and sound. A stiff climb—then away to spend their lives in the enjoyment of the fruits of their enterprise.

"If you don't mind, I'll go first. I am so cursedly heavy," said Sellon. "And just steady it, like a good chap, while I swarm up."

A good deal of plunging, and gasping, and kicking—and we are sorry to add—a little "cussing," and Sellon landed safely upon the grassy ledge. Renshaw was not long in following.

There remained the upper cliff, which was, it will be remembered, nearer the perpendicular than the other one, though not so high. Up this Sellon proceeded to climb, his companion steadying

the rope for him as before. Pausing a few moments to draw up and coil the longer line, Renshaw turned to follow. But—the rope was not there. Looking up, he saw the end of it rapidly disappearing over the brow of the cliff above. What did it mean?

It could not be! He rubbed his eyes and looked again. The rope was gone. What idiotic practical joke could his companion be playing at such a time? Then, with a shock, the blood flowed back to his heart, and he turned deadly cold all over.

Alas and alas! It could mean but one thing. Renshaw's feelings at that moment were indescribable. Amazement, dismay, burning indignation, were all compressed within it, and following upon these the warning words of Marian Selwood, spoken that sunny morning under the cool verandah, flashed through his brain.

"He is not a man I should trust. He doesn't seem to ring true."

Heavens and earth—it could not be! No man living, however base, could be guilty of such an act of black and bitter treachery. But in Maurice Sellon's possession was the great diamond—the superb "Eye."

Even then it could not be. Surely, surely, this man whose life had been saved twice now; whom he had been the means of enriching for the remainder of that life—could not be capable of requiting him in such a manner as this. It must be a mere senseless practical joke.

"Anything gone wrong with the rope?" he called up, striving to suppress the ring of anxiety in his voice.

No answer.

Again he called.

No answer. But this time, he fancied he heard receding footsteps clambering up the steep hillside beyond.

Renshaw Fanning's life had not held many moments more bitter than those which followed. The hideous treachery of his false friend, the terrible fate which stared him in the face—pent up within that deathtrap, and—hollow mockery—wealth untold lying at his feet. And the cold-bloodedness which had planned and carried out so consummate a scheme! Why had not the villain drawn up the longest rope, and left him below in the crater instead of up here on the ledge? Why, because he knew that he himself could be shot dead from below while climbing the upper rope, whereas now he was safe. The whole thing was as clear daylight. There was no room for doubt.

Chapter Thirty Two.

Judas Impromptu.

One of those inexplicable problems which now and again crop up to puzzle the student of human nature and to delight the cynic is the readiness wherewith a man, who on the whole is rather a good fellow, will suddenly, and at a moment's notice, plunge into the lowest depths of base and abject villainy.

When Maurice Sellon first laid his hand upon the lower rope to ascend out of the crater, he had no more idea of committing this act of blackest treachery than his generous and all too trusting friend had. It came to him, so to speak, in mid-air—begotten of a consciousness of the priceless treasure now in his possession—of the ease wherewith he could draw up the rope.

The temptation became too strong. That splendid stone, worth a fortune, would be all his. Renshaw might eventually work his way out by some other point—but not until he himself had got a long start to the good. He remembered his friend's words earlier in their expedition. "Do you think you could find your way back alone?" Strangely prophetic! Yes, he thought he could do that. At any rate, with the fabulous wealth about him, it was worth while making the trial.

We think we have hitherto made it clear that Sellon was not without some good impulses. Equally we seem to have made it clear that he was at the same time what is commonly, and expressively, known as a "slippery character." From a slip to a downright—a heavy—fall is the work of an instant. So, too, had been the dastardly resolve which he had formed and carried out.

He could not have lifted a hand against his friend—his nature was too weak for any such aggressive act of villainy. But to leave him to perish miserably of starvation, shut up there in the crater, involved the playing of a comparatively inactive part. And again, it did not look so bad. Renshaw was a man of infinite resource. He might eventually succeed in finding a way out—probably would. Thus was conscience seared.

Sellon climbed up to where the horses were grazing, closely knee-haltered. He untied the reims, and led them back to the place where they had camped. It was a short distance, but it gave him time to think.

He saddled up his own horse. Then he took out the great diamond. How it flashed in the sinking sunlight. It must be worth a fabulous sum. All his own—all, not half.

His foot was in the stirrup. He took one more look around. There was their resting-place, just as it had been left in the small hours of the morning. His friend's blanket still lay there, as it had been thrown aside. His friend's saddle and bridle—a few reims and other gear. The sight of these objects set him thinking.

The sweet golden sunshine slanted down into the hollow, its course nearly run. Opposite, the great cliffs flushed redly at its touch; below, the crater was already in shade. And upon that

lonely ledge stood the man who was thus treacherously left to die a lingering death—never again to look upon a human face, never again to hear the sound of a human voice.

Why had he been so blindly, so besottedly confiding? Had he not by the very fact placed temptation in the other's way? Marian was right. "He does not seem to ring true," had been her words. Her quick woman's instinct had gauged the risk, while he, in his superior knowledge, had suffered himself to be led blindfold into the trap. Ah, well, these considerations came just a trifle too late. He must make up his mind to meet his end, and that soon, for even to his resourceful brain no glimmer of a way out of the difficulty presented itself.

"Hallo! Fanning!"

The blood tingled in his veins at the call. He paused a moment before replying to the treacherous scoundrel—and then it was in one single stern monosyllable.

"Well?"

"Look here, old chap. I want to talk to you."

"Why don't you show yourself?"

For although the voice came from the cliff's brow above, not even the speaker's head was visible.

"Look here, old boss," went on the latter, ignoring the question. "I'm a pretty desperate sort of a chap just now—because I'm desperately in want of the needful—all of it that I can lay hands on, in fact. Now, with you it's different; for you went out of your way to tell me as much. Remember?"

"Go on."

"Well, you said you'd be content with moderate riches. Now you've got them. With me it's different. I want a good deal more than anything moderate."

He paused, but no answer came from below.

"Well, what I want to propose is this. You hold on to what you've got, and I'll stick to what I've got. Is that a bargain?"

"No."

"Now, Fanning, do be reasonable. By-the-by, you remember when we first talked about this place. I told you I had an object in trying to make a pile, and rather chaffed you on having one too. Said I believed our object was the same. Remember?"

"Well?"

“Well, I little thought how I was hitting the right nail on the head. Now, by agreeing to my suggestion, you can benefit us both—benefit all three of us, in fact. For you behaved devilish well over that other business, mind, devilish well. Look here now. Agree that we shall start quits from this moment—that we each stick to what we’ve got on us—mind you, we’ve had no division yet, and you may have as many stones as I have—or nearly so—for all I—for all either of us—know. Give me your straight word of honour that you agree to this, and—I’ll let down the rope again.”

Here again the speaker fell unconsciously into an inconsistency so paradoxical as to be almost grotesque. Had the position been reversed, would he have scrupled at passing his own “word of honour” a score of times, if necessary, in order to get out of the present quandary. And once out of it would he have hesitated to break his pledged word equally a score of times, and to pursue his claim to the uttermost. Not for a moment would he have so scrupled. Yet he was prepared to accept this other man’s word in perfect good faith. Wherein is indeed a paradox, and, as we have said, a grotesque one.

“And if I refuse?” said Renshaw.

“If—? In that case I shall not let down the rope again.”

“I do refuse, then.”

The stern determined tone left no room for doubt. That, once it was formed, there was no shaking this man’s resolution Maurice was well aware.

“Then you are committing suicide,” he said.

“And you murder—murder in the blackest and most diabolical form in which it has ever been committed. And—believe me or not, as you please—I would rather be myself here, than be you, at large with the results of your villainy. And those results—mark my last words—you will never benefit by.”

To this there was no reply, and some minutes went by in silence. Again Renshaw heard his name called. But he deigned no answer.

“I say, Fanning,” came the voice from overhead again. “Hang it, man, say you agree.”

“Never,” now replied Renshaw, speaking coldly and deliberately. “I have never been a grasping man, and I defy my worst enemy to charge me with a single instance of taking advantage of anybody. But—I have always tried to be a man of principle—to act on principle. And in utterly refusing to play up to your villainous hand I am following out that line consistently. And now, Maurice Sellon, I will just add this. I am alone in the world, and having no ties my life is to that extent my own. I will let it be sacrificed rather than violate a principle. But you, from the hour you leave this place, you will never know a moment’s peace, never for a moment will the

recollection of what you have done to-day cease to haunt you. Here from my living tomb I can afford to pity you."

Again there was silence. But there was an awfulness about those parting words, the more forcible that they were spoken without heat or anger—a solemnity which could not but live in the recollection of him to whom they were addressed. How did they strike him now?

Suddenly something shot out into the air from above, falling with a 'thwack' against the face of the cliff. It was the raw-hide rope.

Renshaw merely looked at it. The end trailed at his feet. Yet he put forward no hand to seize it.

"Come on, old chap," sung out Sellon in his heartiest manner. "Why, I've only been playing off a practical joke on you—just to see how 'grit' you are. And you are 'grit' and no mistake."

But Renshaw shook his head with a bitter smile. Still he made no move forward.

"Do you want to finish me off more quickly than at first?" he said. "I suppose the line will be cut by the time I'm half-way up."

"No. I swear it won't," called out the other. "Man alive, can't you take a little chaff? I tell you I've only been humbugging you all along."

Renshaw did not believe a word of this. But as he stood there the whole truth of the matter seemed to flash upon him. Sellon had been beset by a terrible temptation, and had yielded—for the moment. Then his better instincts had come uppermost, and this was the result.

Still, as he seized the rope, and having tested it, started on his climb, he more than half expected every moment of that climb to be his last. Then as he rose above the brink Sellon put out his hand to help him. This, however, he ignored, and drew himself up unaided.

"What a game chap you are, Fanning," began Sellon, trying to laugh. But the other turned to him, and there was that in the look which cut him short.

"I only wish I could believe in your 'practical joke' theory, Sellon," said Renshaw, and his tones were very cold and stern. "But I can't, and I tell you so straight. Do you know that for the bare attempt at the hideous treachery you proposed just now you would be lynched without mercy, in any mining camp in the world. Wait—let me say it out. I have shared my secret with you, and have given you wealth, and even now I will not go back on our bargain—share and share alike. But there is one condition which I must exact."

"And what's that?" asked Sellon, shortly, not at all relishing the other's way of looking at things.

“I trusted you as fully as any man ever was trusted. I thought the large diamond was as safe in your possession as in my own. I left it in your possession, thereby placing temptation in your way. Now I must insist on taking charge of it myself.”

“Oh, that’s another pair of shoes. Possession, you know—nine points—eh?” answered Maurice, defiantly.

“Why, the very fact of your hesitating a moment proves what your intentions were, and are,” said Renshaw, speaking rather more quickly, for even he was fast reaching the limits of patience. “I must ask you to hand it over.”

“And suppose I decline?”

“One of us two will not leave this place alive.”

Sellon started. Well he might. There was a look upon the other’s face which he had never seen there before. Accustomed as he was to trade upon his friend’s good nature, he could hardly believe him in earnest now. He had felt a real liking for Renshaw, sincere, but dashed with a touch of superiority. A fine fellow in many ways, but soft in others, had been his verdict. And now this man was actually dictating terms to him. Even then, however, some faint stirrings of his better impulses moved Sellon, but greed of gain, selfishness, self-importance, came uppermost.

“I’m not the sort of man to be bullied into anything,” he answered.

They stood there facing each other—there on the brink of that marvellous treasure house—on the brink, too, of a deadly quarrel over the riches which it had yielded them. To the generous mind of one there was something infinitely repulsive—degrading—in the idea of quarrelling over this question of gain. But in this instance it was to him a question of self-respect, and therefore of principle. How was it going to end?

They stood there facing each other; the countenance of one set and determined, that of the other sullen, defiant, dogged. How was it going to end?

Suddenly an ejaculation escaped Sellon, and the expression of his face changed to one of vivid alarm.

“Oh, good God!” he cried. “Here they come! Look! look!” and, turning at the same time, he started off up the hill towards where the horses were standing, fortunately ready saddled.

Renshaw, suspecting a new trick, sent a quick glance backward over his shoulder. But the other had spoken truly.

Swarming over the opposite brow of the mountain, came a crowd of uncouth shapes. Baboons? No.

Ape-like, it was true, but—human.

Chapter Thirty Three.

The "Schelm Bushmen."

No further thought of their quarrel now. That must be put aside in the face of the common enemy.

They had several hundred yards of stiff uphill work before they could reach the horses. The savages were still nearly a mile distant, but above, and running on the level. It would be a near race.

As soon as they perceived that their approach was discovered the barbarians set up a shrill yell, and redoubled their efforts to arrive in time to cut off our two adventurers from their horses. It became a stirring race for life.

Up the steep mountain-side they pressed. Renshaw, being in hard training, easily took the lead. The other began to pant and blow in most distressful fashion almost before he was half way.

"Keep up, Sellon. Put on a spurt, if you can," said Renshaw, dropping on one knee and taking aim at the onrushing crowd.

The weapon cracked. It was a long shot, but he had fired "into the brown." There was a splash of dust, just short of the mob. Then the savages scattered, leaping and bounding like bucks. One could be seen crawling on the sward, evidently badly wounded by the ball in its ricochet.

But the check was only momentary. On pressed the pursuers, now in more scattered formation, zigzagging along the rocks at the base of the cock's-comb ridge, nearer, nearer. They were a hideous group—some squat and monkey-like, others long and gaunt—grotesque mud-coloured figures, their ragged wool and staring, horn-like ears given them the aspect of so many mediaevally depicted fiends. They were armed with assegais and bows. Already many of them were fitting arrows to the string.

Sellon, hardly able to put one foot before the other, had reached his horse. Staggering with exhaustion, he just managed to throw himself into the saddle. But he had completely lost his head.

"Down the gully, Sellon—it's our only chance—but it's neck or nothing. Follow my lead—and—keep your head."

It crossed Renshaw's mind to deliver another shot. But it would only be precious time lost. There were at least fifty of their assailants. One shot, however fatal, would not stop them, and it was of the first importance to keep beyond range of the poisoned arrows.

Rugged as the gully had seemed in ascending, it was a tenfold more formidable business now. It was like riding down a flight of stairs, with the difference that here the evenness of the stairs was

lacking. Large boulders and small ones, sharp stones and smooth stones, loose stones and rubble—all had to be got over somehow. And then, that awful precipice at the bottom!

And now the cliffs resounded with the shrill yells of the pursuers. They had reached the head of the gully, and, dropping from rock to rock with the agility of monkeys, were gaining on the two white men. Renshaw, turning warily in his saddle, while still keeping an eye on the guidance of his steed, got in one revolver shot at a gaunt Koranna, who had sprung to the top of a boulder, and was on the point of launching a spear. The fellow threw up his arms and toppled backwards, but not before he had hurled his weapon, which, inflicting a flesh wound on Sellon's horse, caused the animal to squeal and bound forward.

Perfectly unmanageable, frenzied with pain and terror, the horse shot past Renshaw, his rider vainly endeavouring to restrain him. One stride—two—three—the horse was among the loose rubble on the cliffs brow. There was a prodigious plunging of hoofs—a cloud of dust and gravel—a slide—a frantic struggle—then with a scream, which even at that stirring moment curdled the listeners' blood, the poor steed disappeared into space—while his rider, who, in the very nick of time, had slipped to the ground, stood bewildered and pale at the thought of the frightful danger he had escaped.

But there was peril enough behind to allow no time for thought. The barbarians, profiting by the moment's confusion, came swarming down the rocks, yelling and hissing like fiends. A shower of assegais and arrows came whizzing about the ears of the fugitives.

The latter, in about three bounds, had cleared the fearful "elbow" overhanging the abyss, and which they had crossed so circumspectly in cold blood the previous day. Rounding it safely, they had gained one advantage; they were out of arrow range for the moment.

"Lay hold of my stirrup-leather," cried Renshaw, "and run alongside. There's clear going now for some way to come."

But Sellon had sunk to the ground groaning with pain.

"I can't," he gasped. "My ankle's sprained."

Here was a situation. A dismounted comrade with a sprained ankle, unable to walk even, let alone run; a crowd of bloodthirsty barbarians close behind swarming down the mountain-side in pursuit. Surely one of the two must be sacrificed.

But Renshaw did not hesitate. The other had planned and willingly carried out a diabolical scheme of robbery and murder—even up to the time they were surprised had plainly shown a resolve to rob him of his share of the undertaking. Why should he sacrifice his own life for the benefit of such a worthless ungrateful scoundrel?

Nothing is quicker than thought. In that moment of deadly peril—in the mad heat of a race for life—swifter than the lightning flash there swept through his mind the promise Violet had exacted from him during that last ride together. “Promise that you will stand my friend. Promise that if ever you can help me you will.” And with it there flashed a serious doubt as to whether it would in fact be the act of a friend to be instrumental in placing her at the mercy of such an unprincipled rascal as Maurice Sellon.

But to this succeeded a far graver consideration. The last Mass in the little church at Fort Lamport—doubly solemn because perforce so seldom attended—the white-headed old priest and his simple, straightforward counsels, and above all at that moment the words, intoned in the Sunday’s epistle, “Sed si esurierit inimicus tuus, ciba illum; si sitit, potum da illi.” (“But if thine enemy be hungry, give him to eat; if thirsty, give him to drink.”)

Renshaw’s Christianity was of pure gold. He did not hesitate now.

“Jump up,” he said, dismounting, and helping the other to gain his own saddle, “I’ll run alongside.”

The pursuers had now doubled the spur which had afforded temporary concealment to the fugitives. At sight of one of these on foot, they set up a shrill yell of triumph, and streamed down the declivity.

The latter was fearfully steep. No horse could put his best pace forward without going head over heels, to a dead certainty.

“Turn off to the right, quick!” said Renshaw. At the same moment he was conscious of a slight pricking in the foot. But he heeded it not.

By the above “double” they gained a slight advantage. Unless, however, they could reach ground more level before the pursuers should come within bow-shot, their fate was sealed.

On, on swept the wild man-hunt; nearer, nearer came the shrill yells of the savages. The twang of bow-strings now was heard. The elf-like little demons were already beginning to discharge their deadly, poisoned shafts.

But hope, well-nigh dead in the breasts of the fugitives, arose once more. The scarp of the mountain-side became less steep. In a minute or two they would gain the comparatively level and winding valley by which they had approached. The Korannas seeing this, redoubled their efforts.

But so, too, did the fugitives. The horse-hoofs thundered down the slope, the staunch steed tearing at his bit, and snorting with mingled excitement and apprehension.

The leaping, bounding crowd of hideous barbarians came shambling down like a troop of apes, in hot pursuit, eagerly anticipating the sport of tearing limb from limb the two white invaders. On—on!

At last! The valley was gained. On comparatively level ground the speed of the horse would tell. Yet it would not do to loiter. All manner of short cuts would be known to their enemies; short cute which these human apes in their native wilds could take across the mountains, and arrive at a given point more quickly than a horseman. Our adventurers had good reason to fear such an eventuality. There was no time to be lost.

“Let me hold on to the stirrup leather, Sellon,” said Renshaw. “I can get along at twice the pace then. I’m beginning to feel rather blown now.”

There was that about Sellon’s acquiescence which seemed to show that had the danger been more pressing, it would not have been so readily accorded. Nothing easier than to spur on the horse and dart away. And he still had the great diamond in his possession. But the shouts of the pursuers seemed already growing fainter behind.

The sun was setting. Peak and mountain-wall were gleaming golden in the parting light, but down there in the kloof the darkling grey of evening had already fallen. In half an hour it would be night. Yet they slackened not in their flight. The clinking flash of the horse-hoofs rasped the stony way, but the yelling of the pursuers had died away completely. Still it would not do to slacken their efforts.

Suddenly Renshaw running alongside stumbled, then staggered a few yards and sank to the ground. A curious numbed feeling had come into his legs. They had literally given way beneath him. As he tried to rise, he was conscious of feeling half paralysed.

“Come along, man!” cried the other, impatiently. “Why, what’s the row?”

“This!” he said, slowly, pointing to a small puncture in his boot just on the instep. “I felt the sting when you first came to grief. I’ve been pinked by a poisoned arrow.”

The place was a wild one, shut in between lofty cliffs, gloomy now with the falling shadows of night. Renshaw knew that he would never leave it alive.

“Good-bye, Sellon,” he said, the stupor deepening upon him even as he spoke. “Don’t bother any more about me. You’re on the right track now, and must find your way as best you can. Go on and leave me.”

“Nonsense, old chap—make an effort, and try what you can do.”

But Renshaw shook his head. “No,” he said. “I cannot even get up. You must take care of yourself now. Go on and leave me.”

Sellon looked at him for a moment without a word. Then he—went on.

Chapter Thirty Four.

Left to Die.

The glooming shadows of night crept on apace.

Renshaw, lying there in the wild rocky defile, felt the poison stealing insidiously through his veins in a kind of slow drowsy stupor. He knew that he was doomed; he realised that even if the wild Korannas did not speedily come up and put an end to his sufferings yet his hour had come. The poison was too deadly for antidote, and he had no antidote.

In his stupor he hardly heard the receding hoof-strokes of his companion—his companion for whose life he had given his own, and who now rode away leaving him alone in that remote and savage solitude to die.

He lay there as he had sunk down. The night grew pitchy black between those grim, frowning walls of cliff. The faint stir of a cool breeze played in fitful puffs about his pallid brow already cold and moist with the dews of approaching death. The stars flashed from the vault above in a narrow riband of gold between the loom of the great cliffs against the sky. The melancholy howl of some prowling beast rose now and again upon the night.

There was a patter, patter of stealthy feet among the stones—a gleam of scintillating green from ravening eyes. Nearer, nearer came the pit-pat of those soft footfalls. The wild creatures of the waste had scented their prey.

Man—the lord of the beasts of creation. Man—before whose erect form the four-footed carnivora of the desert fled in terror—what was he now—how was he represented here? A mere thing of flesh and blood, an abject thing—prostrate, helpless, dying. An easy prey. The positions were reversed.

The gleam of those hungry eyes—the baring of gaunt jaws, the lolling tongues—were as things unknown to the stricken adventurer. The shrill yelp, echoing from the great krantzes, calling upon more to come to the feast—the snapping snarl, as hungry rivals drew too near each other—all passed unnoticed. Nearer, nearer they came, a ravening circle. For they knew that the prey was sure.

What a contrast! This man, with the cool, dauntless brain—the hardened frame so splendidly proportioned, lay there in the pitchy blackness at the mercy of the skulking, cowardly scavengers of those grim mountain solitudes. And what had wrought this strange, this startling contrast? Only a mere tiny puncture, scarcely bigger than a pin prick.

A cold nose touched his cheek. The contact acted like a charm. He sat bolt upright and struck out violently. A soft furry coat gave way before his fist—there was a yelp, a snarl of terror, and a sound of pattering feet scurrying away into deeper darkness, but—only to return again.

As though the shock had revived him, Renshaw's brain began to recover its dormant faculties. It awoke to the horror, the peril of the position. And with that awakening came back something of the old adventurous, dauntless resolution. He remembered that violent exercise—to keep the patient walking—was among the specifics in cases of venomous snake-bite, which in conjunction with other antidotes he had more than once seen employed with signal success. But in his own case the other antidotes were wanting.

Still the old dogged determination—the strength of a trained will—prevailed. He would make the effort, even if it were to gain some inaccessible ledge or crevice where he might die in peace. Even in the midst of his numbed and torpid stupor the loathing horror wherewith he had encountered the touch of the wild creature's muzzle acted like a whip. To be devoured by those brutes like a diseased sheep—faugh!

Gaining his feet with an effort, he unscrewed the stopper of his flask and drank off the contents. With the poison working in his system the fiery spirit was as water to him. But its effect was invigorating, and setting his face toward the cliffs he staggered forth into the darkness.

Before the once more erect figure of their dread enemy, Man, the skulking jackals and hyenas slunk back in dismay. But only into the background. Stealthily, warily they watched his progress, following afar softly and noiselessly upon his footsteps. For their keen instinct satisfied them that this stricken representative of the dominant species would never leave their grisly rock-girt haunt alive. It was only a question of patience.

The instinct, too, of the latter led him on. His stupefied brain still realised two things. Under the shelter of the crags he would be in safer hiding from human enemies, and that haply a ledge among the same would afford him a secure refuge from the loathsome beasts now shadowing him, and ready to pounce upon him when he should be too weak to offer any resistance.

On—on, he pressed—ever upward. Steeper and steeper became the way. Suddenly he stopped short. Before him was a wall of rock.

He peered searchingly upward in the darkness. A cleft slanted obliquely up the cliffs face. His knowledge of the mountains and their formation told him that here might be the very thing he sought. His instinct still guiding him, he began to scale the cleft. He found it an easy matter. There were plenty of rough projections, affording hand and foot hold. The ghoul-like scavengers of the desert could not follow him here.

Under ordinary circumstances the climb would have been a difficult one, especially at night. But now, as in the case of the somnambulist, matter triumphed over mind. The mind being dormant and the centre of gravity undisturbed by mental misgivings, however unconscious, he ascended safely.

The climb came to an end. Here was the very thing. A ledge, at first barely four feet broad, and then widening out as it ran round the face of the cliff—and sloping—not outward as ordinarily,

but inward. What he did not see in his now returning torpor, was a black, narrow cave running upward in continuation of the cleft by which he had ascended.

He crawled along the ledge. Here at any rate nothing could disturb his last hours. The cool night wind fanned his brow—the single strip of radiant stars seemed to dance in one dazzling ocean of light. His stupefaction reasserted itself. He sank down in dead unconsciousness. Was it slumber or death?

It was not death. Renshaw awoke at last; awoke to consciousness in a strange half-light. Above was a roof of overhanging rock—underneath him, too, was the same hard rock. A strip of sky, now a pale blue, was all he could see.

Raising himself upon his elbow, he looked forth. The sun was setting in a blood-red curtain of cloud beyond the distant mountain peaks, shedding a fiery glow upon the stupendous chain of iron cliffs which overhung the weird and desolate defile. It came home to Renshaw then, that he must have slept for nearly twenty-four hours.

He still felt terribly weak, and his dazed and dizzy brain was still beclouded as in a fog. The events of yesterday, of his lifetime, in fact, seemed but as a far-away and uncertain dream. At any rate he could die in peace here—in peace with all mankind. He felt no fear of death, he had faced it too often. The utter loneliness of his last hours seemed to hold no terrors for him either, and he even found himself drowsily thinking that such surroundings—the grim, beetling cliffs, the wild and rugged peaks, the utter desolation of this remote untrodden solitude—were meet witnesses to the last hours of one who had spent the bulk of his life in their midst. His mind went back to the present undertaking and its disastrous results—to the "Valley of the Eye," to Sellon's selfish treachery—and his own self-sacrifice. But for that same act of treachery, tardily repented of as it was, they would both have got out safe, for it was during the time thus lost that the horde of Bushmen and Korannas had stolen up to surprise them. Ah, well, what did it matter now? What did anything matter? The treasure—the precious stones which he had thrown into the balance against his own life—what did they count now? He had enough of them about him at that moment to place him in affluent circumstances, had it been willed that he should live. Yet of what account were they now? Mere dross.

Then there arose before him a vision of Sunningdale—the cool, leafy garden, the spreuws piping among the fig trees, the plashing murmur of the river, and Violet Avory, as he had last seen her—no not then so much as at the moment when she had extracted that promise. Well, he had kept his promise, at any rate. And then Violet's image faded, and, strange to say, the face which bent over his rocky couch, even the hard bed of death, was not hers, but that of Marian—sweet, pitying, soothing. And then the poor, clouded brain grew dim again—dim and restful.

But there are times when a subtle instinct of peril will penetrate even a drugged understanding. Uneasily Renshaw raised himself on his elbow, and again looked forth. The sun had disappeared now; a red afterglow still lingered on the loftier peaks, but the abrupt scarps of the great mountains were assuming a purpler gloom. Looking up, he noted that the overhanging rock

projected beyond the slope of the ledge, forming a kind of roof. Looking downward along the ledge he saw—

A huge leopard crouching flat upon its belly, its long tail gently waving, its green scintillating eyes fixed upon him. As they met his, a low rumbling purr issued from the beast's throat, and with a stealthy, almost imperceptible glide, it crawled a little nearer.

With consummate presence of mind, he followed its example. Without changing his position he felt cautiously for his gun. Fool that he was! He had left it behind—surely at the spot where he had sunk down in his stupor. Then he felt for his revolver; but that too, he had somehow contrived to lose. He was unarmed.

The beast was barely twenty yards distant. The low, rumbling purr increased in volume. As he kept his eyes fixed on those of the huge cat, Renshaw felt a strange eerie fascination creeping over him. The thing was not real. It was a nightmare—an illusion come to haunt his last hours. He would break the spell.

Again he looked forth. The loom of the towering peaks was blacker now against the silvery sky—the grey shadows deeper within the desolate kloofs. He noted too that he was at an elevation of nearly thirty feet from the ground. In his weakened state there was no escape that way.

The hungry savage beast crawled nearer and nearer along the ledge. The feline purr changed to a hideous snarl, as with eyes glittering like green stars from its round, speckled head, it bared its fangs, and gathered its lithe muscular body for the fatal spring.

And the man lay powerless to avoid it; unarmed, helpless, unable to stir, to move a finger in his own defence.

Chapter Thirty Five.

The Price of Blood.

After the explanations attendant upon Christopher Selwood's awkward discovery, relations between Violet and her entertainers became somewhat strained.

Spoiled and petted ever since she could remember, bowed down to as a very goddess as she grew up in her fascinating girlhood; accustomed to the most unbounded admiration, and undivided withal, Violet Avory was now receiving almost her first check.

It was all very well for her host to wonder "what the deuce she could see in the fellow," the fact remained that her love for Maurice Sellon engrossed her whole headstrong and passionate nature, and opposition served no other purpose than to rivet her determination.

To reasoning she was deaf. All appeals to her sense of self-respect rendered her sullen—but underlying this sullenness lurked a dogged intensity of resolution. If ever a woman was on the road to ruin Violet Avory was that woman, and she would be lucky did she escape the final goal.

The days that followed were tolerably uncomfortable for all concerned. Violet sulked. She was an adept in the art of putting on an air of outraged innocence, and managed to make everybody supremely uncomfortable accordingly. She kept to her room as much as she conveniently could, and when she did venture out she shunned Marian's companionship, taking her solitary wanderings in secluded places. Her hostess, angered and disgusted, after one or two further attempts at reasoning with her, fell in with her mood, and left her severely to herself. But kind-hearted Chris—with whom she had always been a great favourite—persisted in declaring that she was not the one to blame in the matter—that she was rather deserving of sympathy—and he accordingly was the only one to whom she condescended to unbend.

She was so sorry to be such a nuisance to everybody, she would say, putting on the most winningly plaintive air for his benefit. Had she not better go at once instead of waiting for opportunities, which might not occur for weeks? She would be quite safe, and had no fear of travelling by herself. She was only a "wet blanket" in the house, and an intolerable burden—she could see that. Everybody was so strange now—as if she had done something awful. He, Christopher, was the only one who ever gave her a kind word, or seemed to care whether she was alive or dead. And then out would come the daintiest little lace handkerchief in the world, and, of course, poor old soft-hearted Christopher felt extremely foolish—as she intended he should—and wilder than ever with the absent Sellon, which she did not intend.

Then he would endeavour to reassure her and reiterate again and again that nobody blamed her, which, of course, did not impose upon her, for with the freemasonry existing among women Violet knew better; knew that she was in fact the very one whom her hostess indeed did think the most to blame. She must not hurry away from them like that, he would say. Things would come right again—it was only a temporary misunderstanding, and they would all be as jolly again together as before. And Violet in her secret heart rejoiced—for any day might bring back

her lover. However great was her apparent anxiety to relieve them of her presence it would not do to be hurried away just in time to miss him. That would be too awful.

Her relief at the welcome reprieve would not, however, have been so great had she been aware of a certain fact as to which she had been designedly kept in ignorance. Selwood had written to Maurice, directing the letter to the principal hotel of a town through which the treasure seekers were bound to pass on their return. He had taken steps to ensure its immediate delivery, or return to himself if not claimed within a given period, and in it she asked Sellon not to come to Sunningdale until he had had an interview with the writer—at any place he, Sellon, might choose to appoint. No, assuredly, her equanimity might have been a trifle disturbed had she known of that. So the days went by.

One afternoon she was indulging in a solitary stroll, according to her recent habit. It was nearly sundown. She walked along absently, her dress sweeping the crickets in chirruping showers from the long dank herbage under the shade of the quince hedge. She crossed, the deserted garden, and gained the rough wicket-gate opening out of it on the other side. Down the narrow bridle-path, winding through the tangled brake she moved, still absently as in a dream. And she was in a dream, for it was down this path that they two had walked that first morning—ah! so long ago now.

She stood upon the river bank, on the very spot where they had stood together. The great peaks soaring aloft were all golden in the slanting sunset. The shout and whistle of the Kaffir herds bringing in their flocks sounded from the sunlit hillside, mellowed by distance. Doves cooed softly in the thorn-brake—their voices mingling with the fantastic whistle of the yellow thrush and the shrill chatter of a cloud of finks flashing in and out of their hanging nests above the water. She stood thus in the radiant evening light, trying to infuse her mind with a measure of its peace.

But above the voices of Nature and of evening came another sound—the dull thud of hoofs. Some one was riding up the bridle-path on the other side of the river. Heavens! Could it be—?

The thought set her every pulse tingling. Nearer, nearer came the hoof strokes.

The horseman emerged from the brake. Tired and travel-worn he looked, so too did his steed. The latter plunged knee-deep into the cool stream, and drank eagerly, gratefully, of the flowing waters.

But the glint of the white dress on the bank opposite caught the rider's eye. Up went his head. So too did that of the horse, jerked up suddenly by a violent wrench of the bridle. There was a prodigious splashing, stifling the horseman's exclamation, as he plunged through the drift, and the water flew in great jets around. Then scarce had the dripping steed touched the opposite bank than the rider sprang to the ground and the waiting, expectant figure was folded tight in his arms.

“Oh, Maurice, darling, it is you at last!” she murmured, clinging to him in his close embrace. And then she felt that it was good indeed to live.

“Me? Rather! And ‘at last’ is about the word for it. And so my little girl has been waiting here for me ever since I went away. Confess! Hasn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“Of course. This was always our favourite retreat, wasn’t it? Still, I thought just the very moment I happened to arrive you would be anywhere else—with the rest of the crowd. It’s just one’s luck as a rule. But mine is better this time—rather!”

“But—but—where’s Renshaw?” she asked, lifting her head, as she suddenly became alive to the other’s non-appearance. Sellon looked rather blank.

“H’m—ha!—Renshaw? Well—he isn’t here—hasn’t come, anyhow.”

“But—is he coming on after you?” she said, awake to the inconvenience of their first meeting being suddenly broken in upon.

“M—well. The fact is, Violet darling, you don’t care about anything or anybody now we are together again? The long and the short of it is, poor Fanning has rather come to grief!”

“Come to grief!” she echoed, wonderingly.

“Well—yes. Fact is, I’m afraid the poor chap will never show up here again. He got hit—bowled over by those cursed Bushmen or Korannas, or whatever they were. We had to give them leg-bail, I can tell you. They pinked him with one of their poisoned arrows. He’s done for.”

“Oh! Poor Renshaw!” cried Violet, in horror. “But you—you are unhurt, dearest? You have—have come back to me safe!”

“Safe as a church. I got a trifle damaged too. Sprained my ankle just at the wrong time—those Bushmen devils coming on hard in our rear. Touch and go, I’ll tell you all about it by-and-bye. I shan’t tell the others about Fanning all at once—break it gradually, you know. So don’t you cut in with it.”

“Poor Renshaw!” That was all. In those two words she dismissed the memory of the man but for whose unselfish heroism the lover in whose embrace she nestled so restfully, so gladsomely, would now be lying in ghastly fragments among the weird mountains of that far-away land. “Poor Renshaw!” Such was his epitaph at her lips. Truly her all-absorbing clandestine passion had exercised no improving, no softening influence upon Violet Avory—as, indeed, how should it?—for was it not the intensely selfish absorption of an intensely selfish nature! “Poor Renshaw!”

And the man—he who owed his life to the other many times over, but never so much as in the last instance—what of him?

Nothing! For from such a nature as his nothing was to be expected. This modern Judas, unlike his prototype, was prepared to enjoy to the full the price of blood. No compunction on that head troubled him.

“Oh, Maurice. I must warn you!” cried Violet, suddenly. “Everything has come out.”

He started then. A grey scared look came over his face. His conscience and his mind flew back to those grim, iron-bound deserts.

“Everything?” he stammered, blankly.

“Yes, dear. About ourselves, I mean. I can’t imagine how, but it has. They have been leading me such a life. Hilda has been perfectly hateful. The way in which she has treated me is absolutely scandalous. And Marian—sanctimonious sheep! Pah! I hate them all,” she broke off, her eyes flashing.

“My poor darling. But how do you suppose it happened? You haven’t been leaving any letters about?”

“No—no—no,” she interrupted quickly. “No, no. My belief is—she—she—has found out where I—I am—where you are—and has written to them.”

His face grew dark.

“That devil!” he muttered between his teeth. “That she-devil would do anything—anything.”

“I want to warn you, Maurice. The only way out of the difficulty, while we are here, is for us to pretend to care nothing about each other—that the past was only a matter of a passing flirtation, and not to be taken seriously. Do you follow my plan?”

“Yes; but I don’t like it.”

“That can’t be helped. Do you suppose I like it? But it will not be for long. I am going away very soon—it might be any day now—home again. Then we can make up for the present hateful restraint. What is to prevent you returning by the same steamer? You will, Maurice, darling—you will—will you not?” she urged, clinging closer to him, and looking up into his eyes with a piteously hungering expression, as though fearing to read there the faintest forestalment of a negative. But her fears were groundless.

“Will I? I should rather think I would. Listen, Violet. This mad expedition of poor Fanning’s has turned up trumps. I have that about me at this moment which should be worth two or three

hundred thousand pounds at least. Only think of it. We have the world at our feet—a new life before us. You are, as you say, going home. But it will be to a real home!"

She looked into his eyes—her gaze seemed to burn into his—her breast was heaving convulsively.

They understood each other.

"Do you mean it, Maurice?" she gasped. "My darling, do you really and truly mean it?"

"Mean it? Of course I do. It was with no other object I went risking my life a dozen times a day in that ghastly desert. With the wealth that is ours we can afford to defy all the world—that she-devil included. And we will."

"Yes, we will."

Their lips met once more, and thus the compact was sealed. Alas—poor Violet! She had given herself over, bound, into the enemy's hand. She had sold herself, and the price paid was the price of blood—even the blood of him who had sacrificed his own life for her sake.

Chapter Thirty Six.

Sellon's Last Lie.

But that he held the key to it in the shape of Violet's communication, the reserve, not to say coldness, of his reception by the family, would have astonished Sellon not a little. Now, however, it in no wise disconcerted him; rather, it struck him in the light of a joke. He had got his cue, and meant to act up to it.

So when his somewhat involuntary host asked if he would mind giving him a private interview, he replied with the jolliest laugh in the world—

"Certainly, certainly, my dear fellow. Delighted, Well, Miss Effie"—as that young person ran against them in the hall—"here I am, back again to tease you, you see."

"Where's Uncle Renshaw, Mr Sellon?" said the child.

Maurice stared. The straight question—the straight look accompanying it, disconcerted him for a moment.

"Renshaw! Oh, coming on," he answered quickly, "coming on. Be here soon, I dare say."

He had made the same sort of reply to the same inquiry on the part of his host. He thought he had done with the subject. It irritated him to be called upon to repeat the same lie over and over again.

"By the way, Mr Sellon," began the latter, "did you get the letter I sent you at Maraisdorp?"

"Mister Sellon!" Maurice started. Old Chris, was taking the thing seriously indeed, he thought with an inward laugh.

"Not I," he answered. "Probably for the best of all possible reasons. I didn't come through Maraisdorp, or anywhere near it."

"Before going any further, I want you to look at this," said Selwood, unlocking a small safe and taking out the unfortunate missive. "Wait—excuse me one moment, I want you to look attentively at the direction first."

He still held the envelope. Maurice took one glance at the address—the handwriting—and as he did so his face was not pleasant to behold.

"All right. I know that calligraphy well enough. Ought to by this time. Ha, ha! So she has been favouring you with her peculiar views on things in general and me in particular. You ought to feel honoured."

“I? Favouring me?” echoed the other, in a state of amazement.

“Yes—you. I suppose the communication is an interesting one.”

“My dear Sellon, look at the address again,” said Christopher, handing him the envelope.

“By Jove! It’s for me, after all,” looking at it again. “What a treat! Why the devil can’t the woman write legibly!” he muttered. Then aloud: “Why, it looks exactly as if it was addressed to you, Selwood.”

“Ha! I am very glad indeed to hear you say that. I thought the same. You see, I’d got it mixed up among a crowd of other letters, and opened it by mistake.”

“The devil you did!”

“Yes. I can only tell you how sorry I am, and how I have spent life cursing my blundering asinine stupidity ever since. But there is another thing. I feel bound in honour to tell you that I didn’t become aware of the mistake until I had run my eye down the first page. You will notice there is no beginning. I turned to the signature for enlightenment; but between the first page and the signature I did not read a word.”

Sellon burst into a roar of laughter—apparently over the mistake, in reality as he realised how quickly he would be in a position to turn the enemy’s flank.

“My dear fellow, don’t say another word about it. The joke is an exceedingly rich one. See what comes of our names being so infernally alike. Two Sells—eh? But you don’t suppose I am going to share in your entertainment over this charming epistle? Not much. Just oblige me with a match.”

“Wait, wait,” cried the other. “Better read it this time—or, at any rate, as much of it as it was my misfortune to see.”

“H’m! Well, here goes,” said Maurice, jerking the letter out of the envelope as though it would burn his fingers, “Quite so,” he went on, with a bitter sneer, running his eye down the sheet. “That’s about enough of this highly entertaining document, the rest can be taken as read, like a petition to the House of Commons. That match, if you please. Thanks. I need hardly remind you, Selwood,” he went on, watching the flaming sheet curling up in the grate, “I need hardly remind you how many men there are in this world who marry the wrong woman. I dare say I needn’t remind you either that a considerable percentage of these are entrapped and defrauded into the concern by lies and deception, against which it is next to impossible for any man to guard—at all events any young man. When to this I add that there are women in this world who for sheer, gratuitous, uniform fiendishness of disposition could give the devil points and beat him at an easy canter. I think I’ve said about enough for all present purposes.”

“This is an awkward and most unpleasant business,” said Selwood. “Excuse me if I feel bound to refer once more to that letter. The—er—writer makes reference by name to Miss Avory, who is a guest in my house, and a relation of my wife’s—and that, too, in a very extraordinary manner, to put it as mildly as I can.”

“My dear fellow, that’s a little way of hers. I can assure you I am most awfully put out that you should have been annoyed about the business. As to the mistake, don’t give it another thought.”

“How did Mrs—er—the writer—know Miss Avory was here?”

This was a facer—not so much the question as the fact that the knowledge of Violet’s whereabouts on the part of the writer implied that he, Sellon, had not met her there at Sunningdale for the first time. But he hoped the other might not notice this side of it.

“That’s beyond me,” he answered. “How did she know I was here? For I need hardly tell you we don’t correspond every mail exactly. I can only explain it on the score that more people know Tom Fool than T.F. knows; that there are, I suppose, people in this neighbourhood who hail from the old country, or have relations there, and the postage upon gossip is no higher than that upon business.”

“You will not mind my saying that it is a pity we did not know you were a married man.”

“‘Had been,’ you should have said, not ‘were.’ Not but what legally I am still tied up fast enough—chained and bound—which has this advantage, that it keeps a man from all temptation to make a fool of himself a second time in his life. Still, it doesn’t count otherwise.”

“No, I suppose not,” said the other, significantly. “Perhaps it doesn’t keep a man from making a fool of other people, though.”

“Now, my dear Selwood, what the very deuce are you driving at? For Heaven’s sake let us be straight and open with each other.”

“Well, I mean this. It’s a most unpleasant thing to have to say to any man. But, you see, Miss Avory is our guest, and a relation as well. You must know as well as I do that your attentions to her were very—er—marked.”

One of those jolly laughs which has so genuine a ring, and which Maurice knew so well when to bring in, greeted this speech.

“Look here, Selwood,” he said, “I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but the fact is you don’t understand women in the least. You are quite on the wrong tack, believe me. Miss Avory doesn’t care the ghost of a straw for me, or my ‘attentions.’ You must remember that we both knew—er—the same people in England. There, you must fill in the outline. I am not at liberty to say more. But there won’t be much time to put the matter to the test, for I’ve got to leave you again to-morrow.”

To Christopher Selwood's honourable mind no doubt suggested itself as to the genuineness of this explanation. There was a frank straightforwardness about it which, with a man of his character, was bound to tell. He felt intensely relieved. But to this feeling there succeeded one of humiliation. Had he not made an inordinate fuss over the concern at the start? Had he not raised a veritable storm in a teapot, and set everybody by the ears for weeks? Had he not in his anxiety to unburden himself abdicated his own mature judgment in favour of the less reliable decision of his wife? In short, had he not made a consummate ass of himself all round? Of course he had.

"By the way, Selwood, there is one thing I want to tell you about now we are together," said Maurice, after a pause. "You and the others were asking about Fanning just now. The fact is, he is not with me, but I couldn't say so without entering into further explanations, which would certainly have alarmed the ladies. We found our 'Valley of the Eye' all right, and a deuce of a job it was. Pheugh! I wouldn't go on that jaunt again for twice the loot. The 'Eye' is a genuine concern, I can tell you—a splendid stone—Fanning has got it. Well, we spent the day picking up a few other stones, and just as we were clearing out we were attacked by a lot of Bushmen or Korannas, or whatever they were, and had to run. By Jove! it was touch and go. They pressed us hard until dark, and then we had to separate—to throw them off the scent, don't you see? We agreed to meet at his place—that is, if we were to meet anywhere again in this world. Well, I had an awful time of it in those infernal mountains, dodging the niggers. I couldn't show my nose in the daytime, and didn't know the country well enough to make much headway at night, and I nearly starved. It took me more than a week before I could fetch the river, and get through to Fanning's place, and when I got there he hadn't turned up. But I found a letter which had been sent by special messenger, requiring me at Cape Town, sharp, about some infernal but important law business, and I'm on my way there now. I left a note for Fanning, telling him what to do with my share of the swag when it came to dividing, for we hadn't had time to attend to that then, and except a few small stones he has it all on him. It'll be something good, I guess. I dare say he's turned up at home again long before this. He was just laughing in his sleeve at the idea of a few niggers like that thinking to run him to earth. And he seems to know that awful country like ABC. I never saw such a fellow."

"That's bad news, Sellon, right bad news," said the other, shaking his head. "Renshaw has been all his life at that sort of thing, so we must hope he'll turn up all right. But—the pitcher that goes too often to the pump, you know."

"Well, I need hardly say I devoutly hope he will, for if not I shall be the loser to a very large extent, as all the swag is with him. But I somehow feel certain we shall hear from him almost directly."

We may be sure that in narrating his adventures that evening to the household at large Sellon in no wise minimised his experiences of the undertaking, or his own exploits. It is only fair to say that he really had undergone a very hard time before he had succeeded in striking the river at the drift where they had crossed; and, indeed, it was more by good luck than management that he had reached it at all. And during his narrative one listener was noting every word he said,

with breathless attention. Whenever he looked up, Marian Selwood's blue eyes were fixed upon his face. He began to feel very uncomfortable beneath that steady searching gaze.

But he felt more so when, his story finished, Marian began to ply him with questions. "A regular cross-examination, confound it!" he thought. And then, by way of a diversion, he went to fetch the few diamonds which he had kept apart to show as the sole result of the expedition. These were examined with due interest.

The fact of Sellon arriving alone created no suspicion in the minds of Selwood and his wife, nor yet uneasiness. Was he not a newly imported Briton—and to that extent a greenhorn? If he could find his way out and successfully dodge his pursuers, was it likely that a seasoned adventurer such as Renshaw would fare any worse? So on the latter's account they felt but small anxiety.

Not so Marian, however. A terrible suspicion had taken shape within her mind during Sellon's narrative. "He has murdered him!" was her conclusion. "He has murdered him," she repeated to herself during a night of sleepless agony—such as a strong concentrative nature will sometimes be called upon to undergo. But she kept her suspicions to herself—for the present, at any rate. She was helpless. What could she do? There was nothing to go upon.

Then, on the morrow, Sellon took his departure, as he had announced his intention of doing, and the equanimity with which the circumstance was regarded by Violet, together with their indifferent demeanour towards each other on the previous evening, completely lulled any suspicions which might have lingered in Christopher Selwood's mind; confirming as it did the other's frank and straightforward explanation.

For his wife had not yet told him all that had transpired between herself and Violet.

Chapter Thirty Seven.

From the Dark River's Brink.

It was a weird picture. The grey rocks jutting forth into the evening stillness; the spotted, creeping beast, gathering itself together for its deadly spring; the man, weakened, helpless, lying there at its mercy. Even then, so strange are the fantasies that cross the human brain at the most critical moments—even then, with a kind of grim humour it flashed upon Renshaw Fanning how thoroughly the positions were reversed. Many a time had the spotted pard fallen a victim to his sure aim; now it had devolved upon one of the feline race to give him his death stroke.

With bared fangs and snarling throat, the brute once more gathered itself to spring. But instead of hurling itself upon the prey before it, it uttered a yell of pain and whisking half round seemed to be snapping at its own side. Its tail lashed convulsively, and a frightful roar escaped from its furry chest. There was a faint twanging sound beneath, and again something struck it, this time fair in the eye. Snarling hideously the great beast reared itself up against the cliff, beating the air wildly with its formidable paws. Then its mighty bulk swayed, toppled over, and fell crashing to the ground beneath.

Thoroughly roused now, Renshaw peered cautiously over the ledge. But what he saw opened his eyes to the fact that this opportune, this unlooked-for deliverance, was more apparent than real. In escaping from one peril he had only fallen into another.

The huge cat was rolling and writhing in the throes of death. Its slayer, an under-sized, shrivelled barbarian, was approaching it cautiously—a naked Koranna, armed with bow and arrows and spear. But cautiously as Renshaw had peeped forth the keen glance of the savage had seen him. Their eyes had met.

He lay still, thinking over this last, this desperate chance. He was unarmed—practically that is—for although he had a knife it was not likely the enemy would come to such close quarters as to admit of its use. The latter with his bow and arrows would have him at the most perfect disadvantage. He could climb up to the ledge and finish him off at his leisure.

For some minutes Renshaw lay still as death. Not a sound broke the silence, not a voice, not a footfall. Perhaps, after all, he had been mistaken, and the Koranna had not seen him. Or, more likely, the savage had started off to call up his companions, who probably were not far distant. Was it worth while utilising his chances so far as to make one more effort to save his life, to strive to gain some other place of concealment before the whole horde came up?

But just then a sound reached his ear—a faint, stealthy rasping. The Koranna was already climbing up to the ledge.

The mysterious shuffling continued. A stone, loosened by the climber, fell clattering down the rocks. Then there was silence once more—and—

A wrinkled, parchment-hued countenance reared itself up, peering round the elbow of the cliff. The yellow eyes stared with a wild beast-like gleam, the black wool and protruding ears looking fiend-like in the falling darkness. His hour had come. Momentarily he expected to receive the fatal shaft.

But it came not. After the head followed the squat, ungainly body, standing upright upon the ledge, the sinewy, ape-like hand grasping its primitive, but fatal, armament—the bow and arrows and the spear. But the bow was not bent, no arrow was fitted to the string.

"Allamaghtaag! Myn lieve Baas!" ("Almighty! My dear master!")

Renshaw sat upright and stared at the speaker, and well he might. Was he dreaming? The old familiar Dutch colloquialism—the voice!

The squalid, forbidding-looking savage advanced, his puckered face transformed with concern. Renshaw stared, and stared again. And then he recognised the familiar, if unprepossessing lineaments of his defaulting retainer—old Dirk.

The old Koranna rushed forward and knelt down at his master's side, pouring forth a voluble torrent of questions in the Boer dialect. How had he come there? Where was he wounded? Who had dared to attack him? Those schelm Bosjesmenschen (Rascally Bushmen)! He would declare war against the whole race of them. He would shoot them all. And so on, and so on. But amid all his chatter the faithful old fellow, having discovered where the wound was, had promptly ripped off Renshaw's boot.

Yes, there it was—the poisoned puncture of the Bushman arrow—livid and swollen. For a moment Dirk contemplated it. Then he bent down and examined it more attentively, probing it gingerly with his finger. The result seemed to satisfy him.

"Nay, what, Baasje (Literally, 'little master.' A term of endearment), you will not die this time. The thick leather of the boot has taken off nearly all the poison, and all the running you have had since has done the rest. Still, it was a near thing—a near thing. 'Maghtaag!—if the arrow had pierced you anywhere but through the boot you would have been a dead man long since. Not this time—not this time."

"And the tiger, Dirk?" said Renshaw, with a faint smile. "You are indeed a mighty hunter." For he remembered how often he had chaffed the old Koranna on his much vaunted prowess as a hunter, little thinking in what stead it should eventually stand himself.

"The tiger? Ja Baas. I will just go down and take off his skin before it gets pitch dark. Lie you here and sleep. You are quite safe now, Baas—quite safe. You will not die this time—'Maghtaag, no!"

So poor Renshaw sank back in a profound slumber, for he was thoroughly exhausted. And all through the hours of darkness, while the wild denizens of the waste bayed and howled among

the grim and lonely mountains, the little weazened old yellow man crouched there watching beside him on that rocky ledge, so faithfully, so lovingly. His comrade—the white man—his friend and equal—had deserted him—had left him alone in that desert waste to die, and this runaway servant of his—the degraded and heathen savage—clung to him in his extremity, watched by his side ready to defend him if necessary at the cost of his own life.

Chapter Thirty Eight.

"Eheu!"

The homeward-bound mail steamer had hauled out from the Cape Town docks, and lay moored to the jetty. In less than an hour she would cast loose and start upon her voyage to Old England.

The funnel of the Siberian shone like a newly blacked boot, as did her plated sides, glistening with a coating of fresh paint. Her scuttles flashed like eyes in the sun, and the gleam of her polished brasswork was such as to cause semi-blindness for five minutes after you looked at it. The white pennon of the Union Steamship Company with its red Saint Andrew's cross fluttered at one tapering masthead; at the other the blue peter.

On board of her all was wild confusion. Her decks were crowded with passengers and their friends seeing them off, the latter outnumbering the former six to one; with hawkers of curios and hawkers of books; with quay porters and stewards bringing on and receiving passengers' luggage; with innumerable hat-boxes, and wraps, and hold-alls, and other loose gear; with squalling and rampageous children; with flurried and excited females rushing hither and thither, and getting into everybody's way while besieging every soul—from the chief officer to the cook's boy—with frantic inquiries. The Babel of tongues was deafening, and over and above all the harassing rattle of the donkey engine lowering luggage into the hold. And to swell the clamouring crowd, an endless procession of cabs, driven by broad-hatted Malays, came dashing up to the jetty—laden with passengers and band-boxes and bananas and other truck of nondescript character.

Moving among the throng upon the ship's decks vere two ladies—one elderly, plethoric, matronly; the other young, vivacious, tastefully attired, and in short a very beautiful girl. Many a male glance was cast at her, accompanied by an aspiration—spoken or unspoken—that she was going to sail, and was not one of the "seeing-off" contingent.

"Don't you think, Violet," said the elder lady, "we'd better go down to your cabin now? They'll have taken your luggage there by this time."

"Not yet, Mrs Aldridge. I can still see my brown portmanteau among that heap for the hold. I want to see it go down myself, and be sure of it. Besides, there must be some more of my things under that pile of boxes."

"What a fine ship that New Zealand boat is!" said the old lady, looking at a large steamer anchored out in the bay and surrounded by a swarm of tiny craft, depleted or added to by a continuous string of boats between it and the shore. She, too, was flying the blue peter.

"Isn't she!" acquiesced Violet. "She's the Rangatira, and is nearly a thousand tons larger than the Siberian. I wonder if she'll be the first to start. Ah! there goes my portmanteau. Now I think we may go below."

The crowd in the saloon was not less dense than that on the decks, certainly not less noisy. Champagne corks were popping in all directions. Every table, every lounge was crowded. Stewards were skurrying hither and thither with their trays of bottles and glasses, steering their way with marvellous dexterity among the people, harassed by a chorus of orders, expostulations, objurgations from expectant or disappointed passengers. Groups were making merry, and pledging each other in foaming bumpers, the "seeing-off" contingent in particular making special play with the sparkling "gooseberry," all chattering, talking, laughing. The din was deafening, but the two ladies managed to thread their way through it at last.

"Well, it's quiet here, at any rate," said Violet, as they gained her cabin, of which by favour she was to enjoy the sole possession. "Quiet, but not cool—ugh!" for the scuttle being shut, that peculiar close odour which seems inseparable from all ship cabins, and is in its insufferable fugginess suggestive of seasickness, struck them in full blast.

"I'm glad I'm not going with you," said Mrs Aldridge. "I never could stand the sea. I declare I'm beginning to feel queer already."

"Oh no. All imagination," said Violet, gaily, flinging open the scuttle.

"And now, dear," went on the old lady, "I suppose we haven't many minutes more together. I needn't tell you how glad I have been to have had you with me, and Chris. Selwood will like to know that I saw you off, bright and cheerful."

Violet kissed her heartily. A strange compunction came over the girl. The old lady had been very kind to her during her brief stay. Mrs Aldridge was a relation of Selwood's, and to her care Violet had been consigned for the few days during which the Siberian should be lying in Cape Town docks. Upon which good ship Selwood had safely conveyed her, having, at considerable inconvenience to himself, escorted her to Port Elizabeth, and seen the last of her safe on board.

"Oh, where is my brown hold-all?" cried Violet, suddenly looking round. "It contains all my wraps—sunshade—everything. Dear Mrs Aldridge, do wait here and mount guard over my things while I go up and find it. The stewards are so careless. Besides, they might put some one else in the cabin, and then it wouldn't be so easy to get them out."

As Violet gained the deck, the short sharp strokes of the ship's bell rang out its warning summons. The "seeing-off" contingent must prepare to go ashore, unless it would risk an involuntary voyage. Mrs Aldridge, naturally prone to flurry, sitting there among Violet's boxes and bundles, started at the sound.

"Oh dear! I shall be carried to sea!" she ejaculated, piteously. "Why doesn't she come?"

Minutes slipped by, and still Violet did not appear. Again rang out the sharp imperative strokes of the bell.

“I must go and look for her,” cried the old lady, starting up with that intent. Peering wildly around she reached the deck. Still no sign of Violet.

Two great red conveyances, each drawn by four horses, came clattering up the jetty. They were the mail carts. With lightning swiftness their contents were transferred to the deck and to the hold. The captain, resplendent in buttons and gold lace, was on the bridge. The steam-pipe was roaring as though impatient of further restraint. Already the passing to and fro between the steamer and the jetty had about ceased.

“Violet—Violet! Oh, where can she be?” cried the old lady, in a perfect agony of mind.

Ah, she might have gone back to the cabin. She would go and see. Turning, she was hastening to carry out that idea when again the brazen clang of the bell, this time startling in its peremptory note, caused her to stop short.

“Now, marm—if you’re not going with us it’s time to leave,” said a gruff voice at her side. “Quick, please, she’s a-moving already,” and half thrusting, half lifting the bewildered old lady, the burly quartermaster transferred her to the gangway plank, which no sooner had she crossed than it was withdrawn.

The great steamer slid gently from her moorings, a crowd following her to the end of the jetty, hooraying violently, waving handkerchiefs, bawling out parting fragments of chaff and snatches of songs, and amid all this champagne-bred enthusiasm, its blaring clamour drowning the real grief of the sorrowing few, the propeller of the good ship Siberian throbbed faster and faster, as she swung steadily into her course en route for the Old Country.

Left there upon the jetty, hardly knowing whether she stood on her head or not, poor old Mrs Aldridge was quite overcome. What had become of Violet? Could any harm have happened to the girl? Could she have fallen overboard unseen? No, that could hardly be. They must have missed each other in the crowd and confusion. That was it. Still the thought that she had not taken a last and more affectionate farewell filled the good old lady with profound regret. Well, standing there would not mend matters. She must get home.

And as she turned to leave the jetty, the warning notes of the shore bell on board the New Zealand steamer came floating across the bay.

Through the creaming surges of Table Bay the Rangatira is speeding on her southward course. The loom of the mountainous coast has faded into night, and now the dark velvety vault above is ablaze with mysterious stars, crowding the zenith, hanging literally in patches of sheeny gold rather than twinkling with the feeble and scattered glimmer of more chilly latitudes. There is a damp, sensuous richness in the atmosphere, just tempered by the keen whiff of the salt sea.

The prow of the mighty vessel cleaves up a rushing lustrous wave on either side, and streaming afar in her wake lies a broad band of milky phosphorescent whiteness, striving to rival the very heavens in the starry atoms gleaming in its depths. The tall, tapering masts reel wildly against

the spangled sky, and the harsh clang of the labouring engines make weird harmony with the thunderous throb of the propeller as the great ship drives in her power before the chasing billows.

On the hurricane deck, under the lee of one of the boats swung inward and resting on chocks, leaning over the taffrail, stand two figures—one tall, powerful, masculine—wrapped in a long ulster, the other lithe, graceful, feminine—cloaked and hooded, for, if the atmosphere contains no chill, it holds a dampness which bids fair to do duty for the same. Surely that oval face, those delicate, regular features can belong to no other than Violet Avory. No need to identify her companion.

"You did that well, Violet," Sellon was saying. "The idea of that old party sitting there mounting guard over your wraps on board the wrong ship is a reminiscence that'll set me up in laughter for the rest of my life."

"Poor old Mrs Aldridge," said Violet, with a touch of compunction. "I'm afraid she won't get over it in a hurry—and she's a good old thing. But it's all Hilda Selwood's fault. She shouldn't have set her relations on to 'police' me." And the speaker's tone became hard and defiant.

"Ha, ha! It wasn't in them to upset our little programme, though. When old Selwood put you on board the Siberian at Fort Elizabeth, he reckoned it was all safe then. So it was, as far as he was concerned. He's a good chap, though, is Selwood, and I wouldn't willingly plant such a sell upon him if I could help it, but I couldn't. It's ever a case of two 'sells' as between him and me, to distort his old joke. It was nearly a third one, though, Violet, for I was beginning to make up my mind you were never coming. In another minute I should have gone ashore again when I saw your cab tearing along like mad. As it was, we only fetched the Rangatira by the skin of our teeth, and a royal honorarium to the boatmen."

"Ah, Maurice, I have got you now—and you are mine. Are you not, darling?"

"It looks uncommonly like it."

"For life?"

"For that identical period. So now, cheer up, my Violet. The world is a mere football at the feet of those who have the means to exploit it, and we have. That wretched little foggy England isn't the whole world."

The great steamship went shearing on through the midnight sea, heaving to the Atlantic surge, as she stood upon her course. But the other vessel swiftly speeding northward—soon would she arrive with a forestalment in a measure—in the unaccountable non-appearance of one of her passengers—of the terrible news which must eventually be broken to Violet's mother.

But whereas Violet's own will was the sole principle which had been allowed to govern her life from the day of her birth, it must be admitted, sorrowfully, that her mother was now only reaping what she had sown.

Chapter Thirty Nine.

Conclusion.

Three years have gone by.

Now three years cover a pretty fair section of time. A good deal can be got into that space. But the hand of Time, with its changes and chances, has passed but lightly over peaceful, prosperous Sunningdale. It has, perchance, added a touch of hoar-frost to Christopher Selwood's brown beard, but only through the harmless agency of wear and tear, as that jolly individual puts it. For the seasons have been good, the stock healthy, and crops abundant—and on the strength of such highly favourable conditions we may be sure that genial Christopher's characteristic light-heartedness and general contentment has undergone no rebate. This can hardly be said to apply to the brace of diminutive heroes whose thirst for battle was so inconsiderately nipped in the bud on the memorable night of the attack upon the house. For now they must find outlet for their martial ardour in fistic combat with their school-fellows—or in the more risky line of trying how far they can trench upon the patience of a cane-wielding master. In a word, they are both at school; a state of life which, in common with youth in general and Colonial youth in particular, they emphatically do not prefer. The same lot has befallen Effie, and she, too, is being put through the scholastic mill, though, thanks to the greater adaptability of her sex, the process is far less distasteful to her than to those two young scapegraces, Fred and Basil. So that, save in holiday time, Sunningdale is quieter than when we saw it last? Is it? There is plenty of small fry left to create its share of clatter in the place of those absent under pedagogic discipline.

One change, however, has Time in his course brought round. Marian Fanning is a bride of two months.

Lucky it was that old Dirk's ineradicable instincts had led him on the rove into his native wilds; lucky, indeed, for his master that he had to that extent played football with his trust, though inexpressibly annoying to his said master when that breach of trust was first discovered. Under the old Koranna's able guidance it was not many days before Renshaw was at home again in safety. Nor was the experienced eye of the former at fault in deciding the wound to be no longer dangerous. Some of those wonderful remedies known only to the natives themselves soon put this beyond all doubt, and by the time Renshaw reached home he felt as strong again as ever.

He had started at once for Sunningdale. With such samples of his late companion's consummate selfishness and unparalleled treachery fresh in his mind, it was small wonder that he hardly expected ever to behold Sellon again. And his expectation was realised. That unscrupulous rascal was already on blue ocean, with the magnificent diamond, the superb "Eye" in his possession. No, it was hardly likely that he should ever see Sellon again.

And he did not care to try. In the first place in disclaiming any inordinate desire for riches, Renshaw had been stating a bare fact; and whereas the diamonds in his own possession, when abandoned by his comrade to die, comprised some large and fine stones, likely to realise a considerable sum, he could afford to rest content. In the second, to the bitter disgust and

contempt he felt for the man and his treachery, the news of Violet's flight added a more than severe shock. But this on the whole was salutary—undeniably so. His idol was shattered. And then, as bit by bit the whole tissue of heartless duplicity stood fully revealed, he was forced to admit himself cured.

But the process took time—time and many a bitter heartache. Saddened and disgusted, Renshaw had resolved to strike out an entirely new line. He would travel all over the world.

He sailed for England, disposed of his diamonds, realising nearly seventeen thousand pounds, and even then he probably did not make the best bargain for himself. Then in pursuance of his plan he had spent the following two years on the move. England, the Continent, India, China, Japan, the United States—all were visited, and it was amid the rolling solitude of the Far West that his heart turned to the free open veldt of his native land, and among the iron-bound mountains and brassy skies of Arizona and New Mexico he could almost fancy himself once more in search of the "Valley of the Eye."

And in the cities and turmoil of civilisation so striking a personality as that of Renshaw Fanning was not likely to go unnoticed. For the man who owned that noble, refined face, bronzed with exposure, and when in repose never altogether free from a touch of saddened gravity—all manner of pitfalls were laid. Bright eyes beamed upon him, and soft voices cooed their softest. All in vain, however. His heart was seared. But eventually when the numbness of the shock did begin to wear away, it was homeward that the wanderer's heart turned; and in place of the soiled and dethroned image there arose another; more pure, more fair, more wholesome; that of sweet Marian Selwood. And under this influence, the cycle of his wanderings completed, he dismounted before the garden gate at Sunningdale one evening, and entering the house as if he were returning home, found Marian alone. And then, almost at his first words, the latter had realised that it was good indeed to live, nor was it long before the secret of a lifetime's love was wrested from her beautiful lips. So now Marian is a two months' bride; making a final visit to her old home preparatory to settling down upon the flourishing farm which Renshaw has purchased within a dozen miles of Sunningdale.

Sometimes he talks of making another expedition to the wonderful Valley. True, the marvellous "Eye" shines there in the moonlight no more, but the place holds other stones, and as yet he has only touched the fringe of its wealth. But Marian's mind is made up against, and her foot is down on, any such scheme. Has not the mystic jewel proved indeed a demon's eye to all concerned. They have enough, and life is better than inordinate wealth. Is he not content with the grisly risk he has run, so narrowly escaping with his life? And Renshaw, with a laugh, is fain to answer that he is. Yet peradventure, some day, when the quiver is full—but we must not anticipate.

Not a word more has been heard of Maurice Sellon or the partner of his flight—not a word beyond the brief reassurance on the score of her bodily safety which Violet had had the grace to forward to poor old Mrs Aldridge by the last boat which left the New Zealand steamer. Not a word more is even likely to be heard of either. That "the way of the transgressors is hard" may be a good and edifying axiom for all Sunday school purposes, but it is in no wise borne out by the

experiences of real life. So it is highly probable that Sellon and Violet are in some safe and withal comfortable retreat in the New World, flourishing like the green bay tree, while enjoying to the full the abundant, if treacherously gained, results of the former's expedition in search of "The Valley of the Eye."

The End.