A Secret Of The Lebombo

By
Bertram Mitford

Freeditorial

A SECRET OF THE LEBOMBO

Chapter One

The Sheep-Stealers

The sun flamed down from a cloudless sky upon the green and gold of the wide valley, hot and sensuous in the early afternoon. The joyous piping of sheeny spreeuws mingled with the crowing of cock koorhans concealed amid the grass, or noisily taking to flight to fuss up half a dozen others in the process. Mingled, too, with all this, came the swirl of the red, turgid river, whose high-banked, willow-fringed bed cut a dark contrasting line through the lighter hue of the prevailing bush. From his perch a white-necked crow was debating in his mind as to whether a certain diminutive tortoise crawling among the stones was worth the trouble of cracking and eating, or not.

Wyvern moved stealthily forward, step by step, his pulses tingling with excitement. Then parting some boughs which came in the way he peered down into the donga which lay beneath. What he saw was not a pleasant sight, but—it was what he had expected to see.

Two Kafirs were engaged in the congenial, to them, occupation of butchering a sheep. Not a pleasant sight we have said, but to this man doubly unpleasant, for this was one of his own sheep—not the first by several, as he suspected. Well, he had caught the rascals red-handed at last.

Wyvern stood there cogitating as to his line of action. The Kafirs, utterly unsuspicious of his presence, went on with their cutting and quartering, chattering gleefully in their deep-toned voices, as to what good condition the meat was in, and what a succulent feast they would have when the darkness of night should enable them to fetch it away to the huts from this remote and unsuspected hiding-place. One was clad in a pair of greasy moleskin trousers, hitched up to his shoulders by a pair of filthy braces, largely repaired with string; the other was clad in nothing at all, unless a string of blue beads round his neck counted for anything. In the trouser-wearing savage Wyvern recognised one of his own herds, whose absence from the flock under his charge had led to the present discovery. The other, a tall, powerful, desperate-looking scoundrel with a deeply pock-marked countenance, he did not recognise at all.

It was all very well to have caught them red-handed, but the question was, what course to pursue. They were two to one, hard, wiry savages at that. They had sheath knives and he was unarmed; for a pocket-knife is of little or no use as a defensive weapon in that it is bound to shut on the hand of the wielder. They were engaged in an act the penalty of

which spelt lashes and fine, or, at best a year's hard labour; was it likely they would submit meekly to capture? And then, as there flitted through his mind a recent instance of a stock fanner being unhesitatingly murdered under precisely similar circumstances, Wyvern began to realise that his own position was one of some little danger. Would it not be wiser to withdraw now, and take steps for trapping the culprits when he should have more force at his disposal? Decidedly here was food for reflection.

But the matter was taken out of his hands by one of those unforeseen trifles upon which so much may turn. In his eagerness to watch the proceedings just below he had let one hand come into contact with the leaf of a prickly pear, which sprouted interwoven with the bushes through which he was peering. Now contact with an ordinary thorn would not have moved him, but contact with these innumerable and microscopic stings, as it were, which once in the skin are bound to leave painful recollection of that fact even for weeks, inspired a sort of instinctive horror that had made him start. Even before the stone which he had dislodged beneath his foot had begun to roll into the donga the two miscreants looked up quickly and saw him.

The startled ejaculation which escaped them, gave way to a rapid murmur. Wyvern caught but one word and that was sufficient. He knew that he was about to fight for his life—and, he was unarmed.

The donga was of no depth, perhaps the height of a man, nor were the sides perpendicular; further down where it joined the river-bed they were both high and steep. Lithe, agile as monkeys or cats, the two Kafirs sprang up the bank, gripping their blood-smeared knives, but—each from a different end. They were going to assail him from two sides at once.

Cool now, and deadly dangerous because cornered, in a lightning flash of thought Wyvern decided upon his plan of campaign. He picked up two stones, each large enough to constitute a handful.

The first to appear was his own boy, Sixpence, and no sooner did he appear than he received one stone—hurled by a tolerably powerful arm, and at five yards' distance—bang, crash on the forehead. It would have broken any skull but a native skull. The owner of this particular skull stopped short, staggered, reeled, shook his head stupidly, half-blinded by the blood that was pouring down his face, then subsided; incidentally, into a mass of prickly pear leaves—and thorns. Wyvern, his eyes ablaze with the light of battle, stood, the other stone ready in his right hand, ready to mete out to Number Two a like reception.

But the other did not appear. Instead, a volume of exclamations in deep-toned Xosa, together with a wholly unaccountable hissing, came from the other side of the bush by which he was standing. Wyvern stepped forth. The other Kafir stood, literally anchored by a huge puff-adder which was twined round his leg, not daring to use his knife lest missing those sinuous coils he should fatally wound himself. And the hideous bloated reptile, blown out in its wrath, hung there, tightening its coils in spasmodic writhings as it struck the imprisoned limb again and again with its deadly fangs.

"Throw down the knife, and I'll help you," cried Wyvern, in Boer Dutch.

But the savage, whether it was that he understood not a word of that classic tongue, or that he had gone mad with a very frenzy of despair, instead of obeying, with lightning-like swiftness, hurled the knife—a long-bladed, keenly-ground butcher one—full at the speaker. Wyvern sprang aside, but even then the whizz past his ear told that he had looked death rather closely in the face that day.

His first act was to possess himself of the weapon, then self-preservation moved him to go back to the other, and get possession of his. The said other lay stupidly, still half-stunned, but he had dropped his knife in the fall. This, too, Wyvern picked up, and now, feeling equal to the pair of them, he went back to where the man and the snake were still struggling.

And a ghastly and horrible scene met his eyes. The man, who seemed to have gone completely mad, was plucking and tearing at the snake, uttering the most hideous howls, and literally foaming at the mouth, as he strove to free himself from those terrible coils. He must have been bitten again and again, as now with his hands within the reptile's very mouth he strove to tear its head asunder. The struggle had brought him to the brink of a much deeper part of the donga, and now, as Wyvern looked, puzzled what to do next, seemed to be weakening or to lose his balance. He swayed, then toppled heavily through the bushes, and man and snake went crashing down the well-nigh perpendicular bank.

His own peril thus removed, Wyvern's blood curdled within him at the horror he had witnessed. He went to the place and looked over, but could see nothing. It was too much overhung with bushes—and save for where these had been displaced by a heavy body crashing through, there was no sign or trace of life; no sound either. Probably with all that venom in his system the wretched Kafir was already in the state of coma which should precede death. For him there was no chance, absolutely none. Wyvern went back to where he had left the other.

“Now, Sixpence,” he said, speaking in the taal, which in the Cape Colony is the usual means of communication between white men and natives, “stand up, and put your hands behind you. I’m going to tie them.”

But the fellow begged and prayed that he might be spared this. He would not try to run away, he protested. Where was the use, since his wife and children were at the huts, and besides, was he not well known? Farther he felt very ill, and hardly able to walk as it was, from the effects of the terrible blow the Baas had given him. Perhaps, too, on the strength of that the Baas might bring himself to forgive him. He would serve him so faithfully after that—and the Baas could take twice the value of the sheep out of his wages. Surely the Baas might bring himself to forgive him.

Wyvern, contemplating him, thought he might even be fool enough to do that; and as he put back into his pocket the lanyard of reimpje wherewith he had intended to tie the fellow’s hands, he feared that he might.

“I don’t know about that, Sixpence,” he said. “You have been a pretty schelm sort of a boy, you know. Besides, you would have killed me, you and that other. Who is he, by the way?”

“One of Baas Ferreira’s boys, Baas,” naming a Dutchman whose farm adjoined the river on the other side.

“Well, and which of you was it that planned this slaag?”

The Kafir shrugged his shoulders.

“We did it between us, Baas,” he said, and the answer moved Wyvern the more to let him down easy, though fully alive to the bad policy of doing so, for he appreciated the fact that the fellow had not tried to save himself by throwing the blame on his accomplice.

They had reached the place where Wyvern had left his horse, and now as he mounted he said:

“Now walk on in front of me, Sixpence. I shall think seriously over what I shall do about you. You would get ever so many years in the tronk you know, for coming at me with the knife—and that apart from what you’d get for ‘slaag-ing’ the sheep. I expect the other fellow is dead by this time. The snake struck him again and again.”

“Nkose!” murmured the Kafir deprecatorily, then relapsed into silence. Before they had gone far Wyvern said:

“Go back to your flock, Sixpence. I expect it has straggled a good bit by this time. But—” impressively—“don’t attempt to run away. You are sure to be caught if you do, and then you will have thrown away your last chance.”

“Nkose!” murmured the Kafir again, and bending down he kissed his master’s foot as it rested in the stirrup. Then he walked away.

“Poor devil,” said Wyvern to himself, gazing after him as he rode on. “Well, we are all poor devils—I the most of the lot. I believe I could almost bring myself to envy that ochre-smeared scion of Xosa. He doesn’t need much, and gets it all, while I—?”

Chapter Two.

Lalanté.

Riding slowly home Wyvern's thoughts took on no more cheerful a vein as he looked round upon his farm, which would soon be his no longer. It never ought to have been his at all. He had started by paying far too much for it. He had been struck by the pleasant situation of the place, and was determined to have it at all costs. Further, it was bad veldt, being, in stock-farming parlance, "boer-ed out," that is to say exhausted. It required years of rest what time he took it up, but Wyvern started about three thousand sheep upon it, and contentedly, though unconsciously, prepared to watch their decimation. It came. He had put his little all into the venture, and now his little all was fast approaching vanishing point.

He reached home, off-saddled his horse, and turned the animal loose into an enclosure. By the time he had done so, and entered the house, the episode of the sheep "slaag-ing" had almost faded from his mind. The excitement of the discovery and the struggle past now, in the light of more serious matter the incident seemed of small importance.

You might read something of Wyvern's temperament in the state of his living room. Take the large table, for instance. It was littered with books and papers covering quite two thirds of its space, a careless heap, which gradually encroaching more and more had caused his old Hottentot cook, and general indoor factotum, to ask grumblingly and repeatedly how she was to find room to lay the cloth for the Baas' dinner, with all that rubbish blocking up the whole table. There were letters lying there too, letters unopened, which might have so remained for a couple of days or a week. Wyvern knew or guessed what they were all about: nothing pleasant, that was certain. Why then, should he bother himself? He would wait till he was more in the vein. But somehow "the vein" would be long in coming, and even unpleasant letters, especially those of a business nature, do not improve—like cigars—by keeping. Still—that was Wyvern.

Even the pictures on the walls, mostly framed photographs, were more or less hung anyhow, while some were slipping out of their mounts. Of one, however, none of this held good, and this was hung so that it faced him where he sat at table.

It was the photograph of a girl—and a very handsome girl at that. The eyes, large and clear, seemed to follow the inmate's every movement in all parts of the room, while a generously moulded figure was set forth in the three parts length of the portrait. In the firm, erect pose there was strength, decisiveness, even a suggestion of unconventionality perhaps. At this he gazed, with a murmured expression of ardent love, as he dropped into his seat, and the look of weariful dejection deepened upon his face.

“You, too, lost to me,” he murmured. “You, too, passing from me. What an utter, infernal mess I’ve made of things. I’ve a good mind to end it all. It might even come to that some day.”

His glance had gone round to an object in the further corner. It was a shot-gun standing upright against the wall. He eyed it, gloomily. Just then a door opened, and to the accompaniment of a clatter of plates and things his Hottentot cook entered, bearing a tray. At her Wyvern glanced resentfully.

“I don’t want that stuff,” he said. “Take it away again.”

“Oh, goeije! and it is the Baas’ dinner,” exclaimed the old woman.

“I don’t want any dinner,” was the weary answer. “I’ll have a smoke instead. Do you hear, Sanna. Get away with it.”

“Not want any dinner! Have a smoke instead!” echoed old Sanna. “And the Baas has eaten nothing since breakfast and very little then. Nouw ja! it is wasting the gifts of the good God! And this is a guinea-fowl, too, and partridge—stewed guinea-fowl and partridge, the dish the Baas likes best. And now the Baas says take it away.”

“Yes. Take it away, old Sanna. I can’t eat.”

Muttering, she turned and withdrew. Wyvern, suddenly realising that he might have hurt the poor old creature’s feelings, was about to recall her, when a sound struck upon his ear. It was that of the hoof-strokes of a ridden horse. The dogs outside greeted it with frenzied clamour.

Wyvern frowned. The sound was an unwelcome one, for it probably meant someone who was going to make use of his place for an hour’s off-saddle, and who, in his then vein, would most certainly bore the life out of him.

He went out on the stoep. The hoof-strokes had ceased, so had the canine clamour. He went down the steps and when about to turn the corner of the house an advancing figure did so at the same time, with such suddenness that both nearly collided. It was that of a girl. Both started—he with an exclamation of delighted astonishment. Then without more ado, the newcomer put both her hands upon his shoulders and kissed him, and, tall as he was, she had not to reach up over much in the process either. She was the original of the portrait which occupied the place of honour within.

“Lalanté! My own one, how sweet of you to give me this surprise,” he murmured, releasing her from the long, close embrace which had followed immediately upon the first amenity. “Are you alone?”

“Yes. There’d have been no fun in bringing a crowd.”

“Well, sit down inside and rest while I see to your horse. Hitched to the gate, I suppose?”

“Yes. For the other I’m not going to obey. I’ll go with you. Do you want to be away from me for the first ten minutes I’m here?”

“Do I, indeed? Come along, then.”

They went to the gate, she leaning slightly against him, as they walked, his hand passed lovingly through her arm. And they looked an ideal pair physically, he with his six foot of strong English manhood, his bronzed face, fine and thoughtful, though even now unable to shake off the recollection of crowding in troubles; she, lithe and rounded, moving with the perfect grace of a natural and unstudied ease, her large grey eyes, thickly lashed, wide open and luminous with the sheer delight of this meeting, her cheeks just a little browned with the generous kiss of the African sun. Yes, they seemed an ideal pair, and yet—and yet—this is a world wherein there is no room for ideals.

When they returned to the house they were met by old Sanna, voluble.

“Daag, Klein Missis. Ja, but—I am glad you are come. Now you will make the Baas eat his dinner, ah, yes—surely you will do that. Nothing since breakfast, and out all day in the hot sun, and says he will not eat. And I have made him what he likes best.”

The new arrival looked for a moment at Wyvern, then, with decision: “Bring in the dinner, Sanna, and you can put two plates. I am going to have some too.”

The old woman crowed.

“See now what I always say. It is time we had a Missis here. What is a farm without a Missis? It is like a schuilpaad (tortoise) without a shell.” And she went out, chuckling, to re-appear in about a minute with the rejected tray.

“Nouw ja! that is where Klein Missis’ place ought to be,” began old Sanna, pointing to the other end of the table. “But the Baas piles it up with rubbish and paper, and all sorts of stuff only good to collect dust and tarantulas. But he will have to make room for you soon there, Klein Missis. How soon?”

“Don’t you ask questions, old Sanna,” answered the girl with a laugh. “Meanwhile I prefer sitting here, nearer. We needn’t talk so loud then to make each other hear, do you see?”

The old woman’s yellow face puckered into delighted wrinkles. She was not altogether free from the failings of her race, but she had a very real and motherly affection for Wyvern, and would in all probability have gone through fire and water for him if put to the test.

“Mind you make the coffee extra well to-day, old Sanna,” called out Wyvern, as she turned back to the kitchen.

“Now help me, darling,” said the girl, as they sat down to table. “It is delightful, being all to ourselves like this. Isn’t it?”

“Heavenly,” he answered, dropping a hand upon hers, to the detriment of any speedy compliance with her last injunction. “But how did you manage to get away alone?”

“Father’s gone to a sale at the Krumi Post. He won’t be back till to-morrow.”

Wyvern’s face clouded.

“Has he? That accounts for it. Do you know, dearest, he seems to have changed towards me. Not over anxious for you to see too much of me in these days. Well, I know what that is going to mean.”

“Hush—hush! I am going to have some serious talk with you presently, but—not now. At table that sort of thing interferes with digestion I believe.”

Wyvern dropped his knife and fork, and looked at her fixedly.

“That means—trouble,” he said, a world of bitterness in his tone and face.

“No—no. It doesn’t. Perhaps quite the reverse. So be reassured!—and trust me. Now tell me. What have you been doing with yourself since we last met?”

“Oh, trying to put more of the too late drag on the coach that is whirling down the hill to its final crash.”

“No—no. Don’t talk despondently,” she said. “I want to think of you as strong—and despondency is not strength. You have me and I have you, does that count for nothing?”

“Good Lord, but you make me feel mean. Come now, we’ll throw off this gloomy talk,” with a sudden brightening that was not all forced, so stimulating was the effect of her presence, so soothing that of her love-modulated voice.

“That’s right. Now, what have you been doing with yourself?”

“The latest is that I had a sort of adventure this morning. I caught Sixpence ‘slaag-ing,’ caught him red-handed. There was another schelm in it with him.” And he told her the whole incident.

The colour heightened in her cheeks as she listened, and her eyes were opened wide upon his.

“But they would have killed you, the wretches,” she exclaimed.

“Such was their amiable intent. I believe it will take even Sixpence’s thick skull some little while to get over that stone I let him have.”

“Pity you didn’t kill him,” said the girl, fiercely; and meaning it too.

“No, dearest. Think again. Are times not hard enough in all conscience, without having to meet the costs of a trial for manslaughter, for that’s about what it would have meant. What? ‘Self defence?’ That might not have counted. There were no witnesses, and they’d have tried to make out I did it because I was mad with him for ‘slaag-ing.’”

“That’s true. I hadn’t thought of it in that light. Well, I should think the magistrate will let him have the ‘cat’ and plenty of it,” she added, vindictively.

“No, he won’t. I’ve concluded to let the poor devil off. I’ll deduct the value from his wages—it’s quite illegal of course, but far more satisfactory to both parties, in that it saves trouble all round—and the crack on the head he got can balance the rest of the account.”

The girl looked at him, a whole world of admiring love shining in her eyes. Then she shook her head.

“That’s quite wrong. You’re spoiling the people, you know. In fact you’re putting quite a premium on ‘slaag-ing.’ But you will do everything your own way and different to other people. Well, it wouldn’t be you if you didn’t.”

“Which is an extenuating circumstance, I suppose, sweetheart,” he answered, dropping a hand on to hers. “And now, if we’ve done, I move that we go and continue this debate upon the stoep.”

Chapter Three.

"Light Through the Gloom..."

We have said that in purchasing Seven Kloofs, as his farm was named, Wyvern had been largely moved by a sense of its beautiful site, and it certainly had that redeeming feature. Now as these two sat there on the stoep, a fair and lovely panorama lay spread forth before them. The house was built on the slope of a hill, and, falling away in front, lay miles and miles of undulating veldt, now of a young and tender green—for the season had been a good one—alternating with darker patches of bush, and the lighter green, still, of the feathery mimosa. While beyond, walling in the river valley at some miles distant, ran a lofty ridge, far as the eye could see, stern with stately cliffs, alternating with the ruggedness of rock and boulder which crowned the height. Behind the homestead a network of dark and bushy kloofs interseamed the hills on that side; which, if a very Alsatia for mischievous wild animals, furnished a compensating element in affording sport to the owner—and his neighbours—in their periodical destruction.

Nor were the voices of Nature stilled in the sensuous glory of the unclouded sunlight. The strange call of strange birds echoed unceasingly, blending with the cheery whistle of the familiar spreeuw, ubiquitous in his sheeny flash from bough to bough, and the far-off, melodious call of the hoepoe, in the dusky recesses of bushy kloofs. Dove notes, too, in ceaseless cooing, and the shrill, noisy crow of cock-koorhaans was seldom stilled, any more than the murmuring hum of bees and the screech of crickets; but Nature's voices are never inharmonious, and all these, and more, blended to perfection in a chorus of praise for a spring-reviving world.

"No—that is too far from you, dearest," objected the girl, as Wyvern dragged forward the most comfortable of the cane chairs for her in the vine-trellised shade of the stoep. "Now, you sit there, and I'll sit—here," flinging down a couple of cushions beside his low chair, and seating herself thereon so as to nestle against him. "Now we shall be quite comfy, and can talk."

She had taken from his hand the pouch from which he had begun to fill his pipe, likewise the pipe itself. This she now proceeded to fill for him.

"Aren't you afraid of quite spoiling me, darling?" he murmured tenderly, passing a caressing hand over the soft brown richness of her abundant hair. "Would you always do it, I wonder?"

She looked up quickly.

"'Would you,'" she repeated "Oughtn't you rather to have said 'Will you'?"

"My sweet grammarian, you have found me the exact and right tense," he answered, a little sadly, wondering if she really had any approximate idea as to how badly things were going with him.

"That's right, then. This is getting quite worn out," examining the pouch. "How long ago did I make it? Well, I must make you another, anyhow."

"That'll be too sweet of you."

"Nothing can be too sweet to be done for you."

If it be doubted whether all this incense could be good for any one man, we may concede that possibly for many—even most—it would not. But this one constituted an exception. There was nothing one-sided about it, for he gave her back love for love. Moreover, it was good for him; now, especially, when he stood in need of all the comfort, all the stimulus she could give him; for these two were engaged, and he—was tottering on the verge of ruin.

He looked down into her eyes, and their glances held each other. What priceless riches was such a love as this. Ruin! Why ruin was wealth while such as this remained with him. And yet—and yet—Wyvern's temperament contained but little of the sanguine; moreover he knew his own capabilities, and however high these might or might not stand for ornamental purposes, no one knew better than he did that for the hard, practical purpose of building for himself a pecuniary position they were nil. Nor was he young enough to cherish any illusions upon the subject.

"You said you had some serious talk for me, sweetheart," he said. "Now begin."

"It's about father. He keeps dinning into me that you—that you—are not doing well."

"He's right there," said Wyvern, grimly. "And then?"

"And then—well, I lost my temper."

"You have a temper then?"

She nestled closer to his side, and laid her head against him.

"Haven't I—worse luck!"

He laughed, softly, lovingly.

“Well, I’ll risk that. But, why did you lose it?”

“He told me—he said—that things ought not to go on any longer between us,” answered the girl, slowly.

“Oh, he said that did he? What if he should be right?”

She started to her feet, and her eyes dilated as she fixed them upon his face; her own turning ghastly white.

“You say that—you? If he should be right?”

Wyvern rose too. The greyness which had superseded the bronze of his face was an answer to her white one.

“I am ruined,” he said. “Is it fair to bind you to a broken and ruined man, one who, short of a miracle, will never be anything else?”

“You mean that? That he might be right?” she repeated.

The ashen hue deepened on his countenance.

“In your own interest—yes. As for me, the day that I realised I should see you no more in the same way, as I see you now—that is as mine—would be my last on earth,” he said, his voice breaking, in a very abandonment of passion and despair. Then with an effort, “But there. It was cowardly of me to tell you that.”

“Oh, love—love!” Now they were locked in a firm embrace, and their lips met again and again. In the reaction great tears welled from her eyes, but she was smiling through them. “Now I am answered,” she went on, “I thought I knew what happiness was, but, if possible, I never did until this moment.”

“Did you think I was going to give you up then?” he said, a trifle unsteadily.

“Don’t ask me what I thought I only know I seem to have lived a hundred years in the last minute or so.”

“And I?”

“You too. You have an expressive face, my ideal?”

“Listen, Lalanté. How long have we known each other?”

“Since I first came home. Just a year.”

“And how long have we loved each other?”

“Exactly the same time, to a minute.”

“Yes. And have we ever had the slightest misunderstanding or exchanged one single word that jarred or rankled?”

“Never.”

“Why not?”

“Because of our love—our complete and perfect love.”

“Yes. Now we have had our first misunderstanding, but not in the ordinary and derogatory sense in which the word is used—and it has only served to cement us more closely together. Hasn’t it?”

“It has.”

“Then we will sit down again and talk things over quietly,” he said. “You have been standing long enough, after your long, hot ride.”

He released her beautiful form from his embrace, though reluctantly, and only then after another clinging kiss. She subsided again on to her cushions.

“After my long, hot ride!” she echoed. “Why, it was nothing. I’m as strong as a horse.”

“You are perfect.”

“Oh, and all this time you have not even lighted your pipe!” she cried, gleefully, and radiant with smiles as she picked up that homely and comforting implement where he had let it fall. “Now light it up, dearest, and then we will be comfy, and talk.”

“Yes. Well then, I suppose your father was rather abusing me on the whole, Lalanté; saying I was doing no good, and so forth. He has been doing that more and more of late. Don’t be afraid I shan’t mind; nor shall I feel at all ill-disposed towards him on that account.”

“I’m sure you won’t; first because you are you, secondly because you know that he is utterly powerless to part us. Well then, he said again that your affairs were rapidly going from bad to worse, and that you would never do any good for yourself or anybody else.”

“As for the first he’s right. For the second—I’m not so sure.”

Wyvern spoke with a new confidence that was a little strange to himself—a confidence begotten of the very trust and confidence which this girl had shown in him. His love for her thrilled every fibre of his body and soul. Now that he knew beyond all shadow of a doubt that nothing on earth could part them—and he did know it now—a new, and as we have said, a strange confidence and self-reliance had been born within him.

She, for her part, laughed—laughed lightly, happily.

“But I am,” she answered. “For instance you have done a great deal of good for me. You have turned my days into a sunlight of bliss, and my nights into a dream beside which Heaven might pale. Is that nothing?”

“Child—child!” he said, still passing his hand caressingly over the soft luxuriance of her hair. “Will it last—will it last? Remember you are enthroning a poor sort of idol after all. What then?”

Again she laughed!—lightly, happily.

“What then? Last? Oh, you’ll see. You are a bit older than me, darling, but even you don’t know everything—no, not quite everything.”

The mocking face was turned up, radiant in the love-light of its obsession. Upon the rich, full lips he dropped his own. And the golden glory from above warmed down upon a shining world in its wild splendour here of forest and waste and cliff, and the joyous voices of Nature echoed their multitudinous but ever blending notes. The glow of Heaven lay upon all, and its peace upon two hearts.

“No, I do not know everything,” he said at last, “for I did not know that the whole world could contain one like you.”

Her fingers, intertwined with his, closed upon them in unspoken response. Both seemed to lack heart to revert to more serious and mundane talk in the happiness of the hour; and in God's name, why should they, seeing that such hours can come to few, and then but seldom in a lifetime?

"Baas. Myn lieve Baas?"

"What do you want, old Sanna?" said Wyvern, frowning at the interruption, yet not moving. "Go away. You are disturbing us."

"But myn Baas," persisted the old woman, deprecatorily. "I think something must be dead—there—down by the river. The aasvogels are like a very cloud."

"I don't care if something is dead," he answered. "I don't care if all the world were dead—in fact I wish it was. So go away and don't come bothering me again until I call you."

She obeyed, not in the least huffy. Romance appeals to all natures and nationalities and ages, and even this semi-civilised old scion of a very inferior race was not impervious to a sympathetic heart-warming over the situation.

"Let's go and see what she means, dearest," said Lalanté after the old woman had gone. "I feel as if I should like to move a little, and—are we not still together?"

They went round to the angle of the house, whence they could see to the point indicated. The great scavengers of the air were wheeling and circling in hundreds, away down by the river bank, white and fleecy against the cloudless blue.

"They must have found that wretched Kafir," said the girl. "Isn't that somewhere about where he'd be lying?"

"Yes. But they wouldn't be able to get at him. He fell into a part of the donga which is entirely sheltered by bush and prickly pears. What they have found is the mutton, which in the delight of your arrival I clean forgot to send someone to fetch."

She pressed to her side the hand which lay passed through her arm, and they stood for a little, watching the great white scavengers in the distance.

"I could almost find it in me to vow never to kill another puff-adder after the service that one rendered me," went on Wyvern. "I had a tough contract on hand, and that other

fellow was big and powerful, and had a business-like sort of knife. The stone trick might not have worked out so well twice running."

"Darling, don't take any more of those foolish risks. Why don't you carry a pistol?"

"Oh, it's heavy and therefore hot. I shall have bother enough now over that wretched Kafir. There'll be an inquest and so on. By the way, I shall have to notify your father about the affair. He's the nearest Field-cornet."

"That's all right. You can come over to-morrow and tell him, then we shall see each other two days running, or rather three—for of course you must stop the night."

"He won't ask me. I'm out of favour, remember."

"Won't he? Well, if he doesn't I will; and I think I know who's Baas in household arrangements of that kind."

Both laughed. "I think I do," Wyvern said. "Now let's go round to the stable and see to your horse. It's not very far from counting-in time—worse luck."

"Ah, yes. How time gallops. Now, you will be wanting to get rid of me."

"That of course."

"Well then, you won't—not just yet that is. I'm going to stay and have supper with you. There's a splendid moon, and you can ride back with me until I'm in sight of the house. How does that appeal?"

"In the way of perfection."

"Same here. I didn't let on I was coming here to-day, but nobody will give me away whatever time I get back, that's one thing."

Chapter Four.

"I will not let him go."

Lalanté's intention of spending the evening with him had come with the effect of a reprieve upon Wyvern. For all his trust in her he never parted with her without vague misgivings that by some means or other it might be for the last time; for did he not hold her in opposition to a growing and decided parental hostility? It would be through no fault of hers, he told himself, were such misgivings justified. With all her strength and resolution, circumstances might be too strong for her, hence the misgiving.

They wandered about, happy for the moment, watching the great rays of the westering sun sweep lower and lower over the green expanse of the river valley—upon which now, the whiteness of returning flocks moved slowly homeward.

"I'm going to leave you to yourself for a little now, dearest," said the girl, as these drew nearer. "I should only be in your way, and disturb your counting. Besides, I feel rather hot and dusty, and want to go and titivate."

"Of course. How stupid of me."

"No—no. You needn't come, old Sanna will get me all I want. Now forget that I exist, for the next few minutes. So long," and with a nod and a bright smile she left him.

Sixpence was looking a very subdued and dejected Kafir as his master finished the count of his particular flock; which was accurate—save for one.

"I have been thinking over your case, Sixpence," began Wyvern, when the other boy had been dismissed, "and even now haven't quite made up my mind what to do about it."

"Nkose!" exclaimed the Kafir, deprecatorily, and sorely exercised in his mind. It was no unknown thing under the circumstances to give the culprit the option of receiving a dozen or so well laid on with a new reim, or taking his chance before the nearest Resident Magistrate; an arrangement on the whole satisfactory to both parties, in that the offender got off far more lightly than he would have got off at the hands of the law, and his employer was saved a great deal of trouble and some incidental expense. This, then, Sixpence feared, was the least he could expect, but he need not have, for Wyvern was utterly incapable of an act of violence in cold blood, and very rarely in hot.

"You see," went on the latter, "I'm not sure that it is in my power to forgive you, even if I wanted to. I'm not sure that the law would not compel me to prosecute. I don't see,

either, how we can put the thing away. There's that other fellow lying dead; for he'll be as dead as the sheep you 'slaag-ed' long before this. I shall have to report the whole thing to Baas Le Sage. Then the 'slaag-ing' will all come out."

But the fellow begged and prayed that he might not be sent to the tronk. He would make good the loss—over and over again if his master wished. And Wyvern, an appeal to whose soft side had rarely to be repeated, resolved that he would let the poor devil off if he could possibly do so, and said as much.

"When is Miss Lalanté coming here as Missis?" said old Sanna, as the girl, having bathed her face in cool fresh water, came forth looking radiant with its added glow.

"Don't you be too curious, old Sanna," was the answer. "Perhaps soon—perhaps not so soon. Who knows?"

"A Missis is badly wanted here, ja, very badly. Look at all that," with a sweep of a yellow hand towards the confused pile of books and papers which had encroached over the greater part of the table. "All that would be cleared away. His letters too. Why the Baas does not even take the trouble to open his letters. Look at them."

The girl's heart tightened. Well she knew why those envelopes remained unopened. Their contents but bore upon the difficulties of their recipient, but in no sense with a tendency to alleviate the same. She forebore to touch the untidy heap lest something he might want to find should be misplaced, but she got a duster, and dusted and straightened the pictures and other things upon the wall. One frame only there was no need for her to dust or straighten. It was the one which contained her own portrait: and realising this a very soft, sweet smile came over her face. At which psychological moment Wyvern re-entered.

"I notice this is the only thing you allow old Sanna to dust," she said ingenuously. "How many times a week is she under orders to do it?"

"You shall pay for that," he answered. "There. Now you have done so duly, you shall own that you knew perfectly well that nobody ever touches it but me."

"Oh, goeije! it is as if there were really a Missis here at last."

The interruption came from old Sanna, who at that moment entered, bringing in the dishes. Both laughed.

“See, old Sanna,” said Wyvern. “We are rather tired of that remark. So if you can’t invent a new one don’t make any.”

“Better to be tired of that than of the Missis,” chuckled the old woman, as she withdrew. It will be seen that she was rather a privileged person.

The evening slipped by all too soon for these two, as they sat out on the stoep, watching the suffusing glow that heralded the rising of the broad moon. In the stillness the voices of night, well-nigh as multifold as the voices of day, were scarcely hushed, and the shrill bay of a jackal away beyond the river, would seem but a distance of yards instead of miles. The weird hoot of some ghostly night bird too, would float ever and anon from the hillside; and the dogs lying around the house would start up and bark in deep-toned, angry chorus, as the harsh shout of sentinel baboons echoed forth from the darksome recesses of the kloofs behind the homestead: or perchance as they detected some other sound, too subtle for human ears.

“How restless everything is to-night,” said the girl, listening. “Dearest, it seems a little bit eerie.”

“Oh, on a fine still night things always move about more. It may be something stirring up all those baboons—a leopard perhaps—not wild dogs I hope. You know it’s one of my hobbies that, being able to hear all sorts of wild animal voices when I sit out here of an evening, or when I am lying awake. It’s one of the charms of this place. I wonder if the next man here will say the same.”

“Don’t. Oh, is there no way out,” she cried, in a despairing tone, “no way by which you will not be forced to part with this beautiful place you love so much, and where our lives were to have passed in a very paradise? No way?”

“None.”

Then both sat in silence, fingers intertwined. A rim of gold peered up from behind the dark outline of the opposite rand, then a broad disc, and the great fiery moon soared aloft, penetrating the shadowed recesses of the river valley in a network of silvern gleams. At last Lalanté spoke.

“Dearest, I have to say it, as you know, but—it is time.”

“To saddle up? Yes, I’m afraid it is. But it isn’t good-bye yet, seeing we shall be together for another hour and a half.”

Both had risen. The girl went to find her hat and gloves while Wyvern lighted a waggon lantern and went round to the stable. In his mind was the consciousness of the awful depression that would be upon him during his return ride; when her presence was withdrawn. They would see each other again on the morrow in all probability, but—even then it would be under different circumstances.

The horses, fresh and willing in the cool air, snorted and sidled as their riders fared forth into the peaceful beauty of the radiant night. So fresh were they, indeed, that they could have covered the ten miles that lay before them in far less time than their said riders were disposed to allow them. And the latter were not inclined for hurry. This ride beneath the golden moon, the loom of the heights against the pale sky near and far, the sweet breaths of night distilling perfume from herb and flower, and they two together—alone. They talked—and the subject of their talk was one that never grew old—that never palled—for it was of the time which had elapsed since they had first met—and loved; and that time was one. Talked, too, of the time preceding; when he had been happy, contented here in his quiet way, because then unconscious that he was already on the road to financial ruin—of her father's arrival two years ago, when he had bought the neighbouring stock farm upon which they now dwelt, and had prospered exceedingly; but, more alluring topic still, of her own arrival home a year later than that.

"And you have never quite forgiven me for admitting that I was prepared—well—not to like you?" he said, when they had reached this point.

"Forgiven you, darling? Why—is not the result a very triumph to me? I knew that it was the moment we first looked at each other."

"Did you? From your side I was not so confident then. But I see you now as you first came into the room—that bright, laughing glance meeting mine, without an atom of gêne or self-consciousness. And then—later. We did not have to say much:—we knew that we belonged to each other. Didn't we?"

"We did. We did indeed. Sweetheart, will you be very angry with me if I say something that has been on my mind?"

"How can you use that word as between you and me?"

"Well, then—" she went on, strangely hesitatingly for her. "Even if you had to part with Seven Kloofs, and there's no doubt, I'm afraid, that it'll be no good for years—you might get a place you liked just as well I have a little of my own, remember—not much, but all my own—and that, with what you would save from the wreck, would surely be enough to—to set us up again."

She spoke quickly, hurriedly, deprecatingly, as she noted the grave, disapproving look which deepened upon his face in the brilliant moonlight.

“No—no. Lalanté, love, never that. No. Once you hinted that way before—but—no, that could not be.”

“Now you hurt me.”

“Hurt you—hurt you? Child, if you only knew how I am adoring you at this moment, if possible—I say if possible—more than ever I have done before. Hurt you? You?”

“Now, forgive me. It is I who am hurting you.” And her voice quivered in its tenderness of passion as she reached out her hand to him—they were walking their horses now. “But I thought if two people belonged to each other they had everything in common.”

“Not at this stage, I’m afraid,” he said, with a smile that was meant to be reassuring, but was only sad. “You know I have a certain code of my own.”

“It would be a cruel one if it was not yours,” she answered. But there was nothing of resentment in the tone, only pride, admiration, an intense glory of possession. Nor did she intend to abandon the argument, only to postpone it.

As they had said, they had known from the very first that they belonged to each other. It was as surely a case of coming together as the meeting of two converging rivers; and the process had been as easy, as natural. What had drawn her towards him—apart from his physical attractions, which were not slight, and of which, to do him justice, he was free from any consciousness—was his total dissimilarity to any other man she had ever met. She had told him so more than once—and the reply had been deprecatory. Other men got on, he declared, while he—only seemed to get back; dissimilarity, therefore, was rather a hindrance than a thing to plume oneself upon.

“We are nearly there now,” he said, regretfully, as the track they had been pursuing here merged in a broader main road.

“Yes. But what a day we have had. Hasn’t it been too sweet?”

“Too sweet indeed! A day to look back upon to the very end of one’s life.”

A couple of miles further and they topped a rise. In the stillness the sudden barking of dogs was borne to their ears. It came from where two or three iron roofs glinted in the

moonlight some three-quarters of a mile on the further side of the valley. Both dismounted, for the rest of the way she was to finish alone.

“Good-bye now, my own love, my sweet,” he murmured as they stood, locked together in a last long embrace. “I shall see you to-morrow, but it will not be as it has been to-day.”

“Not quite. But we will have other days like this. And—keep up heart—remember, for my sake. When you are disposed to lose it, think of me and feel sure that nothing can part us—as sure as that moon is shining. Good-bye, my love. It is only ‘good-night,’ though.”

No more was said, as he swung her into the saddle. He himself stood there watching her fast receding form, nor did he leave the spot until the sudden subsidence of the canine clamour, told that she had reached her home.

Then he mounted, and took his way slowly back through the moonlit glories of the beautiful slumbering waste.

Chapter Five.

Rebellion.

Vincent Le Sage was riding leisurely homeward to his farm in the Kunaga River Valley.

His way lay down a stony bush road, winding along a ridge—whence great kloofs fell away on either side, clothed in thick, well-nigh impenetrable bush. Here and there a red krantz with aloe-fringed brow rose up, bronze-gleaming in the morning sun, and away below, in front, and on either hand, the broad river valley into which he was descending.

He was a middle-aged man, of medium height, but tough and wiry. He had good features and his short beard was crisp and grizzled, but the expression of his eyes was cold and business-like, as indeed it was bound to be if there is anything in the science of physiognomy, for he was a byword as being a hard nail at a deal, and everything he touched prospered. In fact his acquaintance near and far were wont to say that Le Sage had never made a bad bargain in his life. Perhaps they were right, but Le Sage himself, now as a turn of the road brought some objects in sight, was more than inclined to question that dictum.

The said objects were only some cattle, a most ordinary everyday sight, and the cattle were not even his. Yet a frown came over his face. The cattle were poor, and one or two, to his experienced eyes, showed signs of disease.

"Wyvern's, of course!" he pronounced to himself wrathfully. "Every case of redwater or brand-ziekte in the whole country-side is sure to be traceable to Wyvern's cattle or sheep. What the devil could have put into such a fellow's head that he was any good in the world at fanning? He'd better stick to his fusty books and become a damned professor. That's about all he's good for. I doubt if he's even good for that I doubt if he's even good for anything."

These wrathful reflections were due to the fact that he had just met with a reminder—one of many—that he had at any rate made one bad bargain, for Wyvern was engaged to his daughter; and now it was a question only of months perhaps, when Wyvern should be sold up.

Then and there he made up his mind again that the engagement should be broken off, and yet while so making it up—we said "again"—the same misgiving that had haunted him on former occasions did so duly and once more, that the said breaking off would be a matter of no little difficulty even were it ever achieved at all. Wyvern might be a bad fanner, a hopeless one in fact, but he would be a hard nut to crack in a matter of this

kind, and Lalanté—well, here was a hard and fast alliance for the offensive and defensive, which would require a breaking power such as he could not but realise to himself he scarcely possessed.

On rode Vincent Sage, mile after mile, still frowning. The good bargain he had made at yesterday's ale had well-nigh faded from his thoughts now, and as he drew near to his home his private worries seemed to oust his professional satisfaction over his own acuteness and the steady but sure accumulation of the goods of this world. He had liked Wyvern well enough during the earlier period of their acquaintance—in fact more than well enough; but he had all the invariably successful man's impatience of—even contempt for—the chronically unsuccessful; and in this particular instance his oft repeated dictum to himself—and sometimes to others—was "Wyvern will never do any good for himself or for anybody else either."

Suddenly he pulled up his horse with a jerk, and emitted a whistle. He was scanning the road, scanning it intently.

"Oh-ho! So that's how the cat jumps!" he exclaimed to himself, grimly.

He had reached the point where the track to Wyvern's farm joined the wider road leading to his own. The frown became more of a set one than ever.

"One horse spoor coming this way alone," he pronounced, "and I know what horse made that spoor. Two horse spoors going back—and the same horse made one of these spoors. That's the game, is it, directly my back is turned? Well, it's a game that must be stopped, and, damn it—it shall be."

In spite of which vehemence, however, that same little cold water misgiving returned to render Vincent Le Sage's mind uncomfortable.

He rode on, slowly now, keeping his horse at a walk; he was near home and there was no occasion for hurry. But as he went, he read that road like the pages of a book. He would find Wyvern at his place? Not a bit of it. For he had marked the returning spoors of the other horse.

Then again he reined in, suddenly and shortly, for the horse-hoofs had ceased and with them mingled the print of boots—and the said boots spelt one of each sex. From that point the spoor of one horse continued alone. The other was a returning one. This, then, was where they had parted.

Vincent Le Sage had every sign of the veldt at his fingers' ends, and here, these imprints on a scantily used road, were as the very elementary side of his craft to him. They had not been made to-day; there were evidences of the effect of dew to show that. They had been made yesterday, and tolerably late at night; that too, he took in, and doing so felt more than ever justified in his resentment. What on earth had Lalanté come to that she should ride over, alone, to this man's place directly his own back was turned, and—return with him late at night? Now he had good ground for interference, and what his inner consciousness told him was still better, a just grievance against Wyvern.

"He'll be sold up," he said to himself in hot wrath, as he covered the short distance which still lay between him and his homestead. "He'll be sold up, and I'll buy the place—I will, by God, even if it's the only rotten bargain I ever made in my life. I won't leave the chance to any other fool, with some arrangement perhaps for keeping him on on the halves. No—I'll buy it myself—although it won't be worth a tinker's twopenny damn for years to come. Then he'll have to clear, and that's what I want."

A Hottentot stable boy ran to take his horse as he dismounted at the gate. Lalanté came down the garden path to meet him. Her greeting of him was unreservedly affectionate. Perhaps his own to her thawed more than he was aware of.

"Come along in, father dear," she cried, hooking her arm within his, and drawing him through the open door into the cool room beyond. "And tell me how you got on. But first of all, you must have something after your ride," unlocking a cupboard and producing a decanter of excellent Boer brandy. "Now, did you pick up anything worth having?"

"Not bad in a small way. Couple of dozen slaughter-oxen of Piet Nel's—he's in a bad way, you know, and obliged to sell I can turn them down upon Hartslief at Gydisdorp, at an easy two pound a head profit, if not more. There was nothing else quite worth taking on. Warren'll do the delivery for me on very small commission."

He had thawed still more as he watched his daughter moving about, ministering to his comfort. Any preconceived idea that Vincent Le Sage was of the tyrannical order of parent may at once be jettisoned. He was—as we have said—simply intolerant, to a fault, of the unsuccessful man.

"Warren?" repeated Lalanté, in some astonishment, as she placed the porous terra-cotta water-bottle wits its fresh, cool contents upon the table. "Was Mr Warren at the sale then?"

"No. I came back by his place."

There was a something in her father's tone, and the searching glance he threw upon her face as he said this, that struck the girl as strange. She had not expected him back by that particular way, but she failed to connect the circumstance with her doings of the day before. The mysteries of spoor, of course, were rather outside her scope.

"Oh, did you?" was all she said. "A little further round, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I had business with him—this and other. Where are the kiddies, Lalanté?"

"Oh, they're larking about down the kloof, catapulting birds, or something."

"All the better. I want to have some serious talk with you."

"Serious? Don't scare me, old chap, will you?" she answered, going to him, and taking his face between her long cool fingers. "Because I'm easily scared, and 'serious' sounds so unconscionably alarming."

Le Sage felt more than ever disarmed. He was glowing angry with himself, and in proportion felt the less inclined to be so with her. His heart swelled with pride and love, as he met the half-laughing, half-wistful eyes of this beautiful, splendid girl of his. How the devil could he get out what he wanted to say, he asked himself savagely? But the thought of Wyvern came to his aid. With him, at any rate, he felt desperately angry.

"What time did you get back last night?" he said, shortly.

It was Lalanté's turn to feel disconcerted.

"Last night? Get back?" she repeated, changing colour ever so slightly.

"Yes. That's what I said," he answered, still more shortly, and inwardly lashing himself up. "What time?"

"Well, it wasn't so very late," replied the girl, serenely. She had had time to pick herself up, though it cost her an effort, while wondering who had given her away; though indeed who could have done so, seeing that she herself had met her father at the gate before he had spoken to anybody? "But there was a fine bright moon—almost at the full."

"Well, you have done a thing I entirely disapprove of. You had no business to go over there all by yourself like that, at night."

“But I didn’t go at night. I went in the morning.”

“But you came back at night. At least if you didn’t I’m a raw Britisher at reading spoor. How’s that?”

Spoor? Oh, this was what had given her away then. This was a factor Lalanté had wholly omitted to take into account, and even if she had not she had never reckoned on her father returning by that particular road at all.

“How’s that?” she repeated sweetly. “Why of course that you’re not a raw Britisher at all.”

“Surely you must see it isn’t the thing for a girl to go and spend the day with a man at his own place all alone,” he fumed. “Can’t you see that?”

“It depends on the girl and the man,” she answered demurely. “Not if they are engaged?”

“Not even then. Coming back late at night too. I’m surprised at Wyvern being a party to it; and shall let him have a bit of my mind next time I see him.”

“Oh, don’t blame him,” said Lalanté, rather quickly. “I paid him a surprise visit, and—and—well, under the circumstances I stopped on. I stopped on. He couldn’t very well turn me out. Now could he?”

Le Sage snorted. He had no reply ready. The shrewd practical farmer, the hard-headed man of business, was floundering more and more hopelessly out of his depth here.

“Were you never young once, father?” said the girl in her softest tone, bending over him and sliding an arm round his shoulders.

“Young? Young? Well, Wyvern’s not particularly young at any rate, and ought to have known better.” Then, bitterly, “I wish to God we’d never set eyes on him.”

The arm was removed.

“You didn’t always wish that. You thought a great deal of him once.”

“That was before I found out he was no good,” retorted Le Sage, who had succeeded in lashing himself up again. “Pity, while you were about it, if you must go in for—for leaving me—you didn’t fix upon some solid and sensible fellow like Warren, for instance, instead of a mere dreamer. Warren’s worth fifty of such wasters as that.”

The “leaving me” had softened the girl, but the opprobrious term applied to her fiancé had been as the one nail that driveth out another.

“Don’t call him names,” she said, coldly, not angrily, thanks to her power of self-control. “He has been unfortunate, but he is the most honourable man who ever lived. The word ‘waster’ doesn’t apply.”

“Oh, I’m not saying anything against his honour,” snapped her father. “But the fact remains that he has never done any good for himself and never will. He’s no chicken, mind; he can’t be so very many years younger than myself. And when a man of his age gets to that age and is—well, where Wyvern is, the chances are a thousand to one he never picks himself up again. How’s that?”

“How’s that? It isn’t.”

“Isn’t it. Well, then, Lalanté, now we’re well on the subject I want you to understand that this affair between you and him had better be broken off. In fact it must be broken off.”

The girl was standing erect and her face had gone white. The large, dark-lashed grey eyes had something of a snap in them.

“It’s too late for that now,” she answered. “It cannot and shall not be broken off, no never. As long as he lives I will cling to him, and the more unfortunate he is the more I will cling to him. He is—my life.”

Le Sage’s face had gone white too—at least as far as the weather-beaten bronze was capable of doing—white with anger.

“So that’s your answer?” he said.

“That’s my answer.”

For a moment they gazed at each other. Then, before a reply could come, a sound without struck upon the ears of both. It was the creaking sound made by the swing of a gate upon its hinges. Both faces turned to the window. Coming up the path between the orange trees was Wyvern himself.

Whereby it is manifest that infinite potentialities lay within the space of the next half-hour.

Chapter Six.

What they did not find.

"How are you, Le Sage?" said Wyvern, as his father-in-law elect met him in the doorway. "You look worried. Anything wrong?"

"Don't know. No—er, well no," as they shook hands. They had been very friendly before Lalanté had appeared upon the scene, and even afterwards, Le Sage had a sneaking weakness for the other, but what he could not pardon was what he termed the other's incapacity. A man might have ill-luck and pick himself up again, but this one, he told himself, was incapable of that. Nor did it carry any soothing effect that Lalanté went straight to him and kissed him openly and affectionately.

"How glad I am to see you, darling," she said, a sunny light in her eyes as she looked at him. Le Sage grunted to himself, but it did not escape Wyvern. Something of warning too in Lalanté's eyes did not escape him either.

"Father is only just back from the sale at Krumi Post," she went on, "and although he did a good stroke of business there he's come back grumpy. Well now it's just dinner-time and you'll all be better after that."

Wyvern was quick to take in that something was wrong, but it never occurred to him to connect it with the doings of the day before. He set it down rather to the general disapproval of himself which had become more and more manifest of late in the demeanour of his quondam friend. There might have been an awkwardness but that Lalanté took care never to leave them alone together.

"Did anyone take your horse, dear?" she said. "Because, if not, I can send someone to shout for Piet."

"That's all right, Piet took him from me at the gate. Well, Le Sage—what did you do at the sale?"

The other told him, thawing a bit. Then, when they sat down to table, Wyvern opened the story of the slaughtering incident, and the tragic end of one of the actors therein. But of the attack of both upon himself he said nothing.

"A most infernal nuisance," grumbled Le Sage. "I don't know why I was fool enough to allow myself to be nominated Field-cornet. Well, if one of the schepsels has cheated the 'cat' the other's all there for it, that's one consolation."

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m going to let the poor devil off.”

“Going to—what?” snapped Le Sage. “Oh, look here, Wyvern, really you’re getting past a joke. A fellow like you is a nuisance to the whole community. Why it’s putting a premium on ‘slaag-tag.’ You catch this swine red-handed—a clear case for the ‘cat’—and then say you’re going to let him off. It isn’t fair to the rest of us. Don’t you see that?”

As a matter of fact Wyvern did see it; and felt a little uncomfortable.

“Perhaps you’re right, Le Sage,” he said. “But I’m too soft-hearted I suppose, and the sight of that other wretched devil, with that beastly snake tied round his leg, squirting blue death into him with every bite, is a sight I shan’t get rid of all in a hurry. And one human life, even that of a Kafir, is about expiation enough for a miserable sheep, worth eighteen bob or a pound at the outside. Eh?”

“I never heard such rot in my life,” was the answer. “All the more reason why the other chap’s hide should be made to smart for the whole mischief. Eh? Aren’t I right, Lalanté?”

A spirit of cussedness made him thus appeal to his daughter, a sort of longing to make her espouse his side against this other. But, even as he did so, he realised that he might as well have spared himself the trouble.

“No. I don’t think you are, since you put it to me,” she answered unhesitatingly. “On the contrary, I think you’d do much better to go and hold your enquiry and leave the other part of the business alone altogether.”

“The devil you do!”

“That’s it. You’ve put it exactly, father,” laughed Lalanté; “You’ll be riding over there after dinner, I suppose. Well, I’ll go with you.”

He expostulated. It was no place for a girl. The sight of a dead Kafir was no sight for her, he pointed out with some show of reason.

“But I’ve no intention of seeing any such sight,” she objected serenely. “I’ll wait for you a little way off while you make your investigations. That’ll be all right.”

Wyvern caught one swift look which rejoiced his heart. She had resolved not to let the whole afternoon go by without him if she could be with him. But there was more

beneath her plan than he suspected. She did not mean to afford her father any opportunity of quarrelling with him, as he almost certainly would, in his then mood, if they were alone together for any space of time just then. In most things Lalanté contrived to get her own way.

Now with a rush and a racket, two small boys came tumbling in, hot and ruddy with their scramblings about the veldt. Each exhibited, in triumph, a bunch of long feathers from the tail of the mouse-bird, or rather of many mouse-birds; the spoil of their bow and spear—or rather, catapults.

"Here you are, dad. You're set up in pipe-cleaners now for some time to come. Hullo, Mr Wyvern. There'll be enough for you too."

They chucked the feathers down unceremoniously upon the table, and began to draw up chairs. But Lalanté interposed.

"No. No you don't, Charlie—Frank—away you go, and do the soap and basin trick. I'm not going to have you sitting down to table straight out of the veldt," she said decisively. "Come—scoot—do you hear?"

"Oh, all right. Man—Mr Wyvern, but there's a big troop of guinea-fowl down by the second draai. I hope you brought your gun."

"Did I say 'Scoot'?" repeated Lalanté, the disciplinarian.

They lingered no further after that. They were good-looking boys, with their sister's large grey eyes. In a trice they were back again, keeping things lively with their chatter, and the girl encouraged them. There was thunder in the air, she recognised, and her main anxiety was to avert the impending storm. And afterwards, before she retired to put on her riding-gear, she managed to impress upon the two youngsters that they were to help entertain their guest for all they knew how until her return, which duty—Wyvern being a prime favourite with them—was not an onerous one; moreover with them Lalanté's word was law.

Their ride forth was not exactly a success. Lalanté, bright, beautiful, sparkling, kept up a flow of laughing quips, but the more she did so, the more gloomy—grumpy she called it—did her father become. Wyvern, riding by her side, felt all aglow with the pride of possession as he noted every fascinating little trick of speech, or manner, or pose, all absolutely natural and unaffected, and all going to make up the very complete charm of her personality. Not for the first time either did he find himself marvelling how this pride of possession should be his at all. Though only in the early twenties Lalanté had

had time and opportunity for “experiences,” but such experiences, however disquieting to the other parties to them, had left her unscathed. She had come to him heart-whole. None before him had ever had power to awaken her. That had been reserved for him, and the awakening had been mutual from the very first.

“We’d better leave the horses here, Le Sage,” suggested Wyvern as they drew near the donga wherein the unfortunate Kafir would be lying. “It’ll be cool for Lalanté under these trees, and the place is only a hundred yards further. Moreover we shall have to scramble a bit to get to it.”

Le Sage glumly assented, cursing the bother of the whole business. He had just got home off a journey and here he was, lugged out over miles of veldt because an infernal fool of a nigger had got bitten by a snake. The Field-cornet job wasn’t good enough at that price, and he’d chuck it.

Thus grumbling, he followed Wyvern in what was literally a scramble, not always free from danger either; for the river bank along the face of which they had to make their way here was steep enough to be almost precipitous, and high enough to render a fall on to the stones below a contingency not to be contemplated with equanimity. But fortune favoured them, and they gained their objective without accident.

“Magtig! what a beastly hole,” grunted Le Sage, as they stood within the mouth of the donga. “Well, the brute must be pretty far gone by this time. Sss! I can smell him already. We’d better start our pipes, Wyvern.”

They were standing at the bottom of a narrow rift some thirty feet in depth, its sides narrowing walls of a sandy-clayey soil and looking uncomfortably suggestive of the possibility of falling in upon them. A close network of boughs and prickly pear plants overhead well-nigh shut off the light of day, turning the place into a regular cavern. A little further and the walls narrowed, necessitating single file progress.

“A devilish unpleasant place to find oneself confronted in by a kwai geel slang,” (Note 1) said Wyvern—who was leading—over his shoulder, grimly. “We couldn’t dodge him at any price here.”

“Yes, yes. But what about the nigger?” said the other testily. “Where the devil is he?”

The same idea had struck Wyvern, who had stopped, and after looking in front was now gazing upwards in most unfeigned amazement.

“Where the devil indeed,” he echoed. “Look, Le Sage. There’s the hole he made in the green stuff tumbling through. Prickly pear leaves too, broken off by the fall. But—where the devil is the chump himself? He ought to be here, but isn’t.”

This was indisputable. The precipitous banks of the place were marked and scored, and leaves and twigs, obviously freshly torn, still clung to the said banks here and there. Some heavy body had manifestly fallen down there at that spot, but of any such thing there was now no other sign.

“Oh, look here, Wyvern. Haven’t you been filling us up with some sick old yarn?” said Le Sage disgustedly. “Why, man, there’s no sign of any dead nigger here. Sure your imagination didn’t play you tricks?”

“Oh, very. No mistake about that—by the way weren’t you saying just now you could smell him?” good-humouredly. “What if some of his pals came and carted him away?”

“Then there’d be spoor, and plenty of it. As it is there’s none. And I do know a little about spoor,” added Le Sage significantly.

“Well it bangs me, I own,” declared Wyvern. “But now we’re here we’d better follow the ditch right up. I don’t feel like taking on that nasty scramble again, do you?”

“No. Drive ahead then.”

Proceeding with some caution, for it was just the place in which to come upon a snake, they made their way gradually upward and soon stood within the open light of day.

“Well, my imagination didn’t play me tricks this shot,” said Wyvern, as they stood looking at the bones of the slaughtered sheep, picked clean by aasvogels and jackals.

“No. There were two of them at this job. I can see that plainly enough,” said Le Sage, scrutinising the ground. “Well, we’ve had our ride for nothing. The first essential towards holding an inquiry on a dead nigger is for there to be a dead nigger to hold it on, and there isn’t one here.”

“Well, I own it bangs me,” said Wyvern, puzzled.

“So it does me,” said Le Sage, significantly.

Note 1. The geel slang, anglice “yellow-snake,” is a variety of cobra, and takes first rank among the deadliest reptiles of South Africa.

Chapter Seven.

A Scare—And a Home Circle.

"Well, Lalanté. Wyvern's snake-bitten Kafir has not only killed himself, but he has performed his own funeral into the bargain—at least, he must have, because there's no sign of him down there. Why—what's the row?"

There was a curious, startled look upon the girl's face—hearing the sound of their voices she had come forward to meet them. She was pale, too, as from the effects of a fright.

"What scared you, dearest?" said Wyvern anxiously—he was at her side in a moment. "Not another snake?"

"No. I believe it was a Kafir."

"A Kafir?" echoed Le Sage. "Hullo, Wyvern. Your snake-bitten chap has not only performed his own funeral but he has already begun to walk."

"Come over to where I was sitting," said the girl. "I can show you better from there."

"But hang it, Lalanté, you're not the one to be scared by the sight of a Kafir," said her father, incredulously.

"This one had an awful look," she answered, with a little shudder. "Hardly human—almost like someone dead."

She had been leading the way—it was only a few yards—to where she had been seated under the shade of some willows.

"Look," she said. "It was over that prickly pear stem. Something made me look up and I saw a head—a fearful-looking black head, not like anything in life. It was glaring at me with such an awful expression, I wonder I didn't scream, but I believe I was afraid even to do that. Then it sank down again and disappeared."

The point indicated might have been a couple of dozen yards distant Wyvern, pressing her hand, felt that she was in a state of tremble.

"Come along, Wyvern. We'll look into this," said Le Sage irritably. He was a man who hated mystery, and was incredulous as regarded this one. "If there is any mad Kafir hanging about here a touch of stirrup iron'll be the best remedy should he prove

obstreperous." And so saying he went to his horse's side and detached one of the stirrups. Now a stirrup iron in the hands of one who knows how to use it, is a very formidable weapon of offence or defence.

"But I'll go too," said the girl, quickly. "I'm dead off staying here by myself after that experience."

"Quite sure it was an experience?" queried her father, somewhat sourly.

But reaching the place she had pointed out, there was no sign of anybody having stood there. Le Sage's first instinct was to examine the ground. He looked up again, baffled.

"No trace of any spoor whatever," he said irritably. "No living being could have stood there and left none—let alone coming here and getting away again. Your imagination is very much on the warpath to-day, Lalanté."

"Just as you like," she answered, piqued. "Only, I was never credited with such a vivid imagination before."

She felt hurt. She really had been badly frightened. The comforting pressure of Wyvern's hand was inexpressibly sweet to her at that moment.

"Oh, well. We'll just take a cast further round," said Le Sage... "No, just as I thought;" he added, after this operation. "My dear child, your spectral Kafir must have vanished into thin air. He certainly couldn't have done so over hard firm ground and left no trace whatever."

"Well, here are two deuced odd things," pronounced Wyvern. "First of all, the chap who was bitten again and again by a puff-adder, and should have been lying down there in an advanced stage of—well—unpleasantness, isn't there at all. The next, Lalanté, who isn't easily frightened, meets with a bad scare at sight of something which sounds uncommonly like the deceased defaulter when last I saw him."

"Yes—it's rum—very," declared Le Sage drily, replacing the stirrup he had taken off his saddle. "Well, good-bye, Wyvern."

"What's that?" said Lalanté, decisively. "Goodbye? But he's going back with us. Aren't you, dear? I shall be most frightfully disappointed if you don't."

The glance she shot at him—her father was busy lighting his pipe—expressed love, entreaty, the possibility of disappointment, all rolled into one. Wyvern would not have

been human if he had withstood it. As a matter of fact he had no wish to, but Le Sage's manner was such that the words seemed to convey a broad hint that to that worthy at any rate his room was preferable to his company. But he was not going to take any marching orders from Le Sage.

"Then that you most certainly shall not be," he said, cheerfully, returning, to the full, the girl's loving glance.

"Of course not," she rejoined, brightly. "I had arranged a little programme in my own mind, and you are to stay the night. It seems to me we have not seen half enough of each other lately. Well, it's time to remedy that and I propose we begin now."

Inwardly Le Sage was furious. He rode on in front grimly silent, but it was little enough those two minded that as they wended over the golden glory of the sunlit plains—together. Together! Yes, and the word covered a haven of rest to both, for then it was that all the world—with its worries and anxieties and apprehensions—was a thing outside. Yet from the point of view of Le Sage there was a good deal to be said. He was not a demonstrative man, this one, who enjoyed the repute of never having made a bad bargain in his life; yet in his heart of hearts he had a very soft place for this beautiful only daughter of his, and the secret of his rancour lay in the fact that he resented her leaving him at all—or at any rate for some time to come. It was unreasonable, he would candidly allow to himself—but the feeling was there. She had brightened his home and his life, and now she was prepared—even anxious—to cease doing both—to leave him at the call of an outside stranger of whose very existence barely a year ago she had hardly been aware. Had it been a man of solid gifts and substantial position upon whom she had bestowed her love, it would have been a gilding of the pill; but she had chosen to throw herself away upon a "waster"—as his favourite and wrathful epithet put it—one on the verge of insolvency, and without the requisite faculties for righting himself—ah, that rendered the potion a very black and nauseous one to the universally successful man.

Now as he rode, in gloomy silence, the laugh, and quip, and tender tone of the pair behind him, was as fuel to the fire of his anxiety to give Wyvern his congé, and that in unmistakable terms. He had made up his mind to do this, from the moment he had looked and had seen him coming in at the gate, but Lalanté had taken care they should never be alone together. Well, he would do it—not to-day but to-morrow morning, and if no opportunity occurred he would make one; point-blank if need be. A "waster" like that, who couldn't even keep himself!

"Hullo, Le Sage. You seem a bit off colour," cried Wyvern genially, ranging up alongside, as they topped the last rise, wherefrom the homestead came into view about a mile in

front. “It really was a beastly shame to lug you off on that fool’s errand after the long ride of it you had had.”

“Oh, I’m all right. It’s all in the day’s job, and I’m as tough as wire, thank the Lord. Is that confounded vermin-preserve behind your place as full as ever, Wyvern? It’s about time you killed some of it off, isn’t it?”

The reference was to the network of rugged bushy kloofs of which mention has been made, and which were specially adapted for the harbouring of various forms of wild life, antipathetic and detrimental to stock.

“Well, I think it is, now you mention it,” was the answer. “We might get up a big hunt next week. You’ll come, won’t you? Come the day before and sleep the night. Bring Lalanté too, and the youngsters.”

“Don’t know. I’m going to be jolly busy next week,” was the answer, the speaker grimly wondering whether their relations even next day would still be such as to render any arrangement of the kind possible.

And so they reached home.

It must be recorded of Lalanté Le Sage that she had no “accomplishments.” She could not play three notes, she declared, neither did she sing, though the voice in which she trilled forth odd snatches naturally and while otherwise occupied, seemed to show that she might have done so had she chosen. Drawing and painting too, were equally out of her line. She had had enough of that sort of thing at school she would explain, and was not going to be bothered with it any more. On the other hand she had a remarkably shrewd and practical mind, and her management of her father’s house was perfect. So also was that of her two small brothers, who, by the way, were only her half brothers, Le Sage having twice married—the first time at an unusually early age. Them she ruled with a rule that was absolute, and—they adored her. Her orders admitted of no question, and still they adored her. Was there one of their boyish interests and pursuits—from the making of a catapult to the most thrilling details of the last blood-and-thunder scalping story they had been reading—into which she did not enter? Not one. And when the question arose of sending them away to school, it was Lalanté who declared in her breezy, decisive way that they were still too small, and what did it matter if they were behind other kiddies of their age in matters of history and geography? They would soon pick it all up afterwards. For her part she never could see what was the advantage of learning a lot of stuff about all those rascally old kings who chopped off everybody’s head who had ever been useful to them. That was about all that history consisted of so far as she remembered anything of it. Geography—well, that of course was of some use—

might be, rather, for as taught in school it seemed to consist of what were the principal towns of all sorts of countries none of them were ever likely to see in their lives, and whether this particular place was noted for the manufacture of carpets, or that for the production of bone-dust. As for the "three R's" she herself had given the youngsters an elementary grounding there, which was about all she was capable of doing, she declared frankly, with her bright laugh—indeed, she wondered that she was even capable of doing that.

Lalanté's order of beauty was extremely hard to define, but it was there for all that. Hers were no straight classical features; the contour of the face was rather towards roundness, and the cupid-bow mouth was not small, but it was tempting in repose, and perfectly irresistible when flashing into a frequent and brilliant smile. It was a face that was provoking in its contradictoriness—the lower half, mobile, mischievous, fun-loving: while the steady straight glance of the large grey eyes, and the clearly marked brows, spelt "character" writ in capitals. It seemed, too, as if Nature had been undecided whether to create her fair or dark, and had given up the problem half way, for there was a golden sheen in the light brown hair, which the warmth of colouring that would come and go beneath the clear skin almost seemed to contradict.

All of which Wyvern was going over in his own mind, for the hundredth time, as on this particular evening he sat watching her, deciding, not for the first time either, that if there was one situation more than another in which she seemed at her very best, it was here in her home circle. He was not talking much; Le Sage was drowsy and inclined to nod. However, he was more than content to sit there revelling in the sheer contemplation of her—now helping to amuse the small boys, now running a needle through a few stitches of work, now throwing a bright smile or some laughing remark across to him. Then, having at length packed the youngsters off to bed, she was free for a long, delightful chat—Le Sage was snoring audibly by this time. It was an evening—one of many—that he would remember to the end of his life, and no instinct or presentiment seemed to warn him that it might be the last of the kind he was destined to experience. At last Le Sage snored so violently that he woke himself, and, jumping up, pronounced it time to turn in—which indisputably it was. But the announcement brought a certain amount of relief to Lalanté, for she had not been without anxiety on the ground of leaving the two alone together.

"I have been simply adoring you all the evening, my darling," whispered Wyvern passionately, as he released her from a good-night embrace.

She did not answer, but her eyes grew luminous, as she lifted her lips for a final kiss. A word of love from him was sufficient to make her simply lose herself. A pressure of two hands, and she was gone.

Chapter Eight.

The "Word in Private."

"I want to have a word with you in private, Wyvern."

"In private?"

"Yes. I was going to yesterday but left it till now. Business matters are best talked about in the morning."

Thus Le Sage, as the two met over their early coffee. Lalanté had not yet appeared.

"All right," assented Wyvern, who had a pretty straight inkling of what was coming. "Where shall we hold our council of war?"

"Out in the open. Nothing like the open veldt if you want to talk over anything important. If you do it in a room ten to one a word or two gets overheard, and a word or two is often quite enough to give away the whole show."

"There I entirely agree. Well—lead on."

Le Sage did so. Hardly a word was exchanged between the two as they walked for about half a mile, first along a bush path, then over the veldt. One was turning over in his mind how he should put the case to the other. The other, anticipating their bearing, had already made up his as to how he should meet the arguments advanced.

Le Sage came to a halt. They had reached the brink of a krantz, of no great height and railing away now in slabs, now in aloe-grown boulders, to the Kunaga River, the swirl and babble of whose turgid waters they could hear, as it coursed between its willow grown banks—could hear but not see, for a morning mist hung over the land, shutting out everything beyond a radius of twenty yards.

"We shall be all right here," said Le Sage, seating himself upon a stone. Then he relapsed into silence, and proceeded to fill his pipe. Wyvern did the same. Decidedly the situation was awkward. When two men who have been friends are about to embark on a discussion which the chances are fifty to one will leave them enemies—in short, is bound to culminate in a quarrel, and that a bitter one—why the preliminaries are sure to be awkward. Wyvern was the one to force the situation.

“Look here, Le Sage. We didn’t come here to smoke the pipe of silent meditation, did we? You said something about business matters you wanted to talk over with me. Now—drive ahead.”

“Yes. How are you getting on?”

The words came out jerkily.

“Wish I could answer ‘Pretty well, thanks. How are you?’” said Wyvern with a rueful laugh. “I’m not getting on at all.”

“No. And I don’t suppose you ever will.”

Wyvern stiffened. The other had never used that tone towards him before.

“That sounds nice, and friendly, and cheering,” he answered coldly. “May I ask why you happen to hold that opinion?”

“Because you haven’t got it in you,” rapped out Le Sage. He was nettled at a certain spice of hauteur that the other had infused into his tone and manner. Moreover, he was nervous, and a commingling of nervousness and irritation is a very bad equipment indeed for the starting upon a difficult and delicate discussion. Wyvern, for his part, was the more sensitive to the bluntness of the statement, in that at the back of his mind lurked a misgiving that the speaker might be stating no more than the truth. Nothing he had ever touched had succeeded. He was no fool in the matter of intellect, but—somehow—he had never quite managed to “get there,” and the consciousness of this was the secret canker of his life. He was disappointed, but not yet soured. In time he might come to be that.

“Are you quite sure of your ground in making that flattering statement?” he said, mustering great self-control—for this sort of talk was not at all what he was used to. Decidedly Le Sage was straining his privileges as father-in-law elect to a dangerous point.

“Well, I don’t know. Only that events seem to bear it out most remarkably. Got rid of that mortgage on your place yet?”

“You know I haven’t.”

“Well, they were going to foreclose, weren’t they? And if they do, it’s tantamount to selling you up. Oh, I know. Of course, it would be no damn business of mine under ordinary circumstances. Under existing ones it is. I’m thinking of Lalanté.”

“Great minds jump together then, for so am I. In fact, I’m thinking of her every day, every moment of my life.”

“If you were to think a little more of her interests, then, it would be better all round.—For instance—I don’t say it with any wish to be inhospitable, mind!—but by the time you get back you’ll have been about twenty-fours hours away from home, and that quite unnecessarily. That’s not the way to run a farm—and especially one like yours. I don’t wonder your people get ‘slaag-ing,’ and all the rest of it.”

This was not a fair hit, thought Wyvern to himself. A decided case of “below the belt.” But he said nothing. He merely puffed away at his pipe, looking straight in front of him. The mist seemed lightening a little above the river.

“Well, then, if the worst comes to the worst, and you have to leave Seven Kloofs, what then? How will you stand? The sale of your stock won’t amount to anything like a fortune I take it.”

“No, but it’ll amount to something. After that—I have an idea.”

“An idea. Pho! That for an idea. One plan’s worth all the ‘ideas’ in the world.”

Le Sage, you see, had got into his element now. His nervousness had quite left him.

“Call it a plan then. And as to it I am hopeful. Why should a man’s luck always be bad, Le Sage. Why the deuce shouldn’t good times dawn for him? Ah! Look there.”

Even as he spoke the mist, which had been lightening over the river, parted with a suddenness that was almost startling, and from a widening patch of vivid blue the newly risen sun poured down his life-giving beams. It was as an instantaneous transition from darkness to light—to bright, beautiful. Nature-awakening light—and with it the birds began to pipe and call with varying note from the surrounding bushes, while a troop of monkeys gambolling upon a sandspit down in the river-bed, were amusing themselves by leaping its channel, to and fro, as though in sheer gladness of heart. Further and further the mist rolled back, unfolding a dewy sparkle upon bush and veldt, a shroud as of myriad diamonds.

“Look—where?” queried Le Sage, shortly.

“Why, at how suddenly it became light, just as I was talking about my plan—and luck changing. I’m not superstitious, but I’ll be hanged if I won’t take that as an omen—and a good one.”

Le Sage grunted, and shook his head in utter disgust.

“An omen?” he repeated. “Good Lord, Wyvern, what rot. Man, you’ll never be anything but a dreamer, and you can’t run a farm upon dreams—no nor anything else. Would you mind letting me into this ‘plan’ of yours?”

“At present I would. Later on, not now. And now, Le Sage, if you have quite done schoolmastering me, I move that we go back. In fact, I don’t know that it was worth while our coming so far just to say all that.”

“But you’ll think so in a minute. It happens I haven’t said all I came to say, and as it has to be said, I may as well say it at once and without beating around the bush. You must cease thinking of Lalanté at all. You must consider your engagement to her at an end.”

Wyvern had felt nearly certain that some such statement constituted the real object of their talk, but now that it was made, it was none the less a blow. He felt himself growing a shade paler under the weather worn bronze of his face.

“What does Lalanté herself say about it,” was his rejoinder.

“Say? Say?” echoed Le Sage, angrily. “She has no say in the matter. I simply forbid it.”

“You can’t do that, Le Sage. She is of full age, you know,” said Wyvern quietly, but with a ring of sadness in his tone. “Look here—no, wait—hear me out,” seeing that the other was about to interrupt with a furious rejoinder. “I’ve set myself out all through this interview never for a moment to lose sight of the fact that you are her father, consequently have sat quiet under a tone I would stand from no other man alive. But even the authority of a father has its limits, and you have started in to exercise yours a trifle too late.”

“Then you refuse to give her up?” furiously.

“Most distinctly. Unless, that is, she herself wished it.”

“Oh, you would then?” said Le Sage, quickly, clutching at a straw.

“Certainly. But I must hear it from her own lips, face to face. Not through a third party, or on paper.” Le Sage’s “straw” seemed to sink.

“I don’t want to irritate you further, Le Sage,” went on Wyvern after a moment’s pause. “But I’m convinced as firmly as that you and I are sitting here that I shall never hear anything of the sort. It is not in Lalanté to turn from me in misfortune. Our love is too complete.”

“And I don’t count. I, her father, am to stand aside as of no account at all?”

The unconscious pathos that welled up in the very bitterness of his tone, reflected what had lain beneath his mind since some time back—that his child should be so ready and eager to leave him. And Wyvern’s instinct was quick to grasp it.

“I quite see your import and sympathise,” he said. “Yes, I sympathise, thoroughly. But Nature is nothing if not pitiless, and this is a provision of Nature. And look here, Le Sage, my existing run of ill-luck ought to be a recommendation from your point of view in that you will be able to keep the child longer with you, for of course I don’t dream of claiming her until my luck changes.”

“That’ll be never then,” rejoined the other, savagely. “Man, haven’t you more sense of honour than to pin a girl to her contract when you know you haven’t enough to keep yourself, let alone her? She is very young too. I don’t know how I ever gave my consent.”

“She has commonsense and capability far beyond her years, and you know it. Now see here, Le Sage. Be reasonable about this, and give me some sort of a show. If I bring off my plan satisfactorily, I shan’t be the first man whose luck has turned.”

“Oh, damn your ‘plan’ and your ‘luck’ too!” retorted the other, now completely losing his temper. “The first’s a fraud and the other’s fudge. Look here, if you weren’t so much infernally bigger and stronger than me, I’d start in now to hammer you within an inch of your life, but as you are, it’s of no use trying.”

“No, it isn’t,” said Wyvern quietly, but not sneeringly.

Le Sage had got up and was pacing up and down feverishly. Wyvern had never moved. Had he known it, he was at that moment in some considerable peril. He was sitting right on the edge of the krantz, and the other was behind him; and Le Sage was one of those men who when they do fairly lose their tempers go nearly mad. Now his face was ghastly, and he snarled like a cornered animal.

“Your plan’s a fraud,” he repeated furiously, “and you’re a fraud yourself. You humbugged me into believing you were a man of solid position, while all the time you were a damned, useless, bankrupt waster. You sneaked my consent under false pretences. Yes, under false pretences,” he bellowed, “and now I withdraw it. D’you hear? I withdraw it unconditionally, you—swindler.”

Wyvern had risen now, but with no sort of idea of violence, and stood confronting the infuriated man.

“Now, Le Sage, don’t you think all this is rather cowardly on your part?” he said, in a quiet, expostulatory tone. “I mean because you must know that you’re the one man privileged to say such things to me—in fact, to go on all day calling me all the frauds and swindlers you want to, and still remain absolutely immune from retaliation. It’s not fair.”

“Not fair, eh?” snarled Le Sage, infuriated by the other’s coolness, though there was nothing in this that was in the least offensive or taunting. “Well, now, look here. Get away off my place, d’you see? This is my ground. A mile further on is my boundary. Well, get across that as soon as ever you like, and don’t set foot on my place again, or by God, I might even blow your brains out.”

“Then you’d get hanged or shut up for a considerable time, and would that be good for Lalanté?”

“Go—d’you hear,” stamped the furious man. “Go. There’s the boundary. Go over it—to hell or the devil.”

“You don’t expect me to walk ten miles when I’ve got a horse, do you? I left one at your place, and, incidentally, a tooth-brush.”

Le Sage by this time was reduced to exhausted speechlessness. He could only glare helplessly. Not wishing to exasperate him further and needlessly, Wyvern had refrained from saying that he had no intention of going until he had seen Lalanté once more. She would be on the look-out for their return, he knew that, would probably come forth to welcome—him, Le Sage would have no power to prevent their meeting.

So they walked back these two, as they had come, in silence.

Chapter Nine.

"Number One."

Gilbert Warren, attorney-at-law, was seated in his office looking out upon the main street of Gydisdorp.

He was an alert, straight, well-set-up man, not much on the further side of thirty, handsome, too, in the dark-haired, somewhat hatchet-faced aquiline type. He was attired in a cool, easy-fitting suit of white duck, for the day had been hot, and still wore his broad-brimmed hat, for he had only just come in.

Now he unlocked a drawer in his table, somewhat hastily, impatiently might almost have been said. Thence he extracted a bundle of documents, and began eagerly to peruse them. Among them were deeds of mortgage.

"A damn rotten place," he said to himself. "These fools have got bitten this time, and serves 'em right. I advised them against touching it. Now to me it doesn't matter. I don't mind dropping a little on it to get him out. If I take it over, why then he'll have to go—and it's worth it. I will—Come in."

This in reply to a knock. A clerk entered.

"It's Ripton, about that committal judgment. Will you see him, sir?"

"—To the devil, willingly," replied Warren sharply. "Tell him to go there."

The clerk went out, tittering, to inform the individual in question that Warren was very busy, and couldn't possibly find time to attend to him to-day, an intimation which had the effect of sending that much harassed and debt-hung waggon-maker slouching down the street, gurgling forth strange profanities, and consigning lawyers in general, and Warren in particular, to the care of precisely the same potentate to whom Warren had just consigned him; only in far more sultry, and utterly unprintable, terms.

"Yes, I'll take it over," the attorney's thoughts ran on, as he scanned the papers. "I can afford a loss on it—rather—and then the stake! Good God! I'd cheerfully plank down all I've made, and start life again, kaal, (lit: naked) for that. Out he'll have to walk—and not much to take along with him either. He won't show his nose around that neighbourhood again. Le Sage will take care of the rest."

Warren was the leading attorney in Gydisdorp. The district was large, well-to-do, and litigious, wherefore over and above will-drawing and conveyancing, and so forth, he had as much practice as he could take care of. There were other matters he undertook, but on the quiet, which were even more paying. Shafto, who came next to him, used to declare that Warren ought to be struck off the rolls; but as the two were great friends and invariably took a couple of "splits" together per diem, in the bar of the Masonic Hotel, nobody believed Shafto—only laughed. Besides, Warren was popular. He was genial and gifted, could tell a good story and sing a good song; moreover, he was a keen sportsman. So life, on the whole, was a rosy thing for him, and more so that Warren's creed could be summed up in a word and a figure. This was it: Number 1.

Pushing the deeds aside, Warren unlocked a drawer, and produced another enclosure. This he handled carefully, tenderly one might have said. Undoing the soft paper wrappings, he extracted a—photograph. Propping it up on his writing-table, he began to study it, and as he did so his face softened unconsciously. Then he took up a large magnifying glass. The powerful lens threw into relief the seductive lines of the splendid figure, the curve of the smiling mouth, the glad, luminous dilation of the eyes—and—it was identical with the portrait hanging on Wyvern's wall—the one that was dusted and cared for.

This had not been given to Warren by its original. Only one had been given by her to anybody, and it we have seen before. Neither had he stolen it. But a considerable bribe to the photographer's assistant, himself in difficulties—Warren was nowhere if he failed to take advantage of other people's difficulties—had procured him this, and another copy, which, he kept at his own house. And as the photographer drove his trade at Cape Town, some hundreds of miles distant from Gydisdorp, why that rendered the transaction all the safer.

"Out he goes," he murmured mechanically, his glance riveted on the portrait. "Out he goes—and then—I come in. Only—do I?"

The crack of a waggon whip and the harsh yell of the driver, from the street outside; the clear, deep-toned voices of a group of Kafirs passing along the footway, rising and falling in cadenced modulation, the barking of a cur, these were the sounds—everyday sounds—that smote upon his ear in the drowsy afternoon heat. Then rose another, and hearing it he quickly put the photograph face downwards, drawing over it a litter of papers. The sound was that of steps, ascending the wooden staircase—for Warren chose to have his own office off the ground floor, contrary to usual custom in Gydisdorp, so as to ensure greater privacy.

"Come in."

There entered the same clerk, having barely had time to knock.

“Mr Wyvern would like to see you, sir.”

“Wyvern? Certainly. In a minute or two. I’ll ring.”

The clerk retired. The “minute or two” was spent by Warren in carefully wrapping up the photograph again and replacing it in the drawer. Which done he banged the spring handbell on his table and waited.

“Why, Wyvern, my dear old chap, how are you? Glad to see you again—only wish I could be of more use to you though.”

He was wringing the other’s hand, and his tone was of the most cordial Warren knew how to play on the cordiality stop in a way to soothe the most suspicious, and Wyvern was not suspicious.

“Oh, I’m all right,” said the other, with a careless laugh, not altogether free from a note of despondency.

“By Jove! You look it too,” said Warren, taking in the tall, fine figure, and the clear-cut face with its hall-mark of breeding stamped large. The clear blue eyes, too, were those of a man in the pink of condition, and taking it all in he realised that with his own powers of attraction, which were undoubted, he himself would be nowhere beside this one, or, at any rate, not where he wanted to be—and the rest didn’t matter. “Well, now, what are the latest developments? They are going to foreclose, aren’t they?”

“Yes. It doesn’t matter much in the long run. I’ve got another scheme on hand now. I’m going to sell out and clear.”

“Eh? The deuce you are?” cried Warren, surprised out of his normal and impassive attitude. “Have a drink, old chap—then we can talk things over snugly. What’ll you have? Whisky or dop?”

“Dop, thanks. It’s a Heaven-sent liquor for this climate.”

Warren took the opportunity while getting out the said refreshment to pull himself together. The other’s news had come just in the nick of time. He need not now take over the mortgage on Seven Kloofs. Its owner was going to dear out anyhow; and he himself would be saved a sure and certain loss.

“Here you are now,” he said, “help yourself. Have a weed, too,” taking a cigar out of a box, and shoving the latter across to Wyvern. “So you’re going to clear, are you? Well, I shall miss you, old chap, so will someone else, I expect—eh? Of course, as acting for Keeling, I’ve been in a sort of way a professional enemy, but I haven’t really, for I’ve more than once kept him from putting the screw on you.”

“I know you have, Warren, and it’s devilish good of you.”

“Oh, that’s all right. You see, we can’t refuse business unless it’s downright shady, so I couldn’t chuck this because you and I are pals. Besides, I’ve done you far more good by taking it. If I hadn’t, Shafto would have got it, and I don’t think, somehow, you’d have found him any improvement. Eh?”

“No, indeed,” laughed Wyvern, who didn’t like Shafto, and whom Shafto didn’t like.

“You’ll find it a bit of a wrench parting with your place, Wyvern?”

“Rather. I love every stick and stone on it, although I’ve only had it such a short time. Besides—it has associations.”

“Of course,” laughed the other, significantly. “One of them being that it has ruined you.”

“Well, yes. But even that has carried its compensations.”

“What are you going to launch out in next? I know you’re a reticent chap, Wyvern, but we’re old pals, and if there’s any sort of way in which I can ever give you a leg up, you know you can rely upon me. I don’t ask with any notion of poking my nose into your private affairs, you know.”

“Well, first of all I’m going to Natal to look up a former friend of mine. We served together in the Zulu War; in fact, we raced neck to neck off that infernal Hlobane Mountain, through thousands of raging devils, and made rather more than a nodding acquaintance with grim old Death that day.”

“By Jove! I should think so. Who is he, by the way?”

“He’s trading in Zululand. He thinks I might join him with advantage.”

“I see,” said Warren, secretly foiled in that he had not got the name. But he was nothing if not cautious. He could get at that later, while not seeming too curious. “Well, I hope

you'll have luck—and return triumphant. By the way, didn't you have a bit of a breeze with old Le Sage the other day?"

"Now how the devil did you get hold of that for a yarn, Warren? I haven't opened my head about it to any living soul—not even a nigger."

The other smiled knowingly.

"There's very little I don't get hold of, old chap. What if Le Sage told me himself?"

"Did he?"

"Yes. He abused you so infernally that I had to tell him to stop—reminding him you were a pal of mine. Then he abused me, but that I didn't mind. We do a lot of business together. You can stand a good deal from anybody on those terms."

"I suppose so. I like Le Sage and don't bear any grudge against him, though for a day or two after I did feel rather sore. He lost his temper a bit, and I felt sorry for him, because losing one's temper takes it out of one so. I know it does out of me when I lose mine."

Warren roared.

"When you lose yours! Why, you never do."

"Don't I? But it's a most infernal weakness. You are sure to come out bottom dog if you do."

"That's about it. Have another drink? No? Sure? Well, then, old man, come out with me to my place for the night. What do you say? We can have a good old yarn, and we shan't have many more of them if you're trekking."

"All right. I will."

"That's good. Now look here. I've got about an hour's business to tackle, then you romp back here, and we'll ride out together. No. I won't ask you to take a cut in at écarté. I know you hate the sight of a pack of cards as dourly as any Covenanting Presbyterian 'meenister.'"

"Well, I do," laughed Wyvern, "but not for the same reason. The evening isn't the time for mathematical calculation. It's the time for yarning and pipes, and conviviality in general. All right. In an hour, then. So long."

Warren ran a bachelor establishment some seven miles out of Gydisdorp. It was, in fact a fine farm, but he was interested in it mainly as a game preserve; the fanning department he turned over to an overseer "on the halves." Not that he was ignorant on that side either, for he exacted his full share of what was yielded by the capabilities of the place. Here he was wont to entertain his friends, and comparatively high play was frequently the order of the evening; indeed it was whispered that it constituted a material addition to his store, both in currency and landed estate. He did neither at Wyvern's expense, however, for the latter declared, once and for all, that he had nothing to lose, and in the next place the whole thing bored him beyond words.

So when Wyvern returned an hour later the two men rode out together, and passed an exceedingly pleasant and convivial evening. Wherein Warren was a paradox. He had a real liking for the other, and would have done anything in the world to do him a good turn, under all other circumstances. Here, however, Wyvern must be sacrificed, for mere friendship was but a featherweight beside Warren's overmastering but as yet secret passion for Lalanté Le Sage, and have we not said that the sum of Warren's credo was Number 1!

And of the two portraits, one in Warren's office, the other in his home, Wyvern, of course, knew nothing.

Chapter Ten.

In the Third Kloof.

Wyvern was sitting out on the stoep smoking his first after supper pipe.

The night was still fairly warm, though just a touch of a sharp twinge showed that it was one of those nights whereon it might not be good to sit still in the open—let alone doze in one's chair—too long. A broad moon, not yet at full, hung in the cloudlessness of the star-gemmed firmament, and he sat listening to the voices of night—the shrill bay of hunting jackals, the ghostly whistle of invisible plover overhead, the boom of belated beetles, the piping screech of tree-frogs, and every now and again an unrestful bark from the dogs lying on the moonlit sward in front. Yet, listening, he heard them not, for his mind was active in other directions. For instance, it was just such a night as this, nearly a month ago, that Lalanté had been sitting here with him, nestling to his side, and the sweet witching hour of enchantment had gone by in happy converse. Yet, since, what transition had taken place. A few stolen meetings, more or less hurried, were all the comfort his weary soul could obtain, and now in a day or two, he would be going forth from here homeless—homeless from this home he loved so well, and, of late, tenfold, in that she was to share it with him.

Then despondency grew apace. His new venture—what was likely to come out of that? Was it indeed as Le Sage had said—that he had not got it in him to do any good for himself? But as though to brace him, came the recollection of this girl, and her sweet presence here, here on the very spot where he now was; this girl, so totally outside his previous experience, so totally unlike anyone he had ever seen before, in her sunny winsomeness, in her brave clear hope, and unconventional decision of character, and, far above all, the unreserved richness of her love which she had poured forth all upon him. Her presence seemed with him now in the distilling fragrance of the sweet calm night—would that it really were—to charm away the despondency that lay upon his soul. Despondency was not strength, she had said in her brave encouraging way. No, it was not; but how throw it off? Suddenly an idea struck him.

He went into the house. Two guns in their covers stood in a corner. One of these he unsheathed, and opening the breech looked down the barrels against the light. They were clear and without a speck. One was rifled, to take the Number 2 Musket ammunition, the other was smooth bore Number 12, and a complete cylinder, guiltless of choke. From a drawer he took half-a-dozen cartridges to fit each; those for the smooth bore being loaded with loepers—three and three and three, in layers, a charge calculated to stop the very devil himself. Then changing his boots for a pair of velschoenen made of the softest of raw hide and quite noiseless, he set forth.

The dogs, lying outside, seeing the gun, sprang up, squirming and whining with delight. It needed quite an amount of persuasion, objurgatory, and running to a mild kick or two, to convince them that their aid and companionship was not in the least wanted upon this occasion. It even required the argument of a couple of stones—flung so as carefully to avoid hitting them—when he reached the outer gate, conclusively to convince them. Then Wyvern took his way along the narrow bush track heading for the entrance to the deep wild kloofs—alone.

He had struck the spoor of a leopard—from the pads an unusually large one—that morning, leading along the bottom of the mazy network of kloofs. Into one of these it had led—the one known as the Third Kloof—and from the passing and repassing of the tracks, now faint, now fresh, he had deduced that the beast was in the habit of using this way as a regular path. Here, then, was a cure for despondency—temporary but exhilarating—but the exhilaration was somewhat dashed by the thought that this was probably the last time he would undertake such a quest here, in what his neighbours characterised by the term of his "vermin-preserve" and voted an unmitigated pest.

Shod in silence he took his way noiselessly along. The bottom of the kloofs was smooth and grassy, which, of course, favoured him. Faint zephyrs of the still night air fanned his face, and here and there a rustling in the black mysterious depths of the bush on either hand, told that his presence was not altogether unknown to its keen denizens. To the dwellers in towns and artificiality there would have been something inexpressibly weird and nerve-stirring in this mystery-suggesting solitude, in the great sweep of the bush-clad spurs, black and gloomy in shadow, silvern and ghostly where the moon reached them, and in the stealthy unknown sounds coming unexpectedly, now on this hand now on that, from the darksome depths of their recesses, but to this man it all brought a strange tightening of the heart. All this mystery of shaggy wood, and sphinx-like krantz looming grey in the moonlight, had been his—his property, his very own—and now it was so no longer. The cloud of despondency was deepening down upon him again.

He had been walking now rather more than an hour, and the moon, mounting higher, was pouring down her pale vertical beams right upon these labyrinthine recesses. Then he struck off from the valley bottom, and ascending, cautiously, noiselessly, the steep and stony hillside, gained a point some fifteen yards higher up.

The position was formed by some small boulders, overhung by spek-boem, and it commanded an ample view of anything passing beneath. He knew the spot well, as indeed he knew every inch of that bushy maze, in parts so thick and tangled and thorn-studded as to be well-nigh impenetrable; many a fine bushbuck ram had he stopped in mid career from this very point when they had been driving out the kloofs, during one of

those hunts to which he would from time to time convene his neighbours. Here, as he lay, he scanned the open smoothness of the grassy valley bottom. But upon it there was no sign of any moving life.

The kloof ended in a mass of tumbled terraced cliff, overhung by a row of straight-stemmed, plumed euphorbia; with aloes, gnome-like in the moonlight, caught here and there in crevice or on ledge. Within the face of the rock slanted black clefts, constituting a complete rookery for the denizens of what his neighbours termed "Wyvern's vermin-preserve." And it was, from his point of view, the very heart of the surrounding maze, and was known as the Third Kloof.

At the meetings of the Gydisdorp Farmers' Association, Wyvern's name was held in evil odour on this account, yet now, lying out in the ghostly, solitary night, he thought of it with glee; for was he not possessor, even if for the last time, of what little there was left of strange, wild Nature, and how many of those who thus decried him, at this hour snoring in bed, would have taken the trouble to turn out under the moon to reduce the "vermin" aforesaid by one? With a lively gathering and dogs, and all that, they were ready enough, but—generally missed what they came out for, and were happy enough to shoot bushbucks instead.

One of these now passed immediately below him as he lay, a fine ram, its dark hide and white belly, and long, straight, slightly spiral horns showing in the moonlight almost as clear as by day. But he never moved. This was not his game to-night. This was not what he had come out for. Then he noticed that the animal began to show signs of uneasiness. It stopped short, raised its head from the grass it had been daintily nibbling, then resumed its nibbling. Then it raised its head again, and seemed to be listening; its full lustrous eye turned towards him showed concern. The head then turned towards the upper end of the kloof, and in the clear light the spectator could even see the working of the nostrils as the graceful animal snuffed in the still night air as though winding something. Then with a couple of bounds it disappeared within the blackness of the further line of bush.

The pulses of the lonely watcher tingled. What had alarmed the buck? All his senses were now concentrated on the point towards which the startled animal had been looking. Ah! This was what he had come out for.

There had stolen out into the open a shape, a long, cat-like, spotted shape. Well he knew it, and now more than ever did excitement thrill his frame. The beast paused, standing erect, its tail slightly waving, its head thrown upwards and opened into a mighty yawn which displayed its great fangs. There was a water-hole in the hollow of the kloof, usually a mere mass of slimy liquid mud, now, thanks to the recent rains fairly well

filled. To this the leopard paced, its massive velvety paws noiseless in their springy gait. Then dropping its head it began to lap, and the disturbance of the water seemed quite loud in the stillness of the night. Cautiously the watcher took aim. The question was should he use the rifle or the shot barrel. At that short distance he could not miss. He decided in favour of the bullet, and had just got his sight well on behind the shoulder, when—

The great leopard raised its speckled head, and suddenly gathered itself together, as though listening intently. This for a fraction of a minute, but sufficiently long to have shifted its position, and the moonlight was uncertain. But before the watcher could get his sights on to the right spot again, in a glide and a bound it had disappeared into the sheltering shadow of the bush.

Wyvern's disgust will hardly bear describing in words. Why had he not got in his shot while he had the chance, and while it was well-nigh impossible to miss. Now he had let his chance go by, and it was not in the least likely to recur. But, what on earth was it that had alarmed the beast?

Below, like an eye, the water-hole glared dully. Beyond it now something was standing—a something which seemed to have risen out of the very earth itself—and it took the black figure of a man. And Wyvern was conscious of the cold shuddering thrill that passed through his own system, for the hideous pock-marked countenance turned upward towards him with deathlike stare, was that of the big Kafir whom the puff-adder had bitten—had bitten again and again and who was, of course, long since dead.

How could it be otherwise? No human system could survive an hour with all that deadly venom injected into it. He could have sworn to that awful face—it had been too deeply impressed upon his recollection at the time of the ghastly incident for him to forget it. There could not be another like it in the world; and it was fully visible to him now with the moon full upon it as the phantom stood there, huge and black. No—the thing could not be mortal. It was a physical impossibility—and he felt his flesh creep as it had never yet done.

The figure was moving. It had struck a crouching attitude, and was coming straight for where he lay. Instinctively Wyvern grasped the gun—though what was the use of a weapon against a thing not of flesh and blood? For a second it paused, then with a bound like that of the savage animal it had just scared away it alighted where the bush and the open met. There was a momentary and convulsive struggle accompanied by fierce hissing, then the horrible figure sprang upright, and stood, holding aloft, firmly grasped by the neck, a large puff-adder.

In the throes of strangulation the bloated coils of the reptile whipped the air convulsively, smooth and slimy in the moonlight—but it was powerless to strike. Itself of no light weight, yet its destroyer was able to hold it at arm's length and at the same time never relax that deadly, strangling grip—the while the expression of the repulsive and horrible countenance turned upon the agonising reptile was one of fiendish gloating. At length the furious writhings died down into a faint muscular heave, and the black fiend, relaxing none of his grip of the now dead reptile, glided into the dark shades which had covered the retreat of the leopard.

Not a sound had been uttered—beyond the first hissing of the snake—not a word said; the whole scene had been horrible and eerie beyond the power of words to describe, in its weird setting of moonlit forest, and cliff and rugged spur. What devilish scene was this which had been enacted there, all in so brief a space of time that the witness thereof could hardly believe he had not dreamt it? Though not in the least timid, Wyvern was an imaginative man, and his imaginative powers were largely stimulated and fostered by his solitary life. Now he asked himself whether the wretched savage had really returned to earth—in a word—"walked," and there in the wild and moonlit solitude the answer seemed very like an affirmative. He recalled Lalanté's scare when they had been searching for the remains of this very being, and how no trace of any living thing had been apparent, even to Le Sage's practised eyes. What did it all mean? Well, it need concern him no further, for in a day or two his interest in Seven Kloofs would be a thing of the past. And having thus decided, a sudden and, under the circumstances, strange drowsiness came upon him and he slept.

The Southern Cross turned in the heavens, and the soft breaths of night played around his forehead and still Wyvern slumbered on, and in the midst of that drear but beautiful solitude he dreamed. He was back at Seven Kloofs again, and, once more, it was his very own. All anxieties were wiped away, and they were rejoicing together in the joy of possession, and in their new-found, undimmed happiness—and then, and then—the stars faded in the lightening vault as the chill dawn awoke the sleeper, heart-weary and sick with the melting of the blissful illusion. But—what was this?

A strange sound, terminating in a sort of whine. Keen and alert now, Wyvern peered forth, just as the great leopard halted beneath, finishing his cavernous yawn, and looking inquiringly upward where scent or instinct told him some enemy was lurking. But just a fraction of a moment too long did he tarry, as the bullet sped forth; the thundrous echoes of the report rolling in many-tongued reverberation among the rocks and krantzes. The great spotted cat lay gasping out its life, with a severed spine.

There are compensatory moments in life, and this was one of them. In the keen exhilaration of the successful shot, Wyvern noted that the beast was an abnormally large

and fine specimen of its kind. The skin should be a parting gift to Lalanté; a final memento of Seven Kloofs.

Chapter Eleven.

Dreams—and a Visit.

"I wonder why Mr Wyvern never comes over to see us now," remarked small Frank Le Sage, one morning.

"I believe he and Lala have had a row," rejoined smaller Charlie; for thus were they wont at times to abbreviate their sister's uncommon, and to them high-sounding name.

She for her part smiled. She would not "shut them up," she liked to hear them talk about him.

"Man, but he's a fine chap," went on the first speaker. "I seem to miss him no end."

"Rather," assented the other. "And doesn't he just know how to make stunning catapults!"

"And to use them too," came the rejoinder.

Lalanté, who had been contemplating the small speakers with a smile of tender approval, burst out laughing at this ingenuous and whole-hearted appreciation of the absent one's claim to esteem.

"And so that's all he's a 'fine chap' for, is it?" she said.

"Oh, no. He's a jolly fine chap all round, you know."

"Rather," confirmed the other. Then, insinuatingly, "I say, Lalanté. Let us off that beastly catechism this morning, won't you? It's such a jolly morning to go down the kloof and humbug about."

It was Sunday, and the form of instruction thus irreverently qualified, was wont on that day to take the place of the "three R's" already referred to.

"Yes, and get yourselves into a nice mess, and tear yourselves to pieces. Supposing any visitors were to turn up—you wouldn't be fit to be seen," answered the girl. But her tone was, for the object they had in view, anything but hopeless.

"We shan't get any visitors except Mr Wyvern, and he won't care," replied he who had made the request.

“I hope he will turn up,” declared the other. “He does spin such ripping good yarns. Do let us off, Lala.”

For answer they were encircled by an arm apiece, and upon each eager, pleading face was bestowed a hearty kiss.

“You darlings, I will then,” she said, releasing them. “But—go and put on your old clothes. I’m not going to have you running wild in those.”

Away they sped rejoicing. The condition was not a hard one. It is only fair to say, however, that their hymn of praise to the absent Wyvern was in no way inspired by ulterior motive. Their admiration for him was whole-souled and genuine.

Lalanté looked after them with something of a sigh. They could be happy enough—a small trifle would accomplish that. But she? However cheerful and sanguine and comforting she might be in the presence of her lover, there were times, when alone, that her heart failed her. And now that presence was withdrawn.

Nearly a month had gone by since her father had fixed an open quarrel upon him, which quarrel, for all its tragic potentialities, had found a somewhat tame and commonplace outcome at the time, to all outward seeming, that is. She had, as Wyvern had foreseen, come out to welcome him on that eventful morning; and while obliged to bid him good-bye then, had assured him openly and unmistakably, and in the presence of her father, that she had no more intention of giving him up than she had of jumping off the nearest krantz; a declaration which caused Le Sage to snarl and curse. Then Wyvern, having the good sense to see that no good purpose could be served by further irritating his quondam friend, had bidden her good-bye—not less affectionately than usual we may be sure—and had ridden off.

Since then a frost had set in between Lalanté and her father, but it was of his own creation and nursing, for after the first soreness, the girl had shown him the same affection as before, possibly even more; for, strange to say, she was capable of seeing the matter from his point of view; moreover she knew that his own soreness was largely a matter of jealousy in that he was no longer first. But she would not promise not to see Wyvern again, and this rankled in Le Sage’s mind more than ever, especially as he felt certain she would find opportunities of seeing him.

As a matter of fact she did so find them, but they were few and far between—and only then, when her father’s business necessitated his absence from home. Now of this Le Sage was aware, or at any rate more than suspicious. He was too proud to question

Lalanté, she having frankly declared that she could not defer to his wishes in the matter. But his hatred of Wyvern became almost an obsession, dangerous alike to himself and its object. He had one satisfaction, however, out of which he gleaned grim comfort—he held the power now to eject Wyvern from Seven Kloofs within the space of a few months; in the acquisition of which power Vincent Le Sage had made the first bad bargain he had ever been known to make in his life.

Her small brothers having skipped off down the kloof, clad in their old garments and armed with a catapult apiece—to the latter extent supremely happy, Lalanté dropped into a roomy cane chair upon the stoep and let herself go in meditation. Let it not be supposed, however, that hers was any mere contemplative life; far from it. Her strong, capable young nature was eminently cut out for the discharge of everyday duties, and the discharge of them well, too. We have seen how she managed her two small brothers, but her father's comfort came second to nothing, and into all that concerned him, and occupied his daily interest, she entered thoroughly. Whereby it is manifest that from his point of view there was a good deal of excuse to be made for his soreness now. And if, as we have said, she had no "accomplishments," and no high opinion of mere schooling, of which, by the way, she had undergone her full share, she had what was better, tact and the capability of rendering the lives of those belonging to her happy and comfortable.

Leaning back in her chair now, in an attitude of meditative ease, her hands knitted behind the soft masses of her sheeny hair, the curving lines of her figure, gowned in cool white, revealed to a sensuous advantage that was wholly unstudied and unconscious, her large grey eyes dilated between their thick lashes, accentuated by the sun-kissed tinge of brown in her clear complexion, the girl made a beautiful picture. In and out beneath the green leaves of the trellised vine which verandahed the stoep, long-waisted hornets winged their way, the winnowing draught of their flight fanning her face; but to such she paid no heed. Her wide gaze was fixed on nothing, but wandered afar—beyond the green and gold of the rolling, spek-boem clad ridges. What was he doing on this heavenly morning? If only he would come over, moved by some afterthought? Why not? Surely a few words need not open so wide a gulf—a few words between men, and one of them angry. But with a sigh she recognised, young as she was, that a few words might open a wider gulf than even a few deeds. If only he would!

There was small chance of it—in fact none. Yet, even then, Lalanté could not be pronounced unhappy. She had all his love, and he had hers. No room was there for any shadow of a doubt or misgiving upon that score, and now she, so to say, bathed herself in its consciousness, even though temporarily reft of the presence of the other of the two thus making to themselves a very paradise within the world!

Strange to say, considering her youth, and the circumstances, after the first natural soreness Lalanté had shown no resentment against her father for the part he had borne in the matter. Him she had treated in the same way as ever, indeed in a manner calculated to soothe rather than feed his rancour. On one or two occasions when he had savagely abused the absent one, she had, with great mastery of self-control, refrained from angry retort, and had begged him, as a matter of consideration for her, to refrain from wounding her. "You would not hurt your little Lalanté, would you, dear?" she had said with an arm round his shoulder. "Well, when you say these things you hurt me as much as you would if you hit me with a stick or a stone. No—more." And Le Sage had stared, startled, into the moist eyes, and mumbling something, had left the room—hurriedly. But he never abused Wyvern again, at least not in her presence—nor when there was any possibility of her being within earshot. It is even possible that he might have relented, and extended a helping hand to the unlucky one, or at any rate have tolerated a further effort; but the hard, business instinct of the invariably successful man rose, as a bar—as a very bulkhead of hard oak—between him and his more human, and better inclinations.

The hot, dreamy hours of the forenoon flowed on, and still Lalanté sat, to all outward appearance doing nothing, but in reality with racing thoughts. She did not even care to read. You read in order to be taken out of yourself, which was just what she didn't want. Her father was in a small inner room, with a pipe in his mouth, making up—we regret to say, having previously stated that the day was Sunday—certain accounts, for, in addition to his farming ventures, he did a good deal in the stock-jobbing line. And the girl sat there, dreaming on, reconstituting in her mind a retrospection of all that had passed within that year, which was, if there had ever been such a thing, literally and actually annus amoris.

She recalled, for instance, their first meeting; how she had come in, hot and dishevelled—or at any rate feeling it—after a long scramble with the two small boys away over the veldt—to find, all unexpectedly, the man of whom she had heard so much as her father's—then—intimate friend. She remembered every line of the expression of the clear-cut, high-bred face, the look of admiration that had momentarily leapt into his eyes directly they rested upon her—hot and dishevelled—in straight, kindly glance; the tall, fine proportions of his frame, the courteous, interested conversation in which he had engaged her. She went over the hiatus of their prompt confidence and growing mutual interest, until—a certain evening, when standing together under the radiant moon amid the fragrant breaths of night—an evening which seemed specially created for such an object—their love had, as it were, rushed together and declared itself as one—yes, as one from the very first. For a brief time life had been a perfectly uninterrupted Paradise, and that to both—and then—and then—trouble, care—black care—had stolen in more and more, but—through it all, love was ever the same, ever undimmed, indeed if

possible refined and winnowed by the prospect of adversity. No—assuredly there was no room for unhappiness in Lalanté's present any more than in her past. The cloud hung heavy, but it would surely lift. It must. It should.

"Who the devil is this?"

The girl started from her day-dream, and turned quickly. In the doorway behind her stood her father, a pair of binoculars in his hand. Then she looked in the direction in which under the circumstance she naturally would look.

Away, where the road topped the ridge, two horsemen were riding; and they were approaching the house. They might have been merely passers-by certainly, but the girl's true instinct informed her that it was not so, and her heart beats quickened. Yet—why two?

"One of 'em's Warren," pronounced Le Sage, with the glasses at his eyes. "And the other—why, damn it! it's—it's that fellow, Wyvern."

This staccato. Lalanté, rising, saw that her father's face had paled, and the hands that held the binoculars shook.

"Now, dear," she adjured, putting a hand round his shoulder. "Don't lose yourself, and remember he may have some particular object in wanting to see you. He has never been here since, and it's quite possible that he has. Now do receive him with common civility. You must, you know. You can't be offensive to a man on your own doorstep. Now can you?"

"Oh, can't I? I seem to remember telling this one never to come near my 'own doorstep' again," snorted Le Sage.

"Never mind. Wait till you hear what he has got to say. You will, won't you."

By this time she had got both arms round his neck, and was holding it tight. He looked into her luminous eyes with his own sombre and angry ones, and somehow the anger seemed to die.

"Very well, dear," he said with an effort, though more gently, and loosening her hold. "I'll wait and see."

Meanwhile the two horsemen were drawing very near.

Chapter Twelve.

Farewell!

Warren it was who broke the awkwardness of the meeting.

“Hullo, Le Sage,” he sang out as they dismounted. “I lugged this chap over to say good-bye to you. He’s just going to clear. I told him he couldn’t clear without saying good-bye, just because you had a bit of a growl at each other.”

This in his most breezy way. Le Sage put out a hand to Wyvern, though not particularly cordially.

“Oh, you’re really going, are you?” he said.

“Yes. Day after to-morrow. My sale comes off next week, but I shan’t wait for it.”

The air was still and clear, and, upon such, voices travel afar. The above conversation, taking place at the stables, had been heard by Lalanté, who therefore felt exceedingly friendly towards Warren, whose words implied that the other would not have come over but for his persuasion. She knew, of course, that Wyvern would not leave without managing a farewell meeting between them—just as she knew what her father did not—that he was on the eve of departure. Yet, here he was, and he should not leave her that day if she could help it. There was parting at the end of it, but all its precious hours in between were theirs.

The anxiety which had at first overclouded her face cleared, as she knew by the conversation of the three men drawing near the house, that her father had kept his word. If his tone was somewhat constrained, why that was only to be expected.

“Well, Miss Lalanté,” cried Warren, in his breeziest way as she came to meet them. “I hope we haven’t invaded you too unexpectedly.”

“Not at all,” she answered cordially. “It was good of you to come over.”

In secret Wyvern somewhat resented this way Warren had of using the girl’s own name, even though not omitting the formal prefix. It was quite unnecessary, and formal prefixes are prone to lapse on occasions. But this little jealous twinge was allayed with her greeting of him—all in the old way. He appreciated, too, Warren’s tactful thought in turning Le Sage’s attention right in the other direction.

Then the small boys came in, hot and dusty after their ramble, and it behoved Lalanté to go and superintend the process of making them presentable for dinner—for which it was nearly time.

In process of that festivity assuredly Wyvern's reputation with the two youngsters as a spinner of "such ripping good yarns" did not suffer as they listened open-mouthed to his narrative of shooting the big leopard in the Third Kloof. The more startling incident of that night he did not narrate for their benefit.

"Man, Mr Wyvern, but I'd like to have been there," said Charlie.

"Do take us with you some night, Mr Wyvern," supplemented Frank.

"There won't be any 'some night' again, Frank. I'm going away."

"What?" cried both youngsters. "No. It's not true."

"But it is," answered Wyvern, with a tinge of sadness. "The day after to-morrow. I've only come to-day to say good-bye."

"But you can't go. Lala, tell him he's not to. He'll stop if you tell him to."

These two youngsters were actually beginning to feel "choky," in proof whereof a plateful apiece of one of their favourite puddings seemed in danger of being left untouched.

The whole-souled affection of the two little boys—Lalanté's brothers—went to Wyvern's heart.

"Never mind, old chappies," he said. "We shall meet again some day, and then you'll be big fellows, and will want to patronise me because I don't bring down a bushbuck ram at four hundred yards when only his head is showing round a spek-boem bush, as you'll do. Here, stop that," he added, as Charlie, the smallest of the pair, began to sniffle ominously, then giving up the effort, broke into a genuine howl. "Men don't cry—and, this last day we most be all jolly together. See?"

"If you're going in for the Zulu trade, Wyvern, I'm afraid you've hit upon the wrong time," struck in Le Sage. "I hear they're all unsettled in the Zulu country over the return of Cetywayo. There'll be a lively war up there among themselves I'm told."

"Got to chance that, like most things in this sad and weary world."

“Man, Mr Wyvern, but they’ll kill you if you go up there,” remarked one of the small boys in round-eyed consternation. “Why you fought against them in the war”—some of his Zulu war experiences being among the “ripping good yarns” he had the reputation for spinning.

“Oh, no they won’t. Besides, you don’t suppose they know who fought against them or who didn’t—and even if they did they’d only respect me the more for it.”

“There’s a little matter I want to talk over with you, Le Sage,” said Warren, as they got up from table, “if it isn’t trenching on your Sabbath rest.”

“Oh, Sabbath rest be hanged,” answered Le Sage, shortly. “Come along.”

“Father, don’t talk in that abominably heathenish way,” laughed Lalanté. “Before your children too!”

She and Wyvern, both, and again, appreciated Warren’s tact, for neither of them believed in the pretext. They had not been alone together yet, and Warren, like the good fellow he was, had resolved that they should be. That was how they read it.

So while the other two adjourned to Le Sage’s business den, these two adjourned to the stoep. The small boys, like their kind, unable to keep still for any length of time, betook themselves off somewhere down in the garden.

“Love, and so you are really going,” began Lalanté with her hand in his.

“Really. But it is going only to return.”

“Yes, I feel that. Yet—it is like parting with one’s very life.”

“That is how I feel it. And yet—and yet—this time somehow I am sanguine. I have a sort of instinct that things are going to mend; that one’s luck cannot always be on the down grade. I can’t tell why, but something—a sort of revelation, perhaps—has come to me telling me I am doing right in going away from here—wrench though it will be. But mere locality—why that’s nothing as long as we have each other. Is it?”

“Darling, you know it is not,” she answered, her head resting in the hollow of his shoulder. “If it were a mere rock island in the middle of the sea and I had you, it would be Paradise.”

He laughed sadly. But it was no time for upsetting her ideals. For a few moments they sat in a happy, if somewhat sad, silence; the same hum of winged insects making its droning lull upon the sunlit air; the sweeping roll of golden green spread out in radiant vista beneath the unclouded sky; the full, seductive beauty of the girl nestling within his arms.

"I was longing for you so," she said at last. "I was sitting here all the morning going over all the time since we had first known each other. I felt that I would give half my life if you would only come over to-day. And—here you are."

"But you didn't think I should go without seeing you again, child?"

"Of course not. But it would have been one of those hurried snatched meetings in the veldt. Well now I have got you all to myself, and I will keep you. Come. We will have a last long walk alone together while they are in there."

The while the thought was hammering in her brain, that to-morrow at the same time all would be as it was now; no shadow of a difference in anything around but—he would be gone.

"I won't keep you waiting a moment," she said, her fingers intertwined in his as she rose. "We will go before they come out."

Wyvern, left there even for that "moment," could not help blessing the luck that had brought Warren over to Seven Kloofs the night before, to talk him into coming to bid good-bye to Le Sage as if nothing had happened. As Lalanté had said, they would have managed a final and farewell meeting; but as she had also said, it would have been a snatched and hurried one.

True to her word she reappeared in a moment, looking her best and sweetest; and that was very good to look at indeed. And they went forth, down the way they knew so well, the way they had so often trodden together, and the voices of the gladsome, sunlit veldt made music as they went.

"Oh, darling," said the girl, as she leaned heavily upon the arm passed through hers, and upon his shoulder. "However am I going to get through the time without you—day after day, week after week, even month after month, and know that you are hundreds of miles from me, after this year—this whole year—when we have been all in all to each other? Tell me—again. No one has ever been to you as I have? Tell me. I will feed on it after you have—gone."

Her hungry, passionate accents thrilled his every fibre, then his arms were around her in a close embrace.

“Lalanté—my own love—my one and only love, I could go on telling you the same thing. No one has ever been to me as you have been or ever could be. You know how from the time our eyes first met we knew we were made for each other, and it was not long before we proved it to be so.”

“Yes, I know. I was thinking of that all this morning, was bathing myself in a very day-dream of our time together. And now, you are leaving me.”

“Oh, sweet—don’t put that tone—that hopeless tone—into it. I am leaving you only to come back to you. You know that there is no one like you in all the world. I could not imagine anything approaching a duplicate of you if I were to try. But, if ever I find a difficulty it is what on earth you can see in me to love like this: in me—a battered failure all along the line. What is it?”

“What is it?” she answered, slowly, her eyes responding to his straight, full gaze. “What is it? I don’t know. Only a little trick of thought-reading—character-reading rather—and when I had seen you I thought I had seen—the Deity.”

“No, no, child,” he said quickly and reprovingly. “You must not—to put it on the lowest ground—pitch your ideals at such dizzy heights. Only think what a fall it means one of these days.”

“Now I could laugh. Never mind. We have just so many hours—how many have we? And then—blank—deathlike blank.”

“No—no—no! Not deathlike. It is life—life through absence. See now, Lalanté—what a sweet name that is, for I am perfectly certain nobody else in the world bears it—I am looking at you, now in the full glow of the sun at his best light I am looking into and photographing your dear face—as if it needed that—so that it will remain fixed in the retina of memory through day and night when we are apart. Those eyes—yes, look into mine, so will it burn the picture in more indelibly, if possible.”

“Oh, love, love!” Her accents thrilled in their passionate abandonment. “You are going away from me and you have torn my very heart out with you. Yes, I look into your eyes, and my very first prayer is that they may look at me in my dreams as they do now. Yes. Even parting is bliss beside what I could imagine of dead love.”

“Dead love! My Lalanté, how could such a term occur as between you and me?”

“No—no. Not as between us. My imagination was only running away with me. That was all.”

Thus they wandered on. Half unconsciously their steps turned towards a favourite spot, where even on the hottest of days shade lay, in the coolness reflected by a rock-face never turned to the sun, ever shadowed by an overhanging growth. Birds piped in the brake with varying and fantastic note, while now and again the still air was rent by the lusty shouting of cock-koorhaans, rising fussily near and far, disturbed by real or imaginary cause of alarm. It was an ideal place, this sheltered nook, for such meetings as these.

Hour followed upon hour, but they heeded it not at all, as they sat and talked; and the glance of each seemed unable to leave the other, and the pressure of interlocked fingers tightened. This would be their first parting since they had first met, and it was difficult to determine upon which of the two it fell the hardest Wyvern was a man of deep and strong feeling, in no wise dulled by the fact that he could no longer exactly be called young, and the impending parting had been with him as an all-pervading heart pain to an extent which well-nigh astonished himself—while as for the girl, her passionate adoration of him was as her whole being. It is safe to say that he could have done with her what he chose; and realising this, and how he stood as a tower of strength to her, not as a source of weakness, in his firm unbending principle, the very fact fed and fostered that adoration.

It was here that their real farewell was made, here alone, unseen save by the bright birds that flitted joyously and piped melodiously in the shaded solitude.

“Oh, my own, my own,” whispered Lalanté, her beautiful form shaken by sobs she was powerless to repress. “My adored love, you will come back to me, even if you meet with nothing but ill-fortune—worse even than you have met with up till now. You will come back to me. Promise.”

He could only bend his head in reply. He dared not trust himself to speak.

“Haven’t those two come in yet?” said Le Sage shortly, sitting up in his chair. “Magtig! Warren, I must have been asleep.”

“Well, you were, but why not?” answered Warren easily. “Oh, never mind about them: you were young once yourself, Le Sage.”

The latter looked grim.

“Wyvern’s not so damned young,” he said. “That makes it all the worse, because it shows he’ll never do any good.”

“He may where he’s going.”

Le Sage snorted.

“Where he’s going. Going!—Yes, that’s the only good thing about him—he’s going.”

If only the speaker knew how intensely his listener was agreeing with him. It might be that Le Sage’s hostility was not the most formidable obstacle these two had to reckon with. A sufficiently lurid picture was at that moment passing before the mental gaze of the easy-mannered, elf-possessed lawyer. People who were “going” did not always return.

“Why, here they are,” he said, “and the kiddies with them.”

The two youngsters, whom they had chanced to pick up on the way, were a factor in easing down the situation, which was as well, for Lalanté’s face with all her brave efforts at absolute self-control, was not without some pathetic trace of the strain she was undergoing.

Supper, that evening, was not a particularly convivial institution; in fact, the conversation was mainly sustained by Warren. Even the two small boys were instinctively subdued.

“By Jove, I believe we are going to have a storm,” said Warren, as they got up. “We’d better saddle up and trek before it comes, eh, Wyvern?”

“Well, you might just escape it,” said Le Sage, with alacrity. “I’ll go and see about getting the horses up.”

The sun was setting in gloomy, lurid fire behind an opaque curtain of inky cloud, as they went forth into the open air; which said air was strangely still and boding and oppressive, though now and again a fitful puff would bring dull distant rumblings of thunder. Wyvern went round with his uncordial host to the stables, while the others remained on the stoep to watch it.

“I don’t seem to like starting in the face of this,” said Warren. “It’s coming up and we shall get it thick about half way.”

“Then don’t start,” said Lalanté decisively. “We can easily put you up. Ah—look!”

A succession of vivid flashes lit up the gloomy murk in the distance, followed immediately by a heavy, detonating roar.

“I believe you’re right,” said Warren, meditatively. “By Jove, it’s coming on at express pace—right for us, too.”

“One thing is certain,” pronounced Lalanté, not even trying to suppress the jubilant ring in her voice, “and that is that you two can’t possibly go: back to-night. It isn’t safe. Look how the storm is working up, right across your road too. No, you can’t. Now, can you, Mr Warren?”

“I’m in Wyvern’s hands,” answered Warren with a laugh, “and he, I suspect, is in yours.”

“Very well. That settles it. Come. We’ll go round and tell them not to bother about getting up the horses, for you’re both going to stop the night. I’m horribly afraid of lightning—for other people.”

The livid, inky cloud was slowly and surely advancing, and as she had said, it was right across the road back to Seven Kloofs. As the two went forth a distant but heavy boom rolled dully to their ears.

“For other people?” repeated Warren significantly. “And for yourself? You are never afraid?”

“No, I don’t believe I am.”

Warren looked at her with warm admiration, and something else—which he succeeded in disguising the more easily that—as we have said—she was in total ignorance of those two portraits which he cherished in secret.

“Here, father,” she called out, as they reached the place where Le Sage and Wyvern were standing, “call those boys back. The horses won’t be wanted till to-morrow. Just look what an awful storm there is working up. Right across the way too.”

“By Jove, so there is,” said Le Sage. “Hope it means real rain, that’s all. You two ’ll have to shake down here to-night.”

The swift glance exchanged between Wyvern and Lalanté did not escape Warren. To those two the coming storm had brought reprieve. Only of a few hours it was true, but—still a reprieve. Their real farewell had been made, still—

Throwing out its dark and jagged streamers in advance, the black curtain of cloud came driving up. A blinding gleam, and one of those awful metallic crashes that are as though the world itself were cleft in twain, and, ever growing louder as it drew nearer, a confused raving roar.

"Hail, by Jove!" pronounced Le Sage. "That's a nuisance because it means little or no rain. Where are those two youngsters, Lalanté?"

"Indoors."

"And that's where we'd better get, and pretty soon," pronounced Wyvern.

But before they got there a hard and splitting impact caused all to hurry their pace, for it was as though they were being pelted with stones; and indeed they were, for the great white ice-globes came crashing down, as with a roar like that of an advancing tidal wave the mighty hailstorm was upon them; in its terrific clamour almost drowning the bellowing of the thunder.

"We're well out of that," went on Wyvern, as they gained the shelter of the house. "By George, if one had come in for it in an open camp, it would have been a case of covering one's head with one's saddle. The stones are as big as hens' eggs. I've only seen it like that once before. Look."

Outside, the enormous hailstones lay like a fall of ice; and as the blue spectral gleams of lightning fell upon the scene the effect was one of marvellous beauty. It was as though a rain of gigantic diamonds was cleaving and illuminating the darkness, while the layer which overspread the ground flashed out a million points of incandescence. Then, with receding roar, the hail cloud whirled on its course, and there was stillness as of death, save for an intermittent roll of thunder.

Lalanté had found herself drawn to a window—the others were crowding the doorway—and as she pressed to her side the arm that encircled her, she gazed forth upon the weird scene of storm and terror with a kind of ecstasy, and, in her heart, blessing it. But for it she would now be alone—alone and heart-wrung. The evil hour was only postponed—but it was postponed—and they stood thus, close together in the darkness, silent in their sweet, sad happiness.

“We’ll be able to ice our grog to-night, Le Sage,” said Warren presently in his breezy way.

“Why, yes. We’d better have some too—and we may as well have some light upon the scene. See to it, Lalanté.”

“All right, father,” said the girl, cheerfully, but inwardly furiously anathematising Warren for breaking up her last solitude à deux. For she instinctively realised there would be no further opportunity of its renewal—either to-night or to-morrow.

Nor—was there.

Chapter Thirteen.

Bully Rawson—General Ruffian.

Bully Rawson lay in his camp in the Lumisana Forest in north-eastern Zululand. He was playing cards with himself, and as he played he cursed.

Primarily he cursed because he could not quite bring off a move in the game which, with a real adversary, would inevitably give him an advantage—profitable but wholly illicit. Secondarily he cursed merely by way of something to say. Thirdly and generally, he cursed from sheer force of habit; but whichever way he did it, and from whatever motive, Bully Rawson's language was entirely unprintable, and, in its relation to the higher Powers, rather bloodcurdling even to those who were by no means straight-laced.

Now, blowing off a fine stream of such expletive, he rose to his feet, and flung the whole pack of cards high in the air. Naturally they would descend in a wide and scattered shower, then he would make his Swazi boy pick them up again, and kick him for not doing it quick enough. This would relieve his feelings some; and would be consistent with the methods he usually adopted to justify his sobriquet.

Seen erect he was a heavy, thick-set man, with a countenance that was forbidding to the last degree. His nose had at one time been broken, and his eyes rolled fiercely beneath shaggy black eyebrows. He wore a long black beard, just turning grey in parts, and plentifully anointed with tobacco juice; and his hands, knotted and gnarled, seemed to point to enormous muscular strength. He looked round upon the sunlit forest, cursed again, then turned to enter a circular thorn enclosure within which rose the yellow domes of half a dozen grass huts.

Two native girls—well-formed as to frame, and with faces that would have been pleasing only that the bare sight of Bully Rawson was not calculated to bring a pleasant expression into any human countenance—were squatted on the ground. Both wore the impiti, or reddened cone of hair rising from the scalp, together with the apron-like mútya which denotes the married state. They were, in fact, his two wives.

"Where is Pakisa?" he said.

"He? Away at the wood-cutting," answered one.

"You two then, go and pick up the 'pictures' I have scattered."

"And the meat I am roasting—what of it?" said the one who had answered.

“You, Nompai,” turning to the other, “You go—au! tyetya!”

This one got up and went out without a word—taking care not to pass this manly specimen any nearer than she could help. As she rose she slung an infant on to her back—an infant far lighter in colour than the lightest native.

“You, Nkombazana, you are rising to the heavens,” he sneered. “You are growing too tall for me. Now I think some hard stick laid about thy bones will keep thee from growing so over fast.”

The woman’s eyes glittered, and a sort of snarl just revealed the fine white teeth. But she did not move. She only said:

“The Snake-doctor—whau! his múti is great and subtle.”

The white man, in the voice of a wild beast’s growl, fired off a storm of expletives, mixing up Anglo-Saxon where the Zulu fell short of lurid enough blasphemy. But Nkombazana answered nothing, and still did not move.

He made a step towards her, then stopped short. The allusion was one he perfectly understood, and it seemed—yes, it seemed almost to cow him. With her he knew well it would not do to go too far. She was a Zulu, and the daughter of a fairly influential chief; the other, Nompai, was a Swazi and the daughter of nobody in particular, wherefore Nompai came in for her own share of kicks, and most—not all—of Nkombazana’s too. He had a lively recollection of a sudden and unaccountable illness—an internal illness—which had seized upon him on a fairly recent occasion, and which for hours had put him through the torments of the damned. This had followed—it might have been a coincidence—right upon a terrific thrashing he had administered to Nkombazana, and his awful convulsions had only been allayed by the treatment of a certain isanusi—known to the natives as the Snake-doctor—treatment for which he had to pay pretty heavily lest worse should befall him. But though he frequently abused and snarled at her, he had never laid hand—or stick—upon his principal wife since. Indeed he would gladly have been rid of her at any cost now. He would not have hesitated to make away with her, but that he dared not. He would willingly have sent her back to her people, but it would never do to arouse their hostility by the slur upon her that such a course would imply, and have we not said above that her father was an influential chief? So to that extent Nkombazana remained mistress of the situation.

Bully Rawson went into a large hut, which he used as a trading store, and reaching down a square bottle filled an enamelled iron cup. No “trade” gin was this—liquor trading by

the way was not allowed in the Zulu country at that time, but plenty of it was done for all that. No. This was excellent Hollands, and having poured the liberal libation down his throat he went forth again. There was not much trade doing just then, but he had entered into a contract for the cutting of poles, to be taken to the coast and shipped; for which he had obtained a concession from the local chief. Now, having lighted his pipe, he strolled leisurely through the forest to where the sound of saw and axe told that such work was going on.

Several natives were more or less busily engaged. These were not Zulus, for at that time no Zulu had yet learned "the dignity of labour"—not in his own country at any rate. They were for the most part. Tonga boys from the coast, and, as ill-luck would have it, just as Rawson emerged from the trees, one of them happened to be squatting on the ground taking snuff. His back was towards his fate, nor did any of the others dare to warn him. Suddenly he felt as though a tree had fallen upon him, and the next few moments were spent by his employer in savagely kicking him round and round the clearing, till at last the luckless wretch fell on the ground and bowled for mercy. This he might not have got but that his afflictor became aware of the presence of three tall Zulus, who stood watching the proceedings, a gleam of mingled amusement and contempt upon their fine faces.

"Greeting, Inxele!" said one.

Bully Rawson scowled. He resented the familiar use of his native name, instead of the respectful "'Nkose." He further resented the sheaf of assegais and small shield which each carried, and which should have been dropped before coming into his camp, or at any rate, while addressing himself. But the Zulu is quick to recognise a blackguard and loth to show him deference, and that this white man was an egregious blackguard as white men went, these were perfectly well aware.

"I see you, amadoda," he answered shortly.

"He, there, has a message," said the first who had spoken, indicating the only one of the three who was not head-ringed. "It has travelled from Tegwini." (Durban.)

"Well, what is it?" rejoined the white man, shortly.

"It is here," said the unringed native, producing a small packet, which he carried tied on to the end of a stick. Rawson snatched it eagerly. It was a sort of oilskin enclosure.

"Now, what the devil can this be?" he said to himself, fairly puzzled. But the mystery was soon solved. The wrappings being undone, revealed nothing less commonplace that a

mere letter—addressed to himself. Yet why should the bronze hue of his forbidding countenance dull to a dirty white as he stared at the envelope? It might have been because he knew that writing well, and had cherished the fond delusion that the writer hadn't the ghost of an idea as to his own whereabouts. What then? Well, the writer of that letter had power to hang him.

He remembered to give the Zulus snuff out of a large box which he always carried, then while they sat down leisurely to enjoy the same, he tore open the envelope, and that with hands which trembled somewhat. The communication, however, was brevity itself. Thus it ran:

"A friend of mine—name Wyvern—is going into your part, even if he is not already there. Take care of him. Do you hear? Take care of him.

"Warren."

Rawson stared at the words while he read them again and again, "Take care of him." Oh, yes, he would do that, he thought to himself with a hideous laugh. Then he fell to wondering what sort of a man this object of Warren's solicitude might be—whether, in fact, he would prove an easy one to "take care of." Well, that, of course, events would show. Anyway, what was certain was that Warren's wishes had to be attended to by him, Bully Rawson.

Turning to the Zulus he asked about news. Was there any?

Not any, they said. The country was getting more and more disturbed because the English Government could not make up its mind. It made one arrangement to-day, and another took its place to-morrow, and now nobody in Zululand knew who was his chief or whether he had any chief at all. There had been some fighting, they had heard, in Umlandela's country, but even about that there was no certain news.

After a little similar talk they got up and took their leave. Rawson, his mind filled with the untoward turn events had taken, quite forgot to kick or thrash any more of his labourers.

The sun's rays were lengthening, and with a few parting curses to those ill-starred mortals he took his way homeward. The cool shaded forest gloom was pleasant, but his thoughts were not. What he was chiefly concerned about was not the task that Warren had set him to perform. Oh, dear no. That, indeed, was, if anything, rather a congenial one to a born cut-throat such as Bully Rawson. What concerned him, and that mightily, was that Warren should have located so exactly his whereabouts, for he knew that

thenceforward he was that astute practitioner's unquestionable and blindly obedient slave; and the part of obedient anything, in no wise appealed to the temperament of Bully Rawson. If only he could, on some pretext, inveigle Warren himself up to that part; and with the idea came a conviction of its utter futility. Warren was one of the sharpest customers this world ever contained, and none knew this better than he did.

Thus engrossed it is hardly surprising that even such a wide-awake bird as himself should remain ignorant of the fact that he was being followed. Yet he was, and that from the time he had started from the wood-cutting camp. Half a dozen lithe, wiry Zulus—all young men—were on his track, moving with cat-like silence and readiness. They were not armed, save with sticks, and these not even the short-handled, formidable knob-kerrie; but their errand to the white man was of unmistakable import; and fell withal—to the white man.

Suddenly the latter became aware of their presence, and turned. They were upon him; like hounds upon a quarry. But Bully Rawson, though unarmed, and the while cursing his folly at being found in that helpless state, was no easy victim. He shot out his enormous fist with the power of a battering-ram, and landing the foremost fair on the jaw, then and there dropped him. The second fared no better. But, with the cat-like agility of their race, the others, springing around him on all sides at once—here, there, everywhere—kept outside the range of that terrible fist, until able to get in a telling blow. This was done—and the powerful ruffian dropped in his turn, more than half-stunned, the blood pouring from a wound in the temple. Did that satisfy them? Not a bit of it. They then and there set to work and belaboured his prostrate form with their sticks, uttering a strident hiss with each resounding thud. In short, they very nearly and literally beat him to a jelly—a chastisement, indeed, which would probably have spelt death to the ordinary man, and was destined to leave this one in a very sore state for some time to come. Then, helping up their injured comrades, they departed, leaving their victim to get himself round as best he could, or not at all.

You will ask what was the motive for this savage act of retribution. Some outrage on his part committed upon one of their womenkind? Or, these were relatives of his own wives who had chosen to avenge his ill-treatment of them? Neither.

In this instance Bully Rawson was destined to suffer for an offence of which he was wholly innocent; to wit, the bursting of a gun which he had traded to a petty chief who hailed from a distant part of the country—for he did a bit of gun-running when opportunity offered. But the old fool had rammed in a double charge—result—his arm blown off; and these six were his sons resolved upon revenge. They dared not kill him—he was necessary to far too powerful a chief for that—though they would otherwise cheerfully have done so; wherefore they had brought with them no deadly weapons, lest

they should be carried away, and effectually finish him off. Wherein lay one of life's little ironies. For his many acts of villainy Bully Rawson was destined to escape. For one casualty for which he was in no sense of the word responsible, he got hammered within an inch of his life.

It must not be taken for granted that this ruffian was a fair specimen or sample of the Zulu trader or up-country going man in general, for such was by no means the case. But, on the principle of "black sheep in every flock," it may be stated at once that in this particular flock Bully Rawson was about the blackest of the black.

Chapter Fourteen.

What Hlabulana Revealed.

In the quadrangle, or courtyard, known as Ulundi Square, in the Royal Hotel at Durban, two men sat talking. One we already know, the other, a wiry, bronzed, and dark-bearded man of medium height, was known to his acquaintance as Joe Fleetwood, and among the natives as "U' Joe," and he was an up-country trader.

"You did the right thing, Wyvern, when you decided to come up here," the latter was saying, "and in a few months' time"—lowering his voice—"if we pull off this jaunt all right, we need neither of us ever take our jackets off again for the rest of our natural lives."

"Not, eh? Didn't know you could make such a rapid fortune in the native trade."

The other smiled drily.

"Look here, Wyvern. You only landed last night—and a most infernal bucketing you seem to have got on that poisonous bar in doing so. So that we've had no opportunity of having a straight, square talk. We won't have it here—too many doors and windows about for that I propose, therefore, that we get on a tram and run down to the back beach—we'll have it all to ourselves there. First of all, though, we'll have these glasses refilled. I don't believe in starting dry. Boy!"

A turbaned Indian waiter glided up, and reappeared in a moment with two long tumblers.

"That's good," exclaimed Fleetwood, having poured down more than half of the sparkling contents of his. "Durban is one of the thirstiest places I've ever struck."

Not much was said as they took their way through the bustle of the streets, bright with the gaudy clothes worn by the Indian population, whose thin, chattering voices formed as great a contrast to the deep, sonorous tones of the manly natives of the land as did their respective owners in aspect and physique.

"By Jove! it brings back old times, seeing these head-ringed chaps about again," said Wyvern, turning to look at a particularly fine specimen of them that had just stalked past. "I wonder if I'd like to go over all our campaigning ground again."

“Our jaunt this time will take us rather off it. I say—that time we ran the gauntlet through to Kambula, from that infernal mountain. It was something to remember, eh?”

Wyvern looked grave.

“One might run as narrow a shave as that again, but it’s a dead cert we couldn’t run a narrower one,” he said.

“Not much. I say, though. You’ve seen some rather different times since then. Let on, old chap—is that her portrait you’ve got stuck up in Number 3 Ulundi Square? Because, if so, you’re in luck’s way, by jingo you are.”

“You’re quite right, Fleetwood, as to both ventures. Only a third ingredient is unfortunately needed to render the luck complete, and that is a sufficiency of means.”

“That all? Well, then, buck up, old chap, because I’d lay a very considerable bet you’ll find that difficulty got over by the time you next set foot in hot—and particularly thirsty—Durban.”

Wyvern looked up keenly. Something in the other’s tone struck him as strange.

“What card have you got up your sleeve, Joe?” he said. “You let out something about ‘a few months’ a little while ago. Well now, I may not know much about the native trade, but I have a devilish shrewd idea that a man doesn’t scare up a fortune at it in that time.”

“You’re right there—quite right—and that’s the very thing we’ve come out to chat about—and sniff the ozone at the same time. It’ll keep till we get there. Here’s our tram.”

These two were great friends. Fleetwood, indeed, was prone to declare that he owed his life to the other’s deftness and coolness on one occasion when they had been campaigning together; a statement, however, which Wyvern unhesitatingly and consistently pooh-poohed. Anyhow, there was nothing that Fleetwood would not have done for him; and having lit upon the marvellous discovery which was behind his sanguine predictions of immediate wealth, he had written at once to Wyvern to come up and share it.

A fresh breeze stirred the blue of the waves, as the milky surf came tumbling up the pebbly beach with thunderous roar. Out in the roadstead vessels were riding to their anchors, prominent among them the blue-white hull and red funnel of the big mail steamer which had brought Wyvern round the day before. On the right, as they faced

seaward, beyond the white boil of surf on the bar, rose the bush-clad Bluff, capped by its lighthouse, and behind, and stretching away on the other hand, the line of scrub-grown sandhills, beyond which rose the wooded slopes of the Berea.

“Now we’re all right,” pronounced Fleetwood, leading the way along the beach. “We’ve got the whole show to ourselves and we know it. Not a soul can get within earshot of us and we not know it, which is important if you’ve got anything important to talk about.”

“Yes,” assented Wyvern, lighting his pipe. “Now—drive ahead. Found a gold mine, eh?”

“That’s just about what it is; only it’s not a gold mine in the ordinary sense of the word. It’s buried gold.”

“The deuce it is. Where?”

“That’s what I’m coming to. Now listen. There exists a certain Zulu of my acquaintance, a head-ringed man named Hlabulana. I have known him a long while, some time before the war, in fact, and he’s a wonderfully straight and reliable man. Well, a good many years ago a strange thing came within his experience. Off the coast of Zululand, about where the Umfolosi river runs out at Saint Lucia Bay, there arrived a ship—a small ship, I gathered from his account, probably a brig or schooner. Now this in itself was an event, because there was absolutely no trade done with Zululand by sea in those days, any more than there is now. But where this craft undertook to anchor was off one of the most rotten, swampy and uninhabited parts of the whole coast. A boat put off from her and came ashore, and in it were four men. They landed, and no sooner had they done so than the vessel, which appears to have been lying a good way out, was seen suddenly to disappear. She had, in fact, gone to the bottom.”

“One minute, Fleetwood,” interrupted Wyvern. “When was this—have you any sort of idea?”

“Yes, I have as it happens. It can’t have been many months before the big fight between Cetywayo and Umbulazi for the succession. Now that came off at the end of 1856, which locates this earlier in the same year. Good while back, isn’t it? Close upon thirty years.”

“Right. Go on.”

“Well, then, they took some packages out of the boat; not very large ones, but still, it seems, about as much as they could manage. They hid the boat under bushes and started inland. All this, of course, was seen, because although that part of the country is poorly populated, still there were, and are, people there, and such an unusual

occurrence was not likely to go unspotted. But the Zulus didn't show themselves. They kept out of sight, and shadowed the four."

"What sort of fellows were the said four?" asked Wyvern. "Nationality, for instance. English?"

"I don't think so. From the account they were dark-skinned, black-bearded chaps, and wore large rings in their ears. I should say—though I've no personal experience of either—Italians or Spaniards—or, maybe, Portuguese."

"Ah! very likely. The latter most probably."

"Well, they held along, inland, keeping the course of the Umfolosi river not far on their left—that is, travelling north-west. They seemed to have their own stores, for they avoided the kraals, and now and then shot game; for they were well armed. When they came to where the Black Umfolosi forks more northward they didn't hesitate but struck up it, which showed that at least one among them had some previous knowledge of the country, and this, in fact, was the case."

"How is it they weren't all captured and marched off to the king?"

"Yes. That's one of the very first questions that occurred to me. Wyvern, and I put it at once. Mpande was king then. The answer was that the country was in such a disturbed state just then, and the people so unsettled, that the few living in those parts were extremely unwilling to go to Nodwengu, for fear they should be obliged to take sides in the row brewing between Cetywayo and his brother. You see, the coast-dwelling Zulus are by no meant the flower of the nation, and these didn't want to be drawn into any fighting at all. They preferred to sit tight at home. They knew, too, that there was little chance of them being hauled over the coals for it, because things were so excessively sultry at and around the seat of government of the Zulu nation, that the high authorities had no time to bother their heads about anything further afield.

"Well, things went on so for a time, and their march progressed. The people inhabiting the coast country took for granted these chaps had been shipwrecked, and were making their way to the nearest settlements of other whites, and it was not till they got in among the passes of the Lebombo range that they were in any way interfered with, and then not until they had reached the western side.

"This is where Hlabulana comes into the story. He was a young 'un then—an umfane. Two of them surprised him while stealthily watching the other two, and he says he has been no nearer death, even in the thickest part of the late war, than he was on that

occasion. One of them could talk some Zulu, and they only spared him on condition he should go with them and help carry the loads; and this he agreed to do, partly out of scare and partly out of curiosity. Then the time came when they quarrelled among themselves, the upshot of which was that two of them knifed the other two in their sleep.

"Now came a deadlock. The two who were left were unable to carry all the plunder, besides they were a good deal weakened and exhausted by their long tramp. They had to hide most of their stuff, presumably intending to return for it at some future time. They buried it accordingly in a cave on the western side of the Lebombo, but Hlabulana wasn't allowed to see the exact spot."

"Then how does he know that they buried it?" asked Wyvern. "They may have just shoved it into some cleft."

"There was earth on their knives, moist earth such as you'd get in a damp cool place where the sun never struck. But he can take us to the spot; there are several holes and caves around, but I don't think we'll find much difficulty in hitting off the right one."

"And then? What makes you think there'll be anything worth finding if we do, for I suppose the two jokers never came back to dig it up again?"

"They didn't, because to cut a long yarn short, the Zulu-speaking chap knifed his mate directly after—and he himself was killed by a sort of outlaw tribe that hung out on the Swazi border. So there the stuff is, waiting for us to dig out, and it'll mean a tidy fortune apiece."

"Yes, but what of the stuff being worth finding?" urged Wyvern, again. He was beginning to feel less sanguine than at first.

"It is—for these reasons. First of all, the comparatively small compass of the loads, points to proportionate value. Then that ruffian murdered his remaining pal so as to get the benefit of the whole lot—but, more important still, Hlabulana more than once caught sight of shining stones, some white, some red and green, in fact, he thinks there were other colours. He remembers it perfectly because once he saw them sorting these into different bags I believe, too, one of the boxes contained bar gold, for he says it was as heavy as a stone of the same size. After the third chap had been knifed Hlabulana thought it about time to make himself scarce and he accordingly did."

"You believe his yarn then, absolutely?"

"Absolutely."

“Well, but—” went on Wyvern, “why didn’t he prospect for the stuff himself, and get all the benefit of it?”

“The untrousered savage is a queer devil, Wyvern; at least as he is represented in this country. The fact is Hlabulana is afraid to meddle with this himself—Zulus are a superstitious crowd you know. As he puts it—white people can do anything, no matter how ‘tagati.’ Wherefore we are to unearth the stuff and give him a share of the plunder according to its value.”

“Confiding of him, very. Do you find them often that way?”

“Oftener than you’d think. When a Zulu has made up his mind you’re to be trusted, he’ll trust you almost to an unlimited extent.”

“Well now, Fleetwood, where is this Golconda?”

“In one of the wildest and most remote tracts of the Zulu country, the Lumisana forest. I’ve been into it once, but never explored it. There’s no trade there to speak of, or anything to take a white man into it. This find, however, is to be made in a sort of amphitheatre, or hollow, known to the Zulus as Ukohlo. Now, listen, Wyvern. We haven’t got to talk about this even between ourselves, unless we’re out like this. You never know who the deuce may be within earshot.”

“That’s so. I’m all safe. I may be a damn fool at money making, or rather, money losing, but I do know how to keep my head shut. But look here, Joe. Have you got any theory of your own with regard to this yarn; for I take it those four beauties didn’t come up out of the sea and lug a few bags of valuable stones up to a remote corner of the Zulu country and plant them there for the future emolument of you and me?”

“Rather. I have a theory. I believe the whole thing spells a big robbery in some other part of the world, what of or who from is a mystery and always will be, for you bet these jokers didn’t leave any clue with the stuff they planted. The fact that the one of them, who for convenience sake we’ll call the leading rip, could talk some Zulu points to the fact that he at any rate had been there before, that the Zululand coast was their deliberate objective, and they couldn’t well have struck a better one. Whether they stole the ship as well is another question, or whether there were more on board her, and these four managed to scuttle her so as to destroy all trace and then clear out with the only boat, is a mystery too. But obviously they reckoned on getting through into Transvaal territory and that way to Europe, thus completely hiding their trail, which was an ingenious idea.”

Wyvern puffed at his pipe for a minute or two. Then seriously:

“What about this, Joe? This stuff—if it is the proceeds of a robbery—what right have we to benefit by it?”

Fleetwood started, stared, then threw back his head and roared.

“Good Lord, Wyvern, you ought to have been a parson. I wouldn’t do a shot on anyone unfairly, as you know. Man alive, but I was only giving you one of my theories—I may have others. Here’s one. You know from time to time yarns crop up in the papers about buried treasure in the West Indies and all sorts of those old piratical romps. Well, this may be a case in point, and these oily-looking, cut-throat scoundrels may have struck upon just one of these finds. To save awkward questions, and the possibility of awkward claims as to ‘treasure trove,’ and all that, they may have hit upon the dodge of bringing it across the sea right out of the ordinary course. Well, now, that theory is just as good as the other. It may be hundreds of years since the swag had a lawful owner or owners. Eh?”

“Yes, that’s all right too.”

“Very well then. We are just as much entitled to the use of it as anyone else. We want money. I do, and judging from that portrait we were talking about just now, why, you poor old chap, you want it a darned sight more. Is that sound reasoning?”

“Perfectly.” His last sight of Lalanté came before Wyvern’s mental gaze; the bitterness and desolation of their parting. Oh, anything that should bring her to him, should secure her to him, provided it was not downright dishonest—and what would he not go through!

“Mind you,” went on Fleetwood, “we haven’t got the stuff yet, and it’ll be a job carrying plenty of risk with it before we do. The Zulu country is a simmering volcano just now over the restoration of Cetywayo. The Usútu faction—that is the King’s faction—and the other side bossed by John Dunn, Sibepu, Hamu and the rest, are glaring at each other all ready to jump at each other’s throats, and when they do it’ll be all hell let loose. Our war’ll be a fleabite to it. We’ll go in, of course, ostensibly as traders, and then be guided by events.”

Wyvern nodded. The prospect of adventure fired his blood. In it he would at any rate partially lose that sense of desolation which was upon him day and night.

“So you see, old chap,” went on Fleetwood, “I didn’t lug you up here to make your fortune out of trading beads, and butcher knives, and yards of Salampore cloth; and, I hope before this time next year to come and do best man at your wedding. Eh?”

“That you shall if it comes off—which of course will depend on our success. By the way, where is this Hlabulana now?”

“He’s at a kraal on the Umvoti, near Stanger, keeping in touch with me. Success? Of course we’ll meet success. Now we’ve had our say we’ll go back and drink to it. After all Durban’s an infernally thirsty place. Success! I should think so.”

Yet at that moment Bully Rawson, unscrupulous ruffian and general cut-throat, was repeating over and over again Warren’s emphatic, if laconic, instructions, “Take care of him. Do you hear? Take care of him,” and was promising himself that he would.

Chapter Fifteen.

Mnyamana's Cattle.

High up among the crags they crouched, like eagles looking forth from an eyrie, sweeping indeed with eagle-like gaze the vast expanse of plain which lay in many an undulating roll, outspread beneath.

Three dark forms, long and lithe, destitute of clothing save for the mútya and a few war adornments in the way of cow-hair tufts, or feathers. Beside each were several bright, broad-bladed assegais, and medium-sized shields, just where they had been deposited. Far away in the distance rose a cloud of dust—a moving cloud of dust.

"Ou! the hand of the spoiler sweeps. The dust which it raises floats away, that which causes it moves on."

A hum of assent greeted this murmured remark, and the eager attention of the look-out was redoubled. The face of the mountain fell grandly away in terraced slopes, rows of great krantzes intervening. There was a glorious feeling of air, and height, and domination from this lofty post of outlook. Far above, a number of white specks soared and floated against the blue empyrean. The instinct of the vulture is unerring, and that instinct had been kept well in practice as regarded this disturbed region for some time past.

The dust cloud moved onward, drawing nearer, yet still a great way off. The faces of the watching three were rigid in their eagerness, the eyes dilated, the nostrils distended like those of a stag snuffing the wind. Then the one who had spoken, taking a broad assegai from the bundle which lay beside him, slid, with a serpentine writhe, down from his coign of vantage, then when the ridge of this was well between him and the expanse over which he had been watching, he drew himself up in a sitting posture, and holding the spear so that it pointed vertically upwards, took one glance at the sun, then twirled the bright blade slowly, facing down upon the valley beneath. This was done several times, until an answering gleam appeared far below. The signaller, satisfied, wormed himself back into his former position on the very crest of the mountain. They renewed their watch, those human eagles, their tense, self-contained excitement deepening as the moments fled by, and it preluded a swoop.

Looking back, to whence had come the answering signal gleam, a maze of broken valley, interseamed with dongas, lay outspread. Opposite and beyond this, a further rocky range towered in a crescent wall. A rugged wilderness, silent, deserted, given over to savage solitude. Yet—was it?

Rank upon rank they crouched, those dark rows of armed warriors, their variegated shields and broad assegais lying upon the ground in front of them. Row upon row of eager, expectant faces; set, intense; the roll of eyeballs alone giving sign of mobile life, a constrained hum passing down the gathering as they drank in the impassioned and burning words of the speaker.

He was a largely-built, thick-set Zulu of a rich copper colour, which threw out in unwonted blackness the jetty shine of his head-ring. He held himself with the erect, haughty ease of a king addressing his subjects, of a despot speaking to those who owned their very lives only at his will. Yet, he was not the King.

He had begun addressing them in the sitting posture, but as he warmed to his subject had risen to his feet, and now strode up and down as he spoke.

"I am nobody. I am a boy. I am a child among the sons of Senzangakona, the Root of the Tree that overshadows the land, the rise of the sun that sheds light on the people. It is not I who should be talking here to-day, Amazulu. Hau! even as that Great One foretold, he who died by 'the stroke of Sopuza' the land is splintered and rent. He, Senzangakona's great son, he whom the whites have taken from us, the shine of whose head-ring is dulled in his prison—what of him? Not little by little, but in large cuts his 'life' is being rent from him. Where are they whom he left—they who were as his life? Ha! are they not given over as a prey to a traitor; the spoiler of his father's house, the son of Mapita. Who is he? The dog of him who is gone. Who is Sibepu?"

"Whau! Sibepu!" broke from the listeners. "The spoiler of his father's house!"

"Eh-hé! The spoiler of his father's house!" echoed the group of chiefs, squatted behind the speaker.

"From the meanest of the nation," went on the speaker, "the Abelungu have chosen those who should be kings over us. Umfanawendhlela, he who now sits at the royal kraals on the Mahlabatini. Who is he? Who is Umfanawendhlela?"

"Whau! Umfanawendhlela!" broke forth again the contemptuous roar.

"Yet such as these are the Abelungu now using as their dogs, setting them on to hunt those before whom they formerly cringed and crawled. Those of the House of Senzangakona are already hungry. All their cattle is being taken by these dogs of the Abelungu, and with the women of the Royal House they can do what they will, for have

they not already done so? But behind these sits another dog and laughs. U' Jandone! Who is Jandone?"

"Hau! U' Jandone!"

This time the roar was indescribable in its volume of execration. It seemed to split the surrounding rocks with the concentrated vengefulness of its echo. For a few moments the speaker could not continue, so irrepressible were the murmurs of wrath and hate which seethed through the ranks of his listeners.

"Who made him a Zulu," he went on, "since he came into the country white? Who made him rich—rich in cattle, and wives, and power? Who but him who is gone? But when the storm gathered and the Abelungu invented childish grievances and said 'the might of Zulu must be crushed'—did this one who had come here white to be made black; who had come here poor to be made rich—did he stand by that Great One's side and say 'This is my father who has made me great. This is my friend, by whom I am what I am. I hold his hand. His fall is my fall. Did he?' Hau! Jandone!"

"Hau! Jandone!" repeated the audience once more in deep-toned wrath and disgust.

Gloomy lightning seemed to shine from the chief's eyes, as with head thrown back and a sneer on his lips, he contemplated the humour of the gathering. He proceeded:

"Our father, Mnyamana, is not here to-day. He is old, and it were better for him to die hungry at home than in the white man's prison. But upon him, heavily have the dogs of the white man fallen, upon him, the valued adviser of two kings. Even now they are eating him up. But—shall they? Behold," and he threw out a hand.

The assembly, following the gesture, turned. High up on the hillside something gleamed—gleamed and glittered again and again. It was the answering signal to those who watched on the mountain crest, and—it was the second answer.

With a deep, fierce murmur the warriors, gripping their shields and weapons, sprang to their feet as one man. Again Dabulamanzi waved his hand.

"In silence," he said. "In silence. So shall we fall upon them the easier."

In silence, accordingly, the great impi moved forth, no shouting, no war-song—but all the more terrible for that. It differed from the state of things prior to, and at the time of the war, in that here were no regiments—head-ringed men and youngsters marching side by side. But upon every face was the grim dark look of hate, not merely the eager

anticipation of impending battle, but worse. The fraternal feud is proverbially the most envenomed. Against no white invader—English or Dutch—were these going forth but against those of their own kindred and colour, towards whom they felt exactly as Royalist did towards Roundhead in a different quarter of the globe three centuries earlier.

Through a long, narrow defile, running round the base of the mountain on which the outlook was posted, streamed the dark human torrent. On over each roll of plain it poured. At length it halted on a ridge. Grey whirling clouds of dust close at hand drew nearer and nearer, and through them the hides and horns of driven cattle. At the sight a fierce gasp went up from the impi, and the warriors looked for the word of their leaders to fall on.

The beasts were driven by a large armed force, though smaller numerically than this which had come to recapture them.

Those in charge, taken by surprise, halted their men. They had walked into a wasp's nest, yet were not disposed to climb down without an effort. So they stood waiting.

They had not long to wait. The impi headed straight for the cattle, and with a decision of purpose that left nothing to be desired, wedged between them and their drivers, and headed them off in another direction. The animals, panic-stricken, began to run wildly; cows with their calves racing one way, staid oxen, caught with the fever of the scare, now and then charging their new drivers, but these were seasoned to that sort of thing, and would skip nimbly out of the way, or roll on the ground, just in time to avoid the head thrust, while to all, each and every incident risky or laughable, was a source of infinite sport. One bull—chocolate-hided, sharp-horned—grew more than a danger, for with that shrill growling bellow emitted by his kind when partly scared and wholly angered, he drove his horns clean through a young warrior, flinging the rent carcase furiously in the air. But this in nowise detracted from the fun in general. Him however they incontinently assegaied.

The while a hubbub of voices rose loud through the trampling and bellowing of the cattle, whose drivers were inclined to show fight. This was in a measure stilled as the leader of the impi strode to the fore. As a brother of the exiled king he was too big a man for even the opposition party to treat otherwise than with a sulky respect.

"Whou, Qapela!" spoke Dabulamanzi, confronting the leader of the band that was driving the cattle. "What is this we see? A fighting leader of the Nokenke regiment, who slew three whites with his own assegai at Isandhlwana, now turned white man's dog, now snapping at his absent king. Whou, Qapela!"

“Whou! Qapela!” echoed the warriors, in roaring derision, as more and more came crowding up.

He, thus held up to scorn, a ringed man of middle age, scowled savagely. It was one thing to be derided by a branch of the Royal Tree, quite another to be savagely hooted by a pack of unringed boys. It needed but a spark to set the train alight, to bring on a savage and bloody fight between the two rival factions.

“No dog of any white man am I, Ndabezita,” (Note 1) he answered, gloomily defiant. “I am but fulfilling the ‘word’ of my chief.”

“And thy chief? Who is he?” went on Dabulamanzi, his head thrown back, in the pride of his royal rank as he confronted the man. “U’ Jandone?”

“Whou! Jandone!” roared the warriors in scathing derision.

“Not so, Ndabezita,” replied the other, in a cool sneering voice, as that of one who is about to score. “My chief is a branch of the Royal Tree; a long branch of the Royal Tree—ah-ah—a long branch. What of U’ Hamu?”

The point was that he had named another brother of the King, an older one than Dabulamanzi; one of the chiefs under the Wolseley settlement, who with John Dunn and Sibepu, and one or two more, was actively opposed to Cetywayo’s return.

“Ha! A long branch!” sneered Dabulamanzi. “A branch cut-off from the Royal Tree. How is that, Qapela?”

“Whou! Qapela!” roared the warriors again, pointing their assegais at him in derision.

“As to ‘cut-off,’ I know not,” answered the other, stung out of his natural respect towards one of the Royal House. “This I know—that that branch now puts forth the most leaves. The ‘word’ from it was: ‘Take the cattle of Mnyamana,’ and I have taken them.”

“But no further shalt thou take them, dead leaf of the cut-off branch,” replied Dabulamanzi, “for we have taken them from thee. See. There they go.”

Away—now quite at a distance, the animals were visible, going at a run, propelled towards the mountain fastnesses by quite a number of men. This fact, too, Qapela noted, and noted with significance, for it meant that by just that number of warriors was the opposing impi reduced, thus bringing it as nearly as possible upon equal terms with his

own. He had lost the cattle—for which he was responsible, and the chief to whom he did konza was no indulgent master. But what if he were to avenge their loss? The obligation he would thus lay himself under would far, far outweigh the mere carrying out of his original orders. He stole one quick look over his followers. Yes. The thing could be done, if only he could convey some sort of word or signal that they should strike immediately and in concert.

But there was with Dabulamanzi's force an old induna named Untúswa, a scarred old battle-dog whose whole life had been spent in a laughing acquaintance with Death, by the side of whose crowded experience such a crisis as this was as the merest child's play; a born strategist, moreover, whose rapidity of plan had turned the scale of more than one hard fought and bloody struggle. He, while these amenities were going forward, had taken but scant notice of them; instead, had let his observation—the outcome of exhaustive experience—go as to the attitude of the other side, and also that of his own. With regard to the latter, a mere breathed word here and there had been sufficient. Warriors had slipped away unostentatiously from his side—to mingle with the rest—far and near—and as they went, they, too, carried a word.

Untúswa read Qapela's mind, and Untúswa knew, none better, the supreme advantage of getting in the first blow. Now he lifted up his voice and roared in deep sonorous tone, the war-shout of the King's party.

"Usútu!"

Like an answering wave in thunder on an iron-bound coast it was taken up and rolled through the multitude. The ranks seemed to tighten a moment, then hurled themselves upon the opposing force. For a few moments there was deadly work—the tramp of feet, the flapping of shield against shie|d, the death-hiss—the strident "I-jjí! I-jjí!" as the spear or heavy knob-stick struck home; then Qapela's force, overwhelmed, demoralised by the suddenness of the onslaught, broke and fled in blind, scattered confusion, the Usútu impi in hot pursuit. A mandate from Dabulamanzi, however, recalled this, as far as was practicable. He had no wish to destroy his own people, any more of them, that is, than was absolutely necessary, only to show that the King, though an exile, was still the Great Great One, in whose light they lived, and that his wrath could still burn far and terrible upon these rebellious ones. But that mandate could not reach those in the forefront of the pursuit, who, carried away by the irresistible dash and excitement of it all, were already far beyond reach of recall. So the chase kept on, not always to the advantage of the pursuers, for these would often turn—and then it was as the fighting of a cornered wild animal. Mile upon mile this fierce running fight went on, until the shades of evening began to deepen, and then there was just one left, a young man, lithe and fleet of foot; and he, beset by a relentless score, stumbled, gasping and exhausted,

his breath coming in labouring sobs, into a white man's camp, to fall, prone, incapable of further movement, nearly across the white men's fire.

Note 1. A term of honour accorded to male members of the Royal House.

Chapter Sixteen.

The Refugee.

"Yes, I'm afraid there's thunder in the air," said Joe Fleetwood, lazily sharpening a well-worn sheath-knife upon the iron rim of a waggon wheel. "All these runners passing to and fro—bristling with assegais, too, and in too much almighty hurry to stop and talk—seem to point that way."

"How'll that affect our scheme?" said Wyvern lazily; he was lying on his back on the ground, his head on his hands and a pipe between his teeth, looking the picture of ease and content. A little way off the waggon boys—all Natal natives—were washing and scrubbing the enamelled metal plates on which their masters had not long ago been lunching, chatting among themselves in subdued tones; and, squatting apart, and throwing at them an occasional remark, was a head-ringed Zulu. Away in front stretched an amphitheatre of mountains, whose wall-like cliffs gleamed in the afternoon sun.

"It may affect us this way," went on Fleetwood, "that if the rival parties come to blows we may be expected to take sides or be chawed up between the two."

"The deuce! Well, we didn't reckon on a second edition of '79, as part of our plans, did we? It won't forward what we came up for, either."

"No, it won't. Another bad sign is we've done next to no trade. When once it became patent we weren't gun-runners, they've kept at a respectful distance."

They had come into the Zulu country as ordinary traders, with two waggons. Fleetwood, of course, was well aware that under existing circumstances trade would be almost at a standstill, but the waggon loads were a pretext; a blind to cover their real intentions.

Now the Zulu before mentioned got up, stretched himself, and strolled leisurely over to them. He was an elderly man with a pleasing face, and, if anything, inclined to stoutness.

"There is thunder in the air," he said, in a casual tone.

"I made that remark but now, Hlabulana," answered Fleetwood. "Well?"

"While sitting over yonder my ears were open to other sounds than the chatter of these Amakafula," went on the Zulu in the same low, matter-of-fact tones. "They heard sounds of war."

“Of war?” repeated Joe, examining the edge of the knife. “Now what sounds were they, Hlabulana?”

“The rush of many feet—the rumble of hoofs. Men are striving, and it is for cattle.”

“I hear it again,” said Hlabulana, who had resumed his squatting attitude.

“So do I,” said the trader, who had seated himself on the ground, and who, while not seeming to, was listening intently.

“What are you two chaps yarning about?” said Wyvern, raising himself upon one elbow. He had mastered the Zulu tongue so far but indifferently. “Hallo! What the deuce is that? Did you hear it?”

Fleetwood nodded. The waggon boys had dropped their work and sprang to their feet, uttering quick exclamations as they stared forth over the veldt. Again that dull and distant roar boomed forth upon the lazy air.

“You and I have heard it before, Wyvern. At Hlobane, for instance. How about the King’s war-shout?”

Wyvern started, and looked grave.

“‘Usútu’?” he said, listening again. “Why, so it might be. Shall we be attacked then, because if so, I’m afraid our chances are slight.”

“I don’t think they’ll interfere with us. What do you think, Hlabulana?” relapsing into the vernacular. “What is being done yonder?”

He addressed, who had been listening intently, shrugged his shoulders slightly.

“I think that the Abesutu and the children of the white man’s chiefs have—met,” he answered, a comical crinkle coming round the corners of his eyes. “Whau! they are always meeting, only to-day there seem more of them than usual. See. They draw nearer.”

Now the sounds of the tumult, though faint, were audible without an effort. It was noticeable that the Natal boys edged very close indeed to their white masters. The Native Contingent at Isandhlwana had been made up largely of their kindred, and the tradition thereof was still fresh and green. A quick exclamation escaped them.

For, over the low ridge sparsely covered with bush, about a mile north-west of their outspan, figures had now come in sight—figures running—dark figures—and now and again something gleamed. More and more came over, and among them were more and more points that gleamed. Fleetwood and Wyvern exchanged a word, then dived into a waggon, to re-appear in a moment, each with a double gun and a very business-like revolver indeed. The native boys fished out a knob-kerrie apiece from somewhere—not that it would have been of much use, still it was some sort of a weapon. The only one who betrayed not the smallest sign of excitement was Hlabulana, the Zulu.

"They are running," he said—"running away. They are not running to attack. Wou! Pakati!" he exclaimed, as one of the fugitives, overtaken by three pursuers, fell.

And now the rout drew very near. There was little noise and no shouting—presumably pursuers and pursued required all their wind. Then the spectators could see that of the latter there was only one left.

He was a young man, tall and long-legged, and with head down he covered the ground with great strides, just keeping his distance and never looking round. Clearly he was making for the white man's protection as his only chance, but—would the white man have the power to afford it?

Eagerly and with deepening excitement did the spectators watch the progress of this straining chase. Ah! he is down! no, it is only a stumble, and as he recovers himself the exultant yell changes to accents of rage. One or two stop, and hurl assegais, but these fall short. A hundred yards more—fifty, forty, ten, and then—the fugitive staggers up and falls—almost into the fire—as we have seen.

The pursuit made no halt, but poured on as though to overwhelm the camp itself.

"We can't have this, Wyvern," muttered Fleetwood uneasily. Then, in the Zulu: "Halt. He who comes ten steps further—drops."

The effect was magical. This white man was known to them, known to them too as one who in a matter of this kind might be relied upon to keep his word. Wherefore they halted with an alacrity that was wholly commendable. A murmur went up.

"It is Ujó!"

"That is right," briskly answered Fleetwood. "And knowing that you know me. And knowing me, you know that any man who takes refuge in my camp is safe: safe from

anybody, as long as I am safe, this is. Now—has anybody any inclination to try if I am safe?"

The opposing crowd consisted of young men; hot-headed, hot-blooded young savages, armed, and having already tasted blood. Not yet were they inclined to relax hold upon their prey. Vociferating, they waved their spears—many of them blood-stained—and their shields, roaring for their prize, their victim. And, by now others having come up to swell the tumult, there were about threescore of them.

"Give him to us!" they bellowed. "He is ours. But for your camp our spears would have drunk his blood ere this."

Fleetwood stood facing them, and shook his head.

"No. I will not give him to you," he answered, quietly decisive.

The uproar grew. Angry voices were raised in hubbub and spears waved. It looked as if a sudden impetuous charge, which would have overwhelmed all before it, was about to be made. But somehow those two double-barrels—for Wyvern had taken his cue from the other and, aiming low, had got his piece well upon the confronting mass—constituted a moral force there was no gainsaying. They made no aggressive move.

"This is our meat you have taken, Ujó," called out one, who seemed the most prominent among the excited Usutus. "Meat for the teeth of our spears. Now, give it up, for we will have it."

"You will not have it, Jolwana, not from here, at any rate," answered Fleetwood, who knew the speaker. "Au! and how didst thou win thy head-ring? Was it not in company with a son of Majendwa? And what of him who lies here? He, too, is a son of Majendwa. Hamba gahlé! Yes—go carefully, for the sons of Majendwa are many."

He thus addressed as Jolwana seemed beside himself with rage. He addressed a few furious words to the others in a ferocious undertone. A move forward was made and a threatening roar went up from the whole pack. But simultaneously with it, a shot rang out sharp. Jolwana's shield, then flourished over his head, was pierced, and Jolwana's fingers ached with the concussion.

"I was but playing with thee, Jolwana," went on Fleetwood, slipping a fresh cartridge into his rifle barrel with lightning-like rapidity. "Stop now, or next time thou goest into the Great Unknown. Then—what of thy two young wives—thy new, pleasant young wives? Whose will they then become?"

At these words, another roar went up, but it was a roar of laughter. Fleetwood not only knew the other, but knew his circumstances thoroughly. A young man to be head-ringed, and one whom Cetywayo had allowed to tunga near the close of the war, and that for a special and secret service performed, he had the reputation of being intensely jealous. With this knowledge used with rare tact, Fleetwood had succeeded in turning the angry crowd into a laughing crowd, and it is a truism that a laughing crowd ceases to be dangerous. This crowd now roared with laughter again and again, for the Zulu has a keen sense of humour. So these heated combatants, themselves and their weapons bespattered with the blood of fleeing fugitives, forgot their blood-lust, and roared with genuine merriment again and again. But Jolwana, their leader, the only one head-ringed among them, did not seem to enter into the joke at all. However, he stopped, which was all Fleetwood—and, incidentally, Wyvern—wanted of him.

"A son of Majendwa!" he scoffed. "Au! but a son of Majendwa ceases to be such when he is found on that side. He has become a hunting dog of the Abelungu."

"Who art thou?" asked Fleetwood of the fugitive, who had now recovered from his exhaustion. "I recall thy face but thy name escapes me."

"Mtezani-ka-Majendwa," was the answer. "It is right what he has said."

"Ka-Majendwa? Yes?" rejoined Fleetwood, half questioningly. "Majendwa has many sons. Yet they—and all the Abaqulusi are on the side of the Abesutu?"

"As to that, my father, there is something of a tale to tell. Yet I have not done with these"—with a wave of the hand towards Jolwana and his followers. "Ah—ah—I have not done with these, but one man can do nothing against threescore. Still, my time will come."

Fleetwood, whose sympathies were all with the King's party, eyed him doubtfully, though, of course, as one who had thrown himself on his protection the young man's safety was absolutely inviolable in so far as he was able to assure it. All of which Mtezani read.

"Something of a tale to tell, my father," he repeated. "Wait till you have heard it. And rest assured that in keeping me breathing this day you and the Inkosi yonder"—designating Wyvern—"have not done the worst thing for yourselves you have ever done in your lives."

Now a great shout arose from the armed crowd, which had been seated, taking snuff.

“Hlalani gahlé Abelungu! We return to the Branch—the Branch of the Royal Tree! Hlala gahlé, Mtezani-ka-Majendwa! Wou! Mtezani-ka-Majendwa!”

It was the same mocking roar which had greeted the mention of the names of the chiefs as they were cited during Dabulamanzi’s stimulating address to his impi. The refugee scowled savagely after the retreating warriors—those who would have taken his life—and muttered. Fleetwood and Wyvern were delighted to see their backs, and returned the farewell with great cordiality. The Natal boys breathed freely once more. But Hlabulana, the Zulu, had sat serenely taking snuff all this while as though no heated—and critical—difference of opinion were taking place within a thousand miles of him.

Chapter Seventeen.

Nearing the Goal.

After this they held on their way without molestation, neither did they come across any further active indications as to the state of the country. Yet, though not active, the volcano was by no means extinct.

They progressed slowly—this partly on account of the ruggedness of the ground, over which nothing but South African built waggons could have travelled without coming in halves, partly because Fleetwood was careful to keep up appearances, and hide the real objective of their trek. Wherefore for days they would outspan near a group of kraals, although of trade there was next to nothing done. At this course of action Wyvern in no wise chafed. He was one of those rare units who recognise that in a given line the other man is an authority while he himself is not, consequently must be allowed an ungrudged free hand. For another thing he was vividly interested. He had fought against the Zulus, and of course except in battles and skirmishes had seen nothing of them. Now he was seeing a great deal of them. There was nothing he enjoyed so much, for instance, as sitting in a cool hut during the hot hours of the day, with three or four fine warriors, who possibly had been foremost in striving to shed his blood during the comparatively recent war, while they told their stories of this or that battle in which he himself had taken part. He was astonished, too, at the readiness with which he followed such narratives, considering that he was as yet very far from at home in the language. Still, gesture, expression, went a long way, and when he was in doubt there was always Fleetwood to help. But he was absorbing the language more and more every day; and the friendly ways of the people, frankly friendly but not servile, independent but always courteous, had long since brought him round to the opinion arrived at by others before him, with opportunities of judging, that the average Zulu is a gentleman. The people, for their part, were strongly attracted to him. His fine stature and presence in the first place appealed powerfully, as it always does to a fine race of warlike savages, in the next, his thoroughbred look, and well-bred ways told too; and the latter, no people are more capable of appreciating than these. As for the part he had taken against them in the late war, no shadow of a grudge or resentment did they bear against him for it; on the contrary, they looked upon him with enhanced respect on the strength of it; even as he himself had predicted to Lalanté would be the case. A man must fight at the “word” of his king, was their way of looking at it. They and the whites had met in fair fight; sometimes one side had got the best of it, and sometimes the other. There was no room for rancour on account of anything so plain and obvious. So Wyvern greatly enjoyed those hours spent in the company of dusky warriors, with a cool bowl of freshly-brewed tywala before him, the clinging cockroaches shimmering in the thatch of the hut overhead, while they vividly recapitulated the stirring times, not so long past, or mapped

out with small stones on the floor—and with wonderful accuracy—the scene of more than one pitched battle from the point of view of their own position and tactics. And it might be that the time was coming when this good understanding should stand him in some stead in the hour of his sore peril and need.

And the incidents of the trek, and this in itself, was no mere picnic. There were times when the conditions of the road—though road in anything like the ordinary sense of the word there was none—were frequently such as to render five miles a day the utmost limits of their advance; when they would spend half a day stuck in a river-bed, with the flood steadily rising, the result of that slaty, blue-black curtain of cloud forming the background further up in the hills; when the storm beat down upon them in its terrific crash, and the whole atmosphere seemed tinged with incandescent electricity; and only by a well-nigh superhuman effort of desperation could they at length induce the span to move at the critical moment, failure in which would mean loss of half their outfit and of more than one life. Or when, after a tremendous rain-burst, the wheels would sink in the boggy soil, rendering it necessary to unload the contents of both waggons and dig a way out; and even then it might be necessary to chop a number of great thorn boughs in order to construct a sufficiently firm way. Incidents such as these would constitute a sufficiency of hard labour—in a steaming climate, too—at which an English navvy, if put, would not hesitate to go on strike. No, this trek decidedly was not a picnic. Yet through it all—drenchings, heat, exhaustion, what not—Wyvern never turned a hair. He was always equable, always ready to take things as they came. Fleetwood, less self-contained, was prone to fire off language of a more or less sultry nature upon such occasions.

“I wouldn’t curse so much if I were you, Joe,” laughed Wyvern once. “It must be so infernally additionally exhausting.” And the other had laughed, and, while thoroughly concurring, had explained that he couldn’t help it.

Plenty of compensations were there, however, for these and other incidents of the road. When they got into the forest country sport was fairly plentiful, and when Wyvern brought down a splendid koodoo bull, shot fair and clean through the heart, it was a moment in his life not the least thrilling that he had known; and instinctively he had gloated over the great spiral horns, picturing them at Seven Kloofs—when he had bought it back, which of course he fully intended to do, as one of the results of their successful quest—and himself and Lalanté, in close juxtaposition, admiring them while he went over some of the incidents of their eventful trek—incidentally, perhaps not for the first time. Then the trek, under the glorious moon with the breaths of night distilling around, the whole atmosphere redolent of life and health-giving openness; or, failing the said moon, the blue-black velvety vault of heaven aglow with myriad stars, seeming to hang down to the earth itself with a luscious brilliance unknown to the severe northern skies; vivid meteors and streak-like falling stars flashing with a frequency only to be

appreciated by those whom circumstances lead to passing many nights in the open. So, as they moved on, slowly, but surely as they hoped, towards their goal, these were indeed compensations.

And Lalanté? She was ever in his thoughts, ever enwrapped in every joyous communing with joyous Nature, or in time of toil and hardship, such toil or hardship was being endured for her. Often, at the midnight outspan, when Fleetwood had laughingly declared that he, having nothing particularly pleasant to think about, and being most infernally sleepy, was going to turn in, Wyvern would sit, or pace up and down, hour upon hour, while the Southern Cross turned in the heavens, and give his powers of imagination and recollection play. He pictured her as he saw her last—heart-wrung; as he used to see her every day, sweet, strong, smiling, in the full glow of her splendid youth and health; his, for she had given herself to him; and the thought thrilled him until he could conjure up her presence here, here in this savage solitude, could hear her voice in his ear, as the tiger wolves slunk and howled dismally in the surrounding brake, even as he had heard it again and again on the moonlit stoep at Seven Kloofs. He had received letters from her since he left, until he had been beyond the reach of receiving letters at all—brave, true, loving letters—sweet beyond all conception of sweetness; treasured beyond all earthly possessions, and in his midnight pacings, when all around was still as death except the weird voices of the wild, he would bring out one or other of these and re-read it by the light of the great overhanging moon. Ah, yes! This love was worth a lifetime of toil and pain, and it had come to him, all so suddenly, so naturally. Did he appreciate it the less on that account? Not one whit. He would achieve the object of his quest, and then—and then—

And then came as a refrain certain words he had heard uttered long ago by a very valued friend of his—incidentally, a highly-placed dignitary of the Catholic Church—when he had been remarking upon the position and circumstances of somebody which should leave nothing to be desired, and which for all that, covered “a thorn in the flesh”—“It is not intended that anyone should be perfectly happy in this world.” Wyvern had realised the truth of this then, as indeed none but a fool could have failed to realise it, since it was a truth borne out by all experience. Now it came back to him with force, and alone with the solitude of the wild, he looked reverently up to the moonlit heavens with an aspiration that here might be the exception which should prove the rule.

The young Zulu whom they had rescued had shown no desire to leave them. He had tacitly and naturally fallen in with their party as though one of it, and Fleetwood was not at all unwilling that he should; for he was a fine, active, warrior-like specimen of his race and came of a splendid fighting stock. There was no telling when such advantages might not be of solid use to his rescuers. He was a son—one of many—of a powerful chief whose clan dwelt in the mountainous fastnesses in the north-west of the country, and

entirely and whole-heartedly attached to the cause of the exiled and captive King. He, Mtezani, had thrown in his lot with the other side, not through conviction, but to get the better of his brothers, with whom he had quarrelled over the division of certain cattle, their patrimony. Besides, he wanted to tunga, and take a wife—he explained frankly enough to Fleetwood. He had heard that under the chiefs set up by the English, any man was at liberty to do this whenever he chose; whereas his father, Majendwa, was among the most conservative of Zulus, and strongly objected to this young bull-calf setting aside the traditions of the nation, and daring to aspire to the head-ring without leave from the Great Great One—who, of course, was not there to grant it. They had done him out of his cattle, he declared, so that he should have no lobola to offer for any girl.

This was a situation which, we may be sure, strongly appealed to Wyvern, who reflected, whimsically enough, that he himself was much in the same position. He accordingly took a great fancy to Mtezani, and the young Zulu seemed to attach himself to him more than to Fleetwood. He would invariably be with him when a hunt was afoot in the wild and broken forest country they were then traversing; and for more than one successful find of koodoo or impala, Wyvern had to thank Mtezani.

They fell in with no more contending impis. Now and again armed runners would fetch up at their outspan, and when pressed for news would give evasive replies, but these became fewer as, at last, through the great tumbled, rolling forests, the precipitous savage rise of the Lebombo range came into view.

“We are getting there at last, Wyvern,” said Fleetwood one day. “But there’s one thing I must tell you that I hadn’t bargained for, and a most infernal nuisance it is too. I learn that almost bang on the scene of our operations, a particularly obnoxious sweep named Rawson—Bully Rawson—a white man, of course, has planted himself down. Now this fellow is likely to prove a considerable thorn in our side, to give us trouble, in fact.”

“Why? Who is he?”

“Oh, as to that nobody knows, strictly, which likely enough is just as well for him. He’s nominally a trader like myself, but actually he’s a chiefs white man, and that spells gun-runner.”

“Yes? But why should he interfere with us?”

“Well, it’s this way. Being in my own line himself, he knows devilish well that no sane being—and he knows me well enough to credit me with sanity—is going to bring a couple of trade waggons up to a remote and almost uninhabited part of the country, that, too, where trekking with the same is more than pain and grief, as you’ve seen—for

trade purposes. No. Well, then, having come to that conclusion, the first thing he'll say to himself will be—what the devil we're up here for at all. See?"

"Yes. But what the same devil is he doing up here himself, then, on those terms? You don't think he has any inkling of Hlabulana's yarn? Eh?"

"No. I don't see how he could have," answered Fleetwood. "He's cutting timber in the Lumisana forest, and shipping it to the coast, which in all probability spells gun-running for Hamu."

"For Hamu? Oh, this is Hamu's country, then?"

"Yes. Well, Rawson was with him before, and they know each other. But here's where the fun comes in. Once he gets suspicious—and, of course, he will, on the terms I told you before, he'll stick to us like our shadows night and day, or at any rate take care that someone else does—say, when he's too drunk to attend to business himself. Then how are we going to set about our prospecting with the care and nicety and, above all, freedom from interruption it requires?"

"When he's too drunk, I think you said, Joe? I read a saving clause in that. What sort of a type—both outwardly and inwardly—is this very attractive being?"

"Oh, outwardly he's a thick-set, shaggy, broken-nosed brute whom any jury would hang at sight without retiring from the box. For the other part, he hasn't a redeeming quality, unless it is that he's as plucky as they make 'em. The only point on which no one has ever been able to damn Bully Rawson is that of his pluck. On all others, everybody who has ever known him is united in damning him to a lurid degree."

"H'm! Yes, it's a nuisance," mused Wyvern. "One rather reckoned on difficulties at the hands of the noble savage, and now it seems we are likely to find them the thickest at those of a white man and a brother. Well, we are two to one. One or other of us must manage to be one too many for Mr Bully Rawson."

Here Mtezani interrupted. He had been away on a private prowl of his own, and had come back in a hurry.

"Nkose, there are people coming," he said. "Impela, they are not very far behind me, and one of them is a white man."

"A white man! What is he like?" said Fleetwood. "Did you see him?"

“Eh-hi!” And the young Zulu gave a rapid and graphic description.

“That is Inxele,” pronounced Hlabulana, who was squatted near.

Fleetwood turned upon his companion a whimsical look.

“Talk of the devil!” he quoted. “Inxele is their name for Bully Rawson.”

Chapter Eighteen.

Entering the Toils.

"Hi—Yup, friends. Glad to see another white man or two in this sooty, flame of fire sort of hole," sung out the new arrival in rough geniality, as he slid from his pony. "Why, if it isn't Joe Fleetwood! Hullo, Joe, but I'm glad to see you again; that I am."

Fleetwood tried to appear as though that sentiment were reciprocated, as they shook hands. Then he introduced Wyvern.

"Glad to meet you, Mister," extending a great gnarled paw. In taking it an intense and unconquerable aversion came upon Wyvern, an aversion which he believed would have been there in any case, and apart from the doubtful character Fleetwood had just given. Rawson, for his part, was appraising Wyvern. So this was the man he had been instructed to "take care of"; and sizing him up he thought the job would not be a difficult one. True, the object of such attention was tall and broad and strong—for the matter of that, Bully himself was no weakling. But he had a confiding, unsuspicious look which seemed to relieve the undertaking of nine tenths of its difficulties.

"Going through to Swaziland, I suppose, Joe? You'll not trade a knife to skin a dog with round here, and, if there was any trade—well, you see, old man—this is my pitch."

For all the boisterous geniality of the tone, there was a distinct note of "warning off" underlying.

"Don't be anxious, Bully," said Fleetwood, easily. "I wouldn't overlap your trade to the tune of a string of beads."

"Damned if you would! Ha-ha, don't I know that?" was the boisterous reply. "Joe Fleetwood's only another name for straight—all the world knows that. Don't you agree with me, Mister?"

"Absolutely," answered Wyvern.

"Known him long?"

"Rather," answered Fleetwood for him. "We fought together in the war up here, and that's equivalent to knowing a man all his life. Why, I shouldn't be here now if it hadn't been for him."

“Oh, shut off that, Joe,” said Wyvern, hastily. “Besides, it’s not quite accurate.”

“I shall cotton to you. Mister,” cried Rawson, “I do like pluck, and you’ve got it, I can see.” He was thinking, however, that the piece of information just obtained brought back all the difficulties. Clearly the attachment existing between these two men was no ordinary one. In dealing with Wyvern, he had also to reckon with Fleetwood, and Fleetwood had the reputation of being an uncommonly useful man to have at one’s back in a crisis, otherwise an awkward customer if taken the wrong way.

Wyvern in no wise felt like reciprocating the compliment. It was all he could do to conceal his disgust for this blatant, loud-mouthed, blasphemous ruffian—the actual text of whose speech has perforce undergone material deletion here. But he laughed good-naturedly and then Fleetwood suggested drinks, a proposal uproariously acclaimed by their visitor.

“Don’t you hurry on, Joe,” said the latter, after a couple had been disposed of, and both fairly stiff. “Trek on and outspan at my place. We can have some roaring games of cards—eh? Had no one to play against for months. Fond of cards, Mister?”

“Hate ’em,” answered Wyvern pleasantly.

“Been skinned too much, maybe?”

“Never gave anyone the chance.”

Rawson stared. This to him was something of a phenomenon.

“Well—well, Joe and I must go at it then. Talking of being skinned, the last fellow I served that way was a half-Dutchman, half-Jew sort of devil. When he’d lost he wouldn’t part—swore I’d cheated. Oh—I went for him, but he flashed off a pistol at me—darned fool couldn’t have hit a haystack. He didn’t get another chance of trying though. I was on him. Lord—Lord—the way I pounded that chap. He couldn’t stand on his legs for ten days after, and as soon as he could I kicked him off the place. Bully Rawson cheated!”

The righteous indignation of this last utterance was so inexpressibly comical to anybody with the most rudimentary knowledge of its utterer’s character, that the effort not to roar out laughing cost Fleetwood physical pain.

“Have another drink, Bully,” he said, by way of sparing himself the necessity of comment.

“Right you are, Joe,” reaching over for the square bottle. “You’re a white man, you are, if ever there was one. Bully Rawson cheated!” he went on, returning to the subject. “Mister, you may not know much of me, but I’m honest Bully Rawson has his faults, but all the world’ll tell you he’s honest, damn him! Eh, Joe?”

“Oh, we’re all honest—as long as we’ve got enough dibs and the other fellow hasn’t. It reminds me of a good joke I heard in the Durban Club the other day. There was a difference of opinion among a lot of the men at lunch as to the shadiness or not of some transaction. At last someone appealed to old Colonel Bowker, who hadn’t taken any part in the general jaw, and began in this way—‘Now, Colonel, as an honest man, what would you say—’ ‘Eh? as a what?’ ‘Why, an honest man.’ ‘But I don’t know that I am an honest man,’ says the old chap, in that dry, lack-lustre way of his. Of course, there was a big grin all round, and the first fellow expostulates, ‘Oh come—hang it all, Colonel. You don’t know—’ ‘No, I don’t. I’ve never been in want of a shilling or a breakfast in my life.’ There was a bigger grin then, for it wasn’t a bad way of putting the thing.”

“Haw-haw! damn good!” pronounced Rawson, who had got into the benign stage of potation, preparatory to the quarrelsome one, wherein he was wont to become sometimes a dangerous animal, and at all times a completely objectionable one. “We’ll see now, Joe. You two fellows come up and outspan at my place. We’ll have a roaring, sparking time, by—” some dozen deities and demons—“we will! I don’t see a white man every day, no by—” the same over again—“I don’t! Tell your boys to in-span, and—come along.”

“Not to-day, Bully. Can’t move the oxen another inch till they’ve had a good long rest.”

Wyvern could hardly conceal his relief—nor his overmastering disgust Fleetwood’s definition of this noble specimen of civilised humanity recurred to him—“A thick-set, shaggy, broken-nosed brute whom any jury would hang at sight without retiring from the box.” Yes, there was nothing wanting from that definition. And he was doomed to see a great deal more of the subject before him, and knowing this the consciousness sickened him.

“Well, come up and see my place then,” persisted the enemy. “The day’s young yet, and it’s only a matter of five mile; and you’ve got horses. Tell your boys to saddle up, and we’ll all go over together.”

We have said that in anything to do with the expedition Wyvern followed his friend’s lead absolutely; wherefore when the latter agreed to this proposition he made no objection by word or sign, taking for granted that their interests would be better served in the long run by such a course.

“Who’s this?” said Bully Rawson, becoming suddenly alive to the presence of Hlabulana. “He doesn’t belong in these parts. I know all them what does.”

“Oh, he’s an old friend of mine,” answered Fleetwood carelessly. “He fell in with us further down, and seemed to want to come along—just for the fun of the thing apparently. So I let him.”

“Sure he ain’t a spy of those damned Usutus?” said Rawson suspiciously.

“Not he. He’s no sort of a spy at all.”

Even then Rawson eyed the man. Had he guessed the secret that lay within that smooth, shaven, ringed pate as Hlabulana sat, watching the white men with indifferent interest, there was no telling what dark and bloody tragedy might not have been the result. For the acquisition of such wealth as this there was no crime, however treacherous, at which that white savage would have stuck; no bloodshed, however wholesale. But the copper-hued savage knew how to guard his secret, as well as he had known whom to entrust with it.

The first living object to meet them as they drew in sight of Rawson’s kraal, was a young native, and to him the meeting seemed not palatable. It seemed, in fact, a terror. He was coming along the path at a trot, and at sight of them pulled up short and looked wildly around as though about to take to headlong flight Rawson, spurring his horse, went for him like an arrow.

“Ho, Pakisa!” he roared, as he curled his whiplash round the boy’s naked ribs. “So thou art skulking again, instead of being at the wood-cutting. Now I will flog thee back to it.” And with every few words he flung out the cutting whiplash with painful effect. In vain the victim doubled. The horsemanship of his chastiser was perfect, and reckless with liquor and sheer lust of cruelty the ruffian would turn as quickly as the belaboured one. At last the latter managed to wriggle into a patch of bush where the horse could not enter.

“Keep cool, Wyvern,” Fleetwood took the opportunity of saying in an undertone. “We don’t know, of course, what that young schelm may have been up to.”

“What a sickening sweep!” was Wyvern’s reply, with a set face.

“Well, that young brute’s got what he won’t forget in a hurry,” cried Rawson, rejoining them. “Skulked away from his job directly my back was turned, and slunk up here to cadge some tywala. One of my wives is his sister, you know.”

“One of your what?” said Wyvern.

“Wives,” shouted Bully, with an evil grin, enjoying the other’s look of disgust. “Wives. I’ve only two of ’em at present—I’ve had lots in my time—and I shall have to lick one of ’em for this, too.”

“You seemed rather—well, rough on your brother-in-law,” answered Wyvern, with a sneer he could no longer repress.

“You’ve got to be. Look here, Wyvern,” waxing familiar, “I take it you’re one of them raw, out from home Britishers who think the way to baas niggers is to soft sawder them. You may take it from me then that it ain’t. Oh, Joe there’ll tell you exactly the same for that matter.”

“Is he a Zulu?” with a jerk of the hand in the direction of the vanishment of the licked one.

“Zulu? Not much. He’s a Swazi.”

“I wonder you’re not afraid of them poisoning you.”

“Look here. What the devil d’you mean?”

The man’s face had gone a sort of dirty ash colour. He sat glowering at Wyvern with evil eyes. The latter thought he saw the gnarled dirty hand which held the bridle-rein shake—and it may have done so, for it may have been that a refrain was sounding in this ruffian’s ears: “The Snake-doctor—whau! his múti is great and subtle!”

“What I said. And now look here,” went on Wyvern very stern and decisive, “I suppose I can’t interfere in your domestic affairs, if only that it would make things worse for the poor wretches afterwards. But I don’t choose to be present at any woman-thrashing performance—black or white. So I’ll wish you good-bye.”

The sudden fury that came into the man’s forbidding face was rather terrific. Then as suddenly it faded out.

“Hang it, Wyvern, couldn’t you see that I was only humbugging. That young rip had to be taught a lesson, but you didn’t suppose I was really going to whack a girl, did you? Bully Rawson has his faults, but no one can say he ain’t soft-hearted at bottom. Why, I wouldn’t do such a thing for the world.”

Wyvern did not exactly believe this; still he felt sure that the threatened chastisement would not now take place. And Fleetwood had made no move towards actively supporting him, and his rule of being guided by Fleetwood still held.

“I should hope not,” he answered, but rather shortly, riding on with them again.

“Why, of course not Man alive, but you mustn’t take everything we say up here as serious. Eh, Joe?” returned Rawson, with huge geniality. “Now we’ll go inside and have another drink and then I want to show you my wood-cutting place.”

If it be imagined for a moment that the speaker had been shamed into relenting, either by Wyvern’s words or demeanour, why the notion may immediately be classed among popular delusions. What was behind it was this. It had suddenly been borne in upon him, that to have Wyvern for a friend would render the allotted task of “taking care” of him infinitely easier than if he should sheer off, and hold himself in a state of suspicious and therefore watchful aloofness. Under his own eyes his opportunities would be greater: whereas his intended victim away, and thoroughly on his guard—why, then the matter was not so easy. And, even then, there flashed through his evil brain a hell-sent idea. The wood-cutting place. There would be a royal opportunity there; and with the hideous thought he had blossomed forth into a rugged geniality again. He could not afford to scare away his bird.

Chapter Nineteen.

Warren's Opportunity.

The Kunaga river was "down"; which is to say that the heavy rains of the last three days, especially among the foot-hills wherein it took its source, had converted it into a red, rolling, turbid torrent, of inconceivable swiftness and power. A comparative trickle at ordinary times, now the great raging flood surged within a few feet of overlapping its ample bed, submerging the lower of the trees fringing its banks well-nigh to their tops. A grand spectacle those seething red waves, hissing and rearing as they encountered some obstacle, then the crash as this gave way, and the mighty current, unchecked, poured onward with a savage roar. Great tree-trunks rolled over and over in the flood, and now and then, bodies of drowned animals, sheep, cattle, horses, swept helplessly down.

"Someone's the poorer for the loss of his whole span," remarked Warren, as a number of drowned oxen were whirled by. "Likely the river first came down in a wall—it does sometimes—and caught the whole lot bang in the middle of a drift."

"Most likely," assented Lalanté. "But I've never seen the river as full as this. Isn't it grand?"

The two were standing on a high, scaur-like bank where the Kunaga swept round one side of Le Sage's farm, and just below the krantz above which its owner and Wyvern had held their somewhat inharmonious discussion. They had strolled down to look at the river. The two youngsters had accompanied them, but now had wandered away on their own account.

The rain had ceased but the sky was veiled in an opaque curtain; the high rand beyond the Kunaga river valley being completely hidden by a grey and lowering murk. The unwonted gloom seemed to add to the terror of the forces of the bellowing flood. The scene on the whole was dreary and depressing to the last degree. Yet no depression did it convey to the hearts of the dwellers on this veldt, for after it the land would smile forth a rich and tender green, and flocks and herds grow fat, and game be plentiful—and, not least, it meant an ample storage of water in dams and tanks against months, it might be, wherein not another drop should fall.

Warren had taken to coming over to Le Sage's of late, and would generally stay the night there, or even two. From Lalanté he would meet with a frank and cordial welcome. She liked him for his own sake—and in addition was he not a friend of the absent one; upon whom and upon whose good qualities he had the tact to lose no opportunity of dwelling.

“I can’t, for the life of me, get at the secret of poor old Wyvern’s ill-luck,” he would say, for instance. “He’s one of the finest fellows I’ve ever known, and yet—he can’t get on. I own it stumps me.”

“But it doesn’t stump me,” grunted Le Sage. “He’s got no head-piece.”

“You’re wrong there, Le Sage, if you’ll excuse my saying so. Head-piece is just what he has got. Too much of it perhaps.”

And the speaker had his reward in Lalanté’s kindling face and grateful glance; and the friendship between them ripened apace.

Warren was playing his game boldly and with depth. He could afford to praise the absent one, being as firmly convinced that that fortunate individual would never return as that he himself was alive and prosperous. And he meant it too. There was no pretence in his tone. He had no personal animus against Wyvern for occupying the place with regard to Lalanté which should have been his. Wyvern stood in his way, that was all, and—he must be got out of it. That he would be got out of it Warren, as we have said, had no doubt whatever, and then—after an interval, a time-healing interval, to whom would Lalanté listen and turn more readily than to Wyvern’s best friend? Herein Warren was true to himself—i.e. Number 1.

Now, on their stroll down to the river the topic of the absent one had come up; his coolness and courage upon one or two occasions when call had arisen for the exercise of those valuable attributes—and here on the bank, after the first comments upon the scene before them, the topic was revived.

“I wonder why women are always such blind worshippers of mere pluck,” Warren remarked.

“But you wouldn’t have us hold cowardice in respect, would you?”

“You can’t respect a negative—and cowardice is a negative.”

“Well then, a man who is a coward?”

“Why not? I know at least two men who are that, and I happen to hold them in some considerable respect. That astonishes you, does it?”

“Well, yes, naturally,” said Lalanté, with a laugh, and wondering whether he was serious.

“Naturally, but illogically. That blind, instinctive shrinking from risk which we call cowardice is constitutional, and its subject can no more help it than he could have helped being born with a club foot, for instance.”

“You do put things well,” said Lalanté. “All the same you’ll never persuade the world in general that a coward is anything but a pitiable object.”

“If by that you mean deserving of pity, why then I agree with you—if of contempt, then I don’t. I’ll tell you another who doesn’t.”

“Who’s that?”

“Wyvern.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve seen him give practical proof of it.”

The girl’s face softened and her eyes filled.

“Him? Oh, he’s goodness itself,” she murmured. “He hasn’t a fault, except that of being unfortunate.”

“Which isn’t a fault. The fact is we are all cowards on some point or other, and a good many of us all round, though we succeed in hiding it. Look at that river now, that swirling, roaring monster against which the strongest swimmer would have that much chance,” with a snap of the finger and thumb. “I should be uncommonly sorry to be put to the test of having to jump in there after some other fellow who had tumbled in. That would be something of a test wouldn’t it; and I’m perfectly certain I should funk it?”

“It would. But I’m perfectly certain you wouldn’t funk it,” laughed Lalanté.

And then, paling their faces and curdling their blood, came a shrill piercing scream of agony and terror. As they turned towards it a small boy came rushing headlong through the sparse mimosas growing along that part of the bank.

“He’s in,” he screamed. “Charlie. He’s in the river—there.”

Following his pointing finger they could see nothing, then, borne swiftly down towards them, a head rose to the surface, showing an agonised little face, in the last degree of

terror, and a pair of hands feebly battling with the vast might of the flood. A second more and Lalanté would have been in there too.

But that second was just sufficient for a pair of arms to close round her, effectually holding her back.

“Not you, Lalanté, d’you hear! I’m a strong swimmer. Now—let me go.”

He almost threw her from him, and that purposely, for stumbling against Frank, the terrified boy had promptly and firmly clutched hold of her. She could not go into the water—and, incidentally, to her death—without dragging him with her. In the same quick atom of time Warren, with a straight, clear, springy leap, had felt the turgid waters of the monster flood close over his head.

He had leaped to come down feet foremost, as was the safest. He risked damaging his head the less, and could see for the fraction of a moment longer the exact position of the drowning boy; and even that fraction of a moment may mean the difference between life and death in a situation such as this.

Not a second too soon had he jumped. As he rose to the surface the boy was just sweeping past him. Darting forth an arm, he seized him by the hand, but—still kept him at arm’s length.

“Charlie,” he said, “be plucky now and keep cool. Whatever happens, don’t grab hold of me. I won’t let go of you but—don’t grab me.”

The boy, half-dazed, seemed to understand. The while the current was whirling them down with frightful velocity. Suddenly something seized Warren by the foot, dragging him down; then as the waters roared over his head the awfulness of the moment came upon him that this was doom. Then—he was free.

A last desperate violent kick had done it. What had entangled him was really the fork in a bough of a sunken tree. But it was time, for on rising to the surface his eyes were swelled and his head seemed to go round giddily, and his breath came in laboured pants; but he had never slackened his hold of the boy.

The latter was now unconscious, and consequently a dead weight. Warren, wiry athletic man as he was, felt his strength failing. The flood was as a very monster, and in its grip he himself was but a shaving, as it roared in his ears, its spume blinding him as it tossed him on high with the crest of its great churning waves. With desperate presence of mind he strove to keep his head. As he rose on each great wave he saw the long broad road of

foaming water in front, bounded by its two dark lines of half-submerged willows—then he saw something else.

An uprooted tree was bearing down upon him, its boughs thrashing the water as the trunk rolled over and over in the surge. It was coming straight at him, borne along more swiftly than he—and his burden. One thrash of those flail-like boughs and then—his efforts would be at an end.

Desperate, but still cool, he tried swimming laterally instead of with the stream, and found that he could. Down came the swirling boughs, like the sails of a windmill, where he had been but a moment before, and this grisly peril passed on. No sooner had it done so than the striver's foot touched something—something firm.

Something firm! Yes, it was firm. Among the whirl and lash of the willow boughs, for by his diagonal course of swimming he had reached the side here, where the swirl of the current, though powerful, was comparatively smooth, and he had touched firm ground. Warren dared to hope, with indescribable relief, that he was standing on the brink of one of those deep, lateral dongas which ran up from the river-bed, one similar to that which the Kafir had fallen into with the snake coiled round his leg. He grasped the supple and whip-like boughs, still carefully feeling out with the other foot lest he should flounder into deep water again, and gave himself over to a breathe.

Charlie now began to show signs of returning consciousness, then opened his eyes.

"Where are we? Magtig! Mr Warren, I thought I was drowned."

"Well, you're not, nor I either. So wake up, old chap, and hold on to these twigs so as to give me a bit of a rest; for I can tell you that sort of swim is no exercise for a young beginner."

The splashing, roaring flood whirled on, throwing up clouds of spume where here and there great waves hurled themselves on to some obstruction. Once the ghastly white head of a drowned calf rose up out of the water just by them, a spectral stare in the lustreless eyes. The lowering afternoon was darkening.

"I believe we could make for terra-firma—that means solid ground—if we went to work carefully," said Warren. "What do you think, Charlie? Shall we try? The swirl up here is fairly light, and you must think you are only swimming in the kloof dam."

The boy looked out upon the roaring rush of waters and shuddered. Not among this would their venture lead them, but among much smoother water, to safety. Still, he was

unnerved after his experience of that awful force, his choking, suffocating, helpless, all but drowning condition. But he was plucky to the core.

“All right. Let’s try,” he said. “But keep hold of my hand, won’t you.”

“Of course,” said Warren. And then once more they struck off, entrusting themselves to the stream, or rather to its eddies.

Chapter Twenty.

In the Roar of the Flood.

Lalanté and her small brother, watching from the bank the earlier struggle with the awful forces, were at first frantic with grief and horror; then the sense of having someone dependent on her was as a nerve-bracing tonic to the girl, and she recovered a modicum of coolness.

“Come, Frank,” she said. “We must run along the bank, and see if we can be of any help at all.”

The weeping youngster brightened up a little, as seizing him by the hand she dragged him along with her, both running for all they knew. But the ground was rough and uneven; if it had not been they could never have kept pace with the swiftness of the flood. Then it dipped abruptly, yet still they managed to stumble along. Up the next rise, panting, their hearts beating as though they would burst, and then—they saw Warren and his burden suddenly sink from sight. At the same time Lalanté’s foot caught in some twisted grass, and down she came, full length, dragging the boy with her.

She tried to get up, but could not do more than struggle to her knees, then fall again. She was too utterly breathless and exhausted to be capable of making further effort. The last she had seen of them, too, was as a numbing physical blow. She could only lie there panting in great sob-like gasps. The little fellow threw his arms round her neck and sobbed too.

“Oh, Lala, will they get out? Do say. Will they get out?”

Even then Warren’s words were hammering in her brain ”...against which the strongest swimmer would have that much chance”; words uttered calmly and authoritatively, scarce a minute before he himself had taken that fatal leap. What chance then had he—had they? And they had already gone under.

“Darling, I’m afraid there’s—there’s—no hope,” she said, unsteadily. “But come. We will walk along the bank—I am quite powerless to run any more—in case we should sight them again. Tell me. How did it happen?”

“We were standing on the bank, shying sticks into the river and watching them float down. Then a great piece of the bank gave way, and Charlie was in.”

Lalanté could hardly restrain a storm of tears. One of her little brothers—her darling little brothers—of whom she was so fond, and who looked up to her for everything, to be carried away like this by the great cruel river, and drowned before her very eyes—oh, it was too awful! What a tale, too, to carry back to their father! And the prompt, cool, brave man—he who at that very moment had been expressing the hope that he might never be called upon to stand such a test, because if so he was sure he would be found wanting—he too had gone, had given his life for that of another. Lalanté was not a Catholic, but human instinct is ever the same, and if ever prayers went up that a soul should have its eternal reward, one went up—none more fervent—from her during those awful moments on behalf of Warren.

The rain had begun again, and was now a steady downpour, while lower and lower the murk descended, blotting out the opposite rand. Great shiny songo-lolos, or "thousand legs," squirmed among the mimosa sprays in repulsive festoons, and in the splashy softness of the thoroughly soaked ground—ordinarily so hard and arid—the foot sank or slipped. The river, too, in whose ordinarily nearly dry bed the small boys had so often disported themselves, or catapulted birds along the banks—now a great bellowing monster—had taken its toll of one of them. All was in keeping, as the darkness brooded down; the splash of the rain, the hopelessness, the death, the despair; a scene, a setting of indescribable gloom and horror, as these two dragged themselves wearily step by step, staring at the long rush of foam-flecked flood in a very whirlwind of grief. Then, upon the blackness of this misery, came a sound.

"Lala—did you hear that?" panted the boy, eagerly.

"Yes. Wait!" gasped Lalanté, holding up a hand.

The sound was repeated. It came from some distance lower down, and took shape as a hail. The girl even thought to descry in it her own name, and to both it came as a very voice from Heaven.

"Man—Lalanté," panted Frank, in uncontrollable excitement, "but that's Mr Warren."

"Yes, it is. Why, then in that case, Charlie's there too, for I know he'd never leave him," answered the girl tremulously and half-laughing, in the nervous reaction of her gratitude. Then she lifted her own voice in a loud, clear call that might have been heard for miles in the stillness. They listened a moment, and an answering hail was returned.

"Come. They may still need our help," she said. "Go steady though. We mustn't exhaust ourselves this time."

First sending forth another long, clear call, to which Frank added the shrillness of his small but carrying voice, they started off along the river bank. It seemed miles, hours, as they stumbled along, now over a stone, now crashing into a bush—but every now and then sending forth another call, which was answered, thank God, now much nearer. At last, through the gloom, for by this it was almost dark, they made out two figures coming slowly towards them.

"Charlie—my darling, whatever made you do it?" began Lalanté as she hugged the smallest of these; womanlike mingling a touch of scold with the joy of the restoration.

"Oh, Lala, you're not cross, are you? I couldn't help it," was the answer, in a tired voice.

"Cross—cross! Oh, you darling, how should I be cross!" raining kisses all over the wet little face. Then, unclasping one arm, she held out a hand.

"Oh, Mr Warren!" was all that she could say, but it seemed to express everything.

Warren took it, in a firm sympathetic grasp. He himself was looking rather fagged—in fact, decidedly not himself—which was little to be wondered at. What he himself wondered was that he was there at all.

"All's well that ends well, Miss Lalanté," he said, cheerily, "which, if not original, about sums up the situation. We're all about equally wet for that matter, but as long as we keep moving we shan't take any harm, and the way back to the house, if not long, is rough enough to keep up our circulation."

"What can I say to you, Mr Warren?" went on Lalanté. "You were just telling me the strongest swimmer would stand no chance in that flood, and then you deliberately went in yourself."

"Not deliberately, Miss Lalanté," smiled Warren. "I assure you it was all on the spur of the moment. Charlie, it's lucky you had the foresight to tumble in above us. If it had been down stream I could never have got near you."

As a matter of fact the feat had been one of great daring and skill, and having accomplished it Warren felt secretly elated as they took their way home. He realised the warm admiration and gratitude which it had aroused in the girl, and, now that it had ended well, he looked upon the whole affair as a gigantic stroke of luck, and, in fact, as the very best thing that could have happened to him. Bye and bye, when Wyvern's memory should begin to dim, then this appreciation would turn to something stronger. Curses on Wyvern! Why should he have this priceless possession, and how

confoundedly calmly he seemed to accept it, as if it were only his due? He, Warren, would have moved heaven and earth to obtain it, yet why should that other gain it with no effort at all? He himself had all the advantages that Wyvern had. He was a clean-run, strong, healthy man, whom more than one girl of his acquaintance would think herself surpassing lucky to capture. Moreover he had made money, and knew how to go on making it, which was a thing Wyvern never had done and never would. Why the deuce then should Wyvern be where he ought to be? he thought bitterly as he walked dripping beside Lalanté, in the gloom of the now fast-darkening night. Well, at any rate, in all probability Wyvern by that time was nowhere at all, thought this man who had just risked his life when the chances were a hundred to one against him, to save that of a helpless child. Yes. Nowhere at all. There was a wholeheartedness about Bully Rawson and his doings which left no room for doubt. He could be trusted to "take care" of anybody.

And yet, through it all there was a certain modicum of compunction; compunction, but no relenting. Had circumstances compelled Wyvern to give up Lalanté, he would have had no more sincere well-wisher than Warren. As it was he stood in Warren's way; therefore—out he must go. Then Warren became alive to the fact that Lalanté's bright eyes were fixed upon him in some concern.

"You didn't hurt yourself—in the river, did you?" she said anxiously.

"Oh no, no. I'm a dull dog, I'm afraid," he answered, with a laugh. "Perhaps I am a bit tired."

"Are you sure you're not hurt?" she persisted, anxiously.

"Very sure indeed. I got a rap on the shin from that confounded tree that did its best to hold me under water, but that was nothing to what I used to get in a football match when I was a nipper."

The drizzle had merged into a steady downpour as they reached the house. In the framing of the lighted doorway Le Sage came out to meet them, smoking a pipe.

"Hullo. You've prolonged a pretty wet walk," he said. "Magtig! but you look like four jolly drowned rats."

"And that's what two of us jolly near were, father," said Lalanté, in clear ringing tones. And then she explained what had happened. Le Sage stared at her as if he were listening to something altogether incredible.

“Good God! Lalanté. And you can hear the river from here, a mile and a half away, bellowing as if it was at the very door. Why, it hasn’t been down like this since the big flood of ’74. And you went in it, Warren, and—got out of it! Well, well. They give Victoria Crosses and so on, but—oh damn it! you deserve a couple of dozen of ’em.”

His voice had a tremble in it as he gripped the other’s hand. The whole thing was more eloquent than a mere speech would have been. He was deeply moved—moved to the core, but Le Sage was not a man of words.

“Oh, that’s all right, Le Sage,” said Warren. “Only as I was telling Charlie, it’s lucky he had the discretion to go in above stream instead of down, or the devil himself would hardly have managed to get him out. Come now, let’s have something warming and then I’ll go and change, though I’ll have to borrow some of your togs for that same purpose.”

“Right. Here you are, and mix it stiff,” said Le Sage, diving into a sideboard and extracting a decanter. “Good Lord! And you got into the Kunaga in a flood like this, and got out again! Why, it’s a record.”

This was Le Sage’s recognition of the fact that this man had saved his child’s life at enormous risk to his own. But Warren thoroughly understood and appreciated it; and was more elate than ever, inwardly.

“Go along, you children, and change at once,” pronounced Lalanté with decision. “And be quick about it, and give yourselves a glowing rub down with a rough towel I don’t know that we two who haven’t been in the river are much drier than the other two who have,” she added with a laugh, as she disappeared.

Half an hour afterwards they all foregathered at table, and it seemed, in the snug, warm, lighted room, as though the ghastly peril of the afternoon were but a passing adventure, calculated to give an additional feeling of snugness and security to the wind-up of the day. But the dull roaring of the flood was borne in to them through it all upon the dripping stillness of the rainy night.

And Warren, listening to it, and knowing that others heard it, felt more elate than ever. He began to see the goal of his hopes more than near.

Chapter Twenty One.

"Take Care of him."

Wyvern found some difficulty in concealing the growing disgust that was upon him as he entered Rawson's kraal. He had by this time been in several native kraals and felt quite at home there: but this—well, somehow it was out of keeping. That unqualified ruffian, his present entertainer, was repulsive enough in all conscience, but he seemed to become ten times more so, when viewed in the light of his domestic arrangements: under which circumstances the fact that he was a white man seemed to have sunk him immeasurably below the level of the savage.

The two women, who were seated together on the ground, looked up quickly as the new arrivals entered. The better favoured of the two, Nkombazana, the Zulu girl, smiled approvingly as her glance rested on Wyvern, and then said something to her companion in a low tone. He, of the two, was clearly the one that aroused their interest Bully Rawson emitted a loud guffaw, true to his programme of keeping up a certain boisterous geniality.

"There you are, Wyvern. Women are the same all the world over, you see. Now these are agreeing that they don't see a thundering fine chap like you every day of the week."

"Which is the one related to the boy you just kicked so unmercifully?" said Wyvern.

"That one, Nompai. She ain't much to look at, but I'll swear she ain't the worst of the two. That other one, Nkombazana, she's a regular vixen—a spitfire I can tell you. I often wish I could clear her out I'd let her go cheap. Oh, see here Wyvern—" as a bright idea struck him, and then he stopped short. Bully Rawson, with all his faults, had the saving grace of perceptiveness, wherefore the bright idea remained unpropounded.

"Well what?"

"Oh nothing. I forget now what I was going to say," with a furtive wink at Fleetwood.

"But why can't you clear her out?" asked Wyvern. "I thought among savages they did what they liked with their womenkind."

There was a dry irony about the tone, that the other may have remarked, but for his own purposes preferred not to notice or resent. He guffawed good-humouredly instead.

“Did you? Well then Wyvern, you’ve got a lot to learn about the manners and customs of this country yet. Nkombazana’s father’s a pretty strong chief, and Joe there’ll tell you what a hornet’s nest I should bring about my ears if I bunked her back to her people.” Fleetwood nodded. “Oh well, damn the women,” went on Bully. “I think we’ve yarned enough about them. So we’ll get into the store hut where it’s cool and have a drink.”

The hut wherein Rawson kept his trade goods was a larger one than the rest, and differed from them in that it had a door through which you need only stoop slightly in entering, instead of crawling on all fours. It also boasted a small glazed window. Unlocking the huge padlock that secured it, their host led the way inside.

“You haven’t got much stuff on hand, Bully,” said Fleetwood, looking round upon the blankets and beads and brass buttons and other “notions” stowed about.

“Oh well no, I do next to no blanket trade these days, and what I do is a darn sight more paying than this truck. Oh, I’ve got an iron or two in the fire, m’yes, but a lot of trade stuff comes in handy as a firescreen, as we know. Eh Joe?” with a knowing wink which made that worthy just a little uneasy. The other had exactly stated their own case: was it accidental, and was he merely referring to the pretty widespread practice of gun-running, or had he, by any means whatever, obtained some inkling as to the real object of the expedition? He nodded carelessly.

“Ja. That’s so,” he replied.

There are three European products which you shall invariably find—even if you find no other—on the confines of civilisation and beyond the same: “square face” gin, a pack of cards, and a bottle of Worcester sauce. The first of these Bully now produced, together with some enamelled metal mugs.

“Here’s luck all round,” he said. “Eh? What’s that? Water? Man—Wyvern, but you’re a bit of a Johnny Raw in these parts. Why we don’t water our stuff here. Eh, Joe?”

“Matter of taste. For my part I don’t care either way,” was the answer—while the host put his head out and bellowed to the women to fetch some.

Now Joe Fleetwood, though one of the shrewdest and most practical of men, had “instincts”—and these were somehow unaccountably aroused. There was a something which warned him that their uproariously effusive host meant mischief, and that at no distant time. Therefore he resolved to keep more than one eye upon him.

Soon they strolled down to the wood-cutting place, and the sombre, surrounding forest was ringing with the sound of axe and saw. The wretched slaves—for practically they were little or nothing else—looked up with dull interest at the new arrivals, but their master, out of deference to Wyvern, omitted to kick or hammer any of them, and laid himself out to be extremely pleasant in his boisterous way, as he explained the arrangements while they strolled around.

"Hold hard, Wyvern. A snake's bitten me."

The words—quick, sharp, replete with alarm—were Fleetwood's. Wyvern, who was just in front of him, stopped dead in his tracks and turned, as with a mighty crash a nearly-cut through tree-trunk came to earth hardly more than a yard in front of him. His next step would have been his last.

"Blazes!" cried Bully Rawson, "but I never thought that log would have come down at all. I was just shoving against it to see how much more cutting through it wanted. What's that about a snake, Joe?"

"No. It isn't one," said that worthy, in a tranquil tone of voice as he looked down. "It's only a thorn dug into my ankle. I was bitten once, and I suppose it's made me nervous ever since. Which is lucky, or you'd have been squashed to pulp, Wyvern."

"By the Lord he would," cried Rawson. "Man alive, but you've had a narrow squeak! Well I'm blasted sorry if I've given you a shaking up—and I can't say more."

"Oh, that'll be all right," said Wyvern, forgetting his own narrow escape in his intense relief. "But look here, Joe. Are you dead sure it wasn't one?"

"Dead cert. Look. Here's the thorn," picking one up.

"Haw-haw-haw!" bellowed Rawson. "Well, Wyvern, I suppose you and I are the only two cusses in the world who can say they've ever seen Joe Fleetwood in a funk. You were in one, weren't you, Joe?"

"Rather," was the answer, drily given.

"Well, I am a clumsy fellow," said Rawson, in his breezy way. "Come along now, and I'll show you my amabele and mealie lands."

He led the way by a narrow game path in the bush and soon they came to a high hedge made of mimosa thorn boughs tightly interlaced. Beyond this some three acres of green crops were visible.

“That’s to keep out the bucks,” said Rawson over his shoulder, for he was leading. “They’d scoff the lot in a night or two if there wasn’t something of the kind. Fond of hunting, Wyvern?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if you come up here on a moonlight night you’ll get plenty of chances. There’s an odd koodoo or so comes sniffing around after that stuff, but the thorn fence humbugs them.”

Wyvern was just thinking how even that inducement would not persuade him to see a moment more of his host than necessity obliged, so intense was the aversion the latter had inspired in him, when a sudden and violent push from behind, almost of the nature of a blow, sent him staggering and then sprawling, cannoning against and nearly upsetting his said host, who was some three or four yards ahead. Simultaneously the detonating roar of an explosion, seeming to come out of the ground itself, rent the air, and a perfect hail of missiles cut leaves and twigs from the bush, or ploughed up the ground a few yards to the right of the path they were pursuing.

“Hold up, man, hold up! Not hit, are you?” sung out Bully Rawson, with great concern. “No? That’s all right. Blast me if that wasn’t one of them spring-guns I’ve been settin’ around this land for the bucks we’ve just been talking about Man, there was half a pound of loepers in it if there was one. You must have kicked the string. The wonder is I didn’t.”

“Bit risky, isn’t it?” struck in Fleetwood, drily.

“Course. But I haven’t been seeing to them for some time. I swear I’d forgotten there were any left set at all.”

“Well, I saw the string,” rejoined Fleetwood, and his tone was decidedly short. “Wyvern was about to kick it, and so I sent him flying just in time. Legs blown off at the shins—no doctor—shock and loss of blood—stone dead in three minutes. Seems to me your place is a bit dangerous, Bully.”

“So it is. The wonder is I didn’t kick it myself. Well let’s chuck mouching about and get back to the store and have another drink. We deserve it after that. Well, I’ll hammer someone sweetly for leaving that thing there, that’s one consolation.”

“It’s none,” said Wyvern, also shortly. “Hammer yourself.”

“Eh? What do you mean?” said the other, trying to suppress his rising fury. “Ah well. Let’s have a look at the gun.”

There it was—a clumsy-looking, half-rusty iron tube like unto a young cannon, secreted in the bushes. To the peg which held up the hammer was attached a long string, its other end being made fast so that it came across the path. Any unwary animal which should collide with that string, would find all its worldly interests at an end there and then. Again Rawson was profuse in his apologies.

But thereafter, the tone of conversation between the two and the third became somewhat strained, and their farewell was none too cordial. As they rode back to their outspan Fleetwood said:

“He’s beginning early.”

“Do you think he meant to shove that tree down on me?”

“Of course he did. When that failed he remembered the spring-gun.”

“Do you think that was a put up thing too?”

“I should rather say so. Look here, Wyvern. I saw him step over the string. He knew it was there.”

“The deuce you did.”

“Well I did. I’ve got a rum sort of instinct, Wyvern, and it has saved more than one man’s life before to-day.”

“And it has saved one man’s life twice to-day, old chap,” answered Wyvern gravely.

“That’s nothing as between you and me,” rejoined the other. “When I remember that day on the Hlobane—”

“Oh damn the Hlobane,” cut in Wyvern. “Now do you think this unhung scoundrel has any inkling of our errand?”

“No, but for some reason or other he’d rather have our room than our company, and the best road towards that is to get rid of us. I had my eye on him from the very beginning, luckily. I saw him start shoving at that tree, and the only way to stop you dead short was to invent that snake-bite lie, just as the only way to make you clear the spring-gun string was to give you the shove I did. You let it off, but the sudden pitch forward just cleared the charge.”

“Well, if he gets up to anything of that sort openly I shall shoot,” said Wyvern decisively.

“So shall I,” said Fleetwood, with equal decision.

The while the subject of these remarks, having solaced his feelings by thrashing one of his dependents, and getting considerably drunk, was arriving at the conclusion that the process of “taking care of” Wyvern was not going to prove as easy as it looked, and that he himself had begun upon it very badly indeed.

Chapter Twenty Two.

The Opal.

An amphitheatre of bush and krantzes, the latter fringed on the sides and brink with the feathery droop of forest trees: dark, lateral kloofs running steeply up into the face of the heights: beyond the silence of a great wilderness, but enhanced by the varying bird voices upon the heat of the still atmosphere, or the hum of insects and the chirrup of crickets; and, over all, the deep blue arch of an unclouded sky.

Wyvern wiped his wet face with his wet handkerchief and gasped. He realised that he was getting limp—the enervating limpness produced by the torrid, up-country, steamy heat, and, proportionately, was getting depressed. So far they seemed no nearer their goal. They had searched, always with the greatest caution, but without success, or even a clue; and Hlabulana, their guide, seemed not nearly so confident now they had reached the locality as he had seemed when he made his statement to Fleetwood. In brief he was puzzled but would not own to it—only put them off in his vague native way. Added to which Joe Fleetwood had been more than once down with rather a bad attack of old up-country fever; in fact he was lying in camp at that moment not able to get about. But Wyvern, leaving him in the care of Hlabulana and Mtezani, the young Zulu to whom they had afforded asylum when the Usutus had pursued him right into their camp—and that under strict orders not to lose sight of him until his own return—had started forth, in his wearied impatience, to see if he could get no nearer the difficulty of solving matters.

Bully Rawson had troubled them no further. In fact they had seen but little of that worthy, who when they suggested trekking on had heartily approved of the idea. Now they were about thirty miles distant from him, allowing for the roundabout roughness of the road. It seemed as though he intended to trouble them no longer, and their precautions, though not exactly suspended, were very much less rigid as time went by.

Wyvern eyed the expanse of savage wilderness—forest and cliff and height—with a sombre hatred. What if this discovery they had come up here to make should elude them after all? What if these recesses, practically labyrinthine in their vastness, should hold that which he had come to seek, that upon which he had pinned his future; should hold it there at his very feet while he walked over it unconscious? The thought was maddening. His depression deepened.

Then arose before him more strongly than ever—for it was ever before him—the vision of Lalanté; of Lalanté, wide-eyed, smiling, ever hopeful—of Lalanté, a tower of strength in her sweetness and confidence, unique in his experience; his complement, his other

half—than whom the whole world could not contain another similar. How, in that far wilderness, he longed and yearned for her presence, her soothing comforting words, the love thrill in the sweetness of her voice, his all—all his—his alone! It was so long since he had been able to receive even the words written by her, to realise that the paper on which they were traced had been pressed by her hand, warm and strong with the pulses of love. When would he again? If this scheme failed, the failure would be irretrievable, abject. And she? Could she go on for ever hoping in him? Would not the surroundings of her life ultimately prove too strong for her? She was young, much younger than himself: could she continue to believe in a man who was an utter and consistent failure all along the line? In the solitude of the great wilderness he was brought more face to face with his knowledge of life—of life and its experiences—and the retrospect was like iron entering into his soul. Her presence was no longer with him: would it ever be again—for of such was life?

All the old time came back: the sweet time at Seven Kloofs when they had been together, sometimes for days at a time, either there or at her own home, especially that blissful day they had spent alone and free from all interruption, the last of its kind before the rupture came; and it seemed as though he had not appreciated it enough then—seemed so now, though in actual fact it would have been impossible for him to have done so more. He could almost find it in his heart to have cursed Le Sage for setting up that barrier between them during those last weeks, what time they could have made the most of the sad sweetness of impending parting; could have set up a rich barrier of love against the blank and separation that was to come. And with it all there came over him a wave of longing—a craving, a yearning—that was perfectly irresistible, but for the accidents of time and distance, to behold Lalanté once more, to hold her once more to him, to hear the full, love-fraught tones of her voice, to look into her eyes, let what might happen afterward. This undertaking had ended in the clouds, and all the buoyant hope which had sustained him had ebbed.

Thus musing he wandered on mechanically, hardly noting whether game he had come out to shoot was to be found or not. Then something caught his gaze. He stood and stared—shading his eyes, and then took a few quick strides. Something shone: shone but dully—but still shone. It was only a steel button.

Wyvern was not an excitable man, but now he thought to hear the pulses of his heart thud violently within his chest. As he stooped and picked up the button, he picked up something else at the same time. It was a knife.

A sheath-knife, red with rust, and with an iron handle—quaint and of an unfamiliar make and pattern. Quickly, but carefully he examined the ground further, and now his heart beat quicker still. On the ground were several fragments of what looked like moss-

grown bits of pottery. He bent down and examined them. The largest piece could be nothing else than the fragment of a skull—a human skull.

Further search revealed more remains, green and crumbly with age. Wyvern looked up at the tossing heights. Yes, here was the amphitheatre or hollow known as Ukohlo. He remembered every detail of the story; he and Joe Fleetwood had talked it over too often for it to be otherwise. Yes, and where the rocky side of the mountain rose abruptly were several holes and caves. The next thing would be to find the right one.

Now every detail of the story fitted in. Clearly this was the spot whereon the two wretched men had been suddenly and treacherously murdered. The knife, the human remains, all pointed that way. Hope, dispelling his former depression, bounded high once more. If necessary they would search every cranny and crevice, and thus could not fail to secure the prize.

But—it was buried. Well, they would dig if necessary. The object would be well worth the time and labour.

A shadow came between him and the light, then another. Wyvern looked up. Great white vultures were wheeling and soaring between him and the sun. What did it mean? Something must be dead or dying within this grim, untrodden wilderness tract; and that hard by, yet of such there was no perceptible sign. A strange, boding uneasiness settled upon him. What could it mean? He was the only living thing moving at that time. Again he looked up. The great white birds had multiplied to a very cloud, and they were right above him, floating round and round at some height.

Just there the holes and caves were formed by large boulders which had fallen together rather than by cracks in the solid cliff face. The opening of one of these formed a complete triangle, and towards this some mysterious instinct impelled Wyvern's footsteps.

He paused a moment before the entrance. A damp, earthy smell came from within, and again the detail as to the earth which Hlabulana had seen sticking to the knives of the adventurers came back to his mind. Yet, the connection of ideas proved nothing. The same earthy smell would probably have greeted his nostrils had he entered any other of the caves which here opened in all directions. Still, there was no harm in just looking into this one.

A man of medium height could have entered it erect, but Wyvern had to stoop. Once inside however, the fissure widened. At the further end chinks of light penetrated where

the boulders forming the hole had fallen together, and these formed dim shafts of sunlight upon the floor.

The latter was soft and earthy. Could it be here that the stuff was buried? Wyvern stamped upon the ground here and there, but it gave forth the same sound everywhere. Carefully, eagerly, he peered around—again and again. There was nothing. He was about to leave the place when—

Something shone.

On the ground, right under one of the shafts of light, it lay. Wyvern picked it up, and hurried to the daylight. Yet his instincts of precaution moved him to examine it while still within the shadow of the cave.

A yellowish, cut stone lay within his hand. Looking at it he felt sure that it was an opal. And then he had to call up all his self-control to steady his nerves. Hlabulana's story was no myth. Clearly this was where the stuff was buried. He would go back and rouse up Fleetwoods—the good news alone was bound to effect a cure—and they would return together to dig it up. This rich secret which the Lebombo had held for so long within its grim fastnesses had been unfathomed at last. Its treasures would make them wealthy for life, and, above all, would bring him Lalanté.

Would they? He had not found them yet—and with the thought came another. Opals, according to popular superstition, were unlucky, and the first sign he had found of the existence and propinquity of the treasure was an opal. The next moment he laughed at himself for giving even a thought to such nonsense, and stepped forth once more into the open day.

Unlucky! Why the whole world seemed to open up in a paradise of delight. Unlucky! He would return and re-purchase Seven Kloofs, the place which he loved; and this time old Sanna would not have to complain that the place needed a "Missis." Le Sage's objection was not to himself but to his impecuniosity, and that obstacle removed, why then—Unlucky!

With a hard ring and a splash of lead, the bullet flattened on the rock beside him, simultaneously with the roar of the report, which rolled, in a volley of echoes, among the surrounding krantzes.

"Bully Rawson, of course," exclaimed Wyvern to himself, as he quickly got behind a rock to consider best as to how he should return the fire.

But this was not quite so easy, for the simple reason that his assailant kept closely concealed. A wreath of smoke hanging in front of a thick row of foliage fringeing the lip of a low krantz some hundred yards distant, showed the point of concealment. He realised too, into what a tight place he had got. His cover was totally inadequate, and whoever was making a target of him could not go on missing him all day. Indeed it was marvellous that he should have missed so easy a mark at all.

Again the superstition concerning the opal recurred to him. No sooner had he found the stone than he found himself in grave danger. Every moment now he expected another bullet. He would almost certainly never live to realise the bright fair future he had just been mapping out. Well, the brutal cowardly ruffian who had come out there to do him to death in the dark as it were, should not benefit by the clue he himself had discovered, and to this end, concealed by the rock, he scraped a hole in the soil and deposited the stone within it. Then he called out:—

"Rawson, you cowardly skulker. Haven't you the pluck to meet me man to man? Come out and show yourself, can't you?"

There was no reply.

"Oh, you're plucky enough at thrashing defenceless women, and boys not a third of your size," went on Wyvern. "Come out now and we'll fight fair with anything you like. Come out, funk-stick."

This time an answer came, or some sort of an answer, and it took the form of quick muttered voices in the Zulu tongue, together with the sound of a scuffle, and a clinking fall of small stones down the face of the krantz. Then a voice was raised—also in the Zulu tongue.

"Come up here, Nkose. Come up here. I have him fast."

And Wyvern knew the voice for that of Mtezani, the young Zulu whose life they had saved, and he went.

But before he went he scraped up the opal which he had buried beneath the loose soil.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Of the Hostile Usutus.

Wyvern had no difficulty in making his way up to the spot whence the shot had been fired, and arriving there an unexpected sight met his eyes. There, sure enough, was Mtezani, and in his hand he held a big, wicked-looking assegai, upraised and in striking attitude, while beneath him, face to the earth, he seated astride upon it, lay the body of a man, another native. Beside them both lay a rifle.

"Lie still, dog," warned the young Zulu. "Lie still, and move not, else my broad blade shall pin thee to the earth. Nkose! Here is he who would have shot you. Look at him."

Wyvern did so, and could not but feel some astonishment, for he recognised in his would-be murderer the boy whom Bully Rawson had so mercilessly thrashed on the first occasion of his visiting that worthy's kraal, Pakisa.

"Here he is," went on the chief's son. "I was behind him when he fired the shot, but just too late to prevent him. But he got no chance of another. Whau!" and his glance rested meaningly on a heavy, short-handled knob-stick which lay on the ground beside them, and at the head of his prisoner, from which blood was trickling. "I am going to kill him now, Nkose, but first he will tell us why he shot at you. Now dog, why was it?" emphasising the question by a sharp dig in the back with the assegai he held.

The wretched Pakisa, beside himself with fear, stammered forth that it was an accident; that he had taken the Inkosi for a buck, and had fired at him.

"That for the first lie," said Mtezani, emphasising the remark with another dig, which made the prostrate one squirm and moan. "Answer, or I cut thee to pieces, strip by strip. Now—why was it?"

"He said I must."

"Ha! Inxele?"

"Eh-hé, Inxele. He promised to shoot me if I failed, and now he will."

"He will not. Go on," said Wyvern. "Why were you to shoot me?"

"I cannot tell, Nkose. Except—yes, I heard him say, when he had taken too much tywala, that you must go—that you must be taken care of—yes that was how he put it, but I knew

what he meant. He gave me this gun—I often go out and shoot game for him, Nkose—and told me to go and watch for you. If I did not take care of you, and that soon, he would come after me, and shoot me, wherever I might be. And he would have done it. I know Inxele, Nkose, if you do not."

"And the other Inkosi, U' Joe—were you to have 'taken care' of him too?" said Wyvern.

"Nothing did he say about that, Nkose," was the answer. "It was you—only you."

Wyvern pondered. What sort of vindictive fiend could this be, he thought, who could deliberately and in cold blood order his assassination merely because he had disapproved of his brutal and barbarous ways? Then the incidents of the falling tree and the spring-gun recurred to him. That these were no accidents he had long since determined, and now here was a fresh attempt; but that Rawson had some powerful motive for removing him out of existence over and above that of sheer vindictiveness, of course never came into his mind.

"How long have you been watching for an opportunity to 'take care of me'?" he asked, but his Zulu was defective, and it was not at once that he could compass the answer.

"Since you have been at your present outspan, Nkose. He said he would shoot me, and he meant it."

"And you, Mtezani," said Wyvern, turning to the latter. "Said I not that you must not leave U' Joe, or the camp until my return? Why then are you here?"

"Nkose! I have smelt this dog prowling about for two days following you. That is why I am here."

Wyvern could hardly find further fault, so he only said:

"Let him up."

"Nkose! I will let him up—I—Ijjí!"

The last came out in a strident ferocious gasp, as its utterer drove the broad blade of his assegai down between the shoulders of his helpless captive. The limbs contracted convulsively, and the slayer, maddened by a sudden access of ferocity, drove in his spear-head again and again.

"That dog will yelp no more," he growled, rising erect.

Wyvern felt absolutely sick.

“What have you done, Mtezani?” he said, sternly. “You have killed an utterly defenceless man. That is not the act of a warrior but of a coward.”

The young Zulu looked more than sulky.

“That was not a man but a dog,” he said. “And he would have taken your life, Nkose.”

This was undeniable. Wyvern felt he could hardly quarrel with a man who had just saved his life; further he recognised that one of those irresistible impulses to shed blood common to most savages had come upon Mtezani. Moreover the thing was done, and no amount of objection on his part could undo it. So he rejoined:

“And you have saved it, Mtezani. Good. I will not forget.”

“Nkose is my father and saved mine,” was the reply. “Now we are a life for a life.”

The speaker had quite regained his good-humour. The paroxysm of savagery had passed, and his pleasant, intelligent face was as usual.

“Whau ’Nkose! What is one dog more or less?” he went on, with a careless laugh. “And—that one knew too much.”

“Knew too much?”

“Eh-hé! He was sent by Inxele to find out what you were here for, and to-day he knew. Now he knows no more.”

Wyvern stopped short and fixed his eyes on the other’s face.

“And you, Mtezani? Do you know?”

“Ou!” bringing a hand to his mouth. “Even that might be, Nkose. But others will not.”

Wyvern eyed him curiously, then led the way back to the camp.

“We shall have to reckon with Inxele about this, Mtezani,” he said. “You have killed his ‘dog.’”

“Hau! and I would kill the dog’s master,” and the savagery blazed up again. “I am a son of Majendwa, Nkose, and a son of Majendwa fears nobody, let alone a white ishinga (a worthless person) such as Inxele Whau, ’Nxele! Xi!”

The contempt expressed was so complete that Wyvern burst out laughing.

“White people like you and U’ Joe, Nkose,” went on the Zulu, “that is one thing, but such as Inxele, that is another! They say you have no king, you Amangisi (English), only a woman for king. If you had a king surely Inxele would have been long since dead.”

Wyvern laughed again at this way of putting things. It was naïve, to say the least of it.

Joe Fleetwood lay restless under several blankets when they reached the camp. The day was blazing hot, but the chills of the dread up-country fever held him in their grip.

“Buck up, old man,” said Wyvern gaily. “I’ve struck it at last.”

“So? Quite cert?” asked the other listlessly.

“Rather. Look at this,” showing the opal. And then he told him all about the finding of it. Fleetwood’s listlessness vanished.

“By Jove, we’re on the spot at last,” he said. “It’s awkward though, Wyvern, that sweep Bully being on our spoor like this. Looks as if he’d got some wind of our plan.”

“Yet that wretched devil that shot at me gave me to understand that it was only me he wanted out of the way. I own I’m stumped. Surely even such a brute as that wouldn’t persistently have a fellow murdered simply because he didn’t like him.”

“Not, eh? It’s plain you don’t know Bully Rawson.”

“Well, at any rate, it’s a relief to know he hasn’t scented our job,” said Wyvern. “Send the other boys out of reach on some sham errand, Joe, and let’s get Hlabulana here and talk things over.”

This was done. With perfect imperturbability the Zulu pronounced that Wyvern had hit upon the spot. When asked why he had allowed them to spend days and weeks in useless search when he could have cut it short by a word he answered:

“You white people cannot hide your minds, Amakosi, and the eyes and ears of Inxele have been ever present I was waiting until there was no more Inxele.”

“Until?” repeated Fleetwood.

“Until there is no more Inxele. Soon there will be no more Inxele.”

“By Jove, there’s no mistaking that for a hint,” said Wyvern in English. “There must be mischief brewing against our exemplary friend. Oughtn’t we to warn him?”

“Not much. Bully Rawson’s big enough and quite ugly enough to take care of himself. Nor does he deserve anything of the kind after his little tricks,” answered Fleetwood decisively. “Besides, it’s him or us, and you know what we’ve come up here for, Wyvern. I’m afraid you’ll never be practical, and it’s time you learnt to be by now. I’ve never shirked helping a friend in a row, but I’m not going out of my way to stick my head into a hornet’s nest for such an unhung blackguard as this.”

“Hallo! What the deuce is up!” exclaimed Wyvern as the furious gallop of a horse drew near. Nor was the mystery long in solving, for there dashed right into the camp, and at headlong pace, no less a personage than he whom they had just been discussing. Moreover he was bleeding from a wound in the hand, and another in the head.

“Chaps,” he roared, flinging himself unsteadily from the saddle. “Get out the shooters mighty quick. The Usutus have looted my kraal, and are coming on, hot foot, behind me. They’ll be here in a sec.”

Fleetwood and Wyvern looked at each other, and both thought the same. Instead of putting their heads into a hornets’ nest for this ruffian, he had brought the hornets’ nest about them.

“Oh, ah, but it can’t be helped,” he jeered, reading their thoughts. “We’re all in this together. You’re white men and you can’t refuse to stand by another white man. So get out the shooters, and we’ll give ’em hell directly.”

Our friends’ camp consisted of a strong scherm, made of thorn boughs tightly interlaced. Within this stood the two waggons, and at nightfall the horses and oxen were brought inside, a necessary precaution, for the bushy and broken fastnesses of the Lebombo range still contained a few lions. Now, even as they were getting out arms and ammunition, the boys who were outside came running in in alarm. Hlabulana, seated on the ground, was taking snuff with his usual imperturbability. Mtezani stood, equally imperturbable except that he gripped his shield and broad assegais in such wise as to suggest that he was ready for as much fight as anybody chose to put up for him.

There was not long to wait. The scherm was erected in an open space, and now from the lines of cover, swarms of Zulus were issuing. The full-sized war-shields and certain personal adornments left no doubt as to their errand being the reverse of a peaceful one, as they poured forward ringing in the scherm on every side. And, swift with thought there flashed through Wyvern's brain the knowledge that they two had attained the object of their search just too late. What could three men do against this swarming number, with no cover but a bush fence, and as for aid from without why there was no such thing possible!

Fleetwood, standing on a waggon box, raised his voice to try and obtain a parley, but even while he was doing so, a shot rang out, then another and another, and with them he realised that the time for parleying had gone by. For Bully Rawson, judging it best to take the bull by the horns, had jumped to the side of the scherm and was pumping the contents of a Winchester repeating rifle into the thickest of the on-rushing mass. Several were seen to fall, and now with an awful roar of rage, the whole body hurled itself upon the barricade like a wave upon a rock.

"Don't fire a shot, Wyvern," whispered Fleetwood hurriedly. "We can't possibly stop them, and it may be our only chance."

What happened next Wyvern for one could hardly have told. The whole inside of the scherm was alive with waving shields and savage forms, and glinting blades. Rawson had gone down under a knob-kerrie deftly hurled, but he and Fleetwood still kept their position upon the waggon box, their undischarged weapons in their hands. They saw their native servants ruthlessly speared, all save a couple who had managed to hide beneath the waggon sail, and death was but a question of moments. Should they die fighting or elect to stake all on their only chance?

The while, Hlabulana sat calmly taking snuff.

Chapter Twenty Four.

"The Hornets' Nest."

The two men sat there side by side, expecting death.

The crowd of roaring, mouthing, excited savages that ringed them in, was increasing from without, and still the sea of waving spear-blades refrained from overwhelming them. The ruffian who had brought this upon them they could not see for the crush.

"Ho, Muntisi! Ho, Laliswayo!" called out Fleetwood in stentorian tones, recognising two men whom he knew.

These, who had only just come up and were pushing a way through the crowd, which parted for them as well as it could, recognised the speaker.

"What is the meaning of it?" cried the latter. "You Laliswayo, who are a chief—what does this mean? There is no war."

"Why as to that, nothing is sure, U' Joe," answered the chief. "You, and Kulisani there, must give up your weapons and you can go."

"And our oxen have all been speared. Can we drag our waggons ourselves?"

"For that I know nothing nor care," was the answer. "As to the waggons these will lighten them for you."

A howl of delight went up from the listeners, who had attained to some degree of quietude while the chief was speaking.

"Take your choice," went on the latter, seeing that they hesitated and were rapidly conferring together. "Look at these," waving a hand over the expectant crowd, which having already tasted blood was hungry for more. "You may kill one or two, or even three, but you cannot kill all. And then, no swift and easy death will yours be."

The tone of hostility underlying this frank threat, was not disguised.

"You, Laliswayo, will be the first to die."

Fleetwood's tone was sternly determined. He had covered the chief with his rifle.

“Bid these go away,” he went on. “At once, before I count ten, or the son of Malamu shall go in search of his father. You know I never miss.”

The moment was a tense one. A dead hush had fallen upon the crowd, but the chiefs face was as unfathomable as stone. It looked as if cool, resolute courage was going to prevail, when there befel one of those accidents which seem almost to justify a belief in luck, good or bad.

Both men had stood up in front of the waggon box, and now Wyvern, slightly shifting a foot, managed to lose his balance, and fall heavily to the ground. Instinctively trying to save himself he cannoned against Fleetwood, upsetting him too, his rifle going off as he fell—but into the air. Quick as thought their enemies were upon them. Their weapons were snatched from their grasp, and they were held down by the sheer force of many powerful hands, while others fetched reims which hung about the waggon and in a moment they were bound so tightly that they could not move.

The roar of mingled rage and exultation that went up, as they were dragged forth into the open, was indescribable.

“They would have killed the chief! They tried to!” were among the exclamations of threatening fury which arose on all sides. Laliswayo strode forward. He was a middle-aged man, tall and well-proportioned, good-looking too after the clean-run Zulu type, and held himself with all the dignity of his race and position.

“What was my word to you, U’ Joe?” he said, his face coldly dark with resentment. “That yours should be no swift and easy death. And now you have tried to kill me even while we were talking together. Hau!”

The disgust expressed by this last exclamation evoked another wrathful outburst. Through it Fleetwood managed to call out:

“That is not true, son of Malamu. By accident did the gun go off.”

“By accident!” echoed the listeners. “By accident! Whau!” And shouts of jeering laughter went up at this.

“By accident, I repeat,” said Fleetwood, calmly. “See. There must be not a few here who know me. Have such ever found me a liar?”

But for some reason this appeal met with no response. The threatening clamour increased, and amid it there were murmurs of death by fire, or the black ants. The chiefs

word had gone forth that no swift and easy death should fall on those who withstood his terms. How could a chief go back on his word? It must stand. Thus they murmured.

Fleetwood glanced at Wyvern to see if he had understood, and he hoped not. But his own heart sank. He knew this Laliswayo, as one of the most prominent and relentless leaders of the Usútu faction, a man bitterly hostile to the whites since the war, and, worst of all, a man who loved popularity. Could he now refuse to accede to the demand of his followers or restrain their barbarous and bloodthirsty aspirations? If not, why—they two had better have blown their own brains out while they could.

Then a diversion occurred.

Mtezani, during the disturbance, had been standing aloof against the further side of the scherm watching events. That he could have been of no use whatever to the sorely harassed pair by coming forward he fully knew, but by keeping in the background until the psychological moment it was just possible he might be. So with the true philosophy of the savage he had kept in the background accordingly.

Now they had discovered him. In the tumult of rushing the scherm he had been overlooked as one of themselves, and now, with the discovery, a clamour arose that he should be killed. He, a Qulusi, the son of a chief ilke Majendwa, to go over to the Sibepu and Hamu faction, and take sides against the King, why death was the least he deserved. Thus they raved, and a ring of spears and infuriated countenances threatened him. But Mtezani sitting on the ground, got out his snuff-horn, and passed it on to Hlabulana as calmly as if they were not there.

Then they jeered at him. He had become the white man's dog—Sibepu's dog. He was in with those who were supplying arms and ammunition to be used against them, the side of the nation, the larger side, which was loyal to its King. And, jeering, their mood grew even nastier than when angry. Hau! A traitor was a coward, of course. Who was there among them mean enough to kill such. And they made mock to look around among each other in quest of some one; and their tone, from jeering, became snarling, and Mtezani's life hung on a hair.

Then Mtezani rose to his feet.

"Where is there one mean enough to kill me?" he repeated, confronting the numbers of those who threatened him. "Whau! Who is there great enough to kill a son of Majendwa? For surely no common man may kill such." And he threw his shield and weapons on the ground, and stood, looking at the raging and fast thickening crowd with calm contempt.

There was a momentary stirring among the latter. Then someone was pushed forward, a fine young warrior, fully armed. Mtezani's face lightened and he made a move to pick up his weapons. But it was only a momentary impulse.

"I am Tulaza, the son of Umbelini," said the chosen champion. "Now I think we have found one great enough to kill a son of Majendwa."

Mtezani uttered a click of contempt.

"Go home, half Swazi dog," he said. "Thou art not even of the Amazulu. Umbelini! Whau! Umbelini!"

This was too much. The one thus insulted hurled a heavy knob-kerrie. In the same move of ducking to avoid it. Mtezani picked up his shield and weapons, and then the fight began. None had any doubt as to how it would end—for the many sons of Majendwa were of noted prowess in deeds of arms—and as it progressed, gradually feeling went over to the other side, for, as he had said, Mtezani was one of themselves, and in fact many of his tribe were present, whereas the other was the son of a refugee Swazi who had done konza to Cetywayo, and had helped in the English war. So the flapping of shields together, and the lungeing and parrying and feinting, caused tremendous excitement among the spectators, which rose to a perfect uproar, as Mtezani managed to beat down his adversary's shield and at the same time deal him a crashing blow on the head which sent him to earth like a felled log.

"It appears," said the victor, looking around, "that the one who is great enough to kill a son of Majendwa is yet to be found."

"Eh-hé," assented Hlabulana, who, the white, had been seated taking snuff, while watching the fight in the capacity of calm, dispassionate critic. A roar of applause endorsed this. The tide had turned. Nobody wanted to kill Mtezani now.

Laliswayo, the while, though he had turned his face towards the scene of the tumult, had not taken the trouble to go over and look into it personally. Now he turned his attention once more to his prisoners.

"You hear what these cry, U' Joe?" he said, "that my word must stand."

"Oh but, you are doing a grave thing, son of Malamu," answered Fleetwood. "You are bringing further ruin upon the nation of Zulu than that which has already befallen it. We are peaceful traders, and there is no war in the land, yet you rush our camp—as if it was

Isandhlwana over again—kill our oxen and our servants, and treat us with indignity and even threaten us with death. Do you think our people will allow that to pass unavenged? Whau, Laliswayo! it may mean that such conduct may make the downfall of the Great Great One, the son of Mpande, more complete."

"Peaceable traders!" echoed the chief, with an evil sneer, for he was striving to lash himself up into rage to cover the secret misgiving which these words caused him. "Peaceable traders, Whau! Such do not join with those like Inxele. You have shot several of our people Is not that making war?"

"We have not. Look at our guns. Except for mine that went off by accident they have not even been fired. You can see for yourself. All the shooting was done by Inxele. Ask him."

"Yeh-bo! Inxele," echoed the bystanders. "We will bring him to life again and ask him," and a rush was made for the spot where Bully Rawson had fallen, stunned and unconscious.

He was no longer there.

Then, indeed, surprise, consternation, was their portion. Why he had been almost killed—so nearly so indeed that they had not thought it worth the trouble of securing him. When he came to they had intended to put him through a few hours of discomfort in which live ashes would play a prominent part, as a preliminary to abolishing him from Zululand in particular and this terrestrial orb in general, and now he had disappeared. The thing was incredible. It was a thing of tagati.

How could it have been? How could he have slipped through and got clean away? It was true they had forgotten him in the excitement of these other two whites and the fight between Mtezani and Tulazi, but how could he get away unseen? Further, he was nearly killed. Well, he could not have gone far.

With shouts of ferocious anticipation they started to quarter the surroundings in search of him—the scherm had been pulled down from the very first. No—he could not have gone far, and when they did find him, why then a long reckoning would have to be paid for the guns supplied to the enemies of the King.

Like hounds they quartered the ground in every direction. No sign of their quest. Then the bush line was entered. Here they would have him. He could not go far. Oh no. He could not go far.

But whether he could go far or not, certain it was that they failed to find him. They searched and searched, far beyond the distance he could possibly have reached within the time, but all to no purpose. Well there were still two upon whom they could wreak a cruel vengeance, and now, all the savage aroused within them, they turned back, discussing what they should do with these other two when the chief had given them over, as of course he would.

Chapter Twenty Five.

"Jealousy is Cruel as the Grave."

Warren was seated in his office at Gydisdorp, and his whole power of mind and thought was concentrated on a letter.

It lay on the table before him. It was not externally a pleasing object. It was covered with thumb marks; the writing was in a laboured, unformed hand; the spelling and grammar were vile and the contents cryptic. Yet to him who now sat dwelling upon it the communication was of so jubilant a nature that his only misgiving was that it might be premature or not true. This was strange, for the gist of the document was to announce the death of one who had been his friend.

"Jealousy is cruel as the grave," sings the Wise Man. Warren was not familiar with the quotation but he instinctively, if unconsciously, realised its purport as he sat there conning the greasy, ill-spelt missive whose contents he knew by heart. And yet so paradoxically logical was his own particular temperament that side by side with the wild jubilation that thrilled his whole being over the certainty that the one obstacle in his way was in it no longer, never would be in it again, ran a vein of real regret for the man for whom under any other circumstances he would have felt a genuine friendship. That he, Gilbert Warren, sat there, in intent, at any rate, a murderer, was the last thing in the world to occur to him. In intent only, as it happened, for the main substance of the communication lay in one sentence, penned in an utterly uneducated style. To be exact it ran thus:

"Wivern and jo fletwood have bin kild by the Usootos."

And then followed further particulars.

Warren had little doubt as to the genuineness of the missive. It was matter of common report that there had been serious disturbances in the remoter parts of Zululand between the faction which cleaved to the captive and exiled King, and that which did not, to wit that influenced by most of the thirteen kinglets appointed under the Wolseley settlement. Wyvern and his friend had somehow got mixed up in one of these ructions, and—there was an end of them.

Unlocking a drawer he got out the portrait of Lalanté, and set it upright before him. She was his now; not all at once of course, but when she began to get over her loss, when the first sense of it began to be bluntened. He was far too cautious in his knowledge of human nature to hurry matters; to seem to "rush" her in any way. His was the part of

earnest sympathiser. He would sound the dead man's praises in every way, and on every available opportunity. He would make himself necessary to her by doing this when other people had practically forgotten that any such person had ever existed. In time she would turn to him, not for a long time it might be—Warren was shrewd enough to realise this—but time was nothing and he could afford to wait, even as he had waited already, and he knew full well that next to Wyvern there was no man living of whom Lalanté held a higher opinion than himself.

The river incident had had much to do with cementing this. Fervently Warren blessed that incident, and had done his best to make the most of it; not by dwelling on it in any way, on the contrary if it was ever mentioned he would pooh-pooh it and change the subject. But he was more than ever welcome at Le Sage's, and made a good deal of his welcome by being frequently there. Moreover he knew that in Le Sage himself he had a powerful and steadfast ally.

All this ran through his busy mind as he gazed at the portrait in a perfect ecstasy of love and passion; taking in the splendid outlines of the form, the straight glance of the fearless wide-opened eyes, the seductive attractiveness of the face, firm, yet so sweet and tender. His! his at last I and yet he would need all his patience. Then a tap at the door brought him back to the practicalities of the hard, business world again. Drawing some papers over the portrait, he sung out:

"Come in."

A clerk entered.

"There's a party downstairs wants to see you, sir. Roughish looking customer too."

"Is he sober?"

"I think so, sir. At least he seems pretty steady on his pins."

"Name?"

"Bexley. Jim Bexley. Said you knew him, sir, and would be sure to see him."

"Right. Show him up when I ring, not before."

When the clerk had gone out Warren replaced the portrait in the drawer, even as we saw him do on a former occasion. He was in no hurry to interview his caller, on the contrary

he sat, thinking profoundly, for quite a while. Then he banged on his handbell.

There was a creaking of heavy footsteps on the wooden stairs, and the clerk reappeared, ushering in the visitor. Even as the clerk had said he was a roughish looking customer, and he was sober. Him we have seen before, for it was no less a personage than our old friend Bully Rawson.

But the "bully" side of him seemed to have departed. His manner was positively cringing as the door closed behind him, leaving him alone with Warren. The latter gazed at him fixedly for a moment. Then he said:

"Sit down."

Rawson obeyed. But the expression of his face as he stared at Warren was that of a cornered animal, cowed as well, or of one in a trap.

"Have you been keeping sober?"

"Yes, Mr Warren. But Lord love ye, if I was never so 'on' I wouldn't blab."

"No, you wouldn't, because you've nothing to blab about."

The tone was absolutely cool and unmoved. With one hand Warren was playing with a paper weight which lay on the table. Rawson fidgetted uneasily.

"I've taken care of him," he said at last. "Oh three times I 'took care of him,' but it were no go. That blanked Fleetwood come in the way twice, the third time I turned it over to a nigger of mine and he got 'took care of' instead. Haw-haw-haw!"

"Howling joke, isn't it?"

"Rather. Them blanked Usutus rushed my kraal, and I just took 'em on to Wyvern and Fleetwood's camp and—well, they took care of 'em."

"You saw it done?"

"Didn't I! And while they was doing it I lit out, slid up a big baobab which looked hollow, and sure enough it was; and there I lay snug while they was huntin' around in every direction for me. Ho-ho! There was a nest of red ants in the hole though, and I jolly well got nearly eaten."

“Yes? Well, you stay around here a little longer—where, I don’t mind one way or the other. Only—keep sober. D’you hear? Keep sober. I may want you at any minute. Meanwhile I’ll just take down all particulars of your yarn.”

He got a sheet of foolscap and put the other through his statement, taking down the details in a concise, business-like way. The only thing on which Rawson seemed hazy was the exact date. He had no call to bother about that sort of thing up-country, he explained apologetically, in fact he hardly knew one day of the week from another, so completely had he got out of the way of reckoning by time.

This done, Rawson shuffled a little uneasily, then said:

“All my things were looted, Mr Warren. I’m a beggar as I stand here, so help me. Couldn’t you let us have something to start me afresh?”

“Not a rix-dollar.”

“You’re a hard ’un to serve,” grunted Rawson.

“You’ll find me a harder one still if you don’t watch it. I’ve no further use for you that I know of, but there’s one Jonathan Baldock that certain judicial authorities in this colony might turn to a very unpleasant use—for Jonathan Baldock. So mind your way about, especially where I am concerned.”

The cowed look upon the ruffianly countenance gave way to the ferocity of desperation. Warren had goaded this savage beast to a point past endurance. As Fleetwood had said, Bully Rawson’s pluck was beyond question, but even it paled before the vision of a beam and a swinging noose. Now, beside himself with fear and rage, he turned on Warren, and reviled him with epithets that we cannot reproduce here. The whole aspect of the man was rather terrific, especially to one who knew his character and repute. But Warren sat calmly through the outburst, turning over a paper here and there.

“Now that you’ve done you may go—and be hanged,” he said at last, when the other had stopped exhausted.

“Yes, but I’ll be hanged for something, hell take me if I don’t,” he roared. “I’ll send you there first, you blasted, snivelling, white-livered liar.”

Warren found himself gazing at the muzzle of a wicked-looking six-shooter, and that in the hand of a desperate and exasperated ruffian. But he did not move, nor did his face change colour in the slightest degree.

"Put up that thing," he said, coolly. "And stop kicking up that infernal row, unless you want everyone else to know what no one knows at present but me."

The hard, cold eyes of the lawyer held the savage, bloodshot ones of the border desperado, and triumphed.

"I'm sorry, Mr Warren," said the latter, shamefacedly, replacing the weapon in his pocket. "My temper's a bit short these days. I sort of forgot myself."

"I should rather think you did. Well, as you have the decency to own it here's something to go on with. Only because you're hard up, mind, not on account of anything you may or may not have done for me," and he opened a drawer, and taking out some notes chucked them across to the other. "Well Jim Bexley, you can go now. Keep me up to where you're to be found in case I want you, and, above all, keep sober. So long."

He banged the handbell and the same clerk came up; and Bully Rawson found himself shown out, while wondering if he had done the right thing, and whether there was anything more to be got out of Warren, also whether the latter had been really as cool as he seemed or whether his coolness was forced "side." As to this Warren was thinking the same thing himself; and came to the conclusion that he had been for one moment in desperate peril. Then he ceased to give the matter another thought.

For some time after his visitor's departure he sat thinking. How would Lalanté take the news? This was the worst side of it. Who was to break it to her? Not he himself—with all his nerve and self-possession this was a task from which Warren shrank. Who better qualified for it than her own father. Le Sage must be the man. He would write to Le Sage, giving the facts.

The facts? A sudden and unaccountable misgiving leaped into his mind, striking him as it were, between the eyes. What if Rawson had invented the story, or had simply escaped and left the other two in the lurch? In that case the chances were ten to one that they turned up again, since the Zulus were only fighting among themselves and not against the whites. How could he have pinned his faith to the word of an utterly irredeemable scoundrel such as Bully Rawson? Thinking now of his former jubilation Warren felt perfectly sick at the thought that it might have been wholly premature. However he would put the matter beyond all doubt. He would wire his agents in Natal to leave no stone unturned; to spare no trouble or expense; to hire a whole army of native spies, if

necessary, to collect every scrap of information throughout the whole of the disturbed country. This need arouse no curiosity; his friendship with Wyvern would account for it.

What was this thing called love, that it should upset reason, and possess the brain to the exclusion of all other things. In the travail of his soul Warren recognised that he was standing on the brink of a pit. By just the exceptional strength of his mind and will did this obsession become the more dangerous should his new-found hopes melt into air, and, realising this, he realised also that it might soon be time to "set his house in order." For the fate of his former friend he felt no compunction whatever, for "jealousy is cruel as the grave."

Chapter Twenty Six.

Warren's News.

"But when will the Baas be back, Klein Missis? Whenever will the Baas be back?"

"Oh, how I wish I knew, Old Sanna," answered Lalanté with a sad smile. Her smile had been growing rather sad of late, since week had been following upon week, and still bringing no word from the absent one. Could it mean that he was on his way back? She dared not hope so.

"And these Zulu menschen, Klein Missis—are they more schelm than our Kafirs here? No but, that could never be. There's Sixpence, he who slaag-ed the sheep. The Baas ought to have had him flogged or taken to the tronk, yet he does neither, but lets him go as if nothing had happened Oh goieje!"

"And Sixpence has been a very good boy ever since, Old Sanna."

The old woman grunted, then went on:

"That was the last day you were here, Miss Lalanté; with the Baas I mean."

The sadness of the smile deepened, and the wide eyes gazing forth over the panorama of rolling plain and distant rock as seen from the stoep at Seven Kloofs, grew misty. Did she not remember that day, the last perfect one before the final rupture! Now Seven Kloofs was the property of her father, his only bad bargain, as we have said elsewhere. He had wanted to turn off old Sanna, if only that she formed a link between Lalanté and the former owner, whose memory he by no means wished kept green; but Lalanté had pleaded so hard against this that he had given way, and the old woman remained on in charge of the unoccupied house.

Hither Lalanté would sometimes ride over, even as to-day, to dwell, in imagination, among the past again. Now she turned from the stoep and entered the living room. The same, and yet not. Bare walls and floor, and yet how replete with memories. Here was where the dear old untidy table—with its litter heap shoved as much off one end as possible—had stood—there the low chair in his favourite corner—even the mark on the wall, where her portrait had hung, showed plain. All so familiar in the memories it brought that it almost seemed as though his tall figure should suddenly darken the doorway, or that some inexplicable replica of his presence should enter the room. Oh if she could but obtain some news, read but one line that his hand had traced!

It is a truism to insist on the associations which this or that particular spot, sometime occupied in common with a presence—gone, it may be, for ever—calls back to the mind, because even the most unimaginative must, in their heart of hearts, own to a consciousness of having at sometime in their lives gone through this feeling. Lalanté of course, was not unimaginative, and the associations which every stick and stone of the place conjured up were overwhelming in their sense of utter desolation. It seemed that every word that had passed between them sounded again in her ears, this jest here and on such an occasion, that light banter or grave discussion there, each and all at such a time and on such a spot. Within doors, outside on the stoep, or in the open veldt it was all the same, that awful, intense craving for the presence which was no longer there.

The patter of running feet and the light laughter of child voices—then her two small brothers came round from the back of the house.

"Time to go back Lala, hey? Oh!"

There was that in their sister's look which turned both of them suddenly grave. A small hand—hot and of course not over clean—stole into each of Lalanté's, and two untidy heads nestled against her, one on each side. These two had long since gained an inkling of the real state of affairs. Now they meant to be consolatory, but of course didn't know what to say, so they said nothing.

"You darlings, yes it is," she answered. "Go and tell Sixpence to bring round the horses."

The former unreliable herd had been given the post of general out-door caretaker of the place—owing again to Lalanté's pleading. Now he appeared, leading the three horses, a grin of cordiality making a white stripe across his broad face. He, again launched forth into inquiry as to when the Baas would return.

"Ou! but he hoped it would be soon," he went on, when he got his answer. "That was a Baas to serve, none like him in the land. He was great, he was a chief indeed. He was his—Sixpence's—father, and his heart was sore until his father's presence was over him once more."

Lalanté smiled, still sadly as she gave the Kafir the length of tobacco which she had brought over for him. Even this raw savage had an affection for the absent one, who had forgiven him what time he had incurred the most severe penalties.

During the homeward ride she was still rather silent. The two small boys, Charlie and Frank, dropped behind and kept up their own chatter, but even it was rather subdued, rather laboured. The sun flamed down in all the glory of the cloudless afternoon. Two

little steinbok rushed, startled, from the roadside, and scampering a couple of score yards halted to gaze at them curiously. It brought back just such another incident when he had been with her, and jumping off, had turned over one of them with a neat rifle shot. The shrill grating cackle of a troop of wild guinea-fowl rose from a clump of prickly pear down towards the river, and, shading her eyes, she could see the long lines of dust rising against the sun as the wary birds ran. Here too, he had bagged quite a goodly number while she waited for him, and under exactly the same circumstances. Every sight and sound of the sunlit veldt, recalled him with a vividness more than ordinary to-day, which is dealing in superlatives. Yet—why?

There was the spot on which they had made their last farewell on that memorable evening. Lalanté had passed over it several times since, but now, to-day, such an overpowering feeling came upon her, as nearly impelled her there and then to dismount and kiss the very dust his feet had pressed. Yet—why?

"Man—Frank," exclaimed Charlie, as they were descending the last slope opposite the homestead. "There's somebody with father. Wonder who it is."

Lalanté started, and strained her eyes. The distance was over great for identification purposes, but whoever it was she was pretty sure who it wasn't.

"Why it's Mr Warren," went on the first speaker. "Ja—but I'm glad. He's no end of a jolly chap."

Again Lalanté's heart tightened, as she remembered a similar eulogium, more than once uttered, with regard to another. Otherwise, as to Warren she was rather glad of his presence than not. He was good company and would somehow draw her on to talk of Wyvern, whose praises he would deftly sound; moreover he never lost a chance of trying to soften her father's resentment against the absent one. Then, too, there was his daring feat in the flooded Kunaga on that dreadful afternoon. But, for any other consideration, if he had only known it, Warren was nowhere. There was only one in the world for her; one who was totally unlike any other she had ever seen or could form any possible idea of. Ah, if it were only that one! Yet, on the whole, she was glad to see Warren. He might even have brought her some news, he who seemed in touch with everybody.

Le Sage and his guest were standing at the gate.

"Take round the horses, kiddies," said the former, shortly, as they dismounted. "And—don't come back here until you're sent for. D'you hear?"

The small boys obeyed without question. There was that in their father's tone which precluded anything of the kind.

"What is it?" Lalanté managed to get out, in a catching sort of gasp, her great eyes fixed upon their faces, her own cold and white. The two men looked at each other.

"Oh, you tell her, Le Sage, for God's sake," muttered Warren. "I can't." And turning, he went indoors.

"What is it, father?" repeated the girl, the lividness of her face truly awful as she pressed her hands convulsively on her heaving heart. "Don't beat about the bush. Tell me."

"For Heaven's sake, child, keep up," he answered jerkily. "It's about Wyvern. Disturbances in Zululand. He's—"

"Dead?"

Le Sage nodded. He could trust himself for no further words, in the face of that fearful stony-eyed grief. Viewing this, at the moment he would have given much to have seen Wyvern standing there alive and well. He had obtained his bitter, oft repeated, but secret wish, and now he would have given half he possessed had he not, as he read the effect of the shock in Lalanté's face.

"Keep up, child. For God's sake keep up. You'll get over it," he jerked forth, as the tall, fine figure of the girl swayed for a moment, then leaned against one of the gate posts for support. Was she going to faint? No, she was made of stronger stuff.

"Get over it?" The words seemed almost demoniacal in their mockery. "Get over it!" Why the world had come to an end for her from that moment. "Get over it?" Something of a wan smile came to her lips, at the bare irony suggested by the idea, as she stood, still grasping the gate post as in an iron grip. The face was white as marble, and the lips were set and blue. Only the great eyes moved, roaming listlessly here and there, but resting on nobody.

"And you—sent—him—to—his—death."

Le Sage shivered beneath the words as beneath the cutting of a lash. The one awful fear then in his mind was that Lalanté might lose her reason. In a rush of penitential tenderness, surprising in a man of his hard and calculating nature, he poured forth a torrent of adjurations to her to pull herself together, and muster up all her courage and listen to what there was to tell; and at length he prevailed.

“Let me hear all,” she said, in a dull voice, sitting back in a low cane chair on the stoep, one in which he had often sat. “No. I don’t want anything,” as her father besought her to let him fetch something in the shape of a restorative. “It’s deeper than that. Only, my heart is broken at this moment. Well, tell me everything.”

Le Sage was gulping with his own voice—in fact, could not command it.

“Tell me. Tell me,” she went on. “How much longer am I to wait?”

“It’s this way, Miss Lalanté,” struck in Warren, who having pulled himself together, now judged it high time to come to the rescue. “There was a scrimmage up there between the King’s party—the Usutus—those who favour Cetywayo’s restoration, you know—and the other faction—those who don’t. Somehow Wyvern and his friend—Fleetwood the other man’s name was—got between the two and were—killed. I have it from an eye-witness, another up-country trader, who, however, managed to escape.”

“Who is he?”

“A man named Bexley—Jim Bexley. He’s a rough customer but a reliable one. I’m afraid, in this case, too reliable.”

“And he saw it done?”

Warren nodded.

“Could I see him?”

“Certainly. But—had you better? It will take a few days to get hold of him, but it shall be done if it would give you the smallest atom of comfort, as indeed what should not?”

“Did he see them killed?”

Again Warren nodded.

“Then how did he escape himself?”

There was an uncomfortable directness about this cross-examination which Warren didn’t like and hadn’t bargained for. He was a believer in woman’s instinct, and to that extent began to feel uneasy. What if Rawson had been lying to him after all? But he answered:

“Just then the Usutus were attacked by the rival faction and in the confusion Bexley escaped. You see, he is an experienced Zulu trader, and knew a lot of them. Some of them would be sure to favour him. I received the news much earlier, but in order not to prematurely alarm you, I sent for the man himself so as to hear the story direct.”

What was this? No word of thanks, of appreciation such as he had expected, passed Lalanté’s lips. Her eyes were fixed on his with a hard, unflinching and, as he thought, distrustful gaze. As a matter of fact it was just that. A sudden instinct, an indefinable flair, had inspired in her mind an element of suspicion. Even the cleverest of actors may at times forget to keep up his part and this is precisely what Warren had done. Some of the intense jubilation which rang in his mind had overflowed into his tone, making his sympathy ring hollow, and even false. There and then Lalanté formed the conclusion that he was not Wyvern’s friend. But she said nothing. What did it matter? What did the whole world matter now?

Over the dusking plains the red afterglow shed its changing rays of beauty. There were the same familiar sights and sounds of the closing day, and the voices of life. Together they two had listened to it, had remarked on it often—the sweetness of the golden air, the rushing forth of innumerable stars as the heavenly vault darkened. Side by side they had watched it all, and now—side by side they would watch it no more. Without a word she rose, and, passing to her room shut herself in, to undergo the first night of agony alone. The first night! and, after that the first awakening—in the morning!

Chapter Twenty Seven.

The Snake-Doctor.

Baffled in their search for Bully Rawson the disappointed savages surged round their two captives like a swarm of devouring ants; and, in fact, it was to the awful, torturing death by this instrumentality that they clamoured the two should be given.

The impi was made up almost entirely of young bloods. There were few head-ringed men among them, and even Laliswayo, though a chief was young for that dignity. His sympathies, too, lay far more with them than with the older and wiser indunas of the nation. In common with young bloods of whatever nationality demoralised by a generality of public disturbance, and collected together under arms by reason of the same, there was a strong element of irresponsible rowdiness among them which is apt to find its outlet in cruelty; and these were savages. Many hands fastened upon the bound and helpless white men, and they were dragged roughly towards one point where the bush line began.

"Ha! The black ants are hungry. The good black ants," was jeered at them. "Now they shall be fed, fed with white meat Ah-ah—with fresh white meat."

"But this is how you treat your abatagati," (Persons condemned for witchcraft) Fleetwood managed to get out. "We are not such. Therefore if we are to die let it be the death of the spear."

But a howl, wrathful and derisive was the only response. They were not going to be done out of their fun. It would be a novel sight to see how the black ants would appreciate white meat. An appeal to Laliswayo on the part of the victims proved equally fruitless, for the simple reason that the chief had purposely withdrawn into the background of his followers. He did not want to hear any such appeal.

The full horror of the fate in store for them was equally patent to both victims. They would be stripped and bound down upon an ants' nest, to be literally devoured alive by countless thousands of the swarming insects. It was a mode of torture frequently resorted to by all the native tribes of Southern Africa in former times, but usually only as the penalty of supposed witchcraft, and even then rarely among the Zulus. It spelt hours of indescribable torment and raving madness, before death brought a merciful relief.

"But ye are abatagati," roared the crowd. "It is through your witchcraft that Inxele has escaped. He was to have fed the ants. He has gone, therefore you must take his place."

“We are not abatagati. We are men,” urged Fleetwood. “Let us then die fighting. Bring any two of your best fighters against each of us—or three if you will. Then you shall see a far more warrior-like sight.”

Derisive jeers were the only reply to this appeal, and now their tormentors flung them down on the ground. They had found an ants’ nest, and the black, vicious insects, stirred up with a stick, were swarming to and fro, their venomous nippers open and extended. An animated discussion was going on among the savages as to which should be the first victim, and whether he should be hung by the heels to a tree with his face just touching the nest, or fastened down straight across it.

“Are they doing this just to scare us?” said Wyvern, through whose mind the bitterest of thoughts were surging. It was hard to die now just as that which they had sought was within their reach. But what a death! Would Lalanté ever come to hear of it, he wondered and would she, in time, when his memory became dim, console herself? And the bitterness of the idea well-nigh served to blunt the anticipation of the ghastly torture that awaited. But as though to remind him of it some sportive savage, not minding a few bites, grabbed a handful of the stuff of which the nest was made, and incidentally many ants, and dashed the lot into Wyvern’s face. A howl of glee went up as, stung by the venomous bites of the insects, the victim instinctively started, and his powerful convulsive efforts to burst his bonds produced a perfectly exquisite degree of amusement. In fact it suggested a new form of preliminary fun. Handfuls of the ants, and dust, were gathered, and placed within the clothing of the sufferers.

Their position was undignified, ignominious. To both of them this consideration occurred.

“Keep it up, Joe,” said Wyvern, with an effort refraining from wincing under the abominable pain of the stings. “Here we are trussed up like a pair of damned fowls, but we needn’t howl out just yet. Suppose that’ll come later.”

Their fortitude seemed to impress the savages. They stared in wonder, reduced to a temporary silence. Then as the clamour broke out afresh, that it was time to begin on the real horror, an interruption occurred.

At first it took the form of a weird, long-drawn sort of chant, drawing nearer and nearer. The Zulus, whose attention had been concentrated on the two captives now turned it in this direction.

“Whau!” they cried. “It is the Snake-Doctor!”

In silence now they stood, as the sound approached, then divided, giving way to a tall and terrible figure which strode down the lane thus opened. For the limbs and body of this weird being were alive with hissing snakes, whose horrible heads and waving necks started forth from him in every attitude and at every angle, while scarcely anything could be seen of him for the moving, glistening coils but his face. And that face! The fell ferocity of it no description could adequately convey, and to complete its horror it was deeply pitted with small pox.

In awed silence the warriors stood while this dreadful being moved between their ranks. Of them however it took no notice but advanced straight to the two helpless white men. And Wyvern, for all the strain of the peril he was in, was lost in wonder at the sight, for this was the third time he had gazed on this apparition. The first was on the occasion of the slaughter of the sheep, the second in the moonlit wildness of the Third Kloof, and now—here. What did it mean? Could it be that these people had real powers of witchcraft, or, as some believed, held real communication with the demon world? It really began to look as if such might be the case. How had this one escaped what seemed certain death, and not only that but had obtained power over the venomous reptiles, one of which ought by all physical laws to have been his destroyer on that first occasion? Could he have discovered some wonderful remedy known only to the natives, which had not only cured him but had rendered him thenceforward immune from their venom? It might be so; and being so the man might have turned the circumstance to account by setting up as a magician, and so have wandered up here.

“These are mine!” he mouthed, pointing to the luckless pair. “I claim them. Now shall my serpents rejoice.”

A murmur of respectful assent went up at this, of eager assent. This would be a new and original mode of amusement, in fact an improvement on the ants’ nest plan.

“This one first,” said the Snake-Doctor, designating Wyvern, who in obedience to another signal was seized and dragged a little further off to a spot where the ground was quite smooth and open. Those who had thus dragged him withdrew, not without some alacrity, to a respectful distance, to watch the fun.

The Snake-Doctor advanced and drawing forth a long reptile, of the yellow-snake variety, held it by its middle, and, standing over his victim allowed it to make a vicious dart, which just stopped short of the latter’s face. This was repeated again and again, the while from the crowd which ringed them around, now in respectful silence, a deep-chested gasp arose with every strike.

The said victim lay, looking upward at his tormentor. He had first intended awaiting the death stroke with closed eyes, but a sort of unaccountable fascination held them open. The black, cruel face, hideously pock-marked, the wool standing out in fantastic plaits from the head, like so many horns, made a satanic picture which the writhings of the satanic reptiles completed. A cold perspiration stood forth upon his face, as he expected every stroke of the deadly reptile to be the last. Then the Snake-Doctor desisted, gathering back the thing again.

Now the next act in this drama of torture by anticipation was to begin. All the loathsome glistening coils which enveloped the person of the Snake-Doctor like clothing, were in motion as he cast forth some half dozen of the reptiles. These crawled around the helpless victim, heads erect and hissing horribly. It was clear that some marvellous magic controlled them as they moved to and fro, obedient to a scarcely perceptible hissing chirrup on his part. Then, in obedience to the same mysterious signal, they approached him, even gliding over his body, but making no attempt to strike him. The hush of the silence was tense. The awed spectators, some of whom had seen instances of the Snake-Doctor's marvellous skill before, watched, still as death, wondering how soon the white man's nerve would break down, and he would become a raving madman, such as his tormentor-in-chief they knew to be at intervals.

There is a period beyond which a state of tense apprehension cannot be kept up. Until this was reached Wyvern underwent the tensest of its torments. Instinctively he turned from side to side with every movement of the horrible reptiles, then, when he found himself staring into the countenance of a great black mamba within a yard of his own the point of indifference was reached. He felt capable of no further agony. The sooner the fatal stroke was dealt the better.

Then the Snake-Doctor began to call in his horrible myrmidons. One by one they came, and, in silent glide, each once more hung its glistening coils about the body and limbs of its repulsive master. Again an awestruck gasp went up from the entranced crowd. What would be the next trial in store for the victim? Something fearful beyond words, for, had not the Snake-Doctor claimed him?

But like the movements of the crawling serpents, a very writhe of panic ran through the riveted spectators. The weird death-hiss broke upon the silence and down they went in scores before the assegais of the advancing enemy; who, in the all entrancing abandonment of the novel spectacle had noiselessly rushed them on all sides, and now was right in among them, stabbing in every direction. They had been surprised by an impi of the rival faction, as strong, if not stronger than their own, now considerably stronger, if only that many, in their fancied security, and the absorbing interest of their cruel entertainment had thrown down their weapons and shields, and so were

massacred in an absolutely defenceless state. The din and horror was indescribable as the surprise became manifest. In among them were the destroyers, stabbing, hacking; and the death-hiss vibrated upon the air, then the war-shout "Usútu," and the flap of shields in counter strife, as the assailed managed to effect some sort of rally. The chief, Laliswayo, was among the earliest slain, and the demoralised Usutus, now without a recognised head, were still making a desperate effort to regain the day.

Wyvern, lying there, expecting immediate death, though now in a different form, suddenly became aware that his bonds had been cut. Stiff and bewildered he strove to rise, and found himself staring stupidly into the face of Mtezani, who was bending over him.

"Take this, Kulisani," said the latter, in the excitement of the moment levelling down into the use of his native sobriquet, and thrusting a heavy, short-handled knob-kerrie into his hand. "Get away, quick, now—into the bush—while there is time. I can do no more for you."

They were almost alone. The roll of battle had carried the contending ranks, like a wave, beyond them. Amid the general confusion none had any thought to spare for any consideration beyond that of repelling the attack.

"But—what of U' Joe?" answered Wyvern. "Where is he? I cannot desert him."

"U' Joe? He is gone," rejoined the young Zulu, impatiently. "Are you tired of life, Kulisani? If not, go too—while there is time."

Wyvern hesitated no longer. Gripping his rude weapon he jumped up and made for the nearest cover, just as, his escape being discovered, several of his late tormentors sprang with shouts in his pursuit.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Hunted.

On, on through the forest shades the hunted man sped, the voices of his pursuers, like hounds upon a trail, sounding deep behind him. Though strong and otherwise athletic, he was in no condition for running, especially for keeping up a long chase, the chasers being wiry, untiring savages.

The ground, too, became rough and stony, and this taxed his powers still more. His aim was to reach the rocks and holes on the Lebombo slopes; could he do so while yet at a fair distance from his enemies he stood just a chance. They might look for him for ever there, or again they might just hit upon the right place.

He set his teeth firm, and with elbows to his sides, kept on, husbanding his wind like a trained sprinter. The while, bitter thoughts surged through his mind; for it was bitter to die just then, tenfold so now that Lalanté was within his reach at last; now that a means of escape had been afforded him. He thought of Joe Fleetwood too, and wondered if he had managed to get clear away and if so in what direction. They had been separated by some little distance what time the snake-torture had begun, and if the other's liberation had been effected in the same way as his own, even as Mtezani had given him to understand, why then it is probable that Fleetwood would head in the direction he himself was taking, to find refuge among the caves and krantzes around the spot where the object of their search lay hidden.

The bush became somewhat dense, and more tangled. Thorns caught and tore at his clothing, and now the voices of his pursuers, and the ferocious deep-toned hum which they had kept up as they ran, was growing very near. They were sure of their prey. What could a white man, and a big and heavy one such as this, do against them as a runner? He might keep it up for a time, but sooner or later they would come up with him, probably utterly exhausted. He was unarmed too. So, not hurrying themselves, they kept on at a long, steady trot—some singing snatches of a war-song as they ran.

Wyvern gripped his short-handled knob-kerrie, wondering whether it was not time to make a last stand before his strength should entirely leave him. But it occurred to him that he could make simply no fight at all. His enemies had only to keep their distance and hurl assegais at him until they had finished him off, and that without the slightest risk to themselves. Turning suddenly, to avoid a clump of haak-doorn, whose fish-hook-like thorns would have held him powerless, or at any rate so seriously have delayed him that he might just as well have given up the struggle, he became aware of a small yellowish animal blundering across his path, together with a hideous snarl just behind.

To this, however, he paid no heed His enemy now was brother man, not the beasts of the forest. Just turning his head, however, for a glance back—he felt his footing fail, and then—the ground gave way beneath him. Down he went, to the bottom of what seemed a deep, covered-in donga.

Yes—that was it. Boughs and bushes, interlaced in thick profusion, all but shut out the light of Heaven from above. He estimated he had fallen a matter of over twenty feet, but the slope of the side had saved his fall. The place was, in fact, the exact counterpart of that into which the unfortunate Kafir had fallen with the puff-adder hanging to his leg, at Seven Kloofs. Well, he would be utterly at the mercy of his enemies now, and with no more facility for making a fight for it than a rat in a trap.

Bruised, half-stunned, he lay and listened. Ah! they were coming. They would be on him in a moment. The secret of his sudden disappearance would be only too obvious to their practised eyes. His time had come.

Suddenly a terrific series of roars and snarlings broke forth above. With it mingled volleys of excited exclamations in the Zulu voice, then the Usútu war-shout. The clamour became terrific. The ground above seemed to shake with it. With each outbreak of roaring, the war-shout would rise in deafening volume—then snarling and hissing, but the sounds would seem to be moving about from place to place. Then arose a mighty shout of triumphant cadence and the roaring was heard no more—instead a hubbub of excited voices, and then Wyvern, partly owing to the tensity of his recent trial, partly owing to sheer exhaustion, subsided into a temporary unconsciousness.

This is what had happened above. The lion-cub which had run across Wyvern's path had strayed from its parent. The latter, with another cub, bounded forward just as the foremost of the pursuing Zulus arrived upon the scene. She sprang like lightning upon the first, crushing his head to fragments in her powerful jaws, and that with such suddenness as to leave him no time to use a weapon. Another, rushing to the rescue, shared the same fate, and then the whole lot came up. There were under a dozen, but they were all young men, and full of warrior courage; yet, even for them, to kill a full-grown lioness—and this one was out of the ordinary large and powerful, and fighting for her cubs to boot—with nothing but assegais and sticks, was a very big feat indeed, and appealed to their sporting instincts far more than continuing the pursuit of one unarmed white man. So with loud shouts they entered into the fray, leaping hither and thither with incredible agility so as to puzzle the infuriated beast, the while delivering a deft throw with the lighter or casting assegai. Another received fatal injuries, and two were badly torn, then one, with consummate daring, watching his opportunity, rushed in and drove his broad-bladed assegai right into the beast's heart; and that one was Mtezani, the son of Majendwa.

A roar of applause and delight arose from the few left. Auf the son of Majendwa was a man indeed—they chorused. Surely the trophies of the lioness were his. The throws of their light assegai were as pin-pricks. It was the umkonto of the son of Majendwa that had cleft the heart. And then they started a stirring dance and song around their slain enemy.

"Have done, brothers!" cried Mtezani at last. "I think we have done better than running down and killing one white man and he unarmed. Now we will take off the skin and return with it; and I think my father will no longer say I am still a boy, and unfit to put on the head-ring."

They agreed, and in high good-humour all turned to to flay the great beast. None had any idea as to the part Mtezani had borne in the escape of the said white man, or of his motive in joining in the pursuit. Further, it is even possible that if they had, his last feat would have gone far in their eyes to justify it or, indeed, anything which he chose to do.

Wyvern awoke to consciousness in the pitch dark. His confused senses at first failed to convey any clear idea of what had happened; indeed the first shape his thoughts took was that he had been killed, and buried. The damp, earthy smell around him must be of course that of the grave, and yet he had suffered little or no pain. How had he been killed? Then suddenly and with a rush all came back—the lion-cubs and the snarl, his own fall, and the tumult overhead. He was not dead then, and now an intense joy took possession of him. All was not yet lost, no, not by any means. It must have been hours since he had fallen in there, and now, listening intently, he heard no sound outside. The Zulus must have given up the pursuit His fall into the covered-in donga had been the saving of him. Clearly the lioness had attacked the pursuing warriors and had either been slain by them or had delayed their advance to such an extent that they had not deemed it worth while to continue the pursuit; and here the strangeness of the repetition of incidents suggested itself. On a former occasion he had been spared the necessity of combating a formidable enemy in an unarmed state by the intervention of a snake, now the same thing had happened through the intervention of a lion.

And now the next thing was to get out of his friendly prison. Looking upward, the overhanging boughs and bush were faintly pierced by threads of golden moonlight; and he blessed that light for would it not make his way plain once up above? He guessed that the donga was of the same nature as the one at Seven Kloofs although here there was no river for it to open into, and to that end he slowly began to make his way downward. No easy matter was it however, in the pitchy gloom, but by dint of taking time, and exercising great care he at length came to where it opened into a kloof, and breathed the

fresh air of night once more. Then he remembered that in his eagerness to get out he had left his knob-kerrie in the donga. He was now entirely unarmed.

Well, it was of no use going back to look for it. He would cut a cudgel presently, but in his eagerness to proceed, he was in no hurry to do that. He began to feel desperately hungry, but that caused him not much concern, for in the course of their wanderings together Fleetwood had put him up to what he had called "veldt-scoff," to wit such roots and berries as were innocuous and would sustain life at a pinch. What was worse however was that a burning thirst had come upon him, and where to find water in what was, for all he knew, an utterly waterless waste, might become a most serious consideration. Still, there was no help for it. He must endure as long as he could, and a feeling of elation took hold of him as he thought of the awful experiences of the last twenty-four hours and the peril from which he had escaped; for now a sure and certain conviction was his that he had been spared with an object, and that object the happiness of Lalanté, and, incidentally, of himself.

And this spirit supported him as, hour after hour, he held on his way, now climbing the wearisome side of a steep kloof, only to find nothing but another on the further side, steering his way by the stars, and lo!—towards morning, in the waning moonlight, there rose the ridge of the Lebombo, right at hand—with its grand terraced heights of bosh and forest and krantz. And—better still—and his heart beat high with joy—he had come right upon the spot where the object of their search lay.

Yes. There was the black opening of the triangular cave about a mile ahead. In the dimness of the hour before dawn he recognised it. Hunger and thirst were forgotten now and he could have sang aloud in exultation; for within that black triangle lay hidden that which should bring him Lalanté.

In his haste to reach it he almost ran. Was it the same? At first a misgiving tortured his mind. There might be many such holes among the broken-ness of the foot-hills. No. There was the ridge from which the wretched myrmidon of Bully Rawson had fired at him. This was the place.

In his hurry he dived inside it. There was something in being on the very spot itself—besides now in the lightening dawn it would serve as a hiding-place in case any of his late enemies were still about or searching for him. The coolness of the hole was refreshing after his rapid and heating travel; so refreshing indeed that a sudden drowsiness came upon him, and he sank on the ground and fell fast asleep.

When he awoke the sun was high in the heavens. Gazing outward he could see the shimmer of heat arising from the stones. Then as he was looking around, reassuring

himself as to the undoubted identity of the place, something moved. He could have sworn it was something or somebody trying to see within. Nonsense! The solitude and excitement of recent events had got upon his nerves. He looked steadily into the gloom of the interior for a moment, then turned suddenly to the entrance. Peering round the great boulder which constituted one side of this was the shaven, ringed head of a Zulu.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

The Secret of the Lebombo.

All in a second Wyvern's hopes were dashed to the ground. From a state of elation he was cast once more into blank despair. Not so easily had his enemies abandoned the pursuit. They had tracked him through the night with the persistency of sleuth-hounds, and now had, literally, run him to earth at last.

That the owner of the head had seen him was beyond all doubt for the head itself had been instantaneously withdrawn, with a smothered exclamation. And he himself was unarmed. In a frenzy of desperation he gazed around. No. The cave contained nothing, not even a loose stone.

It is in such moments of desperation that readiness of resource will come to a man or it will not Wyvern at that moment felt something move beneath his foot. Looking down he saw that his said foot was resting on an upturned blade of stone, which, if he had noticed at all he would have taken for a mere projection of the solid rock. Now an idea occurred to him. Bending down, he quickly loosened it. The piece came away in his hand. It was about two feet long, and shaped like a thick and clumsy sword blade. In a trice he had found himself armed with a most formidable weapon.

Gripping this he stood listening intently, his breath coming quick in the tensity of his excitement. The first of his enemies to enter he would infallibly brain, then the next, and so on, while his strength lasted. They should not again take him alive. Still, not a sound without.

What were they planning? Could it be that they had some devilish scheme of forcing him out by fire or smoke, knowing that he had no firearms? He had read of such a situation, and his heart sank as he realised how easily it could be carried out in his case. Ha!

The silence was broken at last. Without he could just catch the sound of a deep-toned, murmuring whisper in the Zulu tongue.

"Go away and leave me in peace," he called out, in the best Zulu he could muster. "The first to enter shall surely have his head cleft in twain, and then the next. I am not unarmed."

"Whou!"

It would be hard to convey the tone of wonder contained in that brief exclamation, and then at the tone of another voice the hunted and desperate man could hardly trust his own sense of hearing.

“Wyvern, old chap, come on out. It’s only me and Hlabulana.”

The next moment he and Joe Fleetwood were gripping hands. Hlabulana the while began to uncork his snuff-horn.

“This is awfully funny,” went on Fleetwood. “We had suspicions that it was Bully Rawson in there, and were concocting some scheme for getting him out—you know the brute’s quite capable of shooting the pair of us on sight. But how did you get away?”

“Mtezani cut me loose in the scrimmage, but they chevied me a good way I can tell you.” Then he narrated what had subsequently happened. “Got any scoff, Joe?” he concluded. “I’m starving.”

“Only some pounded mealies, which Hlabulana managed to raise from Heaven knows where. Here—fall on.”

While Wyvern was satisfying his cravings with this plain fare, Fleetwood narrated his own escape, which had been effected by Hlabulana under exactly similar circumstances, except that it had not been discovered, and therefore he had not been pursued.

“He told me that Mtezani was taking care of you,” he concluded, “so I came away easy in mind, feeling sure we should come together again when, things were quiet, and we have.”

“By Jove we have! And to think of you having taken me for Bully Rawson. I don’t feel flattered, Joe.”

The other broke into a laugh.

“Tell you what, old man. We both look all fired ruffians enough just now to be taken even for him. At least, I feel it, and can truthfully assure you you look it. And now what are we going to do next? I’ve got a bull-dog six-shooter here that the idiots forgot to bag when they trussed us up.”

“I haven’t even got that,” laughed Wyvern. “I was going to brain the pair of you with a most murderous stone club which I tore up out of the ground. It’s sharp as a sword on one side.”

Something in the words seemed to strike Fleetwood.

“Sharp as a sword?” he echoed.

“Why yes. What’s there in particular about that?”

“Why only that it’ll do to dig with.”

“To dig with? Are we in a position to do our fossicking now?”

“Rather. Now we’re here—bang on the very spot we should be record idiots if we didn’t do something towards discovering what we’ve come for.”

“I’m with you there,” rejoined Wyvern. “But here we are, with one six-shooter between us, no rifles or even a shot-gun. How are we going to get scoff?”

“Oh, Hlabulana will take care of that. He has some remarkably efficient assegais.”

“Well upon my word, the adventure was wild enough before but it has about reached the March hare stage now,” pronounced Wyvern with a laugh. “However our luck, if varied, has turned right last time, and we’ll try it again.”

It was indeed as he had said, a mad adventure. Here were these two, in the heart of a wild and dangerous region, inadequately armed even, and trusting to chance for the bare means of subsistence; and yet instead of making their way back to civilisation as soon as possible—especially after their recent perilous experience and hairbreadth escape—they elected to remain and prosecute their search, yet it is of such that your real adventurer is made.

“We’ll have to keep a bright look-out for Bully Rawson,” said Fleetwood, as they entered the cave. “I know he got clear, and if he has any suspicions that we did, it won’t be long before we see or hear from him.”

“There’s no doubt about the place, I suppose?” said Wyvern, for him, rather excitedly. “Look. Here’s where I found the opal.”

“Not a shadow of doubt Hlabulana has been going over all the situation with me while you were snoozing inside—Lord! and I not knowing it.”

Then, somehow, a silence fell between the two men as they stood looking at each other in the semi-gloom. Were they really going to unearth the rich secret which this savage mountain range had held buried within its lone and desolate heart for so many years, the secret which should make the rest of their lives a time of ease and possession, which should bring to one, at any rate, that which would make life almost too good to live?

"Come on. Let's get to work," said Fleetwood. "Where's this weapon of yours? We can't have very far to dig, because from what Hlabulana says they can't have had time to bury the stuff very deep."

"Here it is. Look. There's the hole I pulled it up from—Hallo!"

Wyvern had gone down on his knees, and was experimentally fitting the stone into its former position. With the above exclamation he placed it aside and began hurriedly clawing at the earth where it had lain, with his bare fingers.

"Here's a box," he said quickly, shovelling out handfuls of earth; "An unmistakable box."

Fleetwood bent over.

"Sure?" he asked, as excited as Wyvern himself.

"Dead cert. Here, lend a hand. We'll soon have it out."

And they did have it out. A few minutes more of eager digging, and the whole top of a metal bound wooden chest was visible. But it required a good deal more exertion before it was clear of earth all round. Then they hauled it up, and although not more than a foot square by half that depth, it required some hauling, for it might have been made of solid lead.

"That's the bar gold," pronounced Fleetwood as, heated and panting, they sat down for a rest. "No 'stones' would weigh anything like that. Well the stones can't be far off. Let's get to work again."

They resumed their digging, systematically, with knives now, first around the excavation first made, then beneath it. Here, in a few minutes, Wyvern hauled out something—something round and moist. It was a small leather bag.

"Let's investigate," he said, and there was a tremble in his voice.

The leather was half rotten with age and damp, and the fastenings gave way when touched. Fleetwood put down his hat, and punching in the crown, poured the contents of the bag into the cavity thus formed. Then the two men looked up and sat staring at each other.

For in the said cavity was a heap of gems, which glittered and sparkled as the light from without struck upon them—rubies and emeralds and opals, many of considerable size, and obviously, even to these two unversed in such matters, of great value. This alone would have been worth all they had gone through for.

Replacing the stones in the bag they continued their excavation now with a tremble of the hands. And small wonder that it should be so. They had just found that which was enough to set them up comfortably for the rest of their lives, and there was even more to find. Any kind of search more fraught with every element of excitement it would be hard to conceive.

And, in fact, less than half-an-hour's search had placed them in possession of three more bags similar to the first, but two of which contained stones far more valuable, than even the first; one nothing but diamonds, and fine ones at that. These, after investigation, were placed aside, and operations resumed.

But further excavation all round and under, brought nothing to light.

"That'll be the lot, I'm thinking," said Fleetwood. "It about corresponds with what Hlabulana said they'd got."

"Joe," said Wyvern gravely. "Do me the favour to pinch my leg, and pinch it hard, just to show that I'm not dreaming, you know. The whole thing seems too good. Seems as if one would wake up in a minute."

"It does, doesn't it," answered the other, equally serious. And again they lapsed into silence, each full of his own thoughts.

"Now for what's to be done," went on Fleetwood. "I don't like these diamonds. There I'm in my element, for, as you know, I was a digger in the early Dutoitspan days—not that they ain't devilish good ones. But they're awkward things to hawk around anywhere in South Africa—the I.D.B. law, you know. Suppose by any chance it got round that one had a bag of diamonds like that in one's possession, they'd have one watched day and night to find out how one got hold of it. Then it'd be bound to give away the rest of the show. We don't want that."

“Not much. Look here, Joe. I’ve an idea which may be a good one or may not. We can’t possibly carry away that box. Let’s bury it again and call for it some time later when things are quiet again. As for the diamonds, we’ll plant them in some other place just to make sure that Hlabulana doesn’t show them to someone else, and pick them up at the same time as the bar gold. How does it pan out?”

“First rate. Only, old chap, I don’t think it’ll be much a case of us calling for them. I’m pretty sure I shall have to undertake it for both, for with a recollection of the portrait in your room in Ulundi Square you’ll be in no hurry to repeat this expedition.”

They set to work to bury the box again. It mattered little enough if here were marks of fresh digging, for who in the world would ever dream of treasure lying buried in this particular cave—one among many—without some due? Hardly had they done so than the entrance darkened, and Hlabulana stood within. In the excitement of their discovery they had forgotten his very existence. Quickly Fleetwood explained to him what they had found, showing him the bags.

“That is right, U’ Joe,” said the Zulu, turning them over in his hands. “There were but four. Whau! I like not this dark hole. It savours of tagati.”

“But you will like all the cattle and new wives your share of this will bring you, son of Musi,” said Fleetwood with a laugh. “If it is tagati it is pretty good tagati for us three, this time anyhow. Well, the sun will soon be down, and I think we had better take a short rest and travel by moonlight. It will be safer.”

This was agreed to, and as the red moon raised her great disc above the lone mountain range, flooding forest and valley and rock with her chastened brilliance, two ragged, unkempt white men stepped forth on their return journey, and upon them was wealth surpassing their highest expectations.

“Hang it all, I can’t believe it yet,” said Wyvern, for the twentieth time, with the twentieth grip on the bags of gems disposed about his clothing.

“I can hardly believe it myself,” rejoined Fleetwood, going through precisely the same performance.

But Hlabulana, the Zulu, said nothing. He only took snuff as calmly as if nothing had happened.

Chapter Thirty.

"In the Morning."

Probably there is no greater fallacy than that youth is quick to cast off impressions; otherwise Lalanté with youth in her favour, should, after the first few days from the shock which had smitten her down, have begun to rally, and to realise that there was something left in life after all. But she did not.

The light of life had gone out. Her very youth was against her. She was just at an age when her whole-souled love for this one who had been taken from her, reached a stage of passionate adoration that was all absorbing, entrancing her whole being. She lived in it. And now she would see him no more—would see him never again on earth. And yet—all her every day surroundings—every sight, every sound, every locality—were wrapped up in memories of him. From such there was no escape, nor did she desire that there should be.

Days grew into weeks, but brought no change, no solace, no relief. She strove to throw off at any rate the outward gloom if only for the sake of her two small brothers, but the attempt was little short of a ghastly failure. At this point she became aware of a marked change in her father. He seemed to be failing in health. He had lost the old elasticity, the old alertness, the old keenness in business matters. It could not be that remorse on the subject of Wyvern was behind it. "You sent him to his death," she had said, in the first agony of her desolation. No, she could not think that compunction on that head would weigh very deep with him. Rather would he regard it as matter for congratulation.

To Warren she had taken an unaccountable dislike, consistent with that first instinct of distrust which had come upon her at the time of the dread revelation. His visits had become rather frequent, but as most of their time was spent closeted alone with her father she supposed that their purport was business, and business only. But now she was only coldly civil to him, no longer cordial. The gloom of her horizon was black all round, without sign of a break. Her days could be got through somehow in the ordinary way, but—oh, the agony of her nights, of her awakening from dreams of the blissful past to the cold dead reality of the present and future!

She had not seen Warren's precious accomplice, to hear the news from his own mouth. Warren had never intended she should, and made excuse to the effect that Bully Rawson had been obliged to go up-country again.

She was seated alone one day on the stoep when the bi-weekly post-bag was brought. Listlessly she got the key, and opened it. There might be news of his end—further detail;

but even from that she shrank. She opened the bag, and turned out all the correspondence. Most of it was for her father, and obviously of a business nature; there were two or three local papers and—

And then Lalanté began to sway unsteadily, and, for all her splendid strength, to feel as if she must sink to the floor. For, at the bottom of the leather bag, lay one more letter, and it was to herself, directed in Wyvern's hand.

With trembling fingers she tore it open. Why—what was this? It was headed "Pietermaritzburg, Natal," and bore a date just seven days old.

What did it mean? What could it mean? It was weeks since Warren had brought her the news of his sad and violent death, and yet here were lines penned by his own hand but seven days ago. Had anybody been playing some cruel practical joke upon her? No. Surely nobody living would be capable of such barbarity; and then, here was his own handwriting—clear, strong, unmistakable—looking her in the face.

With a mist before her eyes Lalanté managed to decipher its purport, which was briefly this. The writer had returned from his undertaking, and had returned successful—successful beyond his wildest hopes—this was emphasised—and would follow on upon the letter at the very earliest opportunity, not more than a couple of days later at the outside, he hoped. And then, there were lines and lines of sweet love-words, sweeter perhaps, certainly sweeter to her after weeks of supposed bereavement than any he had ever before penned.

Again and again she read through the missive, examined the postmarks—everything. No, there was no deception here—and in a couple of days he would be with her once more. She must be patient, but—ah! how could she be? It was as though that one had risen from the dead.

She sank into a low chair, a smile of ineffable happiness irradiating her face. All the past was merely a dream, a nightmare—but—was she not only dreaming now?

"Lalanté, child, what's the matter?"

It was her father's voice—strained, tremulous. Seeing her like this but one conclusion forced itself upon him—that her mind had given way at last.

"The matter is that the news we heard wasn't true. He will be here in a couple of days," showing the letter.

“Oh, thank God for that,” said Le Sage fervently—and he was anything but what is called a pious man.

“What if he is coming back as he went, father?” said Lalanté, who could not forbear a spice of retaliatory mischief in her hour of restored happiness.

“Oh, I don’t care—so he comes back; no I don’t—not a damn. I can’t see my little girl looking as the has looked all this infernal time. And yet—” He broke off suddenly.

“Well he isn’t. He says he’s been successful beyond his wildest hopes.”

“Oh thank the Lord again,” said Le Sage, in a curiously constrained voice. “Does he give particulars?”

“No. Bother particulars. The great thing is he’s coming at all—isn’t it?”

“Oh of course. That’s how women look at things. They don’t know any better—how should they!”

“Well why should they?” retorted Lalanté with a happy laugh. “Now look here, old man, you’ll be civil to him won’t you?”

“Oh yes, I’ll be glad to see him. Will that do for you? Oh it’s a devilish queer world when all’s said and done—a devilish queer world,” and the speaker turned away abruptly to bury himself in his own den. But the girl thought to detect a shade of relief in his tone, even in his look—as though something had occurred to clear up the despondency which, of late, had settled upon him.

The morning rose bright and beautiful—the morning after the receipt of the letter. Lalanté was up while it was yet dark, and it may have been twenty or it may have been thirty times an hour that her quick, eager gaze was turned upon the point where the road came over the ridge. A light mist which had gathered during the night cleared away early, leaving a sparkle of myriad dew-drops upon every bush frond as the sun rose higher in the blue and cloudless sky. But in the open the cock-koorhaans were crowing and squawking tumultuously, and varying bird voices piped or twittered in the cooler shade. It was a heavenly morning, a morning for life and love.

“Two days at the outside,” he had said. But what if at the inside it should be one? That would mean to-day—thought Lalanté; hence the eager scanning of the furthest point of road. Suddenly she started. Something was moving at that point, approaching, and her strong, practised sight took not a moment to decide that it was a mounted figure.

Pressing a hand to her heart to curb its tumultuous beatings she tore down the field-glasses from where they hung. One glance was enough, and in a second she was hurrying down, by a shorter way, to where the road dipped into the kloof prior to reascending. Meanwhile the advancing horseman had disappeared amid the intervening bush.

Barring the road the girl was standing, her tall, beautiful figure framed in the profusion of foliage, her face irradiated with the light of love, her lips slightly parted into a most tender smile as she waited. Such was the vision that burst upon Wyvern, as with a hurried exclamation he flung himself from the saddle rather than dismounted. In the long, close embrace that followed neither seemed able to find words.

"You knew you would find me here," said the girl at last. "But I—up till yesterday I never thought to see you again on earth."

Wyvern started.

"Have I been so very remiss, then, sweetheart? I assure you that until a week ago, I have had no opportunity whatever of communicating with you, or any one else down here."

"It isn't that. They told me you had been killed."

"What? Who told you?"

Briefly she gave him an outline of Warren's narrative. He listened intently.

"Well, it came within an ace of being true news," he said at last. "I have a great deal to tell you, dearest, but at present we will only think of ourselves. My luck has turned as you always predicted it would. We need never be parted again."

"Life of mine, and until yesterday I thought we were for ever," she exclaimed passionately. "Oh but no—it seems impossible. You—to whom I have always looked up, as to something more than human—human yet superhuman—whose every word even on the lightest matter, was higher than a law—you, to be with me always guiding my life, making it every moment too good to live! No, it can't be. Such happiness can never fall to one poor mortal!"

"Lalanté, child—hush—hush!" he said a little unsteadily, his clasp of her tightening. "You must not start by making a god of me, or what will happen when the disillusionment comes?"

“Disillusionment? Oh!”

“Yes. You may laugh now, but—never mind. Well then, what about yourself? Who was it who threw away—what I see”—holding her from him, to gaze at her with intense admiration and love—“upon a battered old addlepate—”

“Battered old addlepate? That’s good,” she interrupted.

“Yes. A battered old addlepate—for if I’ve captured some luck at last it is sheer luck—who seemed congenitally incapable of ever turning anything to account and who was going from bad to worse as fast as any such fool could! Who was it that lightened and cheered as dark a time as could fall to the lot of most men, and, above all, clung to him when all seemed hopeless; and who was prepared to sacrifice the best years of her bright youth—Good God, I think it is I who have to say that such happiness seems impossible.”

Le Sage’s welcome of Wyvern was quiet but cordial, while that accorded him by the two youngsters was boisterous in its delight.

“Man—Mr Wyvern, but you’ll have some stunning new yarns to tell us,” said Charlie.

“A few, Charlie. And the rum part of it is they’ll be true.”

“I’d jolly well punch any fellow’s head who said they weren’t,” rejoined Frank. “That is, if I could,” he added.

At the close of what was certainly the very happiest day in the lives of at any rate two of that quintett, Le Sage said:

“Would you mind coming into my den, Wyvern? I want your advice on a little matter of business. You’re not in a hurry to turn in are you? It may take some time.”

Wyvern stared. For keen, hard-headed Le Sage to want his advice—his—on a matter of business naturally struck him as quaint. But he replied that of course nothing would give him greater pleasure.

“All right. Well take the grog in and smoke a final pipe or two over our indaba. Come along.”

He led the way round to the little room which he used as a private office. It was entered from outside, and being detached from the house was out of earshot of the other inmates.

“First of all,” he began when they were seated, “I want to apologise for what I said that day when—”

“Oh, shut up, Le Sage,” interrupted Wyvern, bringing his hand hard down into that of the other, and enclosing it in a firm grip. “I don’t want to hear another word about that, just as I’ve never given it another thought—not a resentful one at any rate. I can quite see the matter from your point of view—could at the time in fact. Now then, what’s this business matter you want to talk over? Is it about Lalanté?”

“No. It’s about myself.”

Wyvern had already noticed an alteration in Le Sage’s manner and also appearance. The old touch of confident assertiveness seemed to have gone, moreover he looked older and greyer. Now he seemed to look more so still.

“About yourself?” repeated Wyvern, with visions of weak heart or latent disease in the speaker, rising before him.

“Yes. Would it surprise you to hear that I’m practically a ruined man?”

“I should think it would. Good God, Le Sage, you can’t really mean it!”

“I wish I didn’t, but it’s a fact. It’s of no use bothering you with details, Wyvern, for I’ve heard you say one couldn’t shoot a man with a worse head for business than yourself even if you fired a shot-gun up and down the most crowded streets of London all day. Of course saying I wanted your advice was only a blind,” he added with a wan smile.

“But, briefly, how did it happen?”

“Rotten specs, and overdoing that. But the main thing is, Wyvern, and it’s due to you to explain—that in all probability Lalanté will never have a shilling—at least, not from me.”

“I don’t care if she hasn’t half a farthing, as you know perfectly well, Le Sage,” was the decisive answer. “And now, look here. I haven’t any definite notion what that stuff I was telling you about this afternoon will realise; but I’m pretty sure it’ll be something very considerable indeed for each of us. We shall have to go to work about it rather cautiously though.”

“Yes, you will. By Jove, Wyvern, I believe you are developing a business instinct after all.”

“Well what I was going to say is this. Hold on as well as you can until it does realise, and then any capital you may require to set you on your legs again, and clear off liabilities with, I shall take it as a favour if you would let me advance. I am just as certain of getting it all back again as if I stuck it into the Bank of England, and even if I wasn’t what the devil does it matter? We shall be near relations directly.”

The other was looking curiously at him.

“By the Lord, Wyvern, but you are a deuced good chap; in fact a very exceptional one. If you only knew all, now! Why most men would have gladly seen me to the devil under the circumstances.”

“Most men must be very exceptional cads then,” laughed Wyvern, tilting back his chair, and lighting a pipe. “And as for knowing everything I know all I want to know—no, by the bye—there’s one thing I do want to know. Who bought Seven Kloofs? I’m going to buy it back again.”

“The deuce you are! Then let me frankly advise you not to. It’s the most rotten investment I ever made.”

“Oh, so you took it on, then? Why you weren’t keeping up your reputation that shot, Le Sage.”

“No. You shall know some more though, now. I bought it with the sole object of getting you out of this part of the country. How’s that?”

Wyvern threw back his head, and roared.

“How’s that?” he said. “Why you bit off more than you could chew—darned sight more, old chap. Still I’m going to have it back again, not as a stock run but as a game preserve. I’m no good at farming I know, but I’m fond of this part of the country and the climate. So we shall squat down at Seven Kloofs—I think I shall take to writing books, or some such foolishness—and all be as jolly together as it’s possible to be. How’s that?”

“Oh, good enough,” said the other in a relieved tone. “You won’t take the child right away from me then?”

“Rather not I must take her away for a short time though, Le Sage. I must go to England almost directly with Fleetwood to see about realising our plunder, and I can’t leave Lalanté behind. What do you say?”

There was only one thing to be said under the circumstances, and Le Sage, being a sensible man, said it. Afterwards the two men sat talking matters over till far into the night, even into the small hours.

Chapter Thirty One.

Envoi.

A tiny sea-side village, red roofs and grey church tower nestling between the slope of great hills clothed with velvety green woods, and the uplands beyond brilliant with yellow gorse and crimson heather. And the triangle of sunlit sea just glimpsed, is blue as the sky above.

Up the single street two persons are walking, and the summer loveliness of the fair English scene is something of a contrast to the vaster, but not less beautiful, landscape in which we last saw these two framed; for we have seen them before.

Now they gain the modest, but clean and comfortable farm-house lodgings overlooking the village and the sea, and which is nearly the only accommodation so out-of-the-way a place can offer.

"Post in," says Lalanté, womanlike eagerly making for several letters spread out upon the table. "Why here's one from father, forwarded on. Oh I am glad. He hasn't written for quite a long time."

"Getting homesick, child?"

"Darling, you know I'm not. Still I shan't be sorry to be duly installed at dear old Seven Kloofs."

"But there are no shops."

"Don't tease. Oh, but—" and her eyes grew soft—"if you only knew how he appreciated what you did, I mean that offer you made him. He says it was the saving of him."

"In the words I used to him on a somewhat similar occasion—'shut up'," rejoins Wyvern, stopping her mouth with a kiss. "Here's a yarn from Fleetwood! Now we'll each see what each says."

"Joe's news is good," he goes on, glancing down the sheet. "He's working the oracle fine about the plunder, but he says that nearly six months of England, and that mostly London, is about enough for any self-respecting up-country man, and wants to go back again when we do."

“Why of course,” absently and not immediately. Then with a start. “How dreadful! Oh how dreadful!”

“What is?”

“Mr Warren’s dead!”

“No! Poor chap. What did he die of?”

“He committed suicide. Look. You read it out. I can’t,” and Lalanté looked very pale and distressed as she handed over her father’s letter.

“You’ll probably have seen about poor Warren’s death in the English papers—” it went on—“but in case you haven’t, he was found in his sitting room, shot through the heart three weeks ago. All the evidence went to show that it was a case of suicide, even if he hadn’t left a letter to say so. But it gave no reason, and at the adjourned enquiry—held the day before yesterday—nothing could be discovered to throw any light on the matter. All his affairs were in perfect order, in fact he turns out to be a great deal better off than was supposed, and that means a good deal. And the medical evidence proved him to be absolutely strong and healthy. So the thing remains and will remain a complete mystery. Poor chap! One would have thought him the last man in the world to have done such a thing. I send you a cutting with a report of the adjourned enquiry.”

“Your father’s about right, dear,” said Wyvern handing back the letter. “Warren is absolutely the last man I should have suspected of suicidal tendency. Why he had everything under the sun to make life attractive. And yet—I don’t know. Life is such a deuced rum thing, and every donkey knows where his own saddle galls him. Poor Warren may have had something upon his mind.”

Did some shadow of a suspicion cross that of Lalanté as to the real state of the case? If so it was not a thing that she cared to put into words. But she was very shocked at Warren’s sad end. She tried to forget the instinct which had led to her cold suspicions of him of late, and remembered his intrepid courage in rescuing her small brother from the raging waters of the flooded Kunaga.

“Let’s see what the newspaper says about it. It’s the Gydisdorp Herald!” went on Wyvern running his eye down the cutting. “It’s all pretty much the same as what your father says—By Jove! here’s something though. Listen to this:—

“It will be remembered that one of the last services our lamented fellow-townsman was able to render to society at large, is that he was instrumental in procuring the arrest and

conviction of that atrocious scoundrel Jonathan Baldock, who was hanged at Beaufort West, only a week before Mr Warren's sad end. This Baldock or Bexley, or Rawson—he had several aliases—it will be remembered, was convicted of the murder of a Dutch farmer and his wife under circumstances of great barbarity, and for some years had managed to escape detection. But if the feet of Justice are sometimes slow they are nearly always sure. His whereabouts became known to Mr Warren by the merest accident, and that model citizen caused him to be lured from the wild border of Northern Zululand—where his business, we may be sure was of no lawful nature—and his arrest and conviction promptly followed, once he set foot within the confines of British civilisation."

"Well, Lalanté, that is a startler," said Wyvern, when he had concluded. "Why this is no other than that unmitigated ruffian who gave us such a lot of trouble up there. When we saw no more of him after finding the stuff, Joe and I of course took for granted the Usutus had managed to get hold of him again. Well I thoroughly agree with the Gydisdorp rag—if ever a scoundrel richly deserved hanging it was our old acquaintance Bully Rawson."

"I should think so from what you've told me of him alone," assented Lalanté. "But it is very sad about poor Mr Warren. Come dear, let's get through the letters and go out again. The evening is going to be perfectly divine."

There is an element of self about most phases of happiness, and notably about that called Love. They wandered forth, these two, and in the joys and glories of the radiant evening, outer misfortune soon became dimmed in the all absorbing happiness of being together again and together for all time. But they had gone through much.

The End