John Ames Native Commissioner

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Freeditorial

JOHN AMES, NATIVE COMMISSIONER

Chapter One.

Madúla's Cattle.

Madúla's kraal, in the Sikumbutana, was in a state of quite unusual excitement.

The kraal, a large one, surrounded by an oval ring-fence of thorn, contained some seventy or eighty huts. Three or four smaller kraals were dotted around within a mile of it, and the whole lay in a wide, open basin sparsely grown with mimosa and low scrub, shut in by round-topped acacia-grown hills bearing up against the sky-line at no great distance.

The time was towards evening, usually the busy time of the day, for then it was that the cattle were driven in for milking. But now, although the sun was within an hour of the western horizon, no lowing herds could be descried, threading, in dappled streams, the surrounding bush, converging upon the kraal. The denizens of the calf-pens might low for their mothers, and might low in vain; and this was primarily at the root of the prevailing excitement.

In the neighbourhood of the chief's hut squatted six or eight head-ringed men, sullen and resentful, conversing not much, and in low murmurs. At a respectful distance the young men of the kraal clustered in dark groups; less reserved, judging from the fierce hubbub of angry voices, which their eldjers made no effort to restrain. Few women were visible, and such as were, kept well within the shelter of the huts at the back of those of the chief, peering forth anxiously, or darting out to retrieve some fat runaway toddler, which seemed to be straying in the direction of all sorts of imaginary danger. And, in the centre of all this brewing commotion, quite unconcerned, although clearly the object of it, stood ten men, or to be more accurate, eleven. These were of the same colour and build, of the same cast of features, as those around them, but whereas the excited inhabitants of the kraal wore nothing but the mútya, these were clad in neat uniform, consisting of blue serge tunic, red-braided khaki knee-breeches, and fez caps; and while the others showed no weapons—as yet—save knobsticks, these were armed with Martini rifles and well-filled bandoliers. They consisted, in fact, of a sergeant and ten men of the Chartered Company's Matabele Police, and to their presence and errand there at that time was due the brooding, not to say dangerous, excitement prevailing. The nature of that errand stood revealed in the indaba then being held between the two opposing parties.

“Who talks of time?” said the police sergeant, swelling himself out in his uniform, with the swagger of a native of no class who finds himself in a position of authority, and by virtue of it qualified to domineer over and flout those of his own race to whom formerly he looked up with deference. “Who talks of time? You have had time, Madúla—more than enough time—yet the cattle have not been sent in. Now we have come to take them. It is the ‘word’ of the Government.”

A click, expressive of contemptuous disgust, broke from the groups of bystanders, and with it deep-toned murmurs of savage wrath. But its only effect was further to develop the arrogant swagger of the native sergeant.

“Keep your dogs quiet, Madúla,” he said insolently, with a sneering glance at the murmurers. “Hau! A man cannot talk amid such a barking of curs.”

“A man! Hau! A man! A dog rather. A dog—who cringes to those who throw stones at him and his father’s house,” they shouted, undeterred by the presence of their elders and chief; for the familiar, and therefore impudent manner in which this uniformed “dog of the Government” had dared to address their chief by name, stung them beyond control. “Who is the ‘dog’? Nanzicele, the bastard. Not his father’s son, for Izwe was a brave man and a true, and could never have been the father of such a whelp as Nanzicele. Au! Go home, Nanzicele. Go home!” they shouted, shaking their sticks with roars of jeering laughter, in which there was no note of real mirth.

At these insults Nanzicele’s broad countenance grew set with fury and his eyes glared, for beneath the uniform seeming to tell of discipline and self-restraint, the heart of a savage beat hard—the heart of a savage as fierce and ruthless as that which beat in the dusky breast of any of those around. A Matabele of pure blood, he had fought in the ranks of Lo Bengula during the war of occupation, and that he and others should have taken service under their conquerors was an offence the conquered were not likely to forgive. As to his courage though, there was no question, and for all his insolence and swagger, no qualm of misgiving was in his mind as he faced the jeering, infuriated crowd with a savage contempt not less than their own. They represented a couple of hundred at least, and he and his ten men, for all their rifles and cartridges, would be a mere mouthful to them in the event of a sudden rush.

“Dogs? Nay, nay. It is ye who are the dogs—all dogs—dogs of the Government which has made me a chief,” was his fierce retort, as he stood swelling out his chest in the pride of his newly acquired importance. “You have no chiefs now; all are dogs—dogs of the Government. I—I am a chief.”

“Hau! A dog-chief. Nkose! We hail thee, Nanzicele, chief of the dogs!” roared some; while others, more infuriated than the rest, began to crowd in upon the little knot of police. Before the latter could even bring their rifles to the present, Madúla rose, with both hands outspread. Like magic the tumult was stayed at the gesture, though deep-toned mutterings still rolled through the crowd like the threatening of distant thunder.

The chief, Madúla, was an elderly man, tall and powerfully built. Like the police sergeant he was of the “Abezantzi,” the “people from below”—i.e. those from lower down the country, who came up with Umzilikazi, and who constituted the aristocratic order of the Matabele nation, being of pure Zulu parentage; whereas many of his tribal followers were not; hence the haughty contempt with which the police sergeant treated the menacing attitude of the crowd. Standing there; his shaven head—crowned with the shiny ring—thrown back in the easy unconscious dignity of command; his tall erect frame destitute of clothing save the mútya round the loins—of adornment save for a string of symbolical wooden beads, the savage chieftain showed to immeasurable advantage as contrasted with the cheap swagger of the drilled and uniformed convert to the new civilisation who confronted him. Now he spoke.

“Hearken, Nanzicele. Here we have none of the King’s cattle. All we have is our own. When we sent in such of the King’s cattle as were among us, we were told to send in more. We asked for time to search and see if there were a few more that had been overlooked, and we were granted time. Now we have searched and there are no more. If there are no more we can send no more. Can anything be clearer than that?”

A full-throated shout of assent went up from the young men. Their chief had spoken, therefore there was an end of the matter. Nanzicele and his police could now go home, and go empty handed. But Nanzicele had no intention of doing anything of the sort.

“Then that is your ‘word,’ Madúla,” he said. “You will send no cattle?”

“Have I not spoken?” returned the chief. “Whau! The Government must employ queer messengers if it sends men who cannot understand plain words. If there are no King’s cattle for me to send, how can I send any? Is not that ‘word’ plain enough, Nanzicele?” And again a shout of uproarious delight went up from the young men.

“There is a plainer ‘word,’” retorted the police sergeant, “and that is the ‘word’ of the Government. All the cattle in the country are King’s cattle, therefore the cattle of Madúla are King’s cattle, and as Madúla will not send them in I am here to take them. Fare ye well, children of Madúla. You have resisted the arm of the Government, and you have insulted its mouth. Fare ye well;” and there was a volume of threatening significance in the tone.

No movement was made to hinder them as the handful of police marched out between the serried ranks of dusky forms, the glare of savage animosity darting forth from hostile eyes. But as they gained the outside of the kraal a great roar of derision went up, coupled with allusions which caused Nanzicele to scowl darkly. For the incident to which they referred was the curt refusal of a follower of Madúla to give him one of his daughters to wife, at less than the current market value; in which the obdurate parent received the full support of his chief, who was in nowise disposed to befriend the Government policeman. The man had since married his daughter to somebody else, but Nanzicele had neither forgotten nor forgiven. And now the young men of the kraal followed him jeering, and improvising songs asking whether Nanzicele had found a wife yet.

But soon such good humour as underlay their mirth was turned to downright hate. They had followed the retreating police as far as the brow of an eminence some little distance from the kraal, and now a sight met their view which turned every heart black with pent up hostility. Away over the plain a dust cloud was moving, and behind it the multicoloured hides of a considerable herd of cattle. These were travelling at a swift pace, propelled by the shouts of a number of running figures. The bulk, if not the whole, of Madúla's cattle were being swept away by the Government emissaries.

No further time had Madúla's people to devote to this handful of police, whom hitherto they had busied themselves with annoying. With long-drawn whoops of wrath and rally, they surged forward, intent only on retaking their cherished, and, in fact, their only possessions. Assegai blades flashed suddenly aloft, drawn forth from their places of concealment, and the plain was alive with the dark forms of bounding savages. There would be a collision and bloodshed, and the country was in no state for the heaping of fuel upon a smouldering fire.

But Nanzicele's native astuteness had not been caught napping. He had been prepared for some such move, for his quick glance had not been slow to note that many of those who had followed him from the kraal were arrayed in skin karosses or other nondescript articles of attire, whereas, only just before, except for their mútyas, they had been naked. This could mean nothing but concealed weapons, and when such were produced he was ready for the contingency. With hurried, muttered commands to his men to hold their rifles in readiness, he pressed them forward at the double, and arrived on the scene of turmoil not much later than Madúla's excited tribesmen.

These, for their part, had rushed the situation on all sides, and things were already tolerably lively. The scared and maddened cattle, frenzied by the dark forms surging around them front and rear, halted, bunched, "milled" around for a moment in blind unreasoning fear, then broke up and streamed forth over the plain in a dozen different

directions, bellowing wildly, and pursued by the whooping, bounding figures in their rear and on their flanks; and in a few moments, save for long lines of lingering dust-clouds, not one remained in sight. Nanzicele's plan had miscarried entirely. In a fury the latter turned upon his corporal.

"Fool—dog—jackal!" he snarled. "Is this how my orders are obeyed? Instead of carrying them out promptly, were ye all asleep or drinking beer with the women? Yonder cattle should have been halfway to Jonemi's by this time, and lo now, Madúla and his herd of Amaholi are laughing at us. Thou, Singisa—I will have thee flogged out of the ranks with raw-hide whips. Was I to keep Madúla talking for a moon instead of a very small piece of a day, to give thee time to rest thy lazy carcase and go to sleep? Ye shall all suffer for this, and dearly."

But the corporal was not much perturbed by this threat. He merely shrugged his shoulders.

"I know not," he said. "But this I know, Nanzicele. Seven men cannot move quicker than two hundred, and as many were yonder"—pointing in the direction of the retreating dust-clouds. "And we were under no orders to fire upon Madúla's people, nor indeed do I think we were under orders to take his cattle at all."

"Thou art a fool, Singisa," retorted Nanzicele, with a savage scowl.

But whether Singisa was a fool or not, the fact remained with them that Nanzicele's plan had miscarried. All he had effected by his attempted coup de main was to render the name of the Matabele police a trifle more putrescent in the nostrils of the Matabele than it already was, and in the mean time Madúla's cattle were still in Madúla's possession. And, after all, that possession is nine points of the law—meaning presumably nine-tenths—still remains a good old English axiom.

Chapter Two.

John Ames.

John Ames was Native Commissioner for the district of Sikumbutana.

Now, the area of the said district contained about as many square miles as did one half of England. It likewise contained some thousands of its original inhabitants, a considerable percentage of which were Matabele, and the residue Makalaka, the bulk of whom had, prior to the war of occupation, been incorporated into the ranks of Lo Bengula's fighting-men. Indeed, they reckoned themselves as integral with the nation—as much so as the original Abezantzi, even then fast dwindling numerically—and by no means welcomed their so-called emancipation at the hands of the British with the acclaim our theoretically humane civilisation had striven to persuade itself they would. They were settled upon reservations there as in other districts under the charge of Native Commissioners appointed by the Government of the Chartered Company.

Now the duties of these Native Commissioners were multifarious, if ill-defined. They involved the collection of hut tax; the keeping of a vigilant eye upon the people at large; the carrying out of the disarmament programme; the settlement of all local disputes that were potient of settlement; and of about half a hundred other questions that might arise from day to day. These officials were expected to act the part of benevolent uncle all round, to the natives under their charge; and in order to effect this thoroughly, they had to be continually on the move, keeping up a constant system of patrol in order to become acquainted with every nook and corner of their somewhat vast area, and see that things were going on all right in general; and bearing in mind the extent of that area, it will be seen that this alone constituted a very laborious and responsible side of their duties. For it was no case of progressing in a fairly comfortable conveyance: neither the natural formation of the country nor the not very munificent travelling allowance granted by their government would admit of that. It meant real downright roughing it. Day after day of long rides on horseback, over mountain and plain and low-lying fever belt in all weathers, and a camp under rock or tree at night; and when it is remembered that such peregrinations amounted in the aggregate to about half the year, it follows that the faculties both physical and mental, of these useful public servants were not likely to stagnate for lack of use.

There was one other duty which devolved upon them at the time of our story; the collecting of the cattle which the Chartered Company exacted as a war indemnity from the not thoroughly conquered Matabele; and remembering that cattle constitutes the whole worldly wealth of a native, it may be imagined what a thankless and uningratiating task was thrown upon their hands.

John Ames was an excellent specimen of this class of public official. Born on a Natal farm, he could speak the native languages fluently, and had all the idiosyncrasies of the native character at his fingers' ends, a phase of useful knowledge which a few years spent at an English public school had failed to obliterate, and which, on his return to the land of his birth, he was able to turn to practical account. He had come to Rhodesia with the early Pioneers, and having served through the Matabele war of 1893, had elected to remain in the country. He was of goodly height and proportion, standing six feet in his socks, handsome withal, having regular features, and steadfast and penetrating grey eyes; and at the time we make his acquaintance had just turned thirty, but looked more.

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish," he was saying, as he sat in his compound on the day following the events recorded in the last chapter. "This thing will have to be gone into, Inglefield, and that pretty thoroughly."

"Certainly, old chap, certainly. But what is the 'thing' when all's said and done, and what sort of fish are in the kettle? You forget you've been pattering away to these chaps for the last half-hour, and except for a word or two, I haven't caught any of it. Even now I don't know what it's all about."

"These police of yours seem to have been rather playing the fool," was the direct answer.

He addressed as Inglefield was the sub-inspector in charge of the Matabele Police, whose camp lay about a mile away. Inglefield was an English importation, an ex-subaltern in a line regiment, who having lived at the rate of about double his means for a few years, had, in common with not a few of his kind, found it necessary to migrate with the object of "picking up something;" and he had duly "picked up" a commission in the Matabele Police. Now Inglefield twirled his moustache and looked annoyed.

"Oh, the police again!" he retorted, somewhat snappishly. "I say, Ames. Can they by any chance ever do anything right according to you fellows?"

The two men were seated together outside the hut which Ames used for an office. In front of them about a dozen Matabele squatted in a semicircle. One of these—a ringed man—had been speaking at some length, but the bulk of his conversation was utterly unintelligible to Inglefield.

"Granting for the sake of argument they never can, it is hardly to be wondered at," replied Ames, tranquilly. "Their very existence as at present constituted is a mistake, and may prove a most serious one some of these days. First of all, the Matabele have never been more than half conquered, and having given them peace—on not such easy

terms, mind—the first thing we do is to pick out a number of them, arm them, and teach them to shoot. And such fellows are turned loose to keep their own crowd in order. Well, it isn't in human nature that the plan won't lead to ructions, and this is only another of them. I know natives, Inglefield, and you don't, if you'll excuse my saying so. Now, every man Jack of your Matabele Police imagines himself a bigger man than the old indunas of the country before whom he used to shake in his shoes. And the Matabele won't stand that for ever."

"Oh, come now, Ames, you're putting things rather strong. Besides, we seem to have heard all that before."

"And so these fellows can swagger around in their uniforms and put on side, and crow over the old indunas, and bully the crowd at large, and—what is worse, use their position to pay off old grudges. Which is just what seems to have been done in the present case."

"The devil it does! Who says so?"

"The man who has been talking the most is Samvu, the brother of Madúla," went on Ames. "He is here to complain of your men. They appear to have acted in a pretty high-handed way at Madúla's, and the wonder is they didn't come to blows. You remember what the orders were to Nanzicele? We gave them conjointly."

"Yes. He was to remind Madúla that more cattle were due from him, and that it is time they were sent in."

"Precisely. Well, what do you think the fellow has been doing? He sent half his patrol to drive off all Madúla's cattle, while he kept the people of the kraal busy with indaba. Even then he seems to have cheeked the chief and played Harry all round. The wonder is he didn't bring on a fight. As it was, the whole kraal turned out, and simply ran all the cattle back again."

"If he did that, of course he exceeded his orders," allowed Inglefield, albeit somewhat grudgingly. "But how do we know these chaps are not lying?"

"I don't think they are, but of course we must have a full investigation. We can begin it this afternoon. It's dinner-time now. Come in and have a bite, Inglefield."

"No thanks, old chap. I've got something going at the camp, and my cook will get careless if I keep disappointing him. I'll look round in an hour or so. But—I say. Why the deuce should Nanzicele—oh, dash it, I can't get round these infernal clicks!—why should he have played the fool at that particular kraal?"

“There comes in what I was saying before about paying off old grudges. He had a squabble about a girl at that very kraal a little while back, and now sees his chance. Well, so long. We’ll go thoroughly into the thing.”

The police officer mounted his horse and rode away in the direction of the camp, and John Ames, having said a few words to the squatting Matabele, dismissed them for the present, and turned into the hut which he used as a dining and general sitting-room. This was a large, circular hut, rough and ready of aspect outside, with its plastered wall and high conical thatch, but the interior was not without comfort and even tastefulness. It was hung around with a dark blue fabric commonly called by the whites “limbo,” being a corruption of the native name “ulembu,” which signifieth “web.” Strips of white calico constituted the ceiling, and thus both thatch and plastered walls being completely hidden, the interior, hung around with framed photographs and prints, wore a comfortable and homelike aspect. Two small glass windows let in light and air when the door was closed, which it seldom was. Four other huts similarly constructed stood within the compound, doing duty for office, bedroom, kitchen, and store-house respectively, and the whole were enclosed by a palisade of woven grass, standing about breast high.

The life was a lonely one, and there were times when John Ames would feel very tired of it. The place being more than a long day’s journey from anywhere, visitors were few and far between, and beyond Inglefield, the police sub-inspector, he rarely saw a social equal. Inglefield was a married man, but his wife, a soured and disappointed person, had made herself so disagreeable to John Ames on the few occasions they had met, that the latter had dropped all intercourse which involved associating with Inglefield at that worthy’s own home. If Inglefield wanted to see him for social purposes, why, he knew his way up; and truth to tell, it was a way Inglefield not seldom found, for if there is one state more lonely than the man who lives alone in an out of the way locality, it is the man who lives in it with an entirely uncongenial partner. But even with Inglefield the position was occasionally strained, by reason of their official relations Inglefield thought the force under his command could do no wrong; Ames knew that it could, and not infrequently did.

The latter sat down to his solitary meal, which on the whole was a good one; for the game laws were not at that time rigidly enforced, nor had a combination of rinderpest and prospector decimated the larger kinds; and steaks of the roan antelope, hot and frizzling, are by no means despicable. Add to this brown bread and tinned butter, the whole washed down with a couple of glasses of whisky and aerated water from a selzogene, and it will be seen that our lonely official did not fare so badly. The era of “bully” beef and other canned abominations had not yet set in.

His dinner over, John Ames lit a pipe and adjourned to a cane chair before his office door to await the appearance of Inglefield. The day was hot and drowsy, and he wore the light attire customary in Rhodesia—shirt and trousers to wit, and leather belt—and on his head a wide-brimmed hat of the "cowboy" order; but the heat notwithstanding, a shiver ran through his frame, bringing with it a not unwarranted misgiving.

"This infernal fever again," he said to himself half aloud. "How the mischief am I going to get through the rainy season? No. I really must apply for three months' leave, and get to some cool place at the seaside. If they won't give it me I'll resign. I'm not going to turn into a premature wreck to please anybody."

There was very little fear of this alternative. John Ames was far too valuable an official for his superiors to bring themselves to part with so readily. His thorough knowledge of the natives and their ways, his consummate tact in dealing with them, and his scrupulous and unquestionable probity, had already rendered him a man of mark in his department; but withal it never occurred to him for a moment to overestimate himself, or that his chances were one whit better than those of anybody else.

In due course Inglefield arrived, and with him Nanzicele and the squad of police whose conduct was under investigation. John Ames was attended by his native messengers—a brace of stalwart Matabele—and, Madúla's people having been convened, the investigation began.

Even here the picturesque element was not wanting. The open space of the compound was nearly filled; the police ranged in a double file on the one side, the people of Madúla under Samvu, the chief's brother, squatting in a semicircle on the other. Inglefield occupied a chair beside John Ames, his orderly behind him, and his interpreter—for his acquaintance with the language was but scanty—rendering the words of each witness. And these were legion; and as the hearing progressed, both sides became more and more excited, to such an extent that when Nanzicele was making his statement, audible murmurs of dissent and disgust, among which such epithets as "liar" were not undiscernible, arose from Samvu's followers. More than once John Ames would intervene, quiet but decisive; but even his influence seemed strained under the task of preserving order among these rival bands of savage and slightly civilised savage.

But Nanzicele had no chance. When it came to cross-questioning him, Samvu and another ringed man of Madúla's simply turned him inside out. There could be no question but that he had exceeded his orders, and had acted in a grossly provocative and arbitrary manner, calculated to bring about serious trouble.

Yet not all at once was this decision arrived at. Inglefield, promptly sick of the whole thing, would have slurred the proceedings over—anything to finish them that day—but Ames was built of different stuff. Calm and judicial, he gave both sides a thoroughly patient hearing, and the investigation indeed was not concluded until late on the following day. Then the above decision was arrived at and reported to the proper quarter, and in the result, it not being his first offence of the kind, Nanzicele was adjudged to lose his stripes.

There were three parties to whom this decision was exceedingly unwelcome. The first was represented by the comrades of the degraded man, who looked up to him on account of the very derelictions which had brought him into trouble—his high-handed thoroughness, to wit. The second was Inglefield, who felt that he had lost a particularly smart non-com., and one that was useful to him in another capacity, for Nanzicele was a skilful hunter, and could always show his officer where sport was to be obtained; whereas now, Nanzicele, sulky and reduced to the ranks, would probably revenge himself by a falling off in this direction.

The third was Nanzicele himself, and, his fierce and sullen spirit smouldering with bitter resentment, he inwardly vowed vengeance against Madúla and his following. But greater vengeance still did he vow against the white race in general, and John Ames in particular. There was point in this, because he was in a position to suppose that the day might not be so very far distant when his vow should be repaid to the uttermost.

Chapter Three.

Shiminya the Sorcerer.

Shiminya the sorcerer was seated within his “múti” kraal on the banks of the Umgwane river.

This kraal was situated in the heart of a vast thicket of “wait-a-bit” thorns. It was enclosed by a closely woven fence of the same redoubtable growth, whose height and bristling solidity laughed to scorn the efforts of man or beast. The main approach consisted of a narrow labyrinthine passage; other approaches there were, but known only to its weird occupant, who had mechanical but secret means of his own of being warned of any advance, even by the recognised way, some time before the visitor or visitors should arrive at the gate.

This formidable stockade enclosed a space in which stood three huts, circular, with low conical roofs of thatch, and in front of these Shiminya was squatting. He had a large bowl in his hands, which he kept turning from side to side, narrowly scrutinising its contents, which smelt abominably, half muttering, half singing to himself the while. In front, its head couched between its paws, dog-like, blinking its yellow eyes, lay an animal. Yet it was not a dog, but represented the smaller species of hyaena—the South African “wolf.”

This brute looked grim and uncanny enough, but not more so than his master. The latter was a native of small stature and very black hue, with features of an aquiline, almost Semitic cast. But the glance of his eye was baleful, cruel as that of a serpent, keen, rapacious as that of a hawk; and while the muscular development of his frame was slight almost to puniness, his sinister features showed that which must ever dominate over mere brutal sinew and brawn, viz. Mind. Craft, guile, cunning, illimitable patience, and dauntless courage all fought for the mastery in the thin cruel features of the sorcerer.

His whole aspect differed as widely as possible from the pure-blood Matabele, which is scarcely surprising, seeing that he could boast no strain of that warrior race. He was, in fact, of the Amaholi, or slave caste; but as among other and more powerful nations of both new and old civilisation, Mind is bound to tell Shiminya—at the time we make his acquaintance and for some years previously—was one of the highest in the ranks of the mysterious hierarchy known to the natives as “Children of the Umlimo.”

The origin of the cultus of this sinister abstraction has never been located with certainty. Its hierarchy was protected, if not encouraged, by Lo Bengula and his warrior sire, probably out of three parts political motive to a fourth superstitious; and now, at the

period of our story, when the dynasty and despotism of the Matabele kings had gone down before the Maxims of the Chartered Company, the shadowy-sayings of the Umlimo began to be sought out eagerly by the conquered race, and a rosy time seemed likely to set in for the myrmidons of the abstraction.

These, with the astuteness of their craft all the world over, saw their time. The conquered race, strange to say, was not satisfied. It had signally failed to appreciate the blessings of civilisation. If life was a trifle less secure under the rule of the King, why, that was all in accordance with national custom. In the good old days there was plenty of fun and fighting, of raids far and near; of the mustering of regiments at the King's kraal, and cattle-killing and feasting and dancing. Yes, life was life in those days, when looked at from the point, of view of a warrior nation. But now, all this had given place to a state of things which from that point of view was utterly nauseous. The great circle of Bulawayo proudly dominating the land was razed to the ground, its place occupied by a solitary house, whence the white man governed a nation of conquered slaves. Below, in the valley, which formerly shook to the hum and thunder of marching impis, the white man was dumping down his iron houses and calling it his town. Throughout the land even the oldest and most powerful indunas were under white officials, to whom they were obliged to give deferential greeting, and all the little phases of excitement incidental to former days were sternly forbidden. Moreover, the conquerors had seized all the cattle of the nation, and now the land was flooded with arrogant, masterful whites, to whom no spot was sacred if only it was thought to contain a little gold. Outwardly patient, but with black rage and inexhaustible hostility gnawing at their hearts, chiefs and people alike sullenly brooded; and on such dry tinder the sparks, artfully kindled by the "Abantwana 'Mlimo," fell as on well-prepared ground.

Seated there upon the ground, Shiminya continued to shake his bowl of hell-broth. Save for a few birds' claws and a bladder or two fastened in his thick wool—for he was not ringed—he was destitute of the revolting gewgaws of his profession. Suddenly the wolf emitted a low snarl, simultaneously with an inarticulate wail which proceeded from the hut behind.

"Ha—my Lupiswana! Ha—ha, my good little beast!" chuckled Shiminya, apostrophising the creature. "Tea—lick thy jaws, for I think it is time for more blood—only a little—only a taste. Hau!"

As though understanding these words the brute rose, and sneaked over to the wicker door of the hut, sniffing at the fastenings, sullenly growling. Rising, the wizard followed, and, pushing back the animal, crept into the hut, and slapped the door to in its jaws. At his appearance the low moaning rose again, and in its note was the very extremity of pain and fear.

It proceeded from a long dark form lying on the ground, which the eyes, becoming accustomed to the semi-light of the interior, would have no hesitation in pronouncing as human. Further investigation would reveal it a female form, securely bound and lashed to a pole; a female form too, dowered with no small share of symmetry and comeliness. The face, when undistorted by pain and terror, must have been a pleasing one in the extreme.

"Ah—ah, Nompiza!" chuckled the wizard, rubbing his hands together. "The children of Umlimo have pretty houses, do they not—pretty houses?" And he glanced gleefully around his horrible den.

For this is just what it was. Human skulls and bones decked the plastered wall, but the most dreadful object of all was the whole skin of the head and face of a man—of a white man too, with a long heavy beard. This awful object glowered down in the semi-gloom, a gruesome expression of pain in the pucker of the parchment-like hide. Great snake-skins depended from the roof—the heads artfully stuffed, and the attitudes arranged to simulate life; and many a horrid object, suggestive of torture and death, was disposed around.

"A pretty house, Nompiza—ah—ah—a pretty house, is it not?" chuckled Shiminya, leering down into the young woman's face. "And thou hast only to speak one word to be taken out of it. Yet I wonder not at thy refusal."

"I will not speak it, Shiminya," she replied, with some fire of spirit. "The rattle of these old bones has no terror for me. And if thou harmest me further, there are those who will avenge me, child of the Umlimo or not."

For all answer the wizard laughed softly but disdainfully. Then reaching to the door, he opened it. The wolf leaped in, snarling.

"See now, thou obstinate Nompiza," he went on, restraining the brute with a flourish of a large stick painted red, before which it cowered back. "This is Lupiswana—no ordinary wolf. Whoever this one bites becomes tagati, and will be hunted through the night by him after death, until they can escape only by riding on him as the white men ride their horses. Then, if they fall off, they are hunted again night after night—for ever and ever. Ha!"

At the enunciation of this grim superstition the unfortunate prisoner tugged at her bonds, uttering a shriek of terror. She recognised here not the dog she had at first

expected to see, but the horrid mongrel beast held in abhorrence by the superstitious. The growlings of the brute redoubled.

"Now, tell quickly," went on the wizard. "The news of the meeting thou didst make known to two people only. Their names? Hesitate not, or—"

"Shall I be allowed to depart from here if I tell, child of the Umlimo?" she gasped eagerly.

"Thou shalt be taken hence. Oh yes, thou shalt be taken hence."

"Swear it. Swear it," she cried.

"Umzilikazi!" rejoined the wizard, thus ratifying his assertion by the sacred name of the great king, founder of the nation.

But now, seeing its master's vigilance relaxed, the wolf sprang forward, and, with a horrid mumbling snarl, buried its fangs in the helpless prisoner's thigh. A wild, piteous, despairing shriek rent the interior of this fiend's den.

"Take it off! Take it off! Oh, I am devoured! Quick! I will tell!"

Seizing a pair of iron tongs, Shiminya compelled the now infuriated brute to loose its hold, and following it with a tremendous blow on the head, it retreated yelling to the further side of the hut.

"The names—quick—ere it seizes thee again," urged the wizard.

"Pukele," she howled, frantic with agony and terror.

"The son of thy father, who is servant to Jonemi?"

"The same. The other is Ntatu."

The words seemed squeezed from the sufferer. Her thigh, horribly lacerated by the jaws of the savage beast, streaming with blood, was quivering in every nerve.

"Thy sister, formerly wife of Makani?"

"The same. Now, child of the Umlimo, suffer me to depart."

“Thy thigh is not well enough, sister,” replied the wizard, in a soft purring voice, putting his head on one side, and surveying her through half closed eyes. “Tarry till evening, then shalt thou be taken hence. Au! It is not good to be seen quitting the abode of Shiminya. There is tagati in it.”

Having first kicked the wolf out of the hut, the sorcerer set to work to tend the wound of his helpless victim. She, for her part, lay and moaned feebly. She had purchased her life, but at what a cost. Still, even the magnificent physical organisation of a fine savage was not proof against all she had undergone, for this was not her first taste of the torture since being forcibly seized by the satellites of Shiminya and brought hither.

Now, moaning in her pain, Nompiza lay and reflected. She had betrayed two of her father’s children, had marked them out for the vengeance of not only the Abantwana ’Mlimo, but of the disaffected chiefs. This, however, might be remedied. Once out of this she would go straight to Jonemi—which was the name by which John Ames was known to the natives, being a corruption of his own—and claim protection for herself and them, perhaps even procure the arrest of Shiminya. This thought came as a ray of light to the savage girl as she lay there. The white men would protect and avenge her. Yet—poor simpleton!

“Of what art thou thinking, Nompiza?” said the wizard, softly, as he refrained from his seeming work of mercy. “Au! Shall I tell thee? It is that thou wilt reveal to Jonemi all thou knowest of the gathering at the Home of the Umlimo when the moon was full. So shalt thou save thyself and Pukele and Ntatu, the children of thy father.”

A cry of terror escaped the sufferer. How should she have forgotten that this dreadful sorcerer could read the thoughts of men?

“Not so, my father, not so,” she prayed. “I ask for nothing but to be allowed to go home.”

“To go home? But how would that avail one who has been bitten by Lupiswana? There is no escape from that. Lupiswana will come for thee after death. Thou wilt be hunted round for ever, with Lupiswana biting—biting—at thee even as now, and thou wilt spring wildly forward to avoid his bites, and his teeth will close in thy flesh, even as now. Thou wilt run wailing round the kraals of thy people, hunted ever by Lupiswana, but they will not admit thee. They will cover their heads in terror lest the same doom overtake them. Hau! Even this night will that doom begin.”

“This night?” echoed the victim, feeling well-nigh dead with an awful fear. “This night? Now, my father, thou hast promised—hast sworn—I shall be allowed to depart.”

“I did but mean the night of death,” replied the other, his head on one side, his eyes glittering with satanic mirth. “That may be when thou art old and tottering, Nompiza, or it may mean this night, for what is time but a flash, even as that of the summer lightning? The night of death will surely come.”

No relief came into the face of the sufferer. The awful fate predicted for her by Shiminya seemed to her just as certain as though it had already befallen her, and the recollection of the horrid animal tearing at her flesh was too recent. It was a form of superstition, too, not unknown among her people, and here everything seemed to bring it home—time, place, surroundings, and the horror of this gruesome being’s presence. But before she would utter further prayer or protest, a strange hollow, humming noise was heard, at sound of which Shiminya arose suddenly, with an eager look on his repulsive countenance, and crept out of the hut, taking care to secure the door behind him.

Chapter Four.

A Human Spider.

Shiminya resumed his seat upon the ground, with the múti bowl in his hands. The wolf he had already secured in one of the huts. The grim beast was in truth his familiar spirit, and as such not to be gazed upon by profane eyes, and in broad daylight. And now footsteps were heard approaching the scherm, together with the rattle of assegai hafts. Three men entered by the narrow gateway. Shiminya looked up.

"Greeting, Izinduna," he said.

"Greeting to thee, Umtwana 'Mlimo," came the reply in a deep-voiced hum, as the newcomers deposited their assegais just within the gate, and advanced a few steps nearer in. With two of these we are already acquainted, they being, in fact, Madúla and his brother Samvu. The third was another influential chief by name Zazwe.

Shiminya seemed to take no further notice of their presence, continuing to sway the múti bowl from side to side, muttering the while. The faces of the three indunas wore an expression of scarcely to be concealed disgust; that of Zazwe in addition showed unutterable contempt. He was an unprepossessing looking man, lean, and of middle height, with a cold, cruel countenance. At bottom he loathed and despised the whole Umlimo hierarchy as a pack of rank impostors, but it suited him now to cultivate them, for he was an arrant schemer, and would fain see every white man in the country cut to pieces.

"There are three goats in thy kraal beyond the river, Shiminya," he began presently, tired of the silence.

"That is good, my father," the sorcerer condescended to reply. "They are for Umlimo?"

"Nay; for his child."

"And—for Umlimo?"

"There is a young heifer."

"Au! Of such there will soon be no more," replied Shiminya.

"No more?" echoed the trio.

“No more. The whites are bewitching all the cattle in the land. Soon you will see great things. The land will stink with their rotting carcases.”

A murmur went up from the three listeners. They all bent eagerly forward. Shiminya, who knew his dupes, was in no hurry. He continued to shake his bowl of abomination and mutter; then he went on:

“The last time you heard the Great Voice, what did it say? Were not the words thereof as mine are now—I, its child? Whau! I fear there were some who heard that voice and laughed, Izinduna—who heard that voice and did not believe.”

At this juncture there came a subdued wail, inexpressibly doleful, from one of the huts. It was answered by a snarl from another. Two of the three chiefs, listening, felt perturbed, the countenance of Zazwe alone preserving its hard, sceptical expression; though, to tell the truth, even he—so rooted is the innate superstition of savages—did not feel entirely at ease in his surroundings.

“There is, further, a good milch cow for the Umlimo,” spake Madúla, “and for his child a heifer.”

“It is well. There will soon be no more,” repeated the wizard.

“And three fat-tailed sheep, and for Umlimo a young bull,” said Samvu.

“That, too, is good,” was the cold acknowledgment of Shiminya, “for there will soon be no more.”

Now, cattle constitute the very life of all the South African tribes, wherefore the three chiefs felt their hearts sink as they realised the gist of this doleful prophecy. The rinderpest had not as yet made its appearance in their midst, but was very soon destined to do so, and the sorcerers of the nation, having gained secret information that the terrible scourge was, in the ordinary course of things, bound to be upon them soon from further north, used their knowledge as a most powerful lever towards promoting the uprising they were straining every nerve to bring about. In this they found willing aid from many of the chiefs, who saw their power and influence waning day by day; themselves forced to be the subservient vassals of a few—from their point of view—upstart and arrogant whites.

“Why, then, should Makiwa (Matabele term for the white man) wish to bewitch all the cattle?” said Madúla, who at present was in the vacillating stage, though the high-

handed action we have recorded, on the part of the native police, had gone far towards settling him in the wrong direction. “They will suffer equally with ourselves.”

“Our cattle are our life. Their life is in other things,” pronounced Shiminya, who never looked at his interlocutors when he spoke, thus giving his answers an oracular air, as though inspired by the magic stuff into whose black depth he was gazing. “We die. They live.”

“Hau!” cried the listeners, fully comprehending the hint.

“Not many times will the moon be at full before this death is upon us,” went on the wizard, still without looking up. “If there are no whites left in the land, then will it be averted.”

Again that hollow groan proceeded from the hut. Their feelings worked up to an artificial pitch, the superstitious savages felt something like a shudder run through their frames. But the imperturbable Shiminya went on:

“There are two who must die—Pukele, the son of Mambane.”

“He who is servant to Jonemi?” queried Madúla.

“The same.”

“Has he done wrong?” said Samvu, for the man named was one of Madúla’s people, and neither of the brothers liked this edict.

“He knows too much,” was the remorseless reply. “The other is Ntatu, formerly wife of Makani.”

A measure of relief came into the countenances of the two chiefs. A woman more or less mattered nothing, but they did not like to sacrifice one of their men.

“It is the ‘word’ of Umlimo,” pursued Shiminya, decisively. “This must be.” And for the first time he raised his eyes, and fixed them upon the two chiefs with cruel, snake-like stare.

“What is the life of a man, more or less, when Umlimo has spoken?” said Zazwe, thus throwing in the weight of his influence with the dictum of the sorcerer. “A man, too, who is faithful to one of these whites set over us! Au! Umlimo is wise.”

This carried the day; and after some more talk, mostly “dark,” and consisting of hints, the three chiefs, gathering up their assegais, withdrew.

Left alone, Shiminya still sat there, satisfied that his sanguinary edict would be carried out. A dead silence reigned over the great thorn thicket, and as though the satanic influence which seemed to brood upon the place imparted itself to wild Nature, even the very birds forbore to flutter and chirp in its immediate vicinity. The sun sank to the western horizon, shedding its arrows of golden light upon the myriad sharp points of the sea of thorns, then dipped below the rim of the world, and still the grim wizard squatted, like a crafty, cruel, bloodthirsty spider, in the midst of his vast web, though indeed the comparison is a libel on the insect, who slays to appease hunger, whereas this human spider was wont to doom his victims out of a sheer diabolical lust of cruelty and the power which he could sway through that agency. This day, indeed, he might feel content, for it had not been wasted. But the day was not over yet—oh no—not quite yet. Still, would it be possible for this satanic being to commit further deeds of atrocity and of blood? Well, is there not the wretched sufferer lying bound and helpless within the hut?

Again that low, vibrating hum sounded forth. It seemed to come from the thick of the thorn palisade. The deeply plotting brain of the wizard was again on the alert, but its owner evinced no eagerness, not even looking up from what he was doing. Some person or persons had unawares touched the hidden communication wire which, situated at the entrance of the narrow labyrinthine passage leading to the kraal, signalled such approach.

Shiminya’s discernment was consummate in every sense he possessed; indeed, this faculty had not a little to do with the ascendency he had gained. In the very footsteps of the new comer, shod with the amanyatelo—a kind of raw-hide sandal used as protection in thorny country—his keen ear could gather a whole volume of information. They were, in fact, to him an open index of the new comer’s mind. While distant they indicated a mind made up, yet not altogether removed from, the verge of wavering; the possession of a purpose, yet not altogether a whole-heartedness in its carrying out. Nearer they revealed the vulgar trepidation attendant upon the mere fact of approaching a place so sinister and redoubtable as the múti den of a renowned sorcerer, and that in the dim hours of night.

For the brief twilight had long since passed, and now a golden moon, in its third quarter, hung lamplike in the sky, and, save in the shadows, its soft brilliance revealed every detail almost as clear as in the day. It fell on the form of a tall, powerfully built savage, standing there in the gateway, naked save for the mútya, unarmed save for a short, heavy knobstick. This he laid down as he drew near the wizard.

“Greeting, my father,” he uttered.

“Greeting, Nanzicele,” replied the sorcerer, without looking up.

Divested of his civilised and official trappings, the ex-sergeant of police looked what he was—a barbarian pure and simple, no whit less of a one, in fact, than those over whom he was vested with a little brief authority. Whether this visit was made in the interests of loyalty to his superiors or not may hereinafter appear.

“Hast thou brought what I desired of thee, Nanzicele?” said the wizard, coming direct to the point.

Nanzicele, who had squatted himself on the ground opposite the other, now fumbled in a skin bag which was hung around him, and produced a packet. It was small, but solid and heavy.

“What is this?” said Shiminya, counting out ten Martini-Henry cartridges. “Ten? Only ten! Au! When I promised thee vengeance it was not for such poor reward as this.”

“They are not easily obtained, my father. The men from whom I got these will be punished to-morrow for not having them; but I care not. Be content with a few, for few are better than none. And—this vengeance?”

“Thou knowest Pukele—the servant of Jonemi?”

“The son of Mambane?”

“The son of Mambane, who helped hoot thee out of his kraal when thou wouldst not offer enough lobola for Nompiza. He is to die.”

Nanzicele leaped with delight. “When? How?” he cried. “Now will my eyes have a feast indeed.”

“At thy hand. The manner and the time are of thine own choosing. To thee has Umlimo left it.”

Nanzicele’s glee was dashed. His jaw fell.

“Au! I have no wish to dance in the air at the end of a long rope,” he growled; “and such would assuredly be my fate if I slew Pukele, even as it was that of Fondosa, the son of Mbai, who was an innyanga even as thyself, my father. Whau! I saw it with these eyes.

All Fondosa's múti did not save him there, my father, and the whites hanged him dead the same as any rotten Maholi."

"Didst thou glance over one shoulder on the way hither, Nanzicele? Didst thou see Lupiswana following thee, yea, even running at thy side? I traced thy course from here. I saw thee from the time of leaving Jonemi's. He was waiting for thee was Lupiswana. It is not good for a man when such is the case," said Shiminya, whose esprit de corps resented the sneering, contemptuous tone which the other had used in speaking of a member of his "cloth."

For the event referred to was the execution of a Mashuna witch-doctor for the murder of a whole family, whose death he had ordered.

The snake-like stare of Shiminya, the appeal to his superstitions, the sinister associations of the place he was in, a stealthy, mysterious sound even then becoming audible—all told, Nanzicele looked somewhat cowed, remembering, too, how his return journey had to be effected alone and by night.

Having, in vulgar and civilised parlance, taken down his man a peg or two, Shiminya could afford to let the matter of Pukele stand over. Now he said softly—

"And the other ten cartridges, those in thy bag, Nanzicele? Give them to me, for I have a better revenge, here, ready at thy hand, and a safer one."

"Au! They were to have been thine, my father; I was but keeping them to the last," replied the ex-police sergeant, shamefacedly and utterly mendaciously, as he placed the packet in the wizard's outstretched hand. "And now, what is this vengeance?"

Shiminya rose, and, beckoning the other to follow, opened and crept through the door of the hut behind him. A hollow groan rose from the inside. Nanzicele, halfway in, made an instinctive move to draw back. Then he recovered himself. "It is not a good omen to draw back when half through a doorway," said Shiminya, as they both stood upright in the darkness. "Yet—look."

He had struck a match, and lighted a piece of candle. Nanzicele looked down, and a start of surprise leapt through his frame.

"Whau!" he cried. "It is Nompiza!"

"And—thy vengeance," murmured the wizard at his side.

But the sufferer heard it, and began to wail aloud—

“Thy promise, Great Innyanga! Thy promise. Give me not over to this man, for I fear him. Thou didst swear I should be allowed to depart hence; on the head of Umzilikazi thou didst swear it. Thy promise, O Great Innyanga!”

“It shall be kept, sister,” said Shiminya, softly, his eyes fairly scintillating with devilish glee. “I swore to thee that thou shouldst be taken hence, and thou shalt, for this man and I will take thee.”

The wretched creature broke into fresh outcries, which were partly drowned, for already they were dragging her, still lashed to the pole, outside.

“Ha, Nompiza!” jeered Nanzicele, bending down and peering into her face as she lay in the moonlight. “Dost remember how I was driven from thy father’s kraal with jeers? Ha! Whose jeers were the loudest? Whose mockeries the most biting? Thine. And now Kulúla will have to buy another wife. Thou hadst better have been the wife of Nanzicele than of death. Of death, is it not, my father?” turning to Shiminya, who glared a mirthless smile.

Wrought up to a pitch of frenzy by the recollection of the insults he had then received, the vindictive savage continued to taunt and terrify the wretched creature as she lay. Then he went over to pick up his great knobstick.

“Not thus, blunderer; not thus,” said Shiminya, arresting his arm. “See now. Take that end of the pole while I take the other. Go thou first.”

Lifting the pole with its helpless human burden, these bloodthirsty miscreants passed out of the kraal. Down the narrow way they hurried, for Shiminya though small was surprisingly wiry, and the powerful frame of the other felt it not, although their burden was no light one. Down through a steep winding path, and soon the thorns thinned out, giving way to forest trees.

“Well, sister, I predicted that Lupiswana would come for thee to-night,” said Shiminya, as they set their burden down to rest themselves. “And—there he is already.”

A stealthy shape, which had been following close upon their steps, glided into view for a moment and disappeared. The wretched victim saw it too, and uttered such a wild ringing shriek of despair that Nanzicele fairly shuddered.

“Au! I like not this,” he growled. “It is a deed of tagati.”

“Yet thou must do it, brother, or worse will befall thyself,” said Shiminya, quietly. Then they resumed their burden.

Through the trees now came a glint of silver light, then a broad shimmer. It was the glint of the moon upon water. The Umgwane River, in the dry season, consists of a series of holes. One of these they had reached.

“And now, sister,” began the wizard, as they set down their burden upon its brink, “thou seest what is the result of an unquiet tongue. But for that thou wouldst not now be here, and thy brother Pukele and thy sister Ntatu would have yet longer to live. But you all know too much, the three of you. Look! Yonder is Lupiswana waiting for thee, even as I predicted,” said this human devil, who could not refrain from adding acute mental torture to the dying moments of his victim. And as he spoke a low whine rose upon the night air, where a dark sinister shape lay silhouetted against the white stones of the broad river-bed some little distance away.

The victim heard it and wailed, in a manner that resembled the whine of the gruesome beast. Shiminya laughed triumphantly.

“Even the voice she has already,” he exclaimed. “She will howl bravely when Lupiswana hunts her.”

“Have done,” growled Nanzicele. Brutal barbarian as he was, even his savagery stopped short at this; besides, his superstitious nature was riven to the core. “Get it over; get it over!”

They raised the pole once more, and, by a concerted movement, swung it and its human burden over the brink, where the pool was deepest. One wild, appalling shriek, then a splash, and a turmoil of eddies and bubbles rolling and scintillating on the surface, and the cold remorseless face of the brilliant moon looked down, impassive, upon a human creature thus horribly done to death.

“Hlala-gahle!” cried Shiminya, with a fiend-like laugh, watching the uprising of the stream of bubbles. Then, turning to his fellow miscreant, “And now, Nanzicele, whom Makiwa made a chief, and then unmade, the people at Madúla’s can hardly speak for laughing at thee, remembering thy last appearance there, bragging that thou wert a chief. Makiwa has done this, but soon there may not be any Makiwa, for so I read the fates. Go now. When I want thee I will send for thee again.”

And the two murderers separated—Nanzicele, dejected and feeling as though his freedom had gone from him for ever; Shiminya, chuckling and elate, for the day had been a red letter one, and the human spider was gorged full of human prey.

Chapter Five.

The Meeting of the Ways.

The mail-steamer from England had been docked early in Cape Town, and the tables at lunch-time, in the dining room of Cogill's Hotel at Wynberg, were quite full. There is something unmistakable about the newly landed passenger, male or female, especially when taken gregariously; and this comes out mainly in a wholly abnormal vivacity, begotten presumably of a sense of emancipation from the cooped monotony of shipboard, and a conversational tendency to hark back to the incidents of the voyage, and the idiosyncrasies of the populace of the recent floating prison. Add to this a display of brand new ribbons on the hats of certain of the ornamental sex, bearing the name of the floating prison aforesaid, and a sort of huddled up clannishness as of a hanging together for mutual protection in a strange land.

With this phase of humanity were most of the tables filled. One, however, was an exception, containing a square party of four, not of the exuberantly lively order. To be perfectly accurate, though, only three of these constituted a "party;" the fourth, a silent stranger, wearing more the aspect of a man from up-country than one of the newly landed, was unknown to the residue.

"What an abominable noise those people are making," remarked one of the trio, a tall, thin, high-nosed person of about thirty, with a glance at a table over the way, where several newly landed females were screaming over the witticisms of a brace of downy lipped youths, who were under the impression the whole room was hanging upon their words. "I only hope they don't represent the sort of people we shall have to put up with if we stay here."

"Don't you be alarmed about that, Mrs Bateman," said the man on her right. "That stamp of Britisher doesn't stay here. It melts off into boarding-houses and situations in Cape Town or Johannesburg. Just rolls up here because it's the thing to run out to Cogill's and have tiffin first thing on landing; at least, so it thinks. It'll all have disappeared by to-night."

"That's a comfort, anyway, if we do stay. What do you think of this place, Nidia?"

"I think it'll do. Those views of the mountain we got coming along in the train were perfectly lovely. And then it seems so leafy and cool. You can get about from here, too, can't you, Mr Moseley?"

“Oh yes, anywhere. Any amount of trains and trams. And I expect you’ll wear out the roads with that bike of yours, Miss Commerell.”

“By the way, I wonder if they brought our bicycles from the station?” said the other of the two ladies. “You saw them last, Nidia.”

“Yes. They are all right. They were standing outside when we came in.”

Now, utterly workaday and commonplace as all this was, not a word of it escaped the silent stranger. This girl, seated at his right, had riveted his attention from the moment she came in, and indeed there was that about Nidia Commerell’s face which was likely to exercise such an effect. It had a way of lighting up—a sudden lifting of the eyelashes, the breaking into a half smile, revealing a row of teeth beautifully even and white. She had blue eyes, and her hair, which was neither brown nor golden, but something between, curled in soft natural waves along the brow, dispensing with the necessity of any attempt at a fringe; and her colouring was of that warm richness which gave the idea that Nature had at first intended her for a brunette, then got puzzled, and finally had given her up in hopeless despair, which was perhaps the best thing that could have happened, for the result was about as dainty, refined, alluring a specimen of young womanhood as the jaded glance of the discriminating male could wish to rest upon.

This, at any rate, was the mental verdict of the stranger, and for this reason he hailed with inward satisfaction the recently expressed decision of the two as to taking up their quarters there for a time.

“You ought to remain here a few days, and show us about, Mr Moseley,” said the elder of the two ladies, after some more desultory conversation.

“Wish I could, Mrs Bateman. No such luck, though. I’ve got to start for Bulawayo to-night. They are hurrying the soul out of me as it is.”

“Isn’t the journey a frightful one?” asked Nidia.

“It isn’t a delightful one,” laughed the man, who was just a fair average specimen of the well-bred Englishman, of good height, well set up, and well groomed. “Railway to Mafeking, then eight days’ coaching; and they tell me the coach is always crammed full. Pleasant, isn’t it?”

The stranger looked up quickly as though about to say something, but thought better of it. Nidia rejoined—

“What in the world will we do when our time comes?”

“I am afraid you must make up your minds to some discomforts,” replied Moseley. “One of the conditions of life in a new country, you know. But people are very decent in those parts, and I’m sure would do everything they could to assist you.”

A little more conversation, and, lunch being over, the trio withdrew. John Ames, left alone at the table, was lost in all sorts of wild imaginings. Something seemed to have altered within him, and that owing to the proximity of this girl, a perfect stranger, whom three quarters of an hour ago he had never set eyes on. It was really very absurd, he told himself. But when a man has had fever, he is bound to be liable to fall a victim to any kind of absurdity. Fever! that was it—so he told himself.

Now, as he sat there, dreamily cracking almonds, he began to regret his reticence. The very turn of the conversation favoured him. He might have volunteered considerable information for the benefit of the man who was going up-country, he suspected, for the first time. The conversation would have become general, and might have paved the way to an acquaintanceship. There was no necessity for him to have been so reticent. He had lived too long stowed away, he decided. It was high time he came out of his shell.

He had applied for and obtained his leave, and had come down there to spend it. The sea breezes blowing across the isthmus of the Cape Peninsula, the cool leafiness of the lovely suburbs, were as a very tonic after the hot, steamy, tropical glow of his remote home. But the effects of the fever, combined with a natural reserve, kept him from going much among people, and most of his time was spent alone.

“I wonder who that man is who sat at our table,” Nidia Commerell was saying; for the trio were seated outside trying to converse amid the cackle and din of one of the livelier parties before referred to.

“He looked awfully gloomy,” said Mrs Bateman.

“Did you think so, Susie? Now, I thought he looked nice. Perhaps he wasn’t feeling well.”

“He had a look that way, too,” said Moseley. “Up-country man perhaps. Down here to throw off a touch of fever. I’ve seen them before.”

“Poor fellow! That may have accounted for it,” said Nidia. “Yes; he’s quite nice-looking.”

John Ames, meanwhile, was smoking a solitary pipe on the balcony in front of his room, and his thoughts continued to run on this new—and to him, supremely foolish subject.

Then he pulled himself together. He would get on his bicycle and roll down to Muizenberg for a whiff of the briny.

The afternoon was cloudless and still, and the spin along a smooth and, for the most part, level road exhilarating. A brisk stroll on the beach, the rollers tumbling lazily in, and he had brought his mind to other things—the affairs of his district, and whether the other man who was temporarily filling his place would be likely to make a mess of them or not, and how he would pull with Inglefield—whether Madúla had recovered from the sulky mood into which the action of Nanzicele had thrown him—and half a hundred matters of the sort. And so, having re-mounted his wheel, and being about halfway homeward again, he could own himself clear of the foolish vein in which he had set out, when—there whirled round the bend in the road two bicycles, the riders whereof were of the ornamental sex; in fact, the very two upon one of whom his thoughts had been chaotically running.

One quick glance from Nidia Commerell's blue eyes as they shot by, and John Ames was thrown right back into all that futile vein of meditation which he had only just succeeded in putting behind him. The offender, meanwhile, was delivering herself on the subject of him to her companion in no uncertain terms.

"Susie, that's the man who was sitting at our table. I think we'll get to know him. He looks nice, and, as he bikes, he'll come in handy as escort to a pair of unprotected females."

"How do you know he'll appreciate the distinction you propose to confer upon him? He may not, you know. He looks reserved."

"Oh, he's only shy. Say something civil to him to-night at dinner. We'll soon get him out of his shell. He only wants a little judicious drawing out."

The other looked dubious. "I don't know," she said. "I'm not sure we hadn't better leave him alone. You see, I'm responsible for your good behaviour now, Nidia; and really it is a responsibility. I don't like being a party to adding this unfortunate man's to your string of scalps."

We regret to record that at this juncture Nidia's exceedingly pretty mouth framed but one word of one syllable. This was it:

"Bosh!"

“No, it isn’t bosh,” went on her friend, emphatically. “And, the worst of it is, they all take it so badly; and this one looks as if he’d be no exception to the general rule, but very much the reverse. I don’t know what there is about you, but you really ought to be cloistered, my child; you’re too dangerous to be at large.”

“Susie, dry up! We’ll exploit our interesting stranger this evening, that is, presently; and now I think we’d better turn, for after three weeks of the ship I can’t ride any further with the slightest hope of getting back to-night.”

The upshot of all this was that when the two sat down to dinner they gave John Ames the “Good evening” with just as much geniality as the frigidity of English manners would allow to be manifested when outside England towards the only other occupant of the same table. It sufficed for its purposes, and soon the three were in converse.

“We passed each other on the road this evening,” said John Ames. “It was some way out, and I wonder you got back in time. Are you fond of bicycling?”

“We simply live on our bikes when the weather is decent,” replied Nidia. “This seems a good locality for it. The roads are splendid, aren’t they?”

“Yes. I generally wheel down to Muizenberg or Kalk Bay for a puff of sea air. It’s refreshing after the up-country heat.”

“Sea air? But can you get to the sea so soon?” said Mrs Bateman, surprised.

“Oh yes. In less than an hour.”

Both then began to enthuse about the sea, after the British method, which was the more inexplicable considering they had just had three weeks of it, and that viewed from its very worst standpoint—upon it, to wit. They must go there to-morrow. Was it easy to find the way? And so forth. What could John Ames do but volunteer to show it them?—which offer was duly accepted. Things were now upon a good understanding.

“Do they ride bikes much up-country—I think you said you were from up-country, did you not?” said Nidia, artlessly, with that quick lift of the eyelids.

“Oh yes, a good deal. But it’s more for the hard practical purpose of getting from one place to another than just riding about for fun. It strikes one though, if one has any imagination, as a sample of the way in which this aggressive civilisation of ours wedges itself in everywhere. You are right away in the veldt, perhaps only just scared away a clump of sable or roan antelope, or struck the fresh spoor of a brace of business-like

lions, when you look up, and there are two fellows whirring by on up-to-date bikes. You give each other a passing shout and they are gone."

"Yes. It is a contrast, if one has an imagination," said Nidia. "But not everybody has. Don't you think so?"

"Certainly. But when a man lives a good deal alone, and sees comparatively little of his kind, it is apt to stimulate that faculty."

Nidia looked interested. The firm, quiet face before her, the straight glance of the grey eyes, represented a character entirely to her liking, she decided. "Is it long since you came out?" she asked.

"Well, in the sense you mean I can't be said to have come out at all, for I was born and bred out here—in Natal, at least. But I have been in England."

"Really? I thought you were perhaps one of the many who had come out during the last few years."

"Am I not colonial enough?" said John Ames, with a quiet laugh.

"N-no. At least, I don't mean that—in fact, I don't know what I do mean," broke off Nidia, with a perfectly disarming frankness.

"Do you know Bulawayo at all?"

The diversion came from the third of the trio.

"Oh yes; I have just come from up that way."

"Really. I wonder if you ever met my husband. He is a mining engineer. Bateman our name is."

John Ames thought.

"The name doesn't seem altogether unknown to me," he said. "The fact is I am very seldom in Bulawayo. My district lies away out in the wilds, and very wild indeed it is."

"What sort of a place is Bulawayo?"

“Oh, a creditable township enough, considering that barely three years ago it was a vast savage kraal, and, barring a few traders, there wasn’t a white man in the country.”

“But isn’t it full of savages now?” struck in Nidia.

“Yes; there are a good few—not right around Bulawayo, though. Are you likely to be going up there?”

“We are, a little later,” replied Mrs Bateman. “This is fortunate. You will be able to tell us all about it.”

“With pleasure. I shall be too happy to give you any information I can.”

“Is it safe up there?” said Nidia. “Is there no fear of those dreadful savages rising some night and killing us all?”

Unconsciously the official reserve came over John Ames. He had more than once predicted to himself and one or two confidential friends such a contingency as by no means outside the bounds of practical politics, almost invariably to be laughed at for his pains. Now he replied:

“Everything that precaution can do is against it. They are carefully supervised; in fact, it is my own particular business to supervise a considerable section of them.”

“Really? But how do you talk, to them? Can they talk English?”

John Ames smiled. “You forget I mentioned that I was raised in Natal.”

“Of course. How stupid I am!” declared Nidia. “And so you know their language and have to look after them? Isn’t it very exciting?”

“No; deplorably prosaic. There are points of interest about the work, though.”

“And you keep them in order, and know all that’s going on?”

“We try to; and I think on the whole we succeed fairly well.”

But at that very moment Shiminya the sorcerer was dooming to death two persons, and filling with seditious venom the minds of three chiefs of importance within the speaker’s district.

Chapter Six.

About some Dallying.

John Ames was beginning to enjoy his leave, and that actively.

At first he had done so in a negative kind of way. It was pleasant to have nothing to do, and plenty of time to do it in, to rise in the morning and know that until bedtime at night he had only to please himself and take no thought for anything whatever. He had a few acquaintance in the neighbourhood, more or less busy people whose avocations kept them in Cape Town throughout the working day, and so was mostly thrown upon his own resources. This, however, was not without its advantages, for the change had hardly benefited him much as yet, and he was conscious of a sort of mental languor which rendered him rather disinclined than otherwise for the society of his fellows. He liked to mount his bicycle and spin for miles along the smooth level roads, beneath the oak and fir shade, the towering wall of mountain glimpsed ever and anon athwart the trees; or, gaining the nearest point of sea shore, lie on the beach for hours, watching the rollers come tumbling in, and the revels of bathers skipping amid the surf. Hitherto he had been content to do all this alone, now he was not; and the name of the agency which had effected this change was Nidia Commerell.

Nearly a fortnight has gone by since we introduced that entrancing personality to the reader's notice; and whatever effects the same had had upon John Ames, one at any rate was certain, viz. a conviction that it was not good to be alone.

They had seen a good deal of each other within that time. Nidia had carried out to the full her expressed intention of using him as an escort, and he, for his part, had gladly welcomed the rôle, and efficiently discharged it; and whether it was along bicycle ride, or a more remote expedition by rail, or a scramble up the Devil's Peak, that commended itself to the two ladies for the day's programme, there was John Ames in sure and faithful attendance. It did him good, too. There was an ingredient in the tonic which was stimulating, life-giving indeed, and now in this daily companionship he felt that life was worth living. Decidedly he had begun to enjoy his leave.

"Well, Susie, wasn't I justified in my prediction?" said Nidia to her friend, as they were dressing for dinner after one of these expeditions.

"Which prediction? You make so many."

"Concerning John Ames,"—for so they had got into the way of designating him when alone together.

“I said he looked as if he were nice, and also that he would come in handy as an escort for two unprotected females. Well, he is both. Isn’t he?”

“Yes; he is a remarkably well-mannered, pleasant man.”

“With more than two ideas in his head?”

“Yes; he can talk intelligently on any subject, and if he knows nothing about it won’t pretend to.”

“As is the case with the average turned-out-of-a-bandbox, eyeward-twisting-moustache type of Apollo one usually encounters in one’s progress through this vale of woe,” supplied Nidia, with an airy laugh.

“That holds good, too. But, gracious Heavens, child, don’t pile up your adjectives in that mountainous fashion, or you’ll reflect no credit on my most careful training and tuition.”

“All rights Govvie,” cried Nidia, with a peal of merry laughter—the point of the allusion being that prior to her marriage Susie Bateman had been a combination of companion and governess to the girl she was now chaperoning; in fact, was a distant relation to boot. “But the said careful training was such a long time ago. I’m beginning to forget it.”

“Long time ago!”

“Yes, it was. In the days of my youth. I am in my twenty-fourth year, remember. Is that nothing?”

“Of course it’s nothing. But—what were we talking about?”

“Oh, John Ames, as usual.”

“As usual—yes. But, Nidia, isn’t it rather rough on the man? He’s sure to end by falling in love with you.”

Again the girl laughed, but this time she changed colour ever so slightly.

“To end by it! That’s not very complimentary to my transcendent fascinations, O Susie. He ought to begin by it. But—to be serious—perfectly serious—he isn’t that sort.”

“I’m not by any means sure. Why should you think so?”

“No signs. He’d have hung out signals long ago if he’d been trending that way. They all do. The monotony of the procedure is simply wearisome.”

“Nidia, you are really a very dreadful child. Your talk is absolutely shocking to the ears of a well brought up British female.”

“Can’t help it. If a series of idiots come to labour under the impression that life outside my presence—ten days after first becoming aware of my existence—is totally unendurable, where am I to blame? I can’t scowl at them, and nothing short of that will restrain them. Now, the reason why I rather like this man is that he has so far shown no signs of mental aberration.”

She meant it all. For one so plenteously, so dangerously, dowered as far as the other sex was concerned, Nidia Commerell was strangely unromantic. In her allusion to the rapidity with which the average male succumbed to her charms there was no exaggeration. She seemed to possess the art of conquest sudden and complete, yet, in reality, art it was not, for she had not a shadow of the flirt in her composition. The very artlessness of her frank unstudied demeanour constituted, in fact, her most formidable armament. But she refused to see why she should avoid the other sex simply because a large percentage of its members were weak enough to fall in love with her upon no sort of warranty or provocation. There was no affectation, either, in her declaration that the unanimity wherewith they did so candidly bored her.

“Just as I begin to like a man,” she would plaintively declare, “and find him of some use, he gets serious, gloomy, and spoils everything.” And for all her airiness on the subject, she was not entirely without a qualm lest John Ames should follow suit, and him she had more than begun to like very much indeed. The roar of a truly demoniacal gong cut short further discussion of the subject, by warning them that it was time to go down and join the object of it at table. Him they found in an amused state.

“Rather fun,” he said. “Some fellow has been going for that most cherished and firmly rooted institution, the great Cape fish-horn, in a letter to the evening Argus. He doesn’t see how a civilised community at the end of the nineteenth century can tolerate their day and night alike being made hideous by an unending procession of dirty Malays blaring weirdly, wildly, deafeningly through a ‘yard of tin;’ and, for the matter of that, no more do I. Look, here it is”—handing the paper across to Mrs Bateman.

The latter, like most high-featured people, was of censorious habit. “Yes; it’s amusing,” she said. “But there are some people who are never happy unless they are finding fault. I suppose even these poor Malays must earn their living.”

“No fear of their not doing that,” rejoined Ames. “Why, they are the most well-to-do crowd on this peninsula. I take it the writer’s point is they could earn it without making life intolerable to the world at large.”

At which remark, ever so faint a droop of the mouth-corners changed the visage of a silent, middle-aged individual seated at an adjacent table; but his back was towards them, and they couldn’t see it. “Oh, nonsense,” retorted Mrs Bateman, breezily. “People who can’t stand a little noise ought to go and live by themselves on a desert island.”

Here the droop on the lips of the silent one became a very pronounced sneer. “A fool of a woman, answering according to her folly,” he thought.

“Let me see it,” cried Nidia. “Yes; it is a good joke, and perfectly true, too. I know I’ve wished that same hideous noise anywhere times out of number. I quite agree—it is amazing how they tolerate it. I wonder who the writer is. Positively I’d like to send him an anonymous letter of cordial thanks.”

This time the silent one laughed to himself, heartily and undisguisedly.

“Write it to the Argus instead and agree with him; that’ll do just as well,” said John Ames. “The fact of the matter is that the Malay vote is a power just here, and it would be about as easy to uproot Table Mountain itself as the diabolical snoek trumpet under discussion.”

“No, I don’t agree with you in the least, Susie,” declared Nidia. “I think unnecessary racket ought to be put down with a stern hand. Don’t you remember all that abominable cannon nuisance when we were in the Bernese Oberland? You didn’t like that any more than I did. Just fancy, Mr Ames. Some of the most picturesque turnings of the road, almost wherever we went, were tenanted by a miscreant volunteering to let off a horrid cannon for half a franc—to raise an echo.”

“I should have felt like offering him a whole one not to raise it,” was the reply. “But the noble Switzer was shrewd enough to appraise his clients at their correct value. The English are never quite happy unless they are making a noise, unless it is when they are listening to one.”

“Yes; aren’t they?” cried Nidia. “You see it in their fondness for banging doors and talking at the top of their voices on every landing at all hours of the day and night, and throwing their boots about and pounding up and down for hours over somebody else’s head, in a house full of other people.”

The silent one hearkened approvingly. “That’s no fool of a girl,” he was saying to himself.

“I know,” replied John Ames. “And, talking about that stumping overhead trick, if you were wantonly to knock a cripple off his crutch you would be voted the greatest brute on earth. Yet that same cripple will go into the room above yours, and, as you say, pound up and down for hours, or perhaps let fall that same crutch with a mighty bang upon the floor, totally callous to the possibility of there being some unfortunate wight underneath with shattered nerves, and generally seedy, and who would give his soul for a square night’s rest. No; if you expect from other people any of the consideration they expect from you, you are simply laughed at for a fool, and a selfish one at that.”

“Oh, well, in life we have to give and take, I suppose,” remarked the censorious one, with striking originality.

John Ames smiled. He had an idea as to the sort of giving and taking this masterful person would be likely to practise, save in one quarter, that is; for he had not spent the time he had in the society of the two without detecting that she had at any rate one soft place, and that was Nidia Commerell. So he agreed easily, and the talk drifted on to other matters.

It was pleasant out in the moonlight. The elder of the two ladies had pronounced herself tired when Nidia, whose freshness nothing seemed to impair, suggested strolling. John Ames was rather inclined to be silent as they wandered on, the light of the southern moon flooding down through the overshadowing firs, the balmy stillness of the night broken by distant snatches of shrill laughter and the chatter of voices from squalid coloured loafers on the main road. He was realising with a sort of pang at the heart how all this time would soon be behind him, as in a flash, only as an episode to look back to. The girl, noting his silence, was wondering whether it was a prelude to what she had airily termed “hoisting the signals,” and, thus conjecturing, was surprised at herself and her lack of the usual eagerness to avoid them.

“You are feeling much better than when you came down, are you not, Mr Ames?” she said softly.

“Ever so much. I shall go back quite set up.”

Her practised ear detected the slightest suspicion of melancholy in the tone, while admiring the strength which controlled it.

“What a strange life you must have to lead up there!” she went on; for he had told her a good deal about himself during the time of their acquaintanceship.

“Oh yes. It gets monotonous at times. But then, I take it, everything does.”

“But it is such a useful life. And you have helped to open up the country, too.”

“Not I. That is left to other people.”

“But you were with the first expedition, and so of course you helped. I don’t wonder you pioneers are proud of the part you took in extending the Empire. Isn’t that the correct newspaper phrase? At any rate, it sounds something big.”

John Ames smiled queerly. He was not especially proud of the extension of the Empire; he had seen a few things incidental to that process which had killed within him any such incipient inflation.

“Oh yes; there’s a good deal of sound about most of the doings of ‘the Empire,’ but there—I must not get cynical on that head, because the said extension is finding me in bread and cheese just now, and I must endeavour to be ‘proud of’ that.”

“You must have great responsibilities holding the position you do. Tell me, are you able to throw them off while you are away, or do you lie awake sometimes at night wondering if things are going right?”

“Oh, I try not to bother my head about them. It’s of no use taking a holiday and thinking about ‘shop’ all the while. Besides, the man who is in my place is all there. He has been at it as long as I have; and if there is one thing I may say without conceit I do know—in fact, both of us know—it is the wily native and his little ways.”

Ah, John Ames, so you thought, and so thought many others in those boding days! But at this moment the man who is in your place is drinking whisky and water and smoking pipes with the Police sub-inspector in a circular hut on the Sikumbutana, and you are dallying beneath a radiant moon upon a fir-shaded road at Wynberg, with more than one lingering glance into the eyes of the sweet-faced, soft-voiced girl beside you. But one could almost read a leering derisive grin into the face of the cold moon, for that moon is now looking down upon that which would give both yourself and ‘the man in your place’ something very serious to think about and to do. It is looking down upon—let us see what.

Chapter Seven.

The Voice of Umlimo.

It is probable that the Matopo Hills, in Southern Matabeleland, are, as a freak of Nature, unique on the earth's surface.

Only a vast upheaval—whether through the agency of fire or of water, let the geologists determine and quarrel over—can have produced such a bizarre result. A very sea of granite waves, not smooth and rolling, but piled in gigantic, rugged heaps; cones of immense boulders, rising to the height of many hundred feet; titanic masses of castellated rock; slab-like mesas and smooth-headed domes all jumbled together arbitrarily side by side; it is as though at some remote age a stupendous explosion had torn the heart out of earth's surface, and heaving it on high with irresistible force, had allowed it to fall and settle as it would. Colossal boulders, all on end, anyhow, forming dark holes and caves, lead up to the summits of these marvellous cones; and in such clefts wild vegetation finds abundant anchorage—the acacia and wild fig and mahobo-hobo. Here a tall rock pinnacle, balancing upon its apex a great stone, which, to the unthinking eye, a mere touch would send crashing from its airy resting-place where it has reposed for ages and ages beyond all memory; there a solid square granite block the size of a castle, riven from summit to base as completely and smoothly as a bisected cheese. Grim baboons, of large size and abnormal boldness, bark threateningly from the ledges, and every crag is a perfect rookery of predatory birds—hawks and buzzards, and kites and carrion crows—soaring and wheeling beneath the blue of the heavens. Valleys, narrow and winding, intersect this chaotic mass, swampy withal in parts, and harbouring reedy water-holes where, beneath the broad leaves and fair blossoms of radiant lilies, the demon crocodile lurks unsuspected. Great crater-like hollows, too—only to be entered by a single way, and that a very staircase of rocks—the whole a vast and forbidding series of natural fastnesses, which even now have been thoroughly penetrated by but few whites, and at that time by the conquerors of the country not at all.

Evening is drawing down upon this rugged wilderness. The sun has gone off the world, but a rosy afterglow still tinges the piled boulders or smooth, balanced crags rearing up above the feathery foliage of acacia; and, save for an odd one here and there, the wheeling birds of prey have sought their inaccessible roosting-places. But such as have not—for these an unwonted sight lies beneath. The deathlike solitude of each winding valley is disturbed by an unwonted life—the life of men.

On they come—dark forms in straggling lines—threescore here, two there; a dozen further back, even as many as a hundred together. And they are converging upon one

point. This is a hollow, the centre of which forms an open space—once under cultivation—the sides a perfect ruin of shattered rocks.

On they come—line upon line of dark savages—advancing mostly in silence, though now and then the hum of a marching song, as some fresh group arrives at the place, rises upon the stillness in clear cadence. None are armed, unless a stick apiece and a small shield can be defined as weapons; and there is a curiously subdued note pervading the assembly—an elated look on some of those dark faces, a thoughtful one on others—but one of expectancy upon all.

Each party as it arrives squats upon the ground awaiting the next. And still the tread of advancing feet, the hum of approaching voices, and presently the open space is filled with dark humanity to the number of several hundreds. During the period of waiting, chiefs, leaving their own following, greet each other, and draw apart for converse among themselves. Suddenly, and with startling nearness, there echoes forth from a crag overhead a loud resonant bark. It is answered by another and another. A volley of deep-voiced ejaculation, first startled—for their feelings are wrought up—then mirthful, arises from scores of throats. A troop of baboons has discovered this human concourse, and, secure in a lofty vantage ground, is vocally resenting its presence.

But such levity is promptly checked by a sense of the serious nature of the gathering. It is clear that all are assembled who mean to come. And now the gloom lightens with amazing rapidity, as the broad disc of a full moon sails majestically forth above the jumble of serrated crags; and to it turns that sea of wild dark faces stamped with an unwonted expectation and awe, for as yet the bulk of those present have but a dim idea of the end and object of this mysterious convention.

In the lamplike glow of this new light faces are clearly discernible, and amid the group of chiefs are those of Madúla, and Zazwe, and Sikombo, and Umlugula, and several others holding foremost rank among their tribesmen. On this occasion, however, they are not foremost, for it is upon another group that the main interest and expectation centres.

The members of this are decked out in the weird array of sorcerers, are hung around with entrails and claws, mysterious bunches of “charms,” white cowhair and feather adornments, and the grinning skulls of wild animals. One alone is destitute of all ornamentation, but the grim hawk-like countenance, the snaky ferocity of the cruel stare, the lithe stealthiness of movement, stamps this man with an individuality all his own, and he is none other than Shiminya. These are the “Abantwana ’Mlimo,” the hierarchy of the venerated Abstraction, the “Children of Umlimo.” Of them there are perhaps two score. They are seated in a circle, droning a song, or rather a refrain, and, in the midst, Shiminya walks up and down discanting. The chiefs occupy a subsidiary place

to-night, for the seat of the oracle is very near, and these are the mouthpieces of the oracle.

By degrees the assembly gathers around. Voices are hushed. All attention is bent upon these squatting, droning figures. Suddenly they rise, and, bursting through the surrounding ranks, which promptly open to give them way, start off at a run. The crowd follows as though magnet drawn. But the run soon slows down to a kind of dancing step; and, following, the dark assemblage sweeps up the valley bottom, the long dry grass crackling as the excited multitude crushes its way through. On the outskirts of the column a great venomous snake, disturbed, trodden on, rears its hideous head, and, quick as lightning, strikes its death-dealing fangs into the legs of two of the crowd, but in the exaltation of the hour no thought is given to these. They may drop out and die; none can afford to waste time over them.

For nearly an hour the advance continues, the black mass pouring, like ants, over every obstacle—over stones, rocks, uprooted tree-trunks—winding through a tortuous valley bottom, the granite crags, towering aloft in their immensity, looking down as though in cold scornful indifference upon this pigmy outburst of mere human excitement, and then the way opens, becoming comparatively clear. The “Abantwana ’Mlimo” slacken their pace, and then the whole body is brought to a halt.

The spot is a comparatively open one save for the long dry grass. In front is a belt of acacias; but behind, and towering above this, there rises an immense mass of solid granite, its apex about two hundred feet above the bottom of the hollow—a remarkable pile, smoother and more compact than the surrounding crags, and right in the centre of its face is a black spot about twelve feet square.

The blackness, however, is the effect of gloom. This spot is the mouth of a hole or cave.

In dead silence now the multitude crouches, all eyes fixed expectantly upon the black yawning mouth. Yet, what can appear there within, for the rock face is inaccessible to any save winged creatures? A cleft, passing the hole, traverses obliquely the entire pile, but as unavailable for purposes of ascent as the granite face itself. No living being can climb up thence. Another vertical crack descends from above. That, too, is equally unavailable. Yet, with awe-stricken countenances, the whole assembly, crouching in semicircular formation, are straining their eyeballs upon the gaping aperture.

In front are the hierarchs of the grim Abstraction. If here indeed is the home of the latter it is well chosen, for a scene of more utter wildness and desolation than this weird, granite-surrounded fastness is hardly imaginable. The great round moon, floating on high, seems to the impressionable multitude to lower and spread—almost to burn.

And now the “Abantwana ’Mlimo” rise from their squatting posture, and, forming into a double line, their faces lifted towards the black, gaping hole, begin to sing. Their chant rolls forth in a regular rhythm, but the usual accompaniment of the stamping of feet is at first absent. But the song, the wild savage harmony of voices fitting well into their parts, is more tuneful, more melodious, than most barbaric outbursts of the kind. Its burden may be rendered somewhat in this wise—

“Voice from the air, Lighten our way! Word of the Wise, Say! shall we slay? Voice of the Great, Speaking from gloom; Say! shall we wait Darkness of doom?”

The echoes ring out upon the still night air, rolling in eddies of sound among the granite crags. The company of sorcerers, every nerve and muscle at its highest tension, softly move their feet to the time, as again and again they repeat their awesome invocation, and with each repetition the sound gathers volume, until it reaches a mighty roar. The multitude, stricken motionless with the awe of a great expectation, gaze upward with protruding eyeballs, awaiting a reply. It comes.

The singing of the Abantwana ’Mlimo has ceased. There is a silence that may be felt, only broken by a strained breathing from hundreds of throats. Then, from the black cave, high above, sounds forth a voice—a single voice, but of amazing volume and power, the voice of the Great Abstraction—of the Umlimo himself. And the answer is delivered in the same rhythm as the invocation—

“Dire is the scourge, Sweeping from far: Bed is the spear, Warming for war. Burned is the earth, Gloom in the skies; Nation’s new birth—Manhood arise!”

Strong and firm the Voice rolls forth, booming from that black portal as with a thunder note—clear to a marvel in its articulation, cold, remorseless in the decision of its darkly prophesying utterance. Indescribably awe-inspiring as it pours forth its trumpet notes upon the dead silence, small wonder that to the subdued eager listeners it is the voice of a god. Thrice is the rhythm repeated, until every word has burned deep into their minds as melted lead into a beam of soft-grained wood.

And now in the silence which ensues there steps forth from the ranks of the Abantwana ’Mlimo one man. Standing alone a little in front of the rest, he faces upward to the great cave overhead. In the absence of weird adornment, and with the moon upon his bird-like countenance, stands revealed Shiminya.

“Great Great One! Voice of the Wise!” he cries. “Thy children hear thee. They are brought even unto death. The scourge which Makiwa has brought upon them strikes hard. It is striking their cattle down by scores already. There will be no more left.”

There is a pause. With outstretched arms in the moonlight, the mediator stands motionless, awaiting the answer. It comes:—

“There will first be no more Makiwa.”

A heave of marvel and suppressed excitement sways the crowd. There is no misunderstanding this oracular pronouncement, for it is in the main what all are there to hear. Shiminya goes on.

“Oh, Great Great One, the land is burned dry for lack of rain, and thy children die of hunger. Will the land never again yield corn?”

“Makiwa has laid his hand upon it;” and the dull, hollow, remorseless tone, issuing from the darkness, now seems swept by a very tempest of hate, then replies, “Remove the hand!”

Sticks are clutched and shields shaken to the accompaniment of a deep growl of wrath forced from between clenched teeth.

“Remove the hand!” runs in a humming murmur through the multitude. “Ah, ah! Remove the hand!”

Again, with hollow boom, the Voice rolls forth.

“Even the very skies are darkening. Behold!”

Every head is quickly jerked back.

“Whou!”

Just the one ejaculation, volleyed from every throat, and in it there is but one consent, one expression, that of marvel and quaking dread. For in the tense excitement of awaiting the utterances of the oracle none have noticed that the flooding light of the moon has been gradually fading to darkness, albeit not a cloud is in the heavens. Now, as they look up, lo! the silvern orb is half covered with a black shadow. Onward it steals, creeping further and further, until the broad disc is entirely shrouded. A weird unnatural darkness lies upon the earth.

In silent awe the superstitious savages gaze blankly upon the phenomenon. There are those among them who have beheld it before, and to such under ordinary circumstances it would be looked upon with little concern. Now, however, worked up as they are, it is different. There are even some among them who have heard of the darkening of the sun during the first struggle of the great parent race of Zulu against the white invasion. Then it presaged great slaughter of their white enemies. And, as though reading the thoughts of such, the awful voice of the Great Abstraction broke in upon the oppressive, unnatural gloom—

"Children of Matyobane, (Father of Umzilikazi, founder and first king of the Matabelo nation), hearken. When Makíwa thought to eat up the mighty stock from which ye are sprung the very sun withdrew his light, and the plains between Isandhlwana and Umzinyati were red with the blood of Makiwa. Such as were not slain fled from the land. For the children of Zulu the sun grew black. For the children of Matyobane the moon. Lo, the blackening of the moon is the hiding of the nation, crushed, blackened, beneath the might of Makiwa. But the blackness does not last; so is the foot of Makiwa removed from the neck of the people of Matyobane. Behold!"

Every face, which has been turned towards the bark mouth of the oracle, again looks skyward. The black disc is moving back. The outer rim of the broad moon once more shines forth in a shaft of light. Broader and broader does this become, the strained eyeballs of the wrought-up savages bent upon it with concentrated stare. Then the Abantwana 'Mlimo, falling prone to the earth, once more raise the chant, and this time the whole multitude joins, in a great rolling volume of chorus:—

"Burned is the earth, Gloom in the skies; Nation's new birth— Manhood arise!"

In wild uncontrollable excitement the multitude watches the now fast lightening orb; then, when the shadow has entirely left it, shining in bright, clear radiance as before, all faces are once more turned upward to the great granite pile, looming huge against the stars, its front a dull grey in the moonlight. Once more is the silence dead—expectant.

"Oh, Great Great One!" cries Shiminya, standing with arms outstretched, "we behold a nation's new birth. But the time, O Word of the Wise? The time?"

"The time!" And now the Voice rolled from the black cavern mouth in a very thunder roar that reverberated among the mighty granite walls in a shock of echo that struck the entranced auditors speechless. "The time, Children of Matyobane? The time? Before next moon is dead."

Chapter Eight.

The Parting of the Ways.

John Ames was seated beneath the verandah at Cogill's Hotel with a blue official document in his hand and a very disgusted look upon his face.

The former accounted for the latter inasmuch as it was the direct cause thereof. In cold official terminology it regretted the necessity of abridging the period of his leave, and in terse official terminology requested that he would be good enough to return to his post with all possible dispatch.

He looked up from his third reading of this abominable document, and his brows were knitted in a frown. He looked at the thick plumbago hedge opposite, spangled with its pale blue blossoms, at the smooth red stems of the tall firs, up again at the deep blue of the cloudless sky overhead, then down once more upon the detestable missive, and said:—

"Damn!"

John Ames was not addicted to the use of strong language. Now, however, he reckoned the occasion justified it.

"With all possible dispatch." That would mean taking his departure that night—that very night. And here he was, ready and waiting to do the usual escort duty, this time for a long day out on the bicycle. If he were to start that night it would mean exactly halving that long day. With a savage closing of the hand he crushed the official letter into a blue ball, and once more ejaculated—

"Damn!"

"Sssh!"

Thereat he started. Nidia Commerell was standing in the doorway right beside him, drawing on a pair of suede gloves, her blue eyes dancing with mirth. She was clad in a bicycle skirt and light blouse, and wore a plain white sailor hat.

"Sssh! You using naughty swear words? I am surprised at you!"

The smile which rippled brightly from the mobile lips showed, however, that the surprise, if any, was not of a derogatory nature. John Ames laughed ruefully.

“I’m sorry. But really it was under great provocation. I’ve received marching orders.”

“No? Not really? Oh, how disgusting!”

The utterance was quick. His eyes were full upon her face. How would she receive the communication? Was that really a flash of consternation, of regret, that swept over it?

“When must you go?” she continued, still, it seemed to him, speaking rather quickly.

“I ought to start by to-night’s train”—then, breaking off—“Where is Mrs Bateman? Is she ready?”

“We shall have to go without her. She can’t come—says she’s getting headachy.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry!”

Nidia had to turn away her head to avoid a splutter outright. Never had she heard words intended to be sympathetic uttered in tones of more jubilant relief. To herself she said: “You are a sad tarradiddler, John Ames.” To him she said, “Yes; it’s a pity, isn’t it?” He, for his part, was thinking that this time the official order need not be interpreted too literally. It had plainly intimated that a state of things had transpired which necessitated the presence of every official at his post, but this time the state of things could dispense with his adjusting hand for twenty-four hours longer. “With all possible dispatch.” Well, to start that night under the circumstances would not be possible, under others it would. Throughout the whole day Nidia would be alone with him, and he meant that day to be one that he should remember.

They started. At first the exhilarating spin along the smooth fir-shaded road, together with the consciousness that the day was only beginning, caused him partly to forget that most unwelcome recall. They had arranged to use by-roads where the riding was good, and, taking the train at Mowbray, proceed to Cape Town, and ride out thence as far beyond Camp’s Bay as they felt inclined. Now, as they spun along through the sunlit air, between leafy gardens radiant with bright flowers and the piping of gladsome birds, the noble mountain wall away on the left towering majestic though not stern and forbidding, its cliffs softened in the summer haze, its slopes silvered with the beautiful wattle, and great seas of verdure—the bright green of oak foliage throwing out in relief the darker pine and blue eucalyptus—surging up against its mighty base, the very contrast afforded by this glorious scene of well-nigh Paradisical beauty, and the mental vision of a hot steamy wilderness, not unpicturesque, but depressing in the sense of remote loneliness conveyed, was borne forcibly home to the mind of one of them. It was

a question of hours, and all would have fled. He grew silent. Depression had reasserted itself.

Yet, was it merely a sense of the external contrast which was afflicting him? He had traversed this very scene before, and not once or even twice only. He had always admired it, but listlessly. But now? The magic wand had been waved over the whole. But why transform the ordinary and mundane into a paradise for one who was to be suffered but one glimpse therein, and now was to be cast forth? A paradise—ah yes; but a fool's paradise, he told himself bitterly.

"Well?"

He started. The query had come from Nidia, and was uttered artlessly, innocently, but with a spice of mischief.

"Yes? I was wondering?" she went on.

"What were you wondering?"

"Oh, nothing! Only—er—as it is rather—er—slow for me, don't you think so—supposing you give me an inkling of the problem that is absorbing you so profoundly? You haven't said a word for at least ten minutes. And I like talking."

"I am so sorry. Yes; I might have remembered that. How shall I earn forgiveness?"

"By telling me exactly what you were thinking about, absolutely and without reservations. On no other conditions, mind."

"Oh, only what a nuisance it is being called away just now."

The tone was meant to be offhand, but the quick ear of Nidia was not so easy to deceive. When John Ames did look down into the bright laughing face it had taken an expression of sympathy, that with a quick bound of the heart he read for one that was almost tender.

"Yes. It is horrid!" she agreed. "You had a long time to run yet, hadn't you?"

"Nearly a month."

"I call it perfectly abominable. Can't you tell them it is absolutely impossible to come back just now, that—er—in short, on no account can you?"

He looked at her. “Do you wish it?” was on his lips; but he left the words unsaid. He shook his head sadly.

“I’m afraid it can’t be done. You see, I am entirely at their beck and call. And then, from what they say, I believe they really do want me.”

“Yes; I was forgetting that. It is something, after all, to be of some use, as I was telling you the other night; do you remember?”

Did he remember? Was there one word she had ever said to him—one look she had ever given him—that he did not remember, that he had not thought of, and weighed, and pondered over, in the dark silent hours of the night, and in the fresh, but far from silent, hours of early morning? No, indeed; not one.

“I remember every single word you have ever said to me,” he answered gravely, with his full straight glance meeting hers. And then it was Nidia Commerell’s turn to subside into silence, for there struck across her mind, in all its force, the badinage she had exchanged with her friend in the privacy of their chamber. If he had never before, as she defined it, “hung out the signals,” John Ames was beginning to do so now—of that she felt very sure; yet somehow the thought, unlike in other cases, inspired in her no derision, but a quickened beating of the heart, and even a little pain, though why the latter she could not have told.

“Come,” she said suddenly, consulting her watch, “we must put on some pace or we shall miss the train. We have some way to go yet.”

On over the breezy flat of the Rondebosch camp-ground and between long rows of cool firs meeting overhead; then a sharp turn and a spin of straight road; and in spite of the recurring impediments of a stupidly driven van drawn right across the way, and a long double file of khaki-clad mounted infantry crossing at right angles and a foot’s pace, they reached the station in time, but only just. Then, as Nidia, laughing and panting with the hurry of exertion she had been subjected to, flung herself down upon the cushion of the compartment, and her escort, having seen the bicycles safely stowed, at considerable risk to life and limb, thanks to a now fast-moving train, clambered in after her, both felt that the spell which had been moving them to grave and serious talk was broken between them—for the present.

But later—when the midday glow had somewhat lost its force, when the golden lights of afternoon were painting with an even more vivid green the vernal slopes piling up to the great crags overhanging Camp’s Bay, the same seriousness would recur, would somehow

intrude and force its way in. They had left their bicycles at the inn where they had lunched, and had half strolled, half scrambled down to the place they now were in—a snug resting-place indeed, if somewhat hard, being an immense rock, flat-topped and solid. Overhead, two other boulders meeting, formed a sort of cave, affording a welcome shelter from the yet oppressive sun. Beneath, the ocean swell was raving with hoarse sullen murmur among the iron rocks, dark with trailing masses of seaweed, which seemed as a setting designed to throw into more gorgeous relief the vivid, dazzling blue of each little inlet. Before, the vast sheeny ocean plain, billowing to the ruffle of the soft south wind.

"Really, you are incorrigible," said Nidia at last, breaking the silence. "What shall I do to make you talk?"

"Yes; I am very slow to-day—I sorrowfully admit it," he answered, with a laugh which somehow or other lacked the ring of merriment.

"I know," went on Nidia. "I must start discussing the Raid. There! You will have to be interesting then."

"That's ruled out," he replied, the point being that from the very first days of their acquaintance the Raid was a topic he had resolutely declined to argue or to express any opinion upon. "Besides, it's such a threadbare subject. You are right, though. I am treating you very badly. In fact, it is not fair, and I am haunted by a shrivelling conviction that you are sorry you came out to-day, and at this moment are heartily wishing yourself at home. Am I not right?"

"No; quite wrong. I have, you know, a great respect for your convictions—at times, but for this last one I have nothing but contempt; yes, contempt—profound contempt. There! Will that satisfy you?"

Her tone was decisive, without being vehement. In it—in the glance of her eyes—he detected a ring of sympathy, of feeling. Could she read his inner thoughts, he wondered, that each hour of this day as it wore away did but tighten the grip of the bitter desolating pain that had closed around his heart? He watched her as she reclined there, the very embodiment of dainty and graceful ease. He noted the stirring of each little wave of gold-brown hair as it caressed her forehead to the breath of the soft sea wind; the quick lifting of the lashes revealing the deep blue of the soulful eyes, so free and frank and fearless as they met his; the rich tint of the smooth skin, glowing with the kiss of the air and sun; every curve, too, of the mobile expressive lips; and the self-restraint he was forced to put upon himself became something superhuman. And it was their last day together! She, for her part, was thinking, "John Ames is a fool, but the most self-

controlled fool I ever met. How I shall miss him! Yes, indeed, how I shall miss him!" Aloud she said—

"I wonder when we shall be going up-country?"

"Never, I predict," was the somewhat decisive rejoinder.

Nidia raised herself on one elbow. "You seem pretty certain as to that," she said, "so certain that I begin to think the wish is father to the thought."

"Thank you."

"There, there, don't be cross. I am only teasing you. I can be an awful tease at times, can't I? Ask Susie if I can't—if you haven't found it out already, that is."

The mischief had all left her voice, the laughing eyes were soft and sympathetic again. He laughed, too, but somewhat sadly.

"Because things up there are not over bright, and are likely to be less so. The cattle is all dying off from this new disease—rinderpest. The natives have never been thoroughly conquered, and there are still plenty of them. The loss of their cattle will make them desperate, and therefore dangerous. The outlook is gloomy all round."

"Oh, but you will be able to put things right when you get back."

John Ames stared, as well he might. Either she meant what she said or she did not. In the first event, she had a higher opinion of him than ever he had dreamed; in the second, the remark was silly to the last degree; and silliness was a fault, any trace of which he had not as yet discovered in Nidia Commerell.

"You cannot really mean that," he said. "If so, you must be under an entire misconception as to my position. I am only one of several. We each of us try to do our best, but none of us can do anything very great."

Listening intently, Nidia was saying to herself, "How true he rings! Note. The swagger and egotism of the up-to-date Apollo is conspicuously absent here." Then, aloud—

"No; I was not chaffing. I believe you can do a great deal. Remember, we have been very much together of late, and I rather pride myself upon a faculty for character reading."

The delicate insinuation of flattery in her tone constituted the last straw. John Ames felt his resolution growing very weak. Passionate words of adoration rose to his lips—when—

A screech and chatter of child voices and scurrying feet, right behind the rock under whose shadow the two were resting, then the sound of scrambling, and their resting-place was theirs no more. A round half-dozen uproarious infants were spreading themselves over the rock slabs around, their shrill shrieks of glee hardly arrested, as with a start they discovered the presence of others upon their new playground. And that they were there to stay they speedily made known by dint of yelling response to the calls of the parent-bird, whose own voice drew nearer around the rock.

The spell was broken. At that moment John Ames would have given anything to have seen the rocks below swept by a sudden tidal wave. The spell was broken. The moment had come and gone, and he was aware, as by an intuitive flash, that it would not come again.

Nidia rose. Did she welcome the fortuitous relief or not? he wondered, as he glanced at her keenly.

"Let us stroll quietly back," she said. "We shall get no more peace with that nursery romping round us. Besides, it's time we thought of beginning the return ride.

"What an ideal day it has been!" resumed Nidia, when the ground became even enough to carry on conversation with any degree of facility. "Hasn't it?"

"M'yes. Very 'ideal,' in that like other ideals it doesn't last. An ideal is like a wine-glass, sooner or later destined to be shattered."

"That's quite true. I wonder are there any exceptions to the rule?"

"Safely, no. People set one up for themselves and adore it; then crash—bang! some fine day they knock it down, and it shatters into smithereens. Then there is a pedestal empty—a pedestal to let."

"And up goes another image, with like result," laughed the girl.

"Precisely. But how cynical we are becoming. By the way, to go back to what I was saying a little while ago, you will probably not be coming up-country at all. Then we shall never see each other again."

“Even then, why should we not?”

“Why? Why, because the chance that—that made us meet now is not likely to recur. That sort of blessed luck is not apt to duplicate in this vale of woe. Not much.”

She smiled, softly, tenderly. The self-contained John Ames was waxing vehement. His words were tumbling over each other. He could hardly get them out quick enough.

“And would you mind so very much if it did not?”

“Yes.”

“So would I.”

Then silence for a few moments. They were walking along a high-road. At very short intervals the ubiquitous cyclist—singly or in pairs—shot noiselessly by, or here and there a coloured pedestrian, seated by the roadside, eyed them indifferently.

“Why should we lose sight of each other?” said John Ames at length. “Do you know—this time we have had together has been—has been one that I could never have dreamed of as within the bounds of possibility.”

“We have had a good time, haven’t we?” assented Nidia, demurely, though conscious of a quickening pulse. “And now, I don’t mind telling you something—because I have failed to discover one atom of conceit in your composition—so I don’t mind telling you—”

“What?”

The interruption was startling. The voice was dry, the face stony. Had he but known it the interrupter was going up many degrees in the speaker’s estimation.

“Only that I shall miss you dreadfully—when you are gone.”

Nidia’s mischievous demureness simply bubbled with enjoyment at the look of relief which came over the other’s features. She continued—

“As you say, why should we lose sight of each other? You may write to me occasionally—when you can spare the time required for the saving of your country from all the ills that threaten it. But—let’s see, I—oh, well, never mind—I was going to say something, but I won’t. And now—we must not be serious any more. We have had a lovely day, the

loveliest day we could possibly have had, and we are going to have a lovely ride back. Here we are at the hotel again."

The significance of the tone, the veiled emphasis which underlay the remark, was not lost upon the listener. John Ames was one who knew when to let well alone. Patience, tact, a judicious mind, were all among his qualifications for his responsible and difficult post. Should they fail him in a matter where private feeling, however deep, was concerned? So he acquiesced.

Nidia, for her part, was conscious of mingled feelings. She did not know whether to be glad or not that they had been summarily interrupted; on the whole, she thought she was glad. On the other hand, she had not exaggerated in saying she would miss him dreadfully, and already she had some idea as to how she would miss him. Here was a man who was outside her experience, who represented an entirely new phase of character. With her, too, this time that they had spent so much together stood forth.

But although no more was said during their homeward ride of a nature to trench on grave matters, the tone between both of them was one that seemed unconsciously to breathe of confidence and rest. The deep murmur of the ocean swell had sunk its hoarse raving as it lapped the rocks below the skirting road; the golden glory of the heaving waters had turned to a deeper sapphire blue suffused with pink as the sun sank behind the rampart crags, and already two or three stars, twinkling forth, seemed to rest upon, then hover over, the rock crest of the great Lion Mountain, heaving up, a majestic sentinel, over the liquid plain. Yes; both were content, for in the hearts of both still rang the gladness and the quietude of a very conscious refrain:—"We shall meet again, soon."

Thus the parting of the ways. But before they should meet again—what? In that surrounding of peace and evening calm, small wonder that no suggestion should find place as to a very different surrounding, where, far to the north, from the drear mountain wilderness, even at that moment, thundered forth—as another Voice from Sinai of old—a dire and terrible voice telling of scourge and of war—a voice, indeed, of woe and of wrath, sounding its dread tocsin o'er an entire land.

"Burned is the earth, Gloom in the skies Nation's new birth— Manhood arise!"

Chapter Nine.

The Scourge—and After.

Madúla's kraal, in the Sikumbutana, was again in a state of profound malcontentment and unrest, and again for much the same reason as before. Then that reason had been the imminent loss of its cattle, now that loss had become a certainty. The dread scourge had swept over the land, in all its dire unsparingness, and now Madúla and his people were convened to witness the destruction of their worldly wealth.

For the edict of the ruling power had gone forth. The animals were to be destroyed, and that wholesale. Segregated into small herds, they were carefully watched. With the first case of sickness becoming apparent the whole herd containing it was doomed. And now nearly the whole of Madúla's herds had been declared infected.

The place appointed for this wholesale slaughter was an open plain some little distance from the kraal. About threescore dead oxen lay where they had fallen, the nostrils of a few still frothy with the fatal running which denoted the fell pestilence. John Ames, grounding his smoking rifle, turned to talk with Inglefield and another white man, the latter being one of the Government cattle inspectors. Both these carried rifles, too, and behind them was drawn up a troop of native police. In a great semicircle Madúla's people squatted around, their countenances heavy with sullen rankling, their hearts bitter and vengeful. In the mind of the chief the dexterous venom of Shiminya was taking full effect. The fact of a few cattle being sick was seized upon by their rulers as a pretext for the destruction of all; and what would become of the people then? In the minds of the people the predictions of Umlimo were being fulfilled to the letter. Now, however, they could afford to wait. Soon there would be no more cattle; soon—very soon—there would be no more whites.

John Ames, laying down his weapon, addressed the muttering, brooding savages. It was a most revolting task that which had been put upon him, he explained; not one that he would have undertaken of his own free will. To shoot down miserable unresisting animals in cold blood, one after another, could not be otherwise. It would seem to the people that to destroy the whole as well as the sick was an act of sheer wanton tyranny, but they must not look at it in that light. The Government was their father, and had their interests at heart; and although it was found necessary to reduce them to seeming poverty for the time being, yet they would not be losers in the long run. Then, again, they were in no worse case than the white men themselves, whose cattle was destroyed in the same way if disease broke out; but, above all, they must be patient, and bear in mind that by right of conquest all the cattle in the land belonged to the Government, and what they had was only allowed them by favour. This disease was a cloud they were all

passing through, white and black alike. It would pass, and the sun would shine forth again. Let them be patient.

John Ames, in the plenitude of his experience, noted the sullen apathy wherewith his words were received, yet he attached no greater importance to it than he reckoned it deserved; he could appreciate the outrage on their feelings which this wholesale destruction of their most cherished possessions must involve. Then Madúla spoke.

"What Jonemi had told them must be true, since Jonemi said it. But what the people could not understand was why Government should have restored them their cattle, if only to destroy it all before their eyes; should give it back with one hand to take it away with the other. That did not seem like the fatherly act of a fatherly Government. Nor could they understand why the beasts that were not sick should be shot just the same as those that were. Let them be spared until the signs of sickness showed, then shoot them. Those signs might never show themselves." And more to the same effect.

With infinite patience John Ames laid himself out to explain, for the twentieth time, all he had said before. It was like reasoning with a wall. "Let the people only have patience," he concluded. "Let the people have patience."

"M—m!" hummed his auditors, assenting. "Let the people have patience."

But there was a significance in their tone which was lost on him then, though afterwards he was destined to grasp it.

"It's a disgusting business all this butchery," he observed, as he and the other two white men were riding homeward together. "I don't wonder the people are exasperated. As Madúla says, they'll never understand how the Government can give them back the cattle with one hand only to take it all away with the other."

"It strikes me that Mr Madúla says a great deal too much," said Inglefield, dropping the bridle on his horse's neck, while shielding a match with both hands so as to light his pipe. "A little experience of the inside of Bulawayo gaol would do him all the good in the world, in my opinion."

"You can't work these people that way, Inglefield, as I'm always telling you," rejoined John Ames. "You've got to remember that a man like Madúla wants some humouring. He was a bigwig here before either you or I held our commissions in this country, possibly before we had, practically, ever heard of it. Now, for my part, I always try and bear that in mind when dealing with the old-time indunas, and I'm confident it pays."

“Oh, you go on the coddling plan,” was the thoughtless retort. “For my part—well—a nigger’s a nigger, whether he’s an induna or whether he isn’t, and he ought to be taught to respect white men. I wouldn’t make any difference whatever he was. An induna! Faugh! A dirty snuffy nigger with a greasy black curtain ring stuck on top of his head. Pooh! Fancy treating such a brute as that with respect!”

“All right, Inglefield. I don’t in the least agree with you. Perhaps when you’ve had a little experience you may be in a position to form an opinion as to which of our lines is the most workable one.”

“Oh, draw it mild, Ames,” retorted the police officer, ill-humouredly. “It doesn’t follow that because a fellow can patter by the hour to a lot of niggers that he knows everything. I say, old chap, why don’t you chip in for some of old Madúla’s daughters—marry ’em, don’t you know? He has some spanking fine ones, anyway.”

The tone was ill-tempered and sneering to the last degree. Inglefield could be bumptious and quarrelsome at times, but he had a poor life of it, with a detestable wife, and an appointment of no great emolument, nor holding out any particular prospect of advancement. All of which bearing in mind, John Ames controlled his not unnatural resentment, and answered equably:—

“Because I hope to make a better thing of life, Inglefield. But that sort of thing is rather apt to stick to a man, and crop up just when least convenient. I’m no prig or puritan, so putting it on that ground alone, it’s better not touched.”

“Oh, all right, old chap; only don’t be so beastly satirical. I can’t help grousing like the devil at times when I think how I’m stuck away here in this infernal God-forsaken hole. Wish I could fall into a bunk at Bulawayo or Salisbury or anywhere. Even Crosse here has a better time of it going around sniffing out rinderpest.”

“Don’t know about that,” said the cattle inspector. “I’ll swap you bunks, anyway, Inglefield.”

“Wish we could, that’s all,” replied the police officer, who was in a decidedly “grousy” vein, as he owned himself, half petulantly, half laughingly, when presently the conical huts of Sikumbutana hove in sight over the brow of the rise. “Well, now, Ames, you’ll roll up to ‘skoff’ at seven, won’t you, unless you’ll change your mind and come in now?”

“I’ll roll up all right. But not now, I’ve got some work on hand, and it’s early yet.”

“Very well. Seven, then. Don’t go sending over some tinpot excuse, you unreliable beggar.”

“No; I’ll be there. So long. So long, Crosse.” And he turned his horse’s head into the track that led to his own compound. “Rum chap that fellow Ames,” said Inglefield, when he and the cattle inspector were alone together. “He’s a rattling good chap at bottom, and we are really great pals, but we fight like the devil whenever we have to do with each other officially.”

“How’s that?” said Crosse, a quiet, self-contained man, with a large sandy beard and steady, reliable eyes.

“Oh, I don’t know. He’s so beastly officious—he calls it conscientious. Always prating about ‘conscientious discharge of his duties’—‘can’t conscientiously do it’—and so on. You know. Now, only the other day—or, rather, just before he went on leave—he must needs get my pet sergeant reduced—a fellow worth his weight in gold to me as a hunter. Now, of course, the chap has turned sulky, and swears he’s no good—can’t tell where game is or is likely to be, or anything.”

“So. How did he get him reduced?”

“Oh, some rotten bother with that old nigger who was out to-day, Madúla. Nanzicele—Oh, blazes! I can’t manage these infernal clicks.”

“Never mind; you’ll learn some day,” said Crosse. “Well, what did Nanzicele do?”

“Nothing. That’s the point of the whole joke. He was sent to collar some cattle from Madúla, and he—didn’t collar it.”

“And is that why he was reduced?”

“No fear. It was for trying to collar it. The niggers came in and complained to Ames, and Ames insisted on an inquiry. He took two mortal days over it, too; a rotten trumpery affair that ought to have been let rip. Then a lot of darn red tape, and my sergeant was reduced. No; Ames always pampers the niggers, and some day he’ll find out his mistake. If they come around—especially these indunas—he talks to them as if they were somebody. I’d sjambok them out of the compound.”

Crosse, listening, was chuckling to himself, for he knew whose judgment was likely to be the soundest, that of the speaker or that of Ames. Then he said:—

“And this Nanzicele—is he that big tall Kafir who was nearest us, on the outside of the line, during the cattle-shooting?”

“Yes; that’s the chap. By George! he’s a splendid chap, as plucky as the very devil. Many a time I’ve had him out with me, and he’d go through anything. He was with me once when I missed a charging lion out beyond Inyati. He didn’t miss him, though—not much. I’d trust my life to that fellow any day in the week.”

“Trust your life to him, would you?”

“Yes. Rather.”

“M—m!”

“Yes, I would. You don’t know the chap, Crosse. I do. See?”

“’M—yes.”

The while, John Ames, having turned his horse over to his boy, entered his office. There was not much to do that day, as it happened, so after spending half an hour looking over some papers, he locked up for the day, and adjourned to the hut which served him for sitting and dining room combined, in which we have already seen him.

He threw himself into a chair and lighted a pipe. There was an absent, thoughtful look in his eyes, which had been there ever since he found himself alone; wherefore it is hardly surprising that in lieu of seeking solace in literature, he should have sat, to all outward appearances, doing nothing. In reality, he was thinking—thinking hard and deeply.

A month had gone by since his unexpected and most unwelcome recall; but unwelcome as it had been, he could not quarrel with it on the ground of its superfluity. Times had been lively since his return—more than lively—but not in an exhilarating sense. The rinderpest had taken firm root in the land, and was in a fair way of clearing it of horned cattle from end to end. Not at domestic cattle did it stay its ravages either. The wild game went down before its fell breath; every variety of stately and beautiful antelope, formerly preserved with judicious care beneath the rule of the barbarian king, underwent decimation. But it was in the mowing down of the cattle that the serious side of the scourge came, because, apart from the actual loss to the white settlers, the enforced destruction of the native stock rendered the savages both desperate and dangerous. Already rumours of rising were in the air. The sullen, brooding demeanour exhibited by Madúla’s people was but a sample of the whole.

To the perilous side of the position, as regarded himself individually, John Ames was not blind. He was far too experienced for that. And his position was full of peril. Apart from a rising, he was marked out as the actual agent in executing the most hateful law ever forced upon a conquered people. His was the hand by which actually perished its animal wealth. Every bullock or heifer shot down sent a pang of fierce vindictiveness through more than one savage heart. In blind, barbaric reasoning, what more plausible than that to destroy the instrument would be to render inoperative the cause which set that instrument in motion? A blow from behind, a sudden stab, in the desperate impulse of the moment—what more likely?

Not of peril, present or potential, however, was he thinking, as he sat there alone, but of the change, absorbing and entire, which had come over his life since returning from his all too brief furlough. He had left, cool, well-balanced, even-minded; he had returned, so far as his inner moments were concerned, in a trance, a state of absorption. It was wonderful. He hardly recognised himself. But what a new glad sunshine was now irradiating his lonely life. The recollection! Why, he could sit for hours going over it all again. Not again only, but again and again. Everything, from the first accidental meeting to that last bright and golden day by an enchanted sea—to the last farewell. Every word, every tone was recalled and weighed. Ah, he had not known what it was to live before! He had grovelled like a blind grub in the dust and darkness—now he was soaring in arrowy gleams upon wings of light. But—no words had been uttered, no promises exchanged. What matter? If at times of physical depression he felt misgivings he put them from him.

True to her promise, Nidia had written—once—and with that letter he had had no cause to find fault. She had even sent him a dainty little portrait of herself, the only one she had, she explained; but where that was habitually kept we decline to say, “We shall meet again,” she had declared. Yet if that utterance were to be unfulfilled, if indeed this dream were to fade, to go the way of too many such dreams, and to end in a drear awakening, even then was it not something to have lived in the dream, to have looked upon life as so new and golden and altogether priceless? With such considerations would he comfort himself in moments of depression.

“We shall meet again.”

Often he would picture to himself that meeting. There would be others present most probably, but she, in his sight, would be alone. She would be surrounded by adorers, of course, but as her eyes met his she would know there was in reality but one. In all the adjuncts to her serene loveliness which taste and daintiness could surround her with, she would stand before him. Such would be their meeting, and upon it he dwelt; and to

it his imagination reached through space, as to the culminating ecstasy of the goal of a life attained.

From such soarings, however, comes a descent, as abrupt as it is profound, in this hard work-a-day world. John Ames sat bolt upright with a start of dismay, for the clock opposite told its own tale. His musings had carried him over some hours. It was nearly dark, and he was due—almost overdue—at Inglefield's.

Chapter Ten.

The Igniting of the Flame.

“That man’s late again. He always is. Tom, don’t ever ask him again. He seems to treat me with studied rudeness.”

Thus Mrs Inglefield, consulting her watch. She was an acid looking person, who might once have been passable in aspect. Now the deepening of her habitual frown was far from prepossessing.

“It’s only on the stroke of seven,” said Inglefield, shortly. “Give him a little law, Annie. He’ll be here directly. Perhaps some nigger turned up at the last moment on particular business.”

The suggestion was like throwing paraffin upon flames.

“That makes it worse,” exploded the lady. “To keep me—to keep us—waiting to suit the convenience of a few filthy blacks—”

“Well, give the chap a show,” snapped Inglefield, not in the best of humours himself. The while, Crosse, the cattle inspector, sat profoundly pitying Inglefield, thinking, too, that the defaulter, when he did come, was not going to enjoy his dinner overmuch.

“Hope I’m not late,” said a voice in the doorway.

“Not a bit, Ames; at least, only two minutes, and that doesn’t count,” cried Inglefield, cordially, feeling very much “in opposition.”

“Roll up, man, and have an appetiser, Crosse, you’ll cut in?”

John Ames, ignoring the coldness of his hostess’ greeting, noticed that fully a quarter of an hour went by before they sat down to table. When they did sit down the interior of the hut looked snug enough. The bright lamp shed a cheerful glow upon the white napery and silver forks; and pictures and knick-knacks upon the walls and about the room—or rather, the hut, for such it was—rendered the place pleasant and homelike, suggestive of anything but the wilds of savage Matabeleland. Any remark, however, which he addressed to his hostess was met by a curt monosyllable, she turning immediately to converse with Crosse, affably voluble. It mattered nothing. He had only consented to come upon Inglefield’s urgent and repeated invitation, having experienced that sample of behaviour before.

“What sort of a time did you have down in Cape Town, Ames?” said Crosse presently, when he could conversationally break away.

“Rather a good one. It was a great nuisance having to come back.”

“Mr Coates was such a nice man,” interpolated Mrs Inglefield, with meaning, referring to John Ames’s locum tenens. “We used to see a great deal of him.”

“Find any nice girls down there, eh, Ames?” said Inglefield, slily, fully alive to the unveiled rudeness of his spouse.

“Oh yes—several.”

“And one in particular, eh?” went on the other, waggishly, drawing a bow at a venture; for John Ames was not one to wear his heart upon his sleeve or to embark in chatter upon the subject nearest and dearest to that organ.

“Nice girls! I didn’t know there were any nowadays,” snapped Mrs Inglefield. “A pack of bicycling, cigarette-smoking, forward tomboys!”

“Oh, come, Mrs Inglefield,” laughed Crosse, “you mustn’t be so down on them. They’re only up to date, you know.”

“Up to date! Then, thank Heaven I’m not up to date; I’m only old-fashioned,” she retorted.

“I’d be sorry to wear the boots of the chip who told you so, Annie,” pronounced Inglefield. “Besides, you’re romping hard over Ames’s feelings; at least, I surmise you are. He’s too close a bird to give the show away. But—as poor old Corney Grain used to say.”

“Oh, I always say what I mean,” she answered, with an air which plainly added: “if people don’t like it so much the worse for the people.” And John Ames was thinking that never again, under any circumstances whatever, would he sit at the table of this abominably ill-bred and offensive woman. He was right. He never would; but for a reason that it was as well he—and all of them seated there—did not so much as dream.

Then, partly that subject-matter for conversation is, to isolated dwellers in a remote wilderness, necessarily limited, partly because he deemed it a safe topic, Inglefield led the talk round to the day’s doings—the destruction of Madúla’s cattle.

“It’s an infernally wasteful way of getting rid of them,” he said. “I dare say you’ve blazed away nearer a thousand cartridges than a hundred, eh, Ames?”

“Quite that. As you say, it is an abominable waste, and if ever the time comes when we shall sorely need every one of those cartridges for our own defence—”

“Oh, now you’re croaking again, old chap,” interrupted Inglefield; while his spouse remarked—

“Faugh! I’d as soon be a slaughter-house butcher at once. Sooner.”

“Somebody must do it, you know, Mrs Inglefield,” replied John Ames, placidly. “If the job were turned over to natives they’d waste five times the number of cartridges, and the poor beasts would suffer all the more.”

“Suppose we change this very unpleasant subject,” she remarked, looking pointedly at him, quite ignoring the fact that it had been started by her husband, and she it was who had done the most towards keeping it going.

“Policeman he want to see Inkose.”

The interruption proceeded from one of the two small boys who acted as waiters, and who had just entered.

“Tell him to wait until I’ve done dinner, Piccanin,” replied Inglefield, placidly.

“It may be something important,” hazarded John Ames.

“Oh, it’ll keep till after dinner,” was the airy rejoinder. “Er—which policeman is it, Piccanin?”

“Big policeman, ’Nkose; him name Nanzicele. Him come up from barracks now.”

The men’s quarters—which, by the way, were not barracks but native huts—lay about three hundred yards below those occupied by their officer.

“Then tell ‘him’ to go back to them again, and wait until I’ve done dinner,” replied Inglefield, briskly; for he was of an obstinate turn, besides instinctively resenting anything like interference on the part of his brother official.

The small boy retired, and for a moment voices were heard outside. Then there entered—Nanzicele.

"Great Caesar!" cried Inglefield, reddening. "What the devil do you mean, sir, by disobeying orders? Go back to the barracks at once! Here, Puma! Hambasuka! Footsack!"

But ignoring the pointing finger of his irate superior, Nanzicele took one step to the side—leaving the door clear—and, standing at attention, ejaculated in loud and sonorous tones—

"Baba—'Nkose!"

Was it a signal? Crosse, who was seated opposite the door, lurched forward, falling with his face on the table, simultaneously with the crash of two shots fired from outside. John Ames, pinned to his chair by a grip as powerful as steel, was impotent to do more than ineffectually struggle. Half a dozen stalwart savages rushed into the hut, and, dividing their forces, four of them threw themselves upon Inglefield, the remaining two turning their attention to the latter's wife. It was all done in a moment. The suddenness of it, the total, utter unpreparedness of those who, but two seconds ago, had been unsuspectingly dining, left not the smallest chance of resistance. Inglefield, starting up, instinctively to seize the carving-knife, was stabbed again and again with sword-bayonets before he could raise a hand, and fell to the floor. The wretched woman, too petrified with the suddenness and terror of it all even to shriek, was promptly despatched; one savage drawing his weapon across her throat with a slash that nearly severed the head. It was all over in a moment. Yet one victim remained:

John Ames, now bound fast to his chair with straps, felt himself grow dizzy and sick with the horror of this appalling butchery. Blood dripped to the floor, then splashed in bright red drops on the garments of the murderers. And those garments were the uniform of the Native Police.

All seemed to heave in misty dimness before his eyes. In a moment he would faint. Then, with a vast effort of will, he recovered himself. Why had he been spared? In a moment the whole situation flashed through his brain. This was the beginning of a general rising. The Native Police had no grudge against their officers, let alone against Inglefield, who was, if anything, too easy-going. If they were in open revolt, then the rising was general, even as he and one or two others had feared might one day be the case. The fiercely sullen demeanour of Madúla and his people at the destruction of their cattle now assumed an aspect of deadly significance. The destruction of their cattle! Ah, there was the last straw! But—why had he been spared?

Then amid this scene of horror hope came uppermost. His administration had always been signalled by strict and impartial justice to the natives, even when white interests were concerned—a line, be it whispered, not invariably the rule in those days, when the policy known as "supporting the white man against the black" at any cost, was deemed wise and necessary. He was known to several of the chiefs, and by chiefs and people alike respected. It might well be that he was marked out for exemption from a general massacre.

But now a voice, lifted up, seemed to shatter to fragments any such hopes—a great jeering voice, vengeful, triumphant, menacing. It was the voice of Nanzicele, addressing him in voluble Sindabele.

"Ho, Jonemi! Where are you now? And these? 'Let the people have patience. Let the people have patience,' Your words, Jonemi. Great words, Jonemi! Well, the people have had patience, and now their day is come. By this time to-morrow all the whites in the land will be dead."

"Will be dead," echoed those around, with an emphatic hum.

"Why have you—have you all done this thing, Nanzicele?" said John Ames, striving to repress the shudder of loathing and disgust which shook his voice. "Have you not been treated well—treated with every consideration and justice by your officer? And yet—"

"Justice!" growled the savage. "Justice! Now nay, Jonemi; now nay. I was a chief in the Amapolise, now I am a common man again. Who made me so? Not this"—pushing with his foot the bleeding corpse of Inglefield. "But for thy counsels he would not have brought me down. It was thou, Jonemi—thou. Now shall thy blood pour over my hand."

Nanzicele all this while had been working himself up to a state of fury, as he talked into the face of his helpless prisoner, or victim, the others standing around emphatically applauding. Now he seized a poultry knife from the table, and, jerking back John Ames' head, held the edge against his throat.

It was a horrible moment, that expectation of an agonising death, and an ignominious one to boot—one of those moments which could concentrate a lifetime of horror. The helpless man could do nothing. Every second he thought to feel the keen blade slashing through vein and muscle, carotid and windpipe. But the barbarian seemed in no hurry. He threw down the knife again.

“I have a better way with thee than that, Jonemi. When we have finished we will burn down this hut, leaving thee here. Ah—ah!” Then he turned his attention to the table, where the other murderers were promptly demolishing the remnants of the feast.

But for the tragedy just perpetrated the sight would have been comic. Two had got hold of a roast fowl and were quarrelling over it like a couple of dogs over a bone. A third had cut a huge chunk out of a leg of sable antelope, and having plastered it thickly with mustard, was devouring it in great bites, the tears streaming down his face the while. Pepper, too, had discomfited another; and yet another, trying to use it, had driven a fork nearly through his cheek, all talking and spluttering the while. Yet all were foul with the blood which had just been shed; even the white cloth was splashed and smeared with it. Among them John Ames recognised his own body-servant, Pukele. The latter had taken no active part in the murders, having, with two other men, come in later. Still, there he was among them, the man whose faithfulness, to himself at any rate, he had always deemed beyond suspicion; the man with whom he would have entrusted his life, even as poor Inglefield had said but an hour or two ago with regard to Nanzicele. Yet that fiend had been the first to murder him in cold blood. In truth, one could trust nobody. Little, therefore, was he surprised now when Pukele, turning to him, joined the others in abusing and threatening him.

A bottle of whisky, half emptied, stood on the table, and another, unopened, on the sideboard, together with two of “squareface.” Most of those present understood the corkscrew of civilisation, and in a few moments were choking and gasping with the effects of their fiery libations. As this unwonted indulgence began to take effect, the uproar created by the murderous crew became simply indescribable. Plates and dishes were smashed, glasses thrown at each other, and one of the bottles with its precious contents was smashed. And foremost of all, amid the madness of the riot, was Pukele—the quiet Pukele, the faithful Pukele.

Already two of the murderers had rolled under the table dead drunk, falling upon and clutching the gashed bodies of their victims. Others, snatching up knives from the table, with reeling step and blood-lust in their drunken faces, staggered towards their victim. But between the latter and them, somehow, was always interposed the form of the faithful Pukele, of the riotous Pukele, of the treacherous, murdering Pukele.

To John Ames it seemed that death’s bitterness should already be past, for whatever the method of it, death itself was sure. He knew he would never leave that hut alive, and could almost have prayed that all were over. Then his thoughts reverted to Nidia Commerell. How thankful he was that she was in safety twelve hundred miles away. Would she feel more than a transient sorrow or regret when she heard of his end? He would have died at his post anyhow. And then he recalled the words of flattering

approval she had more than once uttered when expressing an interest in his career. And that last long golden day they had passed together. Well, even at this terrible moment he felt thankful he had lived to go through that experience. But—what was this?

The strap which bound his right arm to that of the chair had snapped. Snapped? No; it had been cut. The large form of Pukele stood in front of him, was standing with his hands behind his back, and one of those hands held a sword-bayonet such as was used by the Native Police, its haft towards John Ames. Now he saw who had cut the strap.

He reached forth cautiously, and gently withdrew the weapon from Pukele's grasp; then, having cut the strap confining his other arm, bent down, and in a moment his legs were free. Pukele the while was discoursing volubly with the other Police rebels, fanning a heated discussion and egging them on to drink. But ever between them and the prisoner he stood. A horrible sight they presented, their once smart uniforms filthy with blood and grease, their faces lolling with intoxicated imbecility, their speech thick and their legs tottering. But the treacherous Pukele, the riotous, drunken, abusive Pukele, now seemed, strange to say, as sober as the proverbial judge. He stood firm, unless perhaps a gradual swaying of his body to the left were perceptible; and the door of the hut was behind him—a little to the left.

John Ames, between him and the door aforesaid, watched every move. The savage roysterers were becoming alternately more and more riotous and maudlin. Then the faithful Pukele made a movement with his hand behind him. It was unmistakable. John Ames slid from the chair, and in a moment was through the door, and round behind the hut just in time to avoid running right into the arms of a new—and sober—body of the now revolted police, who had come up to join in the fun and to loot their murdered officer's quarters. He had escaped with his life. After all, there was some fidelity left among these barbarians, he thought, as he stepped briskly, yet cautiously, through the darkness. He had escaped with his life, yet here he was, in the heart of a rebel country—every one of whose white settlers had probably by this time fallen in savage massacre—without food or means of procuring any, and with no other weapon than a sword-bayonet. The outlook was far from reassuring.

Chapter Eleven.

Hollingworth's Farm.

"Roll out, Dibs. Roll out, you lazy beggar. It'll take us at least three hours."

Thus Moseley, surveyor, to Tarrant, ditto. The campfire had gone out during the small hours, and the line of action enjoined upon the latter by his chum was not a congenial one, for the atmosphere half an hour before sunrise was chill and shivery. Yet, early as it was, the horses and pack-donkeys had already been turned out of the "scherm," or extemporised enclosure, in which they had spent the night, and were cropping the grass with an enjoyment born of the night's abstinence.

"No hurry," returned he thus unceremoniously disturbed, rolling his rugs closer around him.

"But there is hurry, Dibs, if we want to get to Hollingworth's by breakfast-time."

"But I don't want to get to Hollingworth's by breakfast-time, or any other time for the matter of that."

"Oh yes, you do, once you're up. Come now, old man. Roll out."

The two were old schoolfellows—hence the nickname which still stuck to one of them—and had met up-country by the merest chance, Moseley we have already seen, in the capacity of newly landed passenger from the English mail-steamer. Tarrant was a lean, dark man, with a pointed beard and a dry expression of countenance. He was inclined to take things easily, declaring that everything was bound to come right if only it were left alone. Moseley, on the other hand, was one of those painfully energetic persons, bursting with an all-pervading and utterly superfluous vitality. They had been out surveying claims, and were now on their return to Bulawayo.

The night's camp had been pitched in a romantic glen, with nothing between the sleepers and the starry heaven but the spreading branches of a wild fig, nothing between them and Mother Earth but some cut grass and a rug. Stiff and cold, Tarrant rose from amid his blankets, and stood rubbing his eyes.

"I'll never come out on survey with you again, Moseley," he declared. "You're a bore of the first water."

"Won't you, old chap? I seem to have heard something of that sort before—often before."

“I mean it this time. Er—Mafuta. Tshetsha with that fire. Tshetsha umlilo, Umfaan. You savvy? Tshetsha!”

Whether the native boy understood this adjuration in the dialect known as “kitchen Kafir” or not, he continued stolidly striving to blow into flame some ends of stick still smouldering from last night’s blaze, it not seeming to occur to him that a couple of handfuls of dry grass would do the trick in as many seconds. The while the dialogue between his white masters continued.

“Who the devil is Hollingworth when he’s at home, Moseley?”

“Down-country man, up here trying to farm. Served in the war against Lo Ben, and had ground given him. Rattling good chap. By the way, he’s got rather a pretty wife.”

“Kids?”

“Yes; three or four. I forget which.”

“Faugh! Hate kids. Always a nuisance. Always yelling. Yell when they’re not happy; yell ten times more when they are. Besides, they smudge their faces with jam. Damn Hollingworth! I won’t go there.”

This statement was received by the other with all serenity and without reply. He knew his chum’s little weakness, therefore knew that the bait thrown out would be not merely nibbled at but swallowed, the objectionable progeny notwithstanding. So he continued pulling on his long boots and otherwise completing his not extravagant toilet with complete equanimity. And then Mafuta, who at length had got the fire to burn, came along with some steaming coffee.

“That’s better,” pronounced Tarrant, having got outside the invigorating brew. “Wonder if there are any crocs in these water puddles, Moseley? I’m going to tub.”

“Tub? Man alive, we’re just ready to start. What on earth do you want to tub now for?”

“I thought you said Hollingworth had a pretty wife,” tranquilly rejoined the other, digging into his kitbag for a towel. “You can’t make acquaintance with a pretty woman when you’re in an untubbed state, you know.”

Moseley roared.

“Oh, skittles!” he said. “You can tub when you get there.”

“I believe you’re right; and the water looks dashed cold at this time of day.”

“And I thought you said you wouldn’t go there.”

“Did I? Oh, well, I suppose I must if you do. It wouldn’t look well, would it?”

“Why, of course not. Hurry up now. The boys want to load up your kit.”

The pack-donkeys had been driven up, and the horses stood ready saddled. In an incredibly short space of time all personal baggage and camp impedimenta had been removed and stowed upon the backs of the patient little Neddies—in the long run and the land of horse-sickness and “fly,” perhaps more serviceable all round than that noble animal the horse. And then, as the first arrowy gleams of the sun began to warm the world, they started from their night’s camp.

It was pleasant country that through which they now rode. Dewdrops still hung from the sprays of the feathery acacias, gleaming like diamonds in the rising sunlight; and the thorn-brake was musical with bird voices, or the clucking of bush-pheasants scuttling alarmed amid the long grass and undergrowth; and here and there a troop of guinea-fowl darting away with the rapidity of spiders at the sound of hoofstrokes, as the wayfarers wended their way along the edge of a native “land.” Kraals, too, the conical roofs of the huts shining yellow in the sunlight; but from these no reek of blue smoke mounted to the heavens. Of cattle, either, was there no sign, nor indeed of human occupancy. The land seemed deserted—dead. What did it mean? Turning back, Moseley called to the boy to find out what he thought about it.

Mafuta came trotting up. Where were all the cattle? There were no cattle. They were all dead of the disease. Where were all the people? They had moved to other parts of the country, or possibly some were still lying asleep as there were no cattle to tend. He, Mafuta, did not know. This was not his part. He came from a kraal a long way off—away beyond the Gwai.

This Mafuta was a young Matabele, who had served in the Ingubo regiment when Lo Bengula was king, and had entered the white man’s service to earn money in order to buy a wife. He was an intelligent and warrior-looking youth, but with an expression of countenance as of one who had gazed on—perhaps taken part in—scenes of cruelty and bloodshed, and would not in the least object to doing so again. He was carrying Tarrant’s Martini rifle and cartridge-belt, and looked thoroughly at home with them, as in fact he was, for his masters would often send him out to shoot game for camp

consumption, when the heat disinclined them for needless activity. Moseley had a shot-gun, which he preferred to carry himself.

Now, however, they were not on sport intent, but held steadily on their way; and, after about two hours' riding, a thread of blue smoke appeared. A little further and they made out a homestead, standing on a slope beyond the high precipitous banks of a dry river.

"It'll be something to get our heels under a table again," remarked Tarrant, as they urged their horses up the steep path of the drift. "Eating your 'skoff' in a sort of tied-in-a-knot attitude, with your plate tobogganing away from you on the very slightest provocation, may be romantic enough on paper, but it's a beastly bore in actual practice. Is that Hollingworth?"

"Yes."

A tall man was advancing towards them from the house. He wore a large beard, and his attire was the same as theirs—a silk shirt, and riding-trousers tucked into long boots, leather belt, and broad-brimmed hat.

"Hallo, Moseley!" he sung out. "Back again, eh? What's the news?"

"Oh, rinderpest—always rinderpest. Here, I say, d'you know Tarrant? No? Well, here he is. Not a bad chap at bottom, but you've got to keep him at it."

The usual hand-shake followed, and then Hollingworth, farmer-like, began to growl.

"Rinderpest? I should think so. Why, I've hardly a hoof left. No fear. I'm going to chuck farming and go prospecting again. But come along in and have a drop of something after your ride. It'll be breakfast-time directly."

"Er—could one have a tub—among other things?" said Tarrant.

"Tub? Why, of course. Here—this way." And their host piloted them behind the scenes.

When the two men re-appeared, refreshed both inwardly and out, the residue of the household were gathered. Tarrant, already appraising his hostess, decided that Moseley's judgment was not at fault. She was a pretty little woman, dark-eyed and sparkling, albeit somewhat overtanned by sun and air; but it took him just two minutes to determine that she had not an idea or thought outside her very restive progeny, which, in proportion of one to the other, were even as a row of organ-pipes. Then a diversion occurred—a diversion strange and startling. The door behind him opened, and

there entered somebody; yet was that any reason why Moseley should suddenly jump up from his seat like a lunatic, at the risk of upsetting no end of things, and vociferate—"Great Heavens! Miss Commerell, who'd have thought of meeting you here? When on earth did you get here? Well, I am glad!" No; there was no need for Moseley to kick up such a fuss. It was beastly bad form; but then, Moseley always was such an impulsive chap.

"So you've met before?" cried Mrs Hollingworth, who had been about to introduce them.

"Rather. I should rather think we had met before," sung out Moseley, in what his travelling chum was wont to call his "hail-the-maintop" voice. "Why, we were fellow-passengers, fellow-actors, fellow-all-sorts-of-things, weren't we, Miss Commerell? But how did you find your way up here, and when?"

"You've asked me about four questions at once, Mr Moseley," said Nidia, in her bright, laughing way, "but I'll only ask you one—How am I going to answer them all at once?"

Tarrant, the while, was murmuring to himself, "Oh, never mind me. Perhaps in half an hour or so he may remember that we are pards, and that I'm entitled to share his acquaintance with the young lady." And indeed at that moment the same idea occurred to Moseley himself, and he proceeded to introduce them.

Nidia was looking her very best. Here, in a settler's homestead, perforce rough, in the hot steamy wilds of Matabeleland, she looked as cool and fresh as with all the appliances of comfort and civilisation ready to hand. Tarrant, who rather fancied himself as a connoisseur in that line, was struck. Here was something quite out of the common, he thought to himself, as his glance took in the animated, expressive face, the lighting up of the blue eyes, the readiness wherewith the lips would curve into the most captivating of smiles, the dainty figure, and the cool, neat, tasteful attire. Mrs Hollingworth was a pretty woman, Moseley had declared, and rightly; but his chum had never prepared him for anything like this.

The while Nidia herself was replying to the questions volubly fired into her by Moseley. They had come up to Bulawayo in due course. Fatiguing! No; on the whole she had rather enjoyed the journey—the novelty and so on—and everybody they met had been very kind to them, and had done all they knew to make things easy. How was Mrs Bateman? Oh, flourishing. In fact, when Mr Bateman returned she herself had, of course, felt de trop, and so had come to inflict herself on Mrs Hollingworth, and see some of the real wild side of the country.

The last in her most arch and quizzical manner.

“It’s a poor time you’ve chosen to look at it in, Miss Commerell,” remarked Hollingworth. “Rinderpest has about done for us all, and bar that the whole show has been as dry as chips.”

“Yet, it’s all very interesting to me, at any rate,” she returned. “And the savages. I can hardly believe they are the wicked ferocious beings you all make out, poor, patient, put-upon looking mortals! Some of the old men have such really fine faces, and their voices are so soft and kindly—though, of course, I can’t understand a word they say,” she broke off, with a whimsical candour that made everybody laugh.

Hollingworth whistled.

“‘Soft and kindly!’ Why, they are just about as sulky and discontented as they can well be—though, poor devils, one can hardly blame them. It must be hard, rough luck to see their cattle shot down by hundreds—by thousands—under their very noses. Of course they abuse the Government for giving them back the cattle with one hand only to take it away with the other. It’s only what we should do ourselves.”

“I should think so. Poor things! Really, Mr Hollingworth, I think you seem to have treated them all very badly.”

Such a sentiment was not popular in Matabeleland then, nor, for the matter of that, has it ever been. In fact, it is about as heterodox an utterance as though some rash wight were to pronounce the former realm of Lo Bengula a non-gold-producing country. But it was impossible to be angry with the owner of the voice that now made it.

“I don’t know that we have, Miss Commerell,” replied Hollingworth. “Indeed, I think, on the whole, we haven’t. Now, I can always get boys enough—so can my neighbours—and that’s the best test. A nigger won’t stop a week with anybody who treats him badly.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that way, Mr Hollingworth. I meant as a nation.”

“Even there, Lo Bengula and the old chiefs didn’t rule them with sugar and honey, let me tell you. But, squarely, I believe they did prefer the kicks of Lo Ben to the halfpence of the Chartered Company; and I suppose it’s natural. A nigger’s ways are not a white man’s ways, and never will be.”

And then as the shrill yells and other vociferations raised by the Hollingworth posterity in fierce debate over the limit of its jam allowance rendered further conversation impossible, an adjournment was made outside.

“Were you all the time at the Cape before coming up here, Miss Commerell?” began Moseley, as they found seats beneath the shade of a large fig-tree.

“Yes. We remained on at Cogill’s. It was rather fun. I think there was hardly a corner of the whole neighbourhood we didn’t explore.”

”—With John Ames.”

The tone, slightly bantering, was thoroughly good-natured. Even one more touchy than Nidia Commerell could hardly have taken offence. But nothing was further from her thoughts.

“You know him, then?” And the expressive face lighted up with genuine pleasure.

“Not personally; only by name.”

“Then, how did you know—”

”—About the explorations? The Cape Peninsula is a very gossipy place.”

“I suppose so. Most places are,” said Nidia, tranquilly; “but that sort of thing never troubles me one little bit. Mr Ames lives somewhere up here, doesn’t he? I wonder where he is now?”

Cool and at ease they sat there chatting. Had she been a clairvoyante a vision might have been vouchsafed to Nidia—the vision of a man, crouching in a thicket of “wacht-een-bietje” thorns, his face and hands lacerated, his clothes torn—a hunted man, with the look of some recent horror stamped upon his pale, set face; the last degree of desperation, of despair, yet of resolution, shining from his eyes; his hand grasping a sword-bayonet, already foul with the dried stains of human blood; and flitting through the brake, their dark forms decked with cowhair and other fantastic adornments, glistening in the sun, a band of armed savages bent on the shedding of blood. But not being blessed—or the reverse—with the faculty of clairvoyance, all she did see was the eminently peaceful scene around her—the two men lazily smoking their pipes beneath the shade of the great tree, while the third moved about attending to some of the hundred and one details of his farm business; the figure of her hostess, her head protected by an ample white “kapje,” coming forth to see that four of her young, disporting themselves in the open in front of the house, were not getting into more mischief than usual, and retiring precipitately within to assuage the yells of the fifth, and haply to attend to some household duty, “Where he is now?” repeated Moseley. “Why,

he can't be far from here. He's Native Commissioner of Sikumbutana. I don't suppose his place can be more than twenty or twenty-two miles off. Eh, Dibs?"

"About that," assented Tarrant, laconically.

"I should so like to see him again," pursued Nidia.

"Nothing easier, Miss Commerell. Get Hollingworth to send over a boy with a note, or a message to that effect, and I predict Ames will be here like a shot."

"I'm sure he would," assented Nidia, in such a genuinely and naturally pleased tone as to set Tarrant the cynic, Tarrant the laconic, Tarrant the incipient admirer of herself, staring. "We were great friends down at the Cape, and made no end of expeditions together. Yes; I would like to see him again."

"Phew!" whistled Tarrant to himself, not entirely deceived by her consummate ingenuousness. "Lucky Ames! Well, there's no show for me in that quarter, that's manifest."

"Isn't he that rather good-looking chap who was sitting at our table the day I had lunch with you at Cogill's?" said Moseley.

"Yes. That's the man. We soon got to know him, and saw a great deal of him."

"And thought a great deal of him?"

"Well, yes. I can see that you're trying to tease me, Mr Moseley, but I don't care. I don't know when I've seen a man I liked better."

"'Present company—' of course?"

"No; not even present company. No; but really, I would like to let Mr Ames know I am here. But I don't like to ask Mr Hollingworth. It's a long way to send, and he may not be able to spare a boy."

Thought Tarrant, "She's a puzzler! She's playing on the innocent stop for all the instrument will carry, or—she's genuine. Can't make her out."

But Moseley lifted up his voice and hailed—

"Hollingworth!"

“What is it?” sung out that worthy. “Sun over the yard-arm yet? All right. You know where to find it. No soda, though; you’ll have to do with selzogene. If you want ‘squareface’ you must get the missis to dig it out of the store. There’s none out. Maitland and Harvey between them got outside what there was yesterday.”

“No, no; that’s not what we want, though it’ll come in directly,” laughed Moseley. “Look here, Hollingworth”—the latter had drawn near by this time—“Miss Commerell has found an old friend up here—Ames at Sikumbutana—and she doesn’t like to ask you to send a boy over to let him know she’s here.”

“But, Mr Moseley, I didn’t tell you to ask Mr Hollingworth,” laughed Nidia.

“Pooh! Why didn’t you like to ask me, Miss Commerell? Of course I can send over. Though—if it will be all the same to you, I’d rather send to-morrow,” Hollingworth added dubiously.

“Certainly it will. Thanks awfully. Are you sure it won’t inconvenience you?” said Nidia, in her most winning way.

“Not to-morrow. To-day, you see, I have two boys away. But I’ll start one off the first thing in the morning.”

She reiterated her thanks; and Tarrant, keenly observant, said to himself: “No; clearly I’ve no show. Damn Ames!”

Chapter Twelve.

The Spreading of the Flame.

“Well, good-bye, Moseley. Pity you’re in such a hurry; you might just as well have stayed the night. However, since you’re determined, you’d better not ride too slow. It’ll take you three mortal hours to fetch Jekyll’s place.”

Thus Hollingworth, soon after the midday dinner. The horses stood ready saddled, the pack-donkeys having been sent on in the forenoon.

“I’ll see you in Bulawayo week after next, I suppose. I’ve got to go in about that disputed ‘pegging’ case. Beastly nuisance! Besides, I’ve got to take Miss Commerell back.”

Tarrant pricked up his ears at this. He had not done much to improve the shining hour with Nidia during that long, cool, lazy morning. He had confined himself to observing her, now and then putting in a word or two, but not often. But he had plans.

And now the farewells became general, all talking at once, as people will on such occasions; for the whole household had turned out to see them off. Suddenly Hollingworth said:—

“You’ve forgotten your rifle, Tarrant. Never mind; don’t get down”—for the other was already mounted. “I’ll get it for you. Which corner did you leave it in?”

“Didn’t leave it. Mafuta’s gone on ahead with it.”

“Oh! No chance of him clearing with it, eh?” said Hollingworth.

“No; he’s a reliable boy. Had him a long time. He’s quite safe.”

Thus in that lurid March of ’96 did the settlers in Matabeleland rejoice in their security.

“You put that on rather well, old man,” said Tarrant, as the two rode along.

“What did I put on?”

“Oh, the surprise part of the business. Now I see why you were so desperately bent on fetching up at Hollingworth’s.”

“Smart boy, Dibs. See through a brick wall, and all that sort of thing,” replied Moseley, good-humouredly. “This time you’ve seen through too far, though. I had no more notion Miss Commerell was there than you had, or even that she was in the country at all. Nice girl, isn’t she?”

“Ye-es. I was studying her rather closely. She’s either the most consummate actress or the most out of the ordinary sample of her sex I’ve encountered for a long, long time, if ever.”

“Well, she’s the last, then. If there’s one thing about Nidia Commerell that appeals to me it is that she’s so perfectly natural, and therefore, of course, unconventional.”

“Oh, she does ‘appeal’ to you, then? I rather thought she did,” said Tarrant, serenely. “But you’ve no show, old man. It’s the other Johnny—what’s his name—”

”—Ames.”

”—Yes. He seems to have got the floor just now.”

“As to the first—skittles; as to the last—why do you think so?”

“Didn’t I tell you I was studying her rather closely? When you first mentioned—er—Ames, she just, ever so little, overdid it. You may rely upon it that joker made his hay while the sun shone.”

Moseley burst into a great contemptuous laugh. “Oh, bosh, Dibs! You’ve got the keenest nose for a mare’s nest I ever saw. I tell you that’s Miss Commerell’s way. If she likes any one she doesn’t in the least mind saying so. That alone shows there’s nothing deeper in it.”

“Her way, is it? Oh, well, then, so much the worse for—er—Ames.”

The while those they had just left were comparing opinions upon them.

“That friend of Mr Moseley’s seems a very quiet man,” Mrs Hollingworth was saying. “Who is he, George?”

“Never saw him before in my life. In the same line of business, I take it. His ‘quietness,’ though, seemed to me to cover a suspicion of ‘side.’ Sort of ‘know everything’ manner.”

“Yes. Perhaps I am wrong, but there seemed a sort of conscious superiority about him. What did you think, Nidia?”

“Just what you do. But we may be wrong. The other is all rights though, so jolly and good-natured always. We came out on the same ship.”

“Moseley. Yes; he’s a good chap, but he’s got a detestable wife,” said Hollingworth.

“It’s astonishing what a number of ‘good chaps’ have,” laughed Nidia. “But where is she?”

“In England now. Moseley drives his trade here, and she has a good time on the lion’s share of the proceeds there. She won’t stay in this country. Yes? What is it?”

This to his son and heir, aetat ten, who was trying to get in a chance of asking to be allowed to go out and shoot a buck.

“Don’t know. You’re too much of a kiddie, Jim. Your mother fidgeted herself—and me—to death last time you went.”

“I got the buck, though,” was the reply, half defiant, half triumphant.

“So you did, sonny. Well, you can go. Be careful with the gun, and don’t be late. It’s a good thing for them to learn to shoot straight in a country like this,” he added, as the boy skipped away without waiting for the possibility of any recall of this edict: and a moment later they saw him disappearing in the bush, away beyond the mealie-lands.

“Fancy you and Ames being old pals, Miss Commerell,” said Hollingworth. “Where did you know each other?”

“Down at the Cape. We were in the same hotel at Wynberg. I saw a good deal of him, and liked him very much. Is he getting on well up here, Mr Hollingworth?”

“Yes, I think so. He’s thought a good deal of in his own line. Shouldn’t wonder if he gets into something better before long. And now, if you’ll excuse me, Miss Commerell, I’ll go and take my usual forty winks, if those ‘kinders’ will let me.”

This was a figure of speech on Hollingworth’s part. Had his progeny been ten times more riotous and restive than it was he would have slept tranquilly through all the racket they could make. There are persons who can sleep through anything—from a fox-terrier in a backyard to a big gun practice—and Hollingworth was one of them.

Nidia, left alone, did not feel in the least inclined to follow his example. A strange restlessness was upon her, a desire for solitude; and where could she obtain this better than amid the wild bush by which the homestead was surrounded? Going inside, she threw on a straw hat, then taking a light umzimbiti walking-stick, she struck into one of the forest paths.

She felt not the slightest fear or misgiving. The natives at that time were deferential and submissive, and seldom encountered outside their own locations. Wild beasts avoided the near proximity of human habitations, at any rate in the full blaze of the afternoon sun, and if she came upon a snake she could always run away; for she was not one of those who imagine that the average serpent can leap—say, fifty feet—through the air, or spends its time lying in wait for human beings for the fun of biting them. So she wandered on beneath the feathery acacias and gnarled wild fig, now stopping to disengage her skirt from the sharp claws of a projecting spray of "haak-doorn," now bending down to examine some strange and brilliant-winged beetle. A pair of "go-away" birds, uttering their cat-like call, darted from tree to tree, keeping ever a short distance before her. When she drew near the spray on which they were perched on they would go again, and she could mark their conical crests as again they plunged forward in arrow-like flight, only to perch again as before.

A small stony kopje rose above the level of the brake. To this she ascended, and, finding a shady spot, sat down upon a granite boulder to rest. Away and around the gaze could range over a great expanse of country, here smoothly undulating in a green sea of verdure, there broken-up into stony hillocks. She could not see the homestead—that was hidden by the gradual depression towards the river-bank, but the river-bed was discernible by the winding slit its course left in the expanse of foliage. And away in the golden haze of the blue horizon a line of hills which she instinctively guessed were those of the Sikumbutana.

So John Ames was so near and she would see him again; a matter of twenty miles or so was no distance in up-country estimation! Yet, why should this consciousness bring with it a feeling of elation? She was not in the least in love with the man. She could mention his name, or hear it mentioned, without a tremor in her voice or a stirring of the pulse. She had not even gone to the pains of inquiring after him, or as to his whereabouts, since her arrival at Bulawayo; yet now, suddenly an impulse was upon her to see him again which amounted almost to a longing. She had missed him greatly after his departure, even as she had said she would, but only as she would have missed anybody in whose society she had found pleasure and entertainment; yet now she found herself looking forward to meeting him again with such a curious mingling of feelings as she had never known before. She had seen him amid conventional, and, to him strange,

surroundings, now she wanted to see him at home as it were, and in his own everyday sphere.

How would they meet? She supposed he would ride over directly he received her note. Would he look surprised and pleased? Would that grave, firm face relax as he greeted her, the straight glance of the grey eyes soften ever so little as it met hers? Thus she pondered. Yet she was not in the least in love with John Ames.

For long she sat, pondering thus. Then, upon the distant stillness, rolled forth a shot, followed by another. It broke the current of her thoughts.

"Jimmie is getting some sport," she said to herself, standing up to look in the direction of the double report. "But he must be finding it very near home. That shot sounded almost as if it were at the house."

She glanced at the sun. Its distance above the horizon reminded her that she must be getting back herself. Rising, she descended the granite kopje, and took her way along the bush-path she had come by. This was a matter of no difficulty, even if she were now following it for the first time, for those among whom she had lately moved had taught her something of the mysteries of "spoor."

How peaceful it looked in the golden light of the afternoon stillness! The homestead, truly, was of the roughest description, with its thatched roof and "dagga" walls, yet it, and the pointed conical huts behind it, were all in keeping. A settler's dwelling in a new land! A halo of romance overspread it in Nidia's mind as she emerged from the bush-path into the clearing.

Stay. What was that? Blood! She had just time to switch her skirt aside. Blood? Yes; a great patch of it—then another and another, and a long trail in the dust as though something heavy had been dragged along the ground. Ah, Jimmie had been in luck again and had brought down another buck. That was the meaning of the double shot she had heard. The animal had been too heavy for the little chap to carry. He had been obliged to drag it, hence the trail along the ground. And in her rejoicing over the small boy's venatorial triumph, Nidia forgot her natural disgust at sight of the blood-gouts which lay thick and hideously red along the trail.

How still it all was! Had their mother taken those earthquakes of children for a walk? she wondered. Even then it was strange to be out of earshot of their voices, if only in the distance. Well, the youthful hunter should be in, anyhow.

"Jimmie!" she called. "Jim-mie!"

No answer.

The front door was closed. She noticed that the trail went round as though to the back of the house, yet in front of the closed door the blood-patches lay thicker than ever. Jimmy would catch it when his mother came back, she thought to herself, for bringing his quarry in at the front door and making that horrid mess. Lifting her skirt to avoid the latter, and making a little grimace of disgust, she turned the handle.

There was a window opposite, but the blind was down. To Nidia, coming in from the full glow of the sunlight, the room was almost dark. Only for a moment though, and then she saw—

She saw that which might have turned many a stronger brain than hers—she saw that which made her cover her eyes with her hands, and stagger back against the doorpost with a low wailing cry of such unutterable horror as can rarely have proceeded from human throat. Oh Heaven! must she look again and go mad? was the thought which flashed through her mind as with hands pressed to her eyes she leaned against the doorpost as rigid as though turned to stone.

On the couch beneath the window aforesaid lay the form of Hollingworth—the form, for little else about the wretched man was distinguishable but his clothing. His skull had been battered in, and his features smashed to a pulp. There he lay, and on the floor beside him a periodical which he had been reading before overtaken by the sleep from which he was destined never to awaken. In one corner lay the corpse of his wife—and, in a row, four children, all with their skulls smashed, and nailed to the ground with assegais—the whole having undergone more or less nameless horrors of mutilation. This is what she saw—this girl—who had never looked upon a scene of violence or of bloodshed in her life. This is what she saw, returning in serene security to the peaceful home that sheltered her. No wonder she stood against the doorpost, her hands pressed tightly to her eyes, her brain on fire. Was it a dream—an awful nightmare? The very magnitude of the horror saved her.

Out into the air again. Not another glance dare she venture into that scene of hideous butchery. Out into the air again. The same golden sun was shining, the same fair earth, the same feathery foliage peaceful in the afternoon light. But within? The world began to go round with her. She staggered as though to sink into a swoon, when—

What was that? A cry? A moan? From the back of the house it seemed to come, and it was distinctly that of a human being in pain. Thither Nidia flew. The sound had created a diversion, and had certainly saved her brain from giving way from shock and fright.

A form was lying on the ground covered with blood and dust. Nidia recognised it in a moment for that of Hollingworth's eldest boy—the youthful hunter whose prowess she had been about to congratulate.

"Jimmie!" she cried, bending over him. "Jimmie, my poor child, what has happened? What have they done to you—to—to everybody?"

Her voice broke down, and she could only sob piteously. She tried to raise the boy's head, but he screamed.

"Oh, don't—don't! Oh, it hurts!"

To her horror, Nidia saw something of the extent of the terrible injuries the poor little fellow had received. Besides a huge bump on the side of the head he was covered with assegai-stabs. Yet he was still alive. Amid his moans, he looked up suddenly.

"Oh, it's you, Miss Commerell!" he gasped.

"Yes—yes. Oh, my dear little boy, what does it all mean?" she wailed, her voice thrilling with horrified pity.

A gleam came into the boy's eyes, and for the moment he seemed to forget his agony.

"I—plugged two of the devils," he said—"two of them. One was Qota, our boy. He got the charge of buckshot, the other the bullet. Then they hit me on the head with a kerrie. Oh-h!"

He sank back groaning under a renewed spasm of pain. This, then, was the double shot Nidia had heard. She saw now the meaning of the bloody trail which she had imagined was that made by the youthful hunter dragging home his quarry. The miscreants had dragged away the bodies of their own dead. Two of them had been sent to their account, red-handed, and that by this mere child, either in defence of those who were all to him, or revengeful in his rage and grief. Bit by bit she got at the truth.

He was returning from an unsuccessful stalk, and had gained the outside of the bush behind the house, when he heard a low prolonged scream proceeding from within. In this he recognised the voice of his mother. Cocking his gun, he ran hurriedly forward, but before he could gain the front door he was met by several savages armed with axes and knobkerries. Two of these he immediately shot—shot them dead, too, he declared—

and then, before he could slip in fresh cartridges, they were upon him. The gun was wrenched from his hand, then something seemed to fall upon his head, for after that he knew no more.

All this was told spasmodically between lengthened pauses, and the effort had quite exhausted the poor little fellow. And now some inkling of the situation seemed to rush through Nidia's reeling brain, though even then the idea that this wholesale murder was but one instance of several at that very moment throughout the land, did not occur to her. She supposed it to be a mere sporadic outbreak of savagery, or lust of plunder. It was clear, too, that this poor child was ignorant of all that had actually happened within, and she felt a sort of miserable consolation in realising that physical agony had so confused his mind that he showed no curiosity on the subject. Nor would he allow her to examine the extent of his hurts. If she so much as touched him he screamed aloud; but she knew, as confidently as though assured by the whole faculty, that his hours were numbered.

"I feel sleepy. How dark it is!" he murmured at length.

Dark! Why, the surroundings were in a very bath of lustre—of golden sunlight glow.

"So sleepy. Don't leave me. Promise you won't leave me!"

"Of course I won't leave you, Jimmie darling," sobbed Nidia, bending down and kissing his forehead; for well she knew what this deepening coma portended. Soon again he spoke, but in the feeblest of murmurs. "You must go. They'll come back and find you; then they'll kill you, the devils. You must go. Hide in the bush, down below the river-bank. They won't look there. Go—go quick. They'll come back. Hark! I hear them."

"But I won't go, Jimmie; I won't leave you, whether they kill me or not," she sobbed, moved to the heart by the unselfishness of this child-hero, who had first slain with his own hand two of the murderers of his parents, and now was urging her to leave him to the solitude he dreaded, lest she should meet with the same fate. But this heroic injunction was his last utterance. A few minutes, and the head fell back, the eyes opening wide in a glassy stare. Little Jimmie had joined his murdered kindred.

The sun sank beneath the rim of the world, and the purple shades of the brief twilight deepened over this once peaceful homestead, now a mausoleum for its butchered inmates lying in their blood. And still Nidia sat there holding the head of the dead boy in her lap.

Chapter Thirteen.

What happened at Jekyll's Store.

Jekyll's Store, near Malengwa, was an institution of considerable importance in its way, for there not only did prospectors and travellers and settlers replenish their supplies, but it served as a place of general "roll up," when the monotony of life in camp or on lonely farms began to weigh upon those destined to lead the same.

Its situation was an open slope, fronting a rolling country, more or less thickly grown with wild fig and mahobo-hobo, mimosa and feathery acacia. Behind, some three or four hundred yards, rose a low ridge of rocks, whose dull greyness was relieved by the vivid green of sugar-bush. Strategically its position was bad, but this was a side to which those who planted it there had not given a thought. The Maxims of the Company's forces had done for the natives for ever and a day. There was not a kick left in them.

The building was a fair-sized oblong one, constructed of the usual wattle and "dagga" as to the walls, and with a high-pitched roof of thatch. Internally it was divided into three compartments—a sleeping-room, a living-room, and the store itself, the latter as large as the two first put together. From end to end of this was a long counter, about a third of which was partitioned off as a public bar. Rows of shelves lined the walls, and every conceivable article seemed represented—blankets and rugs; tinned food and candles; soap and cheese; frying-pans and camp-kettles; cooking-pots and high boots; straps and halters; Boer tobacco and Manila cheroots; all jostling each other, down even to accordions and concertinas, seemed only to begin the list of general "notions" which, either stacked on shelves or hanging from the beam which ran along the building parallel with the spring of the roof, filled every available space. Bags of mealies, too, and flour stood against the further wall; and the shelves backing the bar department were lined with a plentiful and varied assortment of bottles.

Not much less varied was the type of customer who was prone to sample their contents. Miners working for a wage, independent prospectors, transport riders, now and then a company promoter or a mining engineer or surveyor, settlers on farms, an occasional brace of troopers of the Matabeleland Mounted Police—would all roll up at Jekyll's in turn; but by reason of the wide distances over which the sparse population was scattered, there were seldom more than a dozen gathered together there at once—usually less. But even there the characteristics of the gathering were much akin to those pervading similar groups as seen in older civilisation—the bore simple and the bore reiterative, the local Ananias, usually triplicated; the assumptive bore; the literary critic—the last especially in full bloom after a few rounds of "squareface" or John Dewar—and other varieties. Such characteristics, however, were well known to the

sound residue of the assemblage, who would delight to “draw” the individual owners thereof—after the few rounds aforesaid.

Within the store and canteen part of the building about a dozen men were gathered when Moseley and Tarrant rode up. All were attired in the usual light marching order of the country—shirt and trousers, high boots and wide-brimmed hat. Some were lounging against the counter, others squatting on sacks or packing-cases, and all were smoking. Jekyll, himself, a tall man with a grizzled beard, and who had been a good many years in the country before the entry of the first Pioneer force, was dispensing drinks, with the help of his assistant, a young Englishman who had been ploughed for his degree at Oxford. To several of these the new arrivals were known, and forthwith there was a fresh call on the resources of the bar department.

“News?” said Jekyll, in reply to a question from Moseley. “Thought maybe you’d have brought some. There’s talk of a rising among the niggers down beyond Sikumbutana. Heard anything of it?”

“Not a word.”

“Gah on. There won’t be no bloomin’ rahsin’,” cut in a prospector, a Cockney ex-ship-steward. “Nothink but a lot o’ gas. The wy to treat niggers is my wy.”

“And what might that be?” said another prospector, a tall, bronzed, fine-looking man, who had taken his degree at Oxford.

“Why, one o’ my boys cheeked me yesterday, so I ups with a bloomin’ pick-’andle and jes lets ’im ’ave it over the bloomin’ boko. That’s my wy with ’em.”

And the speaker cocked his head and looked around with the defiant bounce of a cad with a couple of drinks too many on board.

“H’m!” rejoined the other man, drily.

“By-the-by,” said Tarrant, “I wonder what Mafuta did with my rifle and cartridges.”

Jekyll pricked up his ears.

“Is that one of your boys?” he said.

“Yes. He was carrying my gun and cartridges.”

“Well, there was no gun and cartridges with your donkeys when they turned up.”

“The devil there wasn’t!” said Tarrant. “Let’s go and look into it.”

They went outside, Jekyll and two or three others accompanying them. The three boys in charge of the donkeys were there. They had off-loaded the packs and taken them inside. Where was Mafuta? They did not know. They had last seen him about half way; after that no more. They thought perhaps he had been ordered to try and shoot some game on the way. Tarrant looked blue.

“Oh, he’ll turn up,” he said, in a tone which conveyed the idea that such a contingency was remote.

“Pity you trusted him with a gun in these times,” said Jekyll. “I’m afraid he’ll clear with it.”

“Wot’ll yer tike for the chawnce?” said the Cockney, who was one of those who had accompanied them outside.

“Oh, he’ll roll up directly,” said Tarrant, ignoring this specimen; “Mafuta’s a reliable boy. I’ve had him a long while.”

Returning from the huts, they became aware of a certain amount of excitement in front of the store. A trooper of the Matabeleland Mounted Police had just ridden up. The rising was a fact, and he had been sent round to warn everybody to come in to Bulawayo if possible; if not, to collect together and form laagers. Several prospectors and miners had been murdered in the Sikumbutana district, but how far the outbreak had spread could not as yet be determined. He was on his way to warn Hollingworth; after that, if he could manage it, he must get through to John Ames’.

The excitement produced by this news was mingled with consternation. Half of those there collected were unarmed. Those who had weapons had left them behind at their camps; while some, with the habitual British carelessness which passes for intrepidity, had not even got any there.

The police trooper’s horse was offsaddled and put into one of the huts which did duty for stable for a feed and a brief rest, and then the whole party re-entered the store to discuss the situation and a fresh round of drinks. While this was in progress some one reported a party of natives approaching from the open side in front of the house. Quickly Jekyll got out a powerful binocular.

“There are about thirty of them,” he said, “but they’ve got no guns—only knobkerries and some axes. On the face of the latest news I believe they mean mischief. Now, chaps, we’ll startle ’em some. They won’t know there’s a whole crowd of you here. They’ll think there’s only me and Selwyn to deal with. Who’ve got guns?”

Seven answered in the affirmative.

“All right. Now then. You, Carbutt and Harris, get to that front window in t’other room—don’t let ’em see you, though. I’ll go out in front and indaba them. Selwyn ’ll stand in the doorway lighting his pipe—and when I sing out, ‘Let go,’ blaze away into the foremost of them. I shall want some men to go outside at the back of the house, though.”

All volunteered.

“No. You three’ll do”—indicating the policeman and two others. “Directly you hear the first shot fired, whip round to the front and blaze into them for all you’re worth. See the plan?”

“Rather, and an A1 plan it is,” said Moseley, who was one of the rearguard, slipping a couple of heavy buckshot cartridges into his shot-gun.

Those for behind scrambled through the back windows—the other two were already in position, one armed with a Winchester, the other with a Lee-Metford. Hardly had they done so than the natives emerged from the sparse bush in front.

There was nothing warlike in their aspect; indeed, to all appearance, they might have been a gang of boys travelling round to look for work in the mines. They halted about fifty yards from the house, and Jekyll, in pursuance of his plan, strolled about a dozen to meet them. Then he called for a couple of them to come up.

Who were they, he asked, and where going? They were looking for work, the spokesman answered. Could the ’Nkose take any of them on? Jekyll observed that perhaps he could do with two or three. Selwyn, the English assistant, was standing in the doorway, carelessly lighting his pipe. Others now began stealing up towards the two spokesmen. The savages little knew into what a trap their treachery was leading them. Then a shout arose from among them:—

“Tyay’ Amakíwa!” (Strike down the whites.)

But, simultaneously with the rush made upon Jekyll, and for which the words were the signal, the rifles of the two men at the window crashed forth in one report. The two

foremost Matabele dropped dead, while the three men stationed behind the house were in position at once, and simply raked the whole crowd. Again and again the magazine rifles spoke, and between them and Moseley's buckshot the result was that a little more than half the treacherous assailants were running for dear life and for the nearest bush; while Jekyll, who had not stirred throughout, stood re-lighting his pipe as if nothing had happened.

"Sharp work, chaps," he said, as they all came out to see the result. "We've taught them how to fight the devil with fire—eh?"

The transformation was marvellous in its rapidity. The place which, five minutes before, had been the scene of a peaceful gathering, was now one of slaughter. More than one there present, who had never witnessed death by violence, gazing upon the stark, bleeding corpses, looked uncomfortable.

"Here's one who isn't dead," said Jekyll. "Let's see if he'll give away anything." And, bending down, Jekyll began to talk fluently in Sindabele. But the wounded man, a big, evil-looking savage, answered never a word. He had a bullet through him, and a couple of grains of heavy buckshot, and was bleeding profusely. The wonder was he was still alive. To all of Jekyll's questions he answered nothing.

"I sy. 'E's a bloomin' impident black beggar, I don't think," said the Cockney, giving the prostrate native a push with his foot that was more than half a kick. "Wish I 'ad my bloomin' pick-'andle 'ere."

"Oh, shut up, Higgins, and leave the nigger alone," said the man who had first taken exception to the swaggering cad's bounce. "We don't do things that way here."

"'Ere, I sy, I'd like to know what I've done. Cawn't a chep mike a bloomin' blanked nigger awnswer a question when a gentleman arsts 'im one—hy?"

But whether this feat was practicable or not was destined to remain unrecorded, for at that moment came the crash of a volley poured from the line of bush wherein the discomfited barbarians had disappeared, and the vicious hum of missiles overhead and around, knocking chips of plaster from the walls of the house. Two men staggered, only wounded though, among them the police trooper, who was shot in the leg.

"Get inside, sharp," sang out Jekyll, himself hauling in one of the wounded. "Stand ready. They'll charge directly."

Hurriedly, yet without panic, the men regained the shelter of the house. At the same time a cloud of savages, who had wormed their way up through the long grass, rose on the edge of the bush, and again poured in their fire. Again the bullets whizzed overhead, some penetrating the plaster wail, but no one was hit. Those within had already flown to the windows, and were returning the fire with a will. Several were seen to fall. The rest dropped down into cover again. Clearly they had no stomach for charging that determined few under cover.

"That's all right," said Jekyll. "This is all part of the scheme. These jokers have got on their war-gear. The first lot were an advance guard. I say, Selwyn, where would you and I have been now but for our friend here giving us the office? We'd have been quietly knocked on the head—eh?"

"We'd have had no show at all," replied the assistant, who was brimful of pluck and beginning to enjoy the fight. But Jekyll, and two or three others, who were alive to the gravity of the situation, failed to discover an enjoyable side thereto.

The Matabele were evidently in sufficient force to render them over-confident, and, indeed, they were hardly careful to remain under shelter. Squads of twenty and thirty could be seen pouring in to swell the already formidable number, glancing through the bush and long grass, all in war-gear, with flowing tufts of red or white cowtail, and wearing the isiqoba, or ball of feathers, on the forehead. Warriors, defying fate, would spring up, and go through the performance known as "gwaza" making a series of quick leaps in the air, shouting the most bloodcurdling promises with regard to their enemies, and darting stabs, lightning-like, this way and that, as though in hand-to-hand conflict with an imaginary foe. At these the besieged whites, acting on the advice of the more experienced, forebore to fire. The mark was a very uncertain one, and there was not much to be gained by picking off two or three of these boasters. Ammunition was not plentiful. In fact, there was every chance of it giving out.

Chapter Fourteen.

The Long Night Through.

“Stand by, now. Here they come,” warned Jekyll. “Not too soon, and fire low.”

For the line of bush was alive with gleaming forms, as fully a hundred warriors darted out, making straight for the store; not in a compact body, but in a scattered line; not erect and in bounds and leaps, but bent low and crouching behind their shields. The while those in the background now opened a tremendous fire upon the building. Fortunately, however, most of the missiles flew high.

Those within, crouching too, with their heads just above the sills of the windows, waited a moment, then, partly rising, fired upon the advancing shields at a hundred yards’ distance. Several were seen to go down. Crash! a second volley, then a third. The magazine rifles were doing their duty right nobly. At the fourth volley the charging warriors, dividing into two sections, sheered off at a tangent, and, dropping down in the grass, crawled away with the silence and rapidity of snakes, offering no mark to draw the defenders’ fire.

“Quick! To the back!” cried Jekyll. “Not all, though.”

With instinctive unanimity the little garrison divided itself. Those told off to the back of the store arrived there in time to see their enemies swarming up among the low rocky ridge which overlooked their position from the rear.

“By George! that was real strategy, covering the advance of the storming party,” said one man, who was an ex-soldier. “Looks as if there were whites among them. Dutch perhaps.”

“No fear,” returned Jekyll. “The most English-hating Dutchman this country ever produced wouldn’t turn niggers on to white men. We’d be much more likely to do it ourselves. Hallo, Selwyn! Not hurt?”

This anxiously, as the young fellow, who had been peering forth watching his chance of a shot, staggered back from the window holding his hands to his head. Then it was seen that his face was streaming with blood.

“N-no; I don’t think so,” was the answer. “A splinter, I think it is.”

“Let’s see,” said Jekyll. “Ah yes. Here you are”—exhibiting an ugly splinter of wood, which he had simultaneously extracted from the other’s forehead. “Only a skin-wound. You’re in luck.”

“There’s some fellow who can shoot, at any rate,” remarked Tarrant, as another bullet pinged in through the window. “Oh, I say! Here, quick, some one! Lend me a rifle, for God’s sake”—almost snatching one from the hand of his neighbour, who yielded, too astonished to demur—and blazed at the point from which the last shot had come, just missing. A shout of laughter was the reply, together with a puff of smoke, and a bullet so near as to make Tarrant duck—of course, after it had passed. He again returned this, again missing, but narrowly.

“Here, try, one of you chaps; I’m no shot. For Heaven’s sake drop the young beast! It’s my infernal boy—Mafuta.”

A roar from his auditors greeted this intelligence, once its tenor was grasped.

“Your boy! But you said he was a reliable boy?” cried Jekyll.

“So he is, damn him. You may rely upon him doing for one of us yet,” answered Tarrant. “He can shoot, can Mafuta. And the infernal young scoundrel’s practising at me with my own gun and cartridges.” And they all roared louder than ever, the besieging Matabele the while deciding that Makíwa was a madder beast than even they had reckoned him.

“Now’s your chance, Dibs!” cried Moseley.

For Mafuta it was, sure enough; and now he had sprung up, and whirling and zigzagging to dodge his former master’s aim, the young rascal, brandishing the stolen rifle over his head in derision, bounded away to better cover, and gained it too.

“Drinks all round to ‘the reliable boy’s’ health!” shouted some one.

“Right. Help yourselves,” answered Jekyll. “Free drinks now, and everything else any one wants. This garrison’s in a state of siege. Only, don’t overdo it, for we’ll need plenty of straight shooting before we get out of this.”

“Good owld Jekyll!” sung out the Cockney prospector, who, to do him justice, was not deficient in pluck. “I always said ’e was one of the raht sort. ’E’s a reel owld corf-drop, ’e is—now mistike abart it.”

There had been a lull in the firing so far, but now the Matabele on the rock ridge began to open on the house from that side. The besieged were between two fires. Chary of throwing away even one shot, they forbore to reply, carefully watching their chance, however. Then it was amusing to see them stealing by twos and threes to the bar, avoiding the line of fire—laughing, as one would dodge to avoid an imaginary bullet. But as the sublime and the ridiculous invariably go hand in hand, so it was in this case. One man, incautiously exposing himself, fell. The heavy, log-like fall told its own tale even before they could spring to his aid. He was stone dead.

An awed silence fell upon the witnesses, broken at length by fierce aspirations for vengeance upon the barbarous foe; not so easy of fulfilment, though, for the latter was not in the least eager to take any of the open chances of war. His game was a waiting one, and he knew it. By keeping up a continuous fire upon the exposed points of the defence, he forced the besieged to remain ever on the alert.

The sun went down, and now the savages began to shout tauntingly.

“Look at it, Amakiwa! You will never see another. Look at it well. Look your last on it. You will not see it rise. There are no whites left in the land.”

“There are enough left to make jackal meat of you all,” shouted back Jekyll in Sindabele. “Au! We shall see many more suns rise, and many shadows against them—the shadows of hung Amandabele.” But a great jeering laugh was all the answer vouchsafed.

With the darkness the firing ceased, but those watching at the windows redoubled their vigilance, every sense on the alert lest the enemy should steal up under its cover and rush the position. Enraged and gloomy at so little opportunity being given them of avenging their comrade’s death, those within almost wished they would. One of the wounded men—the police trooper, to wit—was groaning piteously. Both had been made as comfortable as was practicable, but it was painful to listen to the poor fellow’s pleadings in the darkness, for, of course, they dared not strike a light. Would they not shoot him at once and put him out of his agony, he begged.

“Poor old chap! We’ll see you through all right. You’ll live to talk over all this again and again,” was the pitying reply of a comrade.

“I don’t want to; I want to be dead. Oh, it’s awful—awful!”

His kneebone had been shattered by a bullet, and he was enduring terrible agony. To listen to his pitiful writhings and groans was enough to take the heart out of the most daredevil glutton for fighting.

“Here, have a drink, old man. It’ll buck you up a bit,” said another, groping towards him with a whisky bottle.

“Yes. Give it here. Where is it?” And the sufferer’s groans were silenced in a gasping gurgle.

“Worst thing possible for him, I believe,” whispered Moseley.

“Shouldn’t wonder,” replied Tarrant also in a whisper. “Doesn’t much matter, though, the poor devil! He’s a ‘goner’ anyhow. A knock like that means mortification, and there’s no doctor here to take his leg off, nor could it be done under the circumstances if there was.”

“By the Lord, Moseley,” he resumed, a moment later, “I wonder if there’s anything in what Jekyll said the niggers were saying just now—that there are no whites left in the land. If this is a general outbreak, what of Hollingworth and his crowd?”

An exclamation of dismay escaped the other. Their own position was so essentially one of action that they had had little or no time to take thought for any but themselves. Now it came home to them. But for the timely warning brought by the police trooper, they themselves would have been treacherously set upon and massacred; how, then, should those who had not been so warned escape?

“Heavens! it won’t bear thinking about,” he replied. “Formerly, in the Cape wars; the Kafirs didn’t kill women; at least, so I’ve often heard. Perhaps these don’t either. Dibs, it’s too awful. Let’s put it to Jekyll.”

But the opinion of that worthy, and of two others with experience, was not cheering either. It was impossible to say what these might do. Most of the younger men of the Matabele nation were a mongrel lot, and a ruffianly withal One resolve, however, was arrived at—that if they succeeded in beating off their present assailants, they would hurry over to the aid of the Hollingworths.

The night wore on, and still the enemy gave no sign of his presence. Had he cleared out, they speculated? No, that was not likely, either. The odds were too great in his favour. It was far more likely that he was waiting his chance, either that they might strive to break through his cordon and get away in the darkness—and there were some who but for the fact of having wounded men to look after would have favoured this course—or that he would make a determined rush on the position with the first glimmer of dawn.

In the small hours of the morning the man with the shattered kneebone sank and died. He knew he was doomed, and declared that he welcomed a speedy release. Had he any message? asked the others, awed, now the time for action was in abeyance, at this pitiful passing away in their midst. If so, they pledged themselves solemnly to attend to his wishes. No, not he, was the answer. Anybody belonging to him would be only too glad to be rid of him, and to such the news of his death would be nothing but good news. He had never done any good for himself or anybody else, or he supposed he wouldn't be where he was.

"Don't say that, old chap," said Jekyll. "Every man Jack of us who gets away from here without having his throat cut owes it to you. If that isn't doing any good for anybody else I'd like to know what is."

"Hear, hear!" came in emphatic chorus.

"Oh well, then perhaps a fellow has done something," was the feeble rejoinder. And so the poor fellow passed away.

But they were not to be suffered to give way to the sad impressiveness of the moment, for a quick whisper from those at the back window warned that something was taking place. At the same time those watching the front of the house gave the alarm. Straining their sight in the dimness of the approaching dawn, the besiegers made out a number of dark forms crawling up from all sides. The Matabele were renewing the attack.

Those within had already laid their plans. There were two windows in front and one behindhand at each of these two men were on guard. Carefully aiming so as to rake the dark mass, they let go simultaneously, then dived below the level of the sill, and not a fraction of a moment too soon. A roar of red flame poured from the darkness, both front and rear, and several bullets came humming in, burying themselves in the opposite plaster, and filling the interior with dust. The former tactics had been repeated—the storming party advancing under cover of the fire of their supports. And immediately upon the cessation of that fire, a mass of savages rose from the earth, and, quick as lightning, hurled themselves upon the store.

Then those within had their hands full. The magazine rifles, playing upon the advancing crowd, wrought fearful havoc at point-blank quarters, and bodies, in the struggles of death or wounds, lay heaped up under the windows. But the assailants paused not, pressing on with greater intrepidity than ever, seeming to laugh at death. Now their hands were on the window-sills, but before they could effect an entrance there was the same crash, the same wild spring, the same fall backward without, and mingling with the din of firearms, the unearthly vibration of the Matabele battle-hum, uttered from the

chest through the closed teeth outward, “Jjí-jjí!” rendered the scene as one of the strivings of fiends. Then the set, awful faces of those within—visible in the glare and smoke of the rifles—battling for their lives against tremendous odds!

It could not last. Very few minutes would decide one way or the other. Carbutt, helping defend one of the front windows, found the magazine of his rifle exhausted. Dropping back to fill it, he found his ammunition in like state—exhausted too; and at the same time the man who stepped forward to take his place received a blow with a heavy knobkerrie that sent him down like a bullock. A big Matabele warrior was half in the room; another, quick as thought, drove his assegai clean through the Cockney prospector. The entrance was forced. The besiegers held possession of the interior.

Not quite, though. The last man left alive, viz. Carbutt himself, stepped back through the compartment door and slammed it in their faces. But what avail? They would soon batter it in. It was only staving off the evil day.

The firing without was now renewed—renewed with a fury not hitherto manifested. Yet none of the missiles seemed to take effect. But a perfect uproar was taking place, wild cries, and rushings to and fro. Then the warriors who had entered the further compartment seemed to be crowding out as fast as ever they could. The dawn now was fairly broken. The space around the house had cleared as if by magic, save for the dead and disabled. Those within the bush were retreating, turning to fire as they did so. But—not at the store.

Then came a low rumbling sound, which the besieged ones, hearing, looked at each other for a moment, and then broke into a mighty hurrah, for in it they recognised the sound of hoofs, and of many hoofs.

Some two score horsemen rode up to the door, their uniforms and trappings those of the Matabeleland Mounted Police. That this did not constitute the whole of the force which had so effectually and in the nick of time come to their relief, a sound of brisk firing from the rock ridge at the back of the store served to show. A squad, having taken possession of the said ridge, was hastening the departure of the retreating Matabele.

As the besieged stepped forth they presented a not unimpressive spectacle. Haggard, unshorn; hands blackened and burnt from contact with the quick-firing magazine rifles; the anxious look telling of many hours of strained vigilance; the hard set of determined faces; and the light of battle not yet gone out of their eyes—they were in keeping with the background of bullet-battered wall and the foreground of dark corpses, grim and gory, lying stark and in every variety of contorted shape, at which the Police horses were snorting and shying.

“Just in time, Overton!” said Jekyll, hailing the officer in command, who was a friend of his. “Only just in the nick of time. They had already got inside the further room. Five minutes more would have done for us.”

“You stood them off well,” returned the other, dismounting. “I never thought we’d have been any good at all; thought you’d have been knocked on the head long ago.” Then gravely, “Any—er—losses?”

“Four. One of your men. The one who warned us.”

“Robinson, wasn’t it?”—turning to a trooper, who answered in the affirmative.

“Poor chap! Hallo, Carbutt. You in it, eh?”

“Glad to be out of it, too. Have a drink, Overton. I think we all deserve one.”

Now the residue of the relieving force arrived. These were all dismounted men, prospectors mostly, who had either been warned in time or had fallen in with the Police during their flight. Nearly all were known to some one or other of the defenders of the store, and there was a great interchange of greeting, and more than one story of hairbreadth escapes, told by some, who, like these, had been succoured only in the nick of time.

“There’s going to be the devil to pay,” the police captain was saying. “The rebellion’s a general one, or precious nearly so; at any rate, in this part of the country. Zazwe’s people and Umlugula’s have risen, and Bulawayo was being laagered up for all it was worth when we left. We can’t get any news from Sikumbutana, but Madúla’s a very shaky customer, and if he joins in, then I’m afraid Inglefield and Ames will be in a bad way.”

“Roll up, boys! Roll up!” sang out Jekyll, who had gone outside. “There’s free drinks all round this morning. ‘Skoff,’ too. Help get down some of these tins.”

There was no lack of response to this appeal, and the sun rose upon a busy scene. Glasses and beakers clinked, and men sat or stood around, devouring “bully” beef or canned tongues and other provisions, some of the rougher sort now and then shying the empty tins in scornful hate at the dead bodies of the fallen savages—for, after all, the corpses of four of their countrymen still lay unburied within.

“You’ve done for thirty-one all told, Jekyll,” presently remarked Overton, who had set some of his men to count the dead immediately around the place. “Not a bad bag for seven guns. What?”

“No; but we’ve lost four,” was the grave reply.

Then, having taken in a great deal of much needed refreshment, and effected the burial of their slain comrades—the latter, by the exigencies of the circumstances, somewhat hurriedly performed—the force divided, the Police moving on to warn Hollingworth. With them went Moseley and Tarrant, while the remainder elected to stay at Jekyll’s until they saw how things were likely to turn.

“I don’t know that you’re altogether wise, all of you,” were the Police captain’s parting words. “You’ve held your own against tremendous odds so far; but when it’s a case of the whole country being up against you, I’m afraid you’ll have no show.”

But to this the reply was there were plenty of them now, and they could hold their own against every carmine-tinted nigger in Matabeleland.

It was late in the afternoon when the mounted force arrived at Hollingworth’s farm. There was a silence about the place, an absence of life that struck upon them at once.

“I expect they’ve cleared,” said Moseley. “In fact, they must have, or we’d have heard the kids’ voices in some shape or form.”

“Let’s hope so,” replied the Police captain. Then a startled gasp escaped him. For exactly what had attracted Nidia’s glance on her return attracted his—the broad trail in the dust and the blood-patches, now dry and black.

With sinking hearts they dismounted at the door, and Overton knocked. No answer.

Somehow several of the faces of those who stood looking at each other had gone white. A moment of silence, then, turning the handle, the Police captain entered. He was followed by Moseley and Tarrant.

Almost instinctively they made a movement as though to back out again, then with set faces advanced into the room. Those horrible remains—battered, mutilated—told their own tale. They were too late—too late by twenty-four hours.

Then Tarrant's behaviour astonished the other two. Pushing past them he entered the other rooms, casting quick searching glances into every corner or recess. When he returned there was a look almost of relief upon his face.

"Miss Commerell is not here," he said.

"Miss who?" asked Overton, quickly.

"Miss Commerell. A visitor. Moseley, can she have escaped?"

"I hope to Heaven she has," was the reply. "Wait. We haven't examined the huts or the stable."

Quickly they went round to the back, and with sinking hearts began their search. In one of the huts the body of poor little Jimmie came to light; then the lock of the store-hut was battered off—the stable—everywhere. Still, no trace of the missing girl.

"She may have escaped into the bush," suggested Tarrant, whose suppressed excitement, even at that moment, did not escape the others. "Quick, Overton! Send some of your men to scour it in every direction."

"Not so fast," said the Police captain. "Things can't be done that way. We must go to work systematically."

He called up two of his men who were born colonists and versed in the mysteries of spoor. They, however, did not look hopeful. The ground around the homestead was so tramped and withal so dry, it would be difficult to do anything in that line. But they immediately set to work.

Meanwhile Overton, with the aid of his sergeant, was drawing up an official report, and making general examination. It was clear that the whole family had been set upon and treacherously massacred.

And those who looked upon these pitiful remains—a black lust of vengeance was set up in their hearts which was destined to burn there for many a long day. Woe to the savage who should meet these men in battle, or who, vanquished, should expect mercy. Such mercy they might expect as they had shown; and what that mercy was let the mutilated remains of father, mother, and little children treacherously slaughtered beneath their own roof-tree speak for themselves. "Remember the Hollingworths," would henceforth be a sufficient rallying cry to those who had stood here, when the savage foe should stand before them.

Chapter Fifteen.

In Savage Wilds.

In the morning, peace, tranquillity, security; in the evening, violence, bloodshed, death—such is the sort of contrast that life seems to enjoy affording, especially life in a barbarous land—and however it may appeal to those at a distance from its tragedy, to a refined English girl, brought up amid the comforts of an advanced civilisation, unused, alike, to scenes of violence or to the endurance of hardships, the matter is different. Which may be taken to mean that the position in which Nidia Commerell now found herself was simply appalling.

She was alone—alone in a strange wild land—surrounded by beings who were devils in human shape; at their mercy, in fact; and, we repeat, what that "mercy" would be likely to mean, let those fearful remains within the ill-fated dwelling testify. Whither could she turn—whither fly?

Night was falling fast. Where would she find shelter, let alone food? Not at the price of her life would she enter that awful room again. She dared not. She felt that her reason would go. That sight repeated would turn her into a maniac, and indeed that this had not already happened was due to the saving diversion effected by the finding of poor little Jimmie, and his partial revival. Action. This alone had saved her.

She could not remain where she was. The murderers might return. Little Jimmie's last words came back to her—"Down below the river-bank. They won't look for you there." Yes; she would go.

But the dead boy? She could not leave him thus, in the open. Two huts which did duty for outhouses stood at the back of the house. One of these was locked. It was the store-room. The other was open. The poor little fellow was not heavy for his age, and Nidia was endowed with an average share of strength. She managed to get the body inside; then, shutting the door upon it, stood pondering as to what she should do next.

It was now quite dark, yet thanks to the myriad stars which had rushed forth in the heavens, not so blackly so but that outlines were discernible. Standing thus she thought she heard a sound—the sound of voices. Hope—relief—gave way to terror, as she recognised the clear, yet deep-toned, drawl of native voices. It is probable they were a great way off, for the sound of the human voice, especially the native voice, carries far in the stillness of night; but of this, wholly unnerved by the ghastly discoveries of the last hour, she did not pause to think. In wild panic she fled.

By the light of the stars she could see her way dimly. She knew the path leading to the river-bed, and down it she dashed. Something rustled in the bushes at her right. Her brain throbbed like a steam-hammer, and she pressed her hands to her breast to keep down the piercing, panic-stricken scream which rose to her lips. The grasp of murderous hands put forth to seize her, the crash or stab of savage weapon, were what she expected. Her limbs gave way beneath her, and she sank to the earth.

Only for a moment, though. The instinct of self-preservation rose strong within her. She must conquer her fears. The effort must be made. Rising, she continued her flight, and soon had gained the bed of the river, and the hiding-place for which she was making. There, like a hunted hare, she crouched, striving to still the beatings of her heart, which to her terrified imagination seemed audible enough to reach any ears within hearing of anything.

The place she was in she knew well. It had been a favourite spot for the Hollingworth children to use for their impromptu pic-nics, and more than once she had helped them light their fire and grill the birds they had shot with their catapults—playing at camping out having been one of their favourite amusements. It was a hollow in the river-bank—which here was of stiff clay and perpendicular—and the front being entirely hidden by brushwood, it formed a sort of cave. Here, if anywhere, she would be safe from discovery.

That a great and imminent peril has the effect of nullifying lesser or imaginary ones is a wise provision of Nature. Had it been suggested to Nidia Commerell, say that time the evening before, that she should pass the night all alone in a hole on the banks of the Umgwane River, her reply would have been as unhesitating as it was uncompromising. Not for a fortune—not for ten fortunes—would she have embarked on such an experience, and that with the house and its inhabitants within half a mile. Any one of the half-hundred ordinary terrors of the night, actual or shadowy, potential lions, snakes, leopards—even down to ghosts—would simply turn her into a lunatic before the hours of darkness were half through, she would have declared. Now, the house was there just the same, but turned into a tomb for the awful remains of those with whom last evening at that time she was in happy and social converse, yet she welcomed the darkness of this hole as a very haven of refuge.

But as the night wore on the terrors which came upon the unhappy girl grew more and more acute. Visions of the Hollingworth family, not as she remembered it in life, but as she had seen it in the mutilation and agony of savage butchery, rose before her in the darkness, seeming to point to and suggest her own fate, ghastly and revolting as that which had overtaken them. Each stealthy rustle in the brake—every weird cry of night bird or beast, near or for—carried with it a new terror. A tiger-wolf howled along the

river-bank, and although she knew that this brute is the most skulking and cowardly of carnivora, yet it might be different where there was only a frightened and defenceless woman to deal with. Lions, too, were not unknown in that part of the country; but their movements were sporadic, and there had been no sign of them anywhere in the neighbourhood for some time. Still, the horrible bloodshed which had taken place might attract all manner of wild animals; and she shivered with renewed terror at every sound. Soft footfalls seemed to be stealing towards her under cover of the foliage, breathings as of some fierce carnivorum stalking its prey; and there she lay utterly helpless. And then, the appalling loneliness of those dark hours!

But she was destined to meet with a very real fright before they were over. A clinking of stones struck upon her ear, as though something were coming along the dry river-bed. With despair in her heart she peered forth. Dawn was at hand, and in its gathering light she made out a shape—long, stealthy, sinuous—that of a beast. A leopard was crossing obliquely to the side opposite her hiding-place, where under the further bank lay a small water-hole. Not fifty yards distant, she could make out the markings of its beautiful skin as the great cat crouched there, lapping. At length it rose, and, facing round upon her hiding-place, stood for a moment, the water dripping from its jaws, its yellow eyes blinking. Then it walked back to the other side, uttering a throaty see-saw noise, taking a line which would bring it within twenty yards of where the terrified girl lay. Would it discover her presence? Surely. With fascinated gaze she stared at the beast. She could mark its great fangs as it bared them, emitting its horrid plank-sawing growl, even each smooth and velvety footfall hardly rattling the loose stones as it passed—but—wholly unsuspicious of her proximity.

Then as the sun arose, and all the glad bird and insect life of the wilderness broke into voice, Nidia felt for the moment a gleam of hope. Whether it was that the strain of the last twelve hours had hardened her to peril, or that the shock had changed her, she seemed to herself hardly the same personality, and was surprised at the calmness with which she could now map out the situation. For the first time it began to strike her that the murder of the Hollingworths was part of a preconcerted rising. The latter eventuality she had heard now and again discussed during her brief stay in the country, but only to be dismissed with contempt, as something outside the bounds of possibility. The only one who had not so treated it was John Ames; but even he had not reckoned it as an imminent or even probable danger.

And with the thought of John Ames came an inspiration. If she could strike across-country, surely at his place, if anywhere, she would find refuge. As a Government official he would be provided with police; in fact, she remembered hearing him say there was a strong police force stationed at his headquarters. She had an idea of the direction in which lay Sikumbutana, and she was a good walker. Yet—twenty miles, Moseley had

said it was. This was a long distance. If she had only her bicycle to help her over the half of it!

Their nearest neighbour on the other side, she remembered, was Jekyll, who kept a store, for the supplying of prospectors and others with necessaries and general "notions." She had passed it on her way out to the Hollingworths. This was quite eighteen miles off, practically as far as the Sikumbutana. Besides, a store was the first thing to be attacked and looted were the rising a general one. No; the first was the best plan.

But, as she began to contemplate its immediate carrying out, her heart sank. The wild vastness of the country filled her with dread. She remembered how impressed she had been with it during their journey out from Bulawayo, how every mile covered, as they drove through the hot steamy atmosphere, seemed to be taking them further and further into remote and mysterious regions; and now here she found herself, alone and thrown upon her own resources to accomplish what a man under like circumstances might well recoil from.

Then she called to mind all the stories she had heard or read of what had been done by persons—women especially—situated as she was, more particularly during the Indian Mutiny. They had escaped, and so far so had she. And, she was determined, so would she.

But to travel a distance of twenty miles necessitates a food supply. The bare idea of returning to the homestead filled Nidia with a shuddering dread, and that quite apart from the possible peril of such a course. It seemed to bring back all the terrors of the previous night. Yet it must be done. The store-hut was outside; she need not enter the house at all. Yet—the knowledge of what lay within!

It must be done, however. Already the pangs of hunger were taking hold of her, for she had eaten nothing since the middle of the previous day. Cautiously she stepped forth from her hiding-place, and climbing the steep path down which she had dashed so panic-stricken in the darkness, was soon at the homestead.

How peaceful it looked in the morning sunlight—as though the whole pitiful tragedy had been but a dream—a nightmare. Her eyes filled as she thought of it all; but no, she would not think, except as to the methods of accomplishing her own escape. And the first of these was to obtain the food she had come to seek.

Check Number 1.—The door of the store-hut was padlocked.

She looked round for a stone of convenient shape and size for smashing out the staples that held the lock, and soon found one. Then an idea occurred to her. What if the sound of hammering should reach hostile ears? There was no help for it, however; and soon the pretty, tapering fingers were all sore and rubbed; but the abominable iron remained obdurate. In despair she desisted, and stood panting with the exertion.

The key? To obtain it she would have to enter the house: No, that was not to be thought of—not for a moment. Then another idea struck her. The kitchen door was at the back of the house. No gruesome spectacle of slaughter would meet her eyes if she entered that department, and it was just possible she might find something there, enough, at any rate, to sustain life for a day or two.

No sooner thought out than acted upon. With beating heart she stood within the room. It was as it had been left—crockery in a semi-washed state; utensils lying about; and—her pulses gave a throb of joy—there on a table stood a pie-dish, containing about half of a cold pie. Beside it, too, were three boiled mealie-cobs. The latter she placed in the empty half of the dish, and, laden with this most opportune spoil, she went outside, and having gently closed the door, took her way down the river-path again.

But ere she was half way again the sound of voices was borne to her ears. Standing still for a moment she listened intently. They were native voices, and—they were drawing nearer. Swiftly she fled down the river-path, and having regained her place of refuge, lay within it like a hunted animal, all inclination for food now gone.

No further sound arose to disturb her, and presently a drowsiness came upon her, and she fell fast asleep, slumbering peacefully and dreamlessly. Hour after hour went by, and the sun mounted high in the heavens. When at length she did awaken, lo! the day was half gone. But she felt greatly refreshed, and attacked the viands she had so opportunely discovered with good appetite.

And now Nidia made her first and great mistake. She should have remained where she was until the following day, starting with the very first glimmer of dawn upon her long and weary pilgrimage. This would have given her the advantage of several cool hours in which to travel. Instead, she decided to start at once.

She went over to one of the water-holes, of which there were several, and took a long deep drink. Then she made her way down the dry bed of the river. It was easier walking, for there was no bush or long grass to impede her way, and had the further advantage of screening her from observation. Two or three times, after peeping cautiously forth, she had stolen across a neck of ground so as to shorten the way where the river-bed made a long bend; but the coarse sawlike grass had cut her scantily protected ankles, and her

skirt was ripped in several places by numerous thorns, and by the time she had travelled for three hours, she became sadly alive to the certainty that she had effected very little progress indeed.

Worse still. She was beginning to feel utterly exhausted. Even a fair amount of bicycle training, and that in an equable climate, was inadequate training for a twenty mile across-country walk through the burning enervating heat of sub-tropical Matabeleland, and, moreover, she was tormented by a raging thirst; for no water had she found since first starting, and now she had walked for three hours.

The river-bed here made a bend. Despairingly poor Nidia sent a glance at the sun, to discover that the amount of daylight left to her was diminishing to an alarming degree. Then she climbed up the bank to ascertain whether a short cut might not effect a considerable saving of time.

She discovered it would. The country was dangerously open, though, and there were cultivated lands she would have to pass. Summoning up all her strength and courage, she stole rapidly along, keeping within the shelter of a line of thorn-bushes. These came abruptly to an end, and away, about a quarter of a mile off, stood three or four huts.

Quickly she drew back. Too late. She had been seen. Two natives were crossing the patch of cultivated land—a big man and a small one—and both were armed with guns. She turned instinctively to flee, but in loud and threatening tones they called on her to stop. At the same time a rush of gaunt curs, from the neighbourhood of the huts, howling and yelping, decided the situation. Poor Nidia, panting with exhaustion and fear, turned again, and, trying to summon all her courage, stood awaiting the approach of the two barbarians, who were advancing towards her with rapid strides.

Chapter Sixteen.

Mephisto—in Black.

The aspect of the two natives into whose power she had fallen was not such as to inspire Nidia with any great degree of reassurance. They formed an evil-looking pair; the tall one, heavy, sullen, scowling; the short one, lithe, lean, very black, with hawk-like features and sunken cruel eyes. One circumstance, however, she did not fail to note, and it inspired her with a momentary gleam of hope. The big man was clad in the uniform of the Native Police, very much soiled and worn, and hardly looking identical with the smart get-up she had noticed in members of the same corps at Bulawayo, yet the uniform for all that. If he was a policeman she was safe. He would be bound to protect her, and guide her to some place of safety. To this end she addressed him.

"You are a policeman, are you not?"

"Where you go?" was the gruff reply.

"To Sikumbutana. You must show me the way, and I will give you something you will like—money."

"Sikumbutana? Kwa Jonémi?" repeated the man.

"Jonémi?"—wonderingly. "John Ames! Yes; that is the name," she exclaimed, eagerly recognising it. "How much you give me?"

"A pound. Twenty shillings."

"Give me now"—stretching out his hand.

Could she trust him? She would willingly have given twenty—fifty—pounds to find herself in a place of safety, but the gruff offhand manner, so different to the smooth deferential way in which natives were wont to treat their white conquerors, inspired her with distrust and alarm. But she was in their power absolutely.

She took out her purse—a dainty, silver-rimmed, snake-skin affair—which contained some loose silver and a couple of sovereigns, and opened it. The big native snatched it roughly from her hand.

She started back, flushing with anger, less at the robbery than at the ruffianly manner of its perpetration, but her anger was dashed with a chill, sinking feeling of terror. She was

so entirely within the power of these two savages. Then she remembered how John Ames had laid down, in the course of one of their numerous conversations, that in dealing with natives it never did to let them think you were afraid of them.

"Why did you do that?" she said, looking him straight in the face, her eyes showing more contempt than anger. "You—a policeman? I would have given you all that money if you had asked me, and more, too, when you had taken me where I wanted to go."

Her utterance was purposely slow, clear and deliberate. The big native had sufficient knowledge of English to enable him to understand at any rate the gist of her rebuke. But he only scowled, and made no reply. Then the small man began to address her volubly in Sindabele, but to each of his remarks or questions Nidia could only shake her head. She understood not one word of them. Having satisfied himself to that extent, he left off talking to her, and, turning to the other, began a long and earnest discussion, of which it was just as well that Nidia could not understand a word.

"See, Nanzicele," the short man was saying. "This woman has walked right into our hands. The whites are all killed. Now, kill her."

But the other shook his head with a dissentient grunt.

"One blow of that heavy stick in thy belt, and that head will fly to pieces like a pumpkin rolling down a hill. Or why not cut that white throat and see the red blood flow? Au! The red blood, flowing over a white skin—a skin as white as milk—and the red of the blood—ah—ah! It will be acceptable to Umlimo, that blood. See, Nanzicele, thou hast a knife that is sharp. The red blood will flow as it did from the throat of the wife of thy captain in the hut but two nights ago."

Again the tall barbarian grunted dissent.

"I like not this killing of women, Umtwana 'Mlimo," he answered. "This woman has never harmed me. I will not kill her."

"What about Nompiza?" said the small demon, with his head on one side. "Au! thou didst laugh when she splashed into the water-hole in the moonlight."

"She did harm me, in that she scorned and mocked me. Yet, I liked not that deed either, Shiminya."

"Yonder dogs, shall we call them and set them on to devour this white witch?" went on the sorcerer. "They are hungry, and she is defenceless. We shall laugh at her face of

terror when they attack her on all sides, and then, when they rend her limb from limb—they shall eat white meat for once. Au! It will be a sacrifice pleasing to Umlimo."

"I never heard of a sacrifice pleasing to Umlimo, or any other Great Great One, that was offered through a dog's maw, Shiminya," cried the other, with a great jeer; for too much association had somewhat sapped Nanzicele's respect for the redoubted magician. The latter, conscious of having made a slip, went on.

"Nompiza scorned thee when thou wouldst take her to wife, Nanzicele. Thou art large and strong, but thou hast no cattle, son of Fondosi, therefore thou hast no wives. Here is one who comes straight to thee. She is white, it is true, yet take her."

Of all these atrocious suggestions Nidia, standing there, was of course blissfully ignorant. The sun was declining, and she was inwardly growing somewhat impatient. Would they never have finished their indaba? Was it, perhaps, her look of absolute unconsciousness, her very helplessness, that appealed to some spark of manliness within the heart of that rough savage, as he replied?

"No, no. I want not such. They are tagati, these white women. The Amakiwa are the wisest people in the world, yet they treat such women as these as though they were gods. I have seen it—yes, I, myself. Look, too, at this woman. She is not afraid. There is a power behind her, and I will not offer her violence."

Then the abominable wizard deemed it time to throw his trump card.

"Where is she going? To Sikumbutana," he said, lapsing into a professional oracularism. "To whom is she going? To Jonémi. Nanzicele was a chief in the Amapolise, but he is not now. Why not? Ask Jonémi. This woman knows Jonémi—belongs to him, it may be; perhaps his sister—perhaps his wife. Jonémi was in our power, but he escaped from us. This woman is in our power; shall we let her go?"

This recapitulation of his wrongs and appeal to his vengeful feelings was not entirely without effect upon Nanzicele. He hated John Ames, whom he regarded, and rightly, as the main instrument of his own degradation. He had only spared him, in the massacre of Inglefield's hut, for a worse fate, intending to convey him to Shiminya's múti kraal, and put him to death in the most atrocious form that the fiendish brain of the wizard could devise. Then they had all become drunk, and John Ames had escaped, and for all the trace he had left behind him might just as well have disappeared into empty air. And now, here, ready to his hand, was a scheme of vengeance upon the man he hated. Turning his head, he looked intently at Nidia. But the aspect of her, standing there calm and fearless—fearless because entirely ignorant of what had happened at Sikumbutana,

and still regarding this man, rough as he had shown himself, as her protector by reason of his Police uniform—appealed to the superstitious nature of the savage. He felt that it was even as he had said. There was a power behind her.

"I will not harm her, Shiminya," he growled. "Au! I am sick of all this killing of women. It will bring ill chance upon us. They ought to have been shown a broad road out of the country."

"To show a broader road to more whites to come into it by? Thy words are not words of sense, Nanzicele. Have it as thou wilt, however," said the crafty wizard, who knew when to humour the savage and stubborn temperament of his confederate. "We will take care of her this night—ah—ah! in the only safe and secure place"—with a sinister chuckle.

"Be it so. I will not have her harmed, Shiminya," declared the other. "It may be we shall yet obtain large reward for delivering her back to her own people in safety."

"Will the reward be of lead or of raw-hide?" said the sorcerer, pleasantly. "And who will give it when there are no more whites in the land?"

"No more whites in the land? That will be never," returned Nanzicele, with a great laugh. "That is a good tale for the people, Umtwana 'Mlimo. But for thee and for me—au! we know. When Makiwa sets his foot in any land, that foot is never taken up. It never has been, and never will be."

Yes, decidedly in this case familiarity had bred contempt. The ex-police sergeant had "got behind" the mysterious cult, through his close association with one of its most influential exponents. Shiminya, for his part, was aware of this, and viewed the situation with some concern. Now he only said—

"Talk not so loudly, my son, lest ears grow on yonder bushes as well as thorns. Now we will go home."

A look of relief came into Nidia's face as she knew, by the rising of the two, that their conference was at an end. Then Nanzicele said—

"You go with we."

"Can we get there to-night?" she asked eagerly.

"We try. Where you from?"

Then she told him, and about the murder of the Hollingworths; and her voice shook and her eyes filled. To her listener it was all a huge joke. He knew she was tinder the impression that she was talking to a loyal policeman. Then she began asking questions about John Ames. Was he at home? and so forth. But Nanzicele suddenly became afflicted by a strange density, an almost total ignorance of English.

For upwards of an hour they journeyed on, leaving the cultivated lands, and striking into wilder country. Once a great snake rose in their path, and went gliding away, hissing in wrath, and bright-plumaged birds darted overhead. Vast thickets of "wacht-een-bietje" thorns lined the river-bank, and these they skirted.

Nidia was becoming exhausted. So far excitement and nervous tension had kept her up. Now she felt she could hold out no longer. Just then they halted.

In front was the vast thicket. Shiminya, bending down, crawled into what was nothing more nor less than a tunnel piercing the dense thorns and just wide enough to admit the body of a man. There was something sinister in its very aspect. Nidia drew back.

"Go after him. Go after that man," ordered Nanzicele, roughly.

"No. I don't like it. I can't get through there," she answered. "This can't be the way to Sikumbutana."

Nanzicele snatched out the short-handled heavy knob kerrie stuck through his belt.

"Go after that man," he roared, flourishing it over her head.

The aspect of the great savage was so terrific, the sudden change so startling, that Nidia put her hands over her eyes and shrank back with a faint cry, expecting every moment to feel the hard wood crash down upon her head. Trembling now in every limb, she obeyed without hesitation the command so startlingly emphasised, and crawled as best she could in the wake of Shiminya, Nanzicele bringing up the rear.

The tunnel did not last long, and soon they were able to proceed upright, but still between high walls of the same impenetrable thorn. Lateral passages branched out on either side in such labyrinthine tortuosity of confusion that Nidia's first thought was how it would be possible for any one to find his way through here a second time.

Soon a low whining sound was heard in front; then the thorns seemed to meet in an arch overhead. Passing beneath this, the trio stood in a circular open space, at the upper end of which were three huts, "What place is this?" exclaimed Nidia, striving not to allow her

alarm to show in her voice, for in her heart was a terrible sinking. There was that about this retreat which suggested the den of a wild beast rather than an abode of human beings, even though barbarians. How helpless, how completely at the mercy of these two she felt.

"You stay here," replied Nanzicele. "Sikumbutana too far. Go there to-morrow. Plenty Matabele about make trouble. You stay here."

There was plausibility about the explanation which went far to satisfy her. The situation was a nervous one for a solitary unprotected woman; but she had been through so much within the last twenty-four hours that her sensibilities were becoming blunted. They offered her some boiled corn, but she was too tired to eat. She asked for water, and they brought her some, greasy, uninviting, in a clay bowl, but her thirst was intense.

"You go in there—go to sleep," said Nanzicele, opening one of the huts.

"But I would rather sleep outside."

"You go in there," he repeated, more threateningly. And Nidia, recollecting the knobstick argument, obeyed.

The hut was stuffy and close; suggestive, too, of creeping things both small and great; but, fortunately, she was too completely exhausted to allow room for nervous fears, and sleep overwhelmed her. Sleep! The ghosts of former victims done to death amid every circumstance of horror within that den arose not to appal her. She slept on in blissful ignorance; slept—within the scarce-known retreat of one of the most atrocious monsters of cruelty that ever flourished amid even a barbarous race—slept—within the web of the crafty blood-sucking human spider.

Nanzicele departed, and the sorcerer, having secured the entrances to his den with thick thorn branches, sat crouching over a small red fire, his plotting brain ever at work. He was in high good humour, for here was a new victim for him to practise some of his favourite barbarities upon. In this case they must be refined forms of barbarity, such as would torture the mind rather more acutely than the red-hot iron would the body, and a better subject for such he thought he had never seen. So he squatted there, and gleefully chuckled. Beside him crouched the wolf. "Ah, ah, Lupiswana!" he exclaimed, addressing his familiar spirit. "It may be that thou shalt sink thy fangs into white flesh—dainty delicate flesh, Lupiswana. White blood, too—white red blood—richer, more rare than that of Nompiza, and such. It is sleeping now. Come, Lupiswana; we will go forth and see."

Taking one of the red faggots from the fire, he blew it into flame; then, rising, he went to the door of the hut wherein Nidia was asleep. Softly undoing the fastenings, he entered. The light flickered fitfully on the horrible trophies disposed around. The evil beast at his side was emitting a low, throaty growl; but neither that nor the proximity of this demon availed to awaken the sleeping girl. Calm, peaceful, she slumbered on amid her hideous surroundings. The wizard went forth again, “Ah, ah, Lupiswana! She knows not what is before her. To-morrow I think thou must have one taste of this white flesh—perhaps two.”

And the four-footed demon growled in response to the biped one.

Chapter Seventeen.

Of Peril and Fear.

Nidia's sleep had been dreamless and profound, wherefore when she awoke the next morning she felt rested and refreshed. A shudder of repulsion ran: through her as her gaze made out the hideous adornments of her grisly sleeping apartment—the skulls and bones and stuffed snake-skins—but she felt no real fear. Even the human mask, looking sufficiently horrible in the semi-darkness of the hut, failed to inspire her with the wild panic terror which the wizard had confidently reckoned upon. Waking up amid such gruesome surroundings would, he calculated, produce such a shock upon her nerves as to render her frantic with terror, and this was one of the little refinements of cruelty he had promised himself. But she had gone through too much real peril, had looked on horrors too material to be scared by such mere bogeydom as a few skulls and bones.

She lay for a little while longer thinking out the position. Though naturally not a little anxious and a trifle uneasy, she was far from realising the desperate nature of her position, and that the very man she trusted in as protector and guide was an arch-rebel who had instigated and participated in more than one treacherous and wholesale murder. She supposed they had brought her here for the reason this man had given—for better security—and that to-day he would guide her safely to Sikumbutana.

To this end she rose. A snuffling noise outside the door of the hut attracted her attention, then a low growl. Some kraal cur, was all the thought she gave it. She opened the door and went outside. The sun was well up, and the birds were twittering in the thorn thicket, but of those who had brought her there she saw no sign. The ashes of the fire over which Shiminya had squatted lay white and dead, but of himself and the other there was no sign. But the animal she had heard was lying across the entrance of the kraal. She surveyed it with some curiosity. If this was a dog she had never seen one like it before. It was more like the pictures she had seen of a hyaena.

She went back into the hut to put on her straw hat, for the sun was hot. The fact of having the hat with her reminded her of the signal escape she herself had had from the massacre which had overwhelmed the Hollingworths. But that she had felt moved to take a stroll that afternoon she would have shared their fate. Then she upbraided herself. Was it not selfish to feel any sort of satisfaction under such circumstances? Ah, but—life was life, and death was ghastly and terrible—and she was alive.

As she came forth again the brute lying across the entrance opened its yellow eyes and snarled. She called to it in a soothing tone, which caused it to snarl louder. The sun waxed hotter and hotter, yet somehow she preferred the shadeless glare to the dour

interior of the hut. What had become of the two natives? She felt instinctively that they were not in the other huts, therefore they must be absent. But on what errand? She began to feel more and more uneasy.

The sun mounted higher and higher, and still no sign of their return. Were they, after all, treacherous? Yet why had they not murdered her at first? They could so easily have done so. But perhaps they had gone to fetch some more of their countrymen to enjoy the spectacle of seeing her put to death.

With such fears did poor Nidia torment herself. Then suddenly she became alive to the fact that a little more of this sort of speculation would utterly unnerve her. So she resolved by an effort of will to put such imaginings far from her, and as an initiative in that direction she would try to find something to eat, for she was growing hungry.

Rising, she went to one of the huts. The recumbent beast snarled so threateningly that she half turned. Would it fly at her? She looked around for a stick or a stone. There was nothing of the sort in sight. Still looking over her shoulder she undid the fastenings of the door. The brute lay snarling, but made no move to attack her.

The interior of the hut was close and frowsy, but looked as if it were used more as a store-room than for purposes of habitation, for it was piled up with all manner of odds and ends—blankets, rolls of “limbo,” looking-glasses, boots, hats, shirts, and articles of native clothing and adornment, all jostled up together—even a camp wash-basin and jug. The latter looked inviting. If only she could find some water. Ah, here was some! A large calabash when shaken gave forth a gurgling sound, and in a moment Nidia was plunging her face into a most refreshing basinful.

Further investigation revealed some cold boiled mealies. They were insipid and uninviting fare, and the bowl containing them was not over clean; still, they were something to eat, and poor Nidia was becoming very hungry. So she devoured them before pursuing her investigations further.

Ha! what was this? Meat it seemed like, and it was wrapped in a damp rag. Well, a steak done over the coals would not come in badly just then, she thought, reflecting how fortunate it was she had once taken lessons in a cookery school. She even smiled to herself as she pictured her dusky entertainers returning to find her in the middle of the breakfast, which certainly they had been at no pains to provide.

She undid the damp cloth. Yes; it was meat, uncooked meat—and then—She dashed the whole to the ground, and stood, with distended eyeballs, gazing at what lay there, the very personification of staring horror.

For there lay upon the ground two human hands—arms, rather—for they were attached to the forearm, which had been disjointed at the elbow. They were clearly those of a native, albeit turned almost white, as though from the action of water. This was what the damp rag had contained, these two sodden maimed limbs of a human being.

But with the discovery an idea suddenly struck root in Nidia's mind which seemed to turn her to stone, so appalling was it in its likelihood. Were these people cannibals—secret cannibals, perhaps? The smaller of the two men had, at any rate, a totally different look to any other native she had ever seen. This, then, was why she had been brought here, was being kept here. This, too, accounted for the absence of her custodians. They had gone to fetch others to share in their feast—that feast herself.

Utterly beside herself now with the horror of this dreadful thought, she dashed from the hut—one idea in her mind—to get away from this awful place at whatever cost. But there was another who entertained different ideas concerning the disposal of her movements, and that was the wolf.

For as she approached the gap in the circular fence which constituted the exit, the brute lay and snarled. She talked soothingly, then scoldingly, as to a dog. All to no purpose. It lifted its hideous head, and snarled louder and more threateningly. But it would not budge an inch, and she could only pass through that gap over its body.

Perfectly frantic with desperation, Nidia tore a thorn bough from the fence; and, advanced upon the beast. It crouched, snarling shrilly; then, as she thrust the spiky end sharply against its face, it sprang at her open-mouthed, uttering a fiendish yell. But for the bough she would have had her throat torn out; as it was the sharp spines served as a shield between her and the infuriated brute, which, with ears thrown back and fangs bared, squirmed hither and thither to get round this thorny buckler—its eyes flashing flame, its jaws spitting foam. The struggle could not last for ever. Her strength was fast leaving her, and in her extremity a wild shriek of the most awful terror and despair pealed forth from the lips of the unhappy girl. Then another and another.

What was this? Unheard by the combatants because drowned by the savage yells and snarls of the one and the terrified screams of the other, there was a tearing, crashing sound at the upper end of the enclosure. A man dashed through the thorny fence—a white man—hatless and with clothes well-nigh in tatters—pale as death, his right hand grasping a sword-bayonet. Without a moment's hesitation he made straight at the infuriated beast, darting such a stab with his weapon that had it gone home the wizard's "familiar spirit" would have needed a successor. The quick movements of the animal, however, turned the blade aside—result a deep ugly gash along the ribs. But seeing it

had no longer to deal with a badly frightened woman, but a strong, determined man, the skulking nature of the beast came uppermost even in the midst of its fury. With a shrill yelp of pain and fear, it fell off, and, turning, fled through the entrance like a streak of lightning.

The girl dropped the thorny bough and faced her rescuer, with a burst of half hysterical laughter. One exclamation escaped her—

"John Ames!"

Wonder, delight, relief—all entered into the tone. In the extremity of her fear and exhaustion conventionality was lost sight of—formality forgotten. The name by which she had been accustomed to designate him alone with her friend, to think of him alone with herself would out. Not another, word, though, could she utter. She stood there breathless, panting, a mist before her eyes, after the violence of her exertions, the extremity of her fear.

"Don't try and talk," he said—"simply rest."

She looked at him—still panting violently—shook her head, and smiled. She was physically incapable of speaking after her exertion. But even then a contrast rose vividly before her—this man now, and when she had last seen him. They had bidden him good-bye, she and her relative, in the front door of the hotel at Wynberg, cordially—and conventionally—mutually expressing the wish to meet again soon up-country. Now, here he stood, having dropped, as it were, from the clouds, to come to her aid in her moment of sore need. And his appearance—haggard, unshaven, hatless, his clothes in tatters; yet it seemed to her sufficient at this moment that he was here at all. For some little while they sat in silence. Then he said—

"If you are sufficiently rested, tell me how it is you are here—in this place."

"Oh yes; I can talk now. But—oh, what would I have done with that horrible fiend of an animal but for you? I should have been torn to pieces."

"Strange, too, how it got here. I know the sort of beast. It in a kind of mongrel hyaena—Lupiswana, the natives call it. Ah! Now I begin to see."

This as if a sudden idea had struck him. But again he repeated his request that she should tell him her experiences. And this she did—from the murder of the Hollingworths right on.

“And so you were coming to me for refuge?” he said, for she had made no secret of that part of it either. “It was well indeed you did not, for I only escaped through the fidelity of my own servant. I will tell you all about it another time. I must take care of you until we fall in with a patrol. We shall have to keep closely in hiding, you know. I am only a fugitive like yourself. The whole country is up in arms, but it is only a question of time and—”

A bullet hummed over the speaker’s head, very near, simultaneously with the crash of a firearm, discharged from the entrance of the enclosure, where a small lean native stood already inserting another cartridge in the breach of his smoking rifle. But John Ames was upon him with a tiger spring, just in time to strike up the barrel and send the bullet humming into space.

“No, no! You don’t go like that,” he said in Sindabele, gripping the other’s wrists. The savage, small and thin, was no match for the tall muscular white man; yet even he was less puny than he appeared and was striving for an opportunity to slide, eel-like, from that grasp, and make good his escape. “Gahle, gahle! or I will break your wrists.”

Then the native gave in, whining that Jonémi was his father, and he shot at him in mistake, seeing him in his kraal. He had retired there in peace, in order to keep out of all the trouble that was being made.

“Yes; thou knowest me, and I know thee, Shiminya,” was the answer. “In the mean time I will take thy rifle—which belongs to the Government—and cartridges. That’s it. Now, go and sit over there, and if thou movest I will shoot thee dead, for I can shoot better than thou.”

The discomfited sorcerer, now the odds were against him, did as he was told, turning the while to Nidia and adjuring her to speak for him. His was the kraal that had taken her in. He had housed and fed her. This very day he had intended to take her to Sikumbutana. He had gone forth to see that the way was clear so that he might do so in safety, and, returning, had found Jonémi, whom, mistaking for some plunderer, he had fired at.

Nidia, of course, understood not a word of this, but John Ames had let the rascal’s tongue run on. He more than suspected Shiminya to be an instigator of the murder of the Inglefields, and was sure that he was aware of it. For the rest, it certainly seemed as he had said. Nidia’s own tale was in keeping. They had been somewhat rough in their manner to her, but had given her food and shelter, and had done her no serious harm. As for her ghastly find within the hut, John Ames had speedily quieted her fears on that

head. This Shiminya was a wizard of note, and portions of the human anatomy were occasionally used by such in their disgusting and superstitious rites.

“We have need of many things which thou hast in thy huts, Shiminya,” he said, “for we are going to leave thee, and return to Sikumbutana”—this with design. “I, for instance, have no hat, and my clothes are torn. I need further thy rifle, or rather the rifle of Government, and all the cartridges thou hast. Rise, therefore, and show us where such may be found. But first I will bind thy hands.”

The countenance of the sorcerer, which had brightened up, fell at this. Nidia, at a word from John Ames, having searched in the huts for the necessary thongs, the binding was effected in the most masterly manner. Then, forcing the prisoner into the hut where Nidia had made her startling discovery, John Ames set to work to ransack the place. Luckily, it was a very store-house of European goods, which Shiminya, being of an avaricious turn, had exacted from his clients and dupes and kept hoarded up here. Most of the articles of wear, though of coarse and shoddy make, were new; and, best of all, there were four packets of Martini-Henry cartridges stowed away in the thatch; for here was one who knew where to look for that kind of contraband goods.

“I am now going to kill thee, Shiminya,” said John Ames, when he had selected, not all he wanted, but all he would be able to carry.

The wizard looked scared, for well he knew how richly he deserved death at the hand of every white man in the land, and this one he believed to be quite capable of carrying out his threat. But the cunning rogue shrewdly played upon his best stop, and kept reiterating all he had done for the inkosikazi when she had appealed to him for protection, frightened and exhausted and alone.

“Yet it is necessary that I should slay thee, Shiminya, for although thou hast done this for the inkosikazi, I know that thou lovest me not; and if I spare thee, how long will it be before thou art running in front of Madúla’s people, and crying, ‘This way hath Jonemi gone’?”

And turning to Nidia, he asked her to go outside, saying that he would join her in a moment. Then, being alone with his captive, he took up a heavy knobkerrie.

“Now, Shiminya. Thy death is near,” he said, raising the club.

But the wizard was another instance to the contrary of the cut-and-dried idea that cruelty and cowardice are bound to go hand in hand. No further appeal for mercy did he

make. Not a word did he utter. With a last look of hate glowing in his snaky eyes, he put forth his skull, as though to meet the blow. But the other lowered his weapon.

“I give thee thy life, Shiminya,” he said. “Should the time ever come, remember that thy life lay within my hand and I gave it thee.”

The wizard murmured assent. Of a truth he felt that the jaws of Death had been opened very wide before him, and then closed.

“But I trust thee not, so I will leave thee here bound,” went on John Ames. “It will not be long ere thy people find thee out.”

He tied his prisoner fast by the feet to the pole of the hut, and was just leaving him, when Shiminya exclaimed—

“’Nkose, make, I pray thee, the door very fast. Do not only tie it. Thrust also a stout stick through the fastenings.”

“Why so?” said John Ames in amazement.

“Animals might get in. And I am helpless.”

“Lupiswana, for one?”

“Au! Jonémi knows everything,” replied the sorcerer, with a half smile.

“I see. Yes; I will see that the door is fast. Hlala-gahle, Shiminya.”

“Now we must leave,” he said, rejoining Nidia, and then setting to work to bar up the wizard in his own den. Then, as they stepped forth, he told her how he had designedly caused the latter to feel himself within the very portal of death, in order that he might the more thoroughly realise how entirely his life had been given him. If there was any good in the man he would appreciate this act of clemency, explained John Ames.

She looked at him in admiration.

“What an ingenious idea!” she said. “But there must be some good in him or he would have killed me when I was in his power.”

“There is that in his favour. Yet I wish I could think that he had no worse object in view in not killing you. He is one of the Abantwana ’Mlimo, and I have had my eye on him for

some time. The other man wore a police uniform, you say? You were not able to catch his name?"

"No. You see, I don't understand a word of the language."

"H'm. That's a pity, for your description of him almost tallies with that of the greatest rascal unhung, and whom I hope will not very long remain unhung."

"This is not the way I came in by," said Nidia. "Look. I don't remember that water-hole."

They had gained the river-bed, and before them lay a still deep pool. But the grisly remains which lay beneath its placid waters rose not up in judgment against the cruel murderer, who sat bound in his own den up above; and little did they who now passed it dream of the shrieking tragedy of which it had more than once been the scene in the dead of night. And the wizard? At that moment even he was beginning to taste of some of the terror which he had delighted in meting out to his helpless victims, for he himself was now helpless, and the evil beast having returned, and being by some mysterious instinct aware of the fact, was tearing and scratching and growling at the fastenings of the hut door in order to get at its more evil master, who, for his part, in spite of the extra precaution, was momentarily growing more and more anxious lest it should succeed. One taste of white flesh he had promised his "familiar"! The probability was that ere the day should close it would have gorged its fill of black.

Chapter Eighteen.

Haven between Storm.

“Do you know, this place reminds me a little of our resting ground that day down among the rocks at Camp’s Bay,” Nidia said, gazing up at the gigantic boulder, which, piled obliquely against two more, formed a natural penthouse on a very large scale. A blackened patch against the rock in the entrance of the cave, showed a fireplace surrounded by stones, and the very scanty baggage of the fugitives was disposed around.

John Ames, who was engaged in his normal occupation, viz. mounting guard, turned.

“Yes,” he said; “it’s the same sort of day, and grander scenery, because wilder. Peaceful, too. Yet here we are, you and I, obliged to hide among rocks and holes in peril of our lives.”

“Strange, isn’t it, how adaptable one can become?” went on Nidia. “That day, do you remember, when you were so sceptical as to our ever meeting again, who could have thought how we would meet and what experiences should have been ours between then and now?

“Do you know,” she went on gravely, after a thoughtful pause, “at times I think I must be frightfully hard-hearted and unfeeling—I mean, to have looked upon what I did—” and she shuddered.

“I liked the Hollingworths so much, too. And yet somehow it all seems to have happened so long ago. Why is it that I do not feel it more, think of it more? Tell me your opinion.”

“One word explains it,” he answered. “That is, ‘Action’.”

“Action?”

“Yes. You have been kept continually on the move ever since. First of all, you had your own safety to secure; consequently you had no time to think of anything but that—of anybody but yourself.”

“That sounds horribly selfish, somehow, but true.”

“Well, selfishness in its etymological sense is only another word for self-preservation, or, at any rate, an extension of that principle. Were you to sit down and weep over the loss of your friends until some obliging barbarian should come up and put an end to you? I

think the pluck you showed throughout was wonderful, and not less so the soundness of judgment. When you found poor Hollingworth's youngster so badly hurt, didn't you sit there and look after him at momentary risk of your life until he died, poor little chap? Selfish? I call it by another name, and so will other people when we get safely out of this."

Nidia smiled, rather sadly, and shook her head.

"Leave you alone for trying to flatter me," she said softly. "You have been doing nothing else ever since we have been together. But—you don't really think me unfeeling and hard-hearted, Mr Ames?"

He turned quickly, for he had been looking out over the surrounding waste.

"That isn't what you called me the first time in Shiminya's kraal," he said.

"What? Unfeeling and hard-hearted. No. Why should I?" she rejoined demurely, but brimming with mischief. Then, as he looked hurt, "Don't be angry. I'm only teasing, as usual. Really, though, I ought to apologise for that slip. But the name came out without my knowing it. You see, Susie and I used always to call you by it between ourselves. We saw it in the book at Cogill's the day we arrived, written in a hand that seemed somehow to stand out differently from among all the others. At first, when we were trying to locate the people there, we used to wonder which was 'John Ames,' and so we got into the habit of calling you that way by ourselves. And in my mingled scare and surprise the other day, out it came."

"We have been through a good deal together during the last four days," he said, "including one of the narrowest shaves for our lives we can ever possibly again experience. Heaven knows how long we are destined to roam the wilds together, but why not keep the conventional until our return to conventionality?"

"Very well," she answered.

It was even as he had said. This was the afternoon of the fourth day after leaving Shiminya's den, and now they were well in among the Matopo range. Here, if anywhere, amid this vast sea of jumbled boulders and granite cones and wide rocky hollows, they would be comparatively safe, if only they kept a constant and careful look out, John Ames declared. The open country would be swarming with rebels, and it was not improbable that Bulawayo itself was in a state of siege. Here, where almost every stone represented a hiding-place, they could lie perdu for any time; and such was far the safer course, at any rate until able to gain some inkling of what had really transpired, as to

which they were so far in complete ignorance. If the Matabele had risen upon Bulawayo with the same secrecy and suddenness wherewith they had surprised outlying stations, why, the capital would be absolutely at their mercy, in which case the only whites left alive in the land would be stray fugitives like themselves. Indeed, to John Ames it seemed too much to hope that any other state of things could be the prevalent one, wherefore for the present these rugged and seldom trodden fastnesses afforded the securest of all refuges. This plan he had put to Nidia, and she had agreed at once.

"Do not even go to the trouble of consulting me," she had said. "Always act exactly as you think best. What do I know about things here, and where would I have been now but for you?"

"You showed yourself full of resource before I came on the scene, anyway. You might have pulled through just as well."

"No; I should never have been able to keep it up. Heavens! where would I have been?"—looking round upon the wilderness and realising its sombre vastness. "But with you I feel almost as safe as I did—well, this day last week."

As he had said, they had indeed been a great deal together during the past four days, really a great deal more so than during the three weeks and upwards that they had known each other down-country. Hiding away in sluit and river-bed and thorn thicket, every step of their flight had been attended with peril. Discovery meant death—certain death. Even were any trace of them lighted upon so as to arouse suspicion of their presence in the minds of their ruthless enemies, detection would not long follow. They could be tracked and hunted down with dogs, whatever start they might have gained; and as for hoping to distance their pursuers, why, a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, and Nidia, for all the fine healthy training she was most fortunately in, was hardly a match, either in fleetness or staying power, for a pack of hardy muscular barbarians. No; in superlative caution alone lay their only chance of safety.

And, throughout all this most trying experience—trying alike in the terrible strain upon the nerves, and the physical strain of forced marches in the enervating heat of a sub-tropical climate, over rough and fatiguing ground—how many times had Nidia noted with confidence and admiration the consummate judgment of her fellow-fugitive; the unflagging vigilance, the readiness of resource, and the tranquil hopefulness which he threw into the situation. Never a moment did he relax observation even in the most trivial matters, and his knowledge of the country, too, was wonderful. The part they had to traverse was the most dangerous part, indeed, through which their line of flight could possibly take them, bearing, as it did, a considerable population. More than once they would have to pass so near a kraal that the barking of dogs almost made them think they

were discovered; but the narrow escape to which we heard him allude had occurred at about noon of the second day after leaving Shiminya's.

The line of country they were traversing was rough and difficult—undulating flats covered with long grass, and plentifully studded with trees, but there was no avoiding it, and, indeed, every step, even here, was fraught with the gravest peril, for they were in the neighbourhood of quite a cluster of kraals. Poor Nidia felt as though she must give up in despair and exhaustion. The flags of the coarse grass cut her ankles like saws, and she felt as though she could hardly drag one foot after another, and even the words of cheer whispered by her companion seemed to fall on deaf ears. Suddenly the latter halted, listened a moment, then Nidia felt herself seized, and, with a whisper of caution, dragged down as though into the very earth itself. As a matter of fact this was nearly the case. The place she found herself in was a shallow donga, almost concealed by long grass and brambles, and these her companion was quickly but noiselessly dragging over her and himself. Then had come the sound of footsteps, the hum of voices. She could see out through the grass that was over her, and that without moving a muscle. An impi was approaching, and that in a line which should bring it right over their hiding-place; an impi of considerable size, and which might have numbered some hundreds. The warriors were marching in no particular order, and she could make out every detail of their equipment—the great tufted shields and gleaming assegais; rifles, too, many of them carried, and knobkerries and battle-axes. Some were crested with great ostrich skin war-bonnets covering the head and shoulders, others wore the isiqoba, or ball of feathers, fixed to the forelock; a long wing feather of the kite or crane stuck through this, and rising horn-like above the head; and catskin mútyas and anklets of flowing cowhair. At any other time she would have admired the spectacle exceedingly; now, however, in the grim dark faces and rolling eyeballs she could see nothing but the countenances of bloodthirsty and pitiless fiends. Oh, Heaven! would they never pass? The throb of her heart-beats seemed loud enough to attract their attention and cause them to stop. But no sooner had one squad glided by than another appeared; and with the advent of each, to those who lay there, it seemed that the bitterness of death had to be gone through again. Several passed so near to their hiding-place that the effluvium of their heated bodies reached the fugitives, musky and strong, but their attention was fixed upon the conversation of their fellows on the other side, and that peril was over. But not until nearly an hour had passed since the last of the savages had disappeared, and the lingering drawl of their deep-toned voices had died away, would John Ames suffer his companion even so much as to whisper, let alone move.

Well, that peril had passed over their beads, and now, in the well-nigh uninhabited fastnesses of the Matopo, they felt comparatively safe. And Nidia, remembering, and observing her fellow-fugitive and protector, would find herself twenty times a day making comparisons between him and all the other men she had ever known in a sense

which was sadly unflattering to the latter; and an unconscious softness would come into her voice in conversing with him which was not a little trying to John Ames.

For if there was one point upon which the latter had made up his mind, it was that while Nidia was alone with him, and entirely under his care, he must never for a moment allow his feelings to get the better of him. To do so under the circumstances was, rightly or wrongly, to take an advantage of the position, against which his principles rose up in revolt. Yet there were times when his guard would insensibly slacken, and his tone, too, would take on an unconscious softening.

They were fugitives, those two, hiding for their lives in the heart of a savage and hostile land, wherein well-nigh every one of their own colour had almost certainly been massacred, yet to one of them, at any rate, the days that followed, that saw them hiding in and wandering through this grim rock wilderness, were days of sheer unadulterated delight. Life in the open entailed upon him no privation—he was used to it; to rough it on coarse and scanty fare he never felt, and as a price to pay for the happiness that was now his, why, it did not come in at all. To awaken in the morning to the consciousness that the whole day should be spent in the society and presence of this girl; that she was as absolutely dependent upon him—upon his care and protection—as she was upon the very air she breathed; that throughout the livelong day he would have in his ears the music of her voice, under his gaze the sunny witchery of that bright face, the blue eyes lighting up in rallying mockery, or growing soft and dewy and serious according to the thoughts discussed between them—all this was to John Ames rapture unutterable. He looked back on his many communings in his solitary comings and goings, and how the thought of her alone had possessed his whole being, how he would sit for hours recalling every incident of their acquaintanceship, even—so vivid was memory—going over all that was said and done on each day of the same, and yet, running through all, the hope of meeting again, somehow, somewhere. And now they had met—not as he had all along pictured, under conventional circumstances and surrounded by others, but as the survivors of savage massacre, who had been wonderfully thrown together, having passed through an ordeal of tragedy and blood. Her very life was in his hands, and by a sure and certain instinct he knew that it was in his hands to save once more, even as he had done more than once already.

And that his cup of joy might be full, the way in which his charge accepted the position was perfect. Under the circumstances other women might well have given way. The very precariousness of their situation, recollection of the horrors and perils so lately passed through, apprehensions as to the future, the necessary roughness of their life, the deprivation of a thousand and one of the many conveniences and comforts—great and small—of ordinary civilisation, the society of but one companion day after day—all might have conduced to low spirits and constraint and irritation, but nothing of the kind

was manifest in Nidia Commerell. A day of complete rest in their snug hiding-place amid the rocks had completely set her up. The outdoor life and plain rough living, and sense of temporary security, had brought a healthy glow into her face, and the excitement and novelty of the position a brightness and sparkle into her eyes, that rendered her in the sight of her companion more entrancing to look upon than ever. Nor did she show the least tendency to become weary of him, any more than in that time, which now seemed so long back, when they were so much together amid surroundings of civilisation and peace. Her spirits were unflagging, her appreciation of his efforts and care for her comfort never wanting. She, too, seemed to have made up her mind to put the past, with its grievous and terrible recollections, the future, with its apprehensive uncertainty, far from her, and to live in the present.

And at night, when the grim mountain solitudes would be awakened by strange eerie sounds—the weird bay of the jackal, the harsh truculent bark of the baboon, the howling of tiger wolves, and other mysterious and uncanny noises, exaggerated by echo, rolling and reverberating among the grim rocks—she would lie and listen, her eyes upon the patch of gushing stars framed in the black portal of their rocky retreat, alive to the ghostly gloom and vastness of the wilderness around; then, rejoicing in the sense of proximity, even the care, of one whose slumber was light unto wakefulness in the reliability of his guard over her, she would fall asleep once more in the restful security afforded by the contrast.

Chapter Nineteen.

A Footprint in the Sand.

Reduced to existence in its most primitive state, it followed that the means of sustaining such existence were perforce primitive, and, foreseeing this, John Ames had managed, during their progress through the inhabited districts, to levy upon the grain fields. But although the supply was not yet exhausted, it had to be supplemented. There was no grain in the mountains, wherefore it became necessary to go out and hunt.

This primitive method of obtaining food was, however, handicapped by two important considerations. First, there was very little game indeed, most of that little consisted of birds—wild guinea-fowl, francolin, and a few partridges—and the hunter, though well set up in rifle ammunition, had no shot-gun. Much hard climbing sometimes produced a klip-springer; but this comes under the second of the two considerations, the inexpediency of discharging a firearm lest the report should reach undesirable ears. Fortunately John Ames, having been raised among natives, was an adept at throwing a kerrie, and with this primitive weapon was able to keep the larder supplied.

It meant hard work, though. Just as he would be congratulating himself upon having successfully stalked a troop of guinea-fowl, yet wanting a little shorter throwing-range, the abominable birds would raise their grating cackle of alarm, and, running like spiders through the grass, eventually wing their way to a lofty pile of boulders. Then the stalk had to be begun over again, involving unwearied patience and a well-nigh superhuman display of activity; involving, too, a more or less prolonged absence from camp.

Nidia, left alone during such absences, was obliged to summon all her courage, all her self-command. For she felt so thoroughly alone. The consciousness that no human being was within reach, that she stood solitary as she looked forth upon the tossing sea of granite crags and feathery foliage and frowning piles of rocks towering to the sky like giants' castles, would get upon her nerves to such an extent that when her companion was absent longer than usual she would become half frantic with uneasiness and fear. What if he should not come back? What if he should meet with an accident, a fall, perhaps, and perish miserably in those grim solitudes, alone, unaided, or, what was much more likely, allow himself to be surprised by the savage enemy? What would become of her? And then she would take herself to task. Was it only of herself she could think at such a time? Had she no thought for him and his safety? Ah! had she not? She could hardly disguise the truth from herself. It was of no use to reason that being thrown together she must perforce make the best of the companionship into which she was thrown. She was face to face with the fact that John Ames was becoming very dear to her indeed.

More and more did each enforced absence emphasise this consciousness. It did not lessen her uneasiness; indeed, if any thing, very much the reverse. But it changed the quality thereof. She thought less and less of what a mishap involving him would entail upon her, more and more of what it would mean on his account.

And yet this growing consciousness did not give rise to any alteration in their daily relations. Nidia Commerell's character was stamped with a very strong individuality. Prudery was utterly foreign to it, and she could not for the life of her see any necessity for affecting a reserve she did not feel, because she had for the first time in her life discovered a man possessed of every quality to which she could look up—merely because she and that man happened to be alone together in a wilderness, in hiding for their lives. She smiled a little to herself as she thought of her people in England, and what they would say if they could see her now. Then she thought of their anxiety on hearing of the outbreak in Rhodesia, but they would not have time to be anxious before hearing of her safety. She wondered, too, whether Susie Bateman was becoming alarmed about her, and from that she got to thinking, not for the first time that afternoon, that John Ames was later than usual; and, thus thinking, she rose to look forth.

The sun was dipping to the serrated sky-line, bathing the granite-piles in a lurid flush. The light had gone off the wide hollow beneath, leaving its broken-up stormy billows cold and grey, and the hush of evening was in the air. Then a sound fell upon her ear, the sound as of a stone dislodged by a light footfall. Her pulse beat quicker. It was her companion returning at last.

But the glad smile, which she had prepared to welcome him faded from her lips, and her face grew pale. Down yonder, on the fringe of the acacia growth, a figure was standing; but it was not his.

Had the savage enemy found them out at last? Nidia's heart-strings tightened and her blood froze. A further glance served to reassure her, but only partially. The figure was not that of a native, of a savage. But—was it human?

It had vanished—silently, imperceptibly; had vanished as suddenly as it had appeared, but in that brief moment she had taken in every detail. The figure was that of a European, clad in brown, weather-beaten garments, tall, and wearing a long white beard. But the face. She had seen it for that moment, turned towards the setting sun, the light full upon it—full in the eyes—and never before had she beheld so awful an expression of fiendish hate stamped upon the human countenance. Was it human? The face was that of a devil! Nidia felt her flesh creep, and her hair rise, as she called to mind its expression, and all sorts of weird ideas, begotten of solitude amid vastness, circled

through her brain. Was this frowning wilderness truly a demon-haunted spot, or had she seen the spectre of one of her murdered countrymen, who could not rest in his blood-stained grave? But that it could be a human figure she felt it impossible to believe.

Then another idea struck her. Was it indeed human—one who had escaped, like themselves, only to discover, or perhaps to witness the slaughter of those dear to him, whose brain had been turned thereby, and who, in a state of maniacal fury, was wandering at large? This solution, however, was hardly more palatable than the first. Had it seen her? She thought not; for she had remained perfectly still, true to an oft repeated injunction of her companion's, as to the fatal attraction exercised towards oneself by any sudden movement, however slight. The sun had sunk altogether now, and already the very brief twilight was descending upon the surrounding waste. Would he never return? Nidia's heart was well-nigh bursting with mingled terror and anxiety. Then it leapt for joy. A low whistle, a bar or two of a favourite song, a home-coming signal agreed upon between them, was borne to her ears. She could have laughed aloud in her delight. She composed both her face and manner to hide from him her terrors, for she had been careful never to let him suspect the half of what she went through during these protracted absences. Then his figure appeared striding out from the darkness.

"I've been in luck to-day, Miss Commerell!" he exclaimed gaily, flinging down a brace of full grown guinea-fowl, "Got them both at one throw, too."

Nidia did not for a moment reply. She was looking up at him with a very soft and entrancing flush upon her face, and a light in her wide-opened eyes which he never quite remembered ever having seen there before. Then she said slowly, and with the air of one repeating a lesson—

"We have been through a good deal together during the last four days, including one of the narrowest shaves for our lives we can ever possibly again experience, and Heaven knows how long we are destined to roam the wilds together; but why not keep the conventional until our return to conventionality? Have I got a good memory, John?"

"Excellent," he answered. "I must try to imitate it."

His tone was even; but Nidia was not deceived. She was as well aware as he of the thrill that went through his heart on hearing his own words so exactly repeated, and all that they involved, and being so, she admired his self-restraint, and appreciated it in proportion to its rarity. If he had begun "to hang out the signals" at one time, he was careful to avoid doing so now. Yet—she knew.

“I’m afraid I’m late,” he went on. “I hope you did not begin to get frightened. The fact is, I had a very long hard scramble after those wretched birds.”

“Yes. Oblige me by putting down that bundle of sticks, and going and sitting over there. I am going to build this fire, not you. Don’t you hear? Do as you’re told,” she went on, with a little stamp of her foot, as he made no movement towards obeying. “You do the outdoor work, I the in. That’s fair division of labour.”

“I won’t hear of any ‘division of labour,’ falling to you,” he objected.

“Now, how often have we fought over this already? The only thing we ever do fight about, isn’t it? Go and sit over there, you poor tired thing, and—and talk to me.”

The while she took the sticks from his hands, looking up into his face, with a merry, defiant expression of command mingled with softness upon hers, that again John Ames came near losing his head. However, he obeyed. It was sheer delight to him to sit there watching her, as she broke up the sticks and deftly kindled a blaze in the fireplace, securely sheltered by rocks from outside gaze, chatting away the while. The fire was wanted rather for light and cheerfulness than for cooking purposes, for it was late, and there was sufficient remaining from the last cooking to make a supper of. While they were discussing this he told her about his afternoon’s doings, and the long and hard scramble he had been obliged to undertake over two high granite kopjes before obtaining his birds. There was smoke visible, far away to the south-west, but what it meant was impossible to say. Then she, for her part, told him what she had seen. He looked surprised, even startled, and the next moment strove to conceal it.

“Are you dead sure your imagination wasn’t playing tricks with you, Nidia? When one is alone in a place like this for hours at a time one’s imagination will turn anything into shape. I have more than once blazed at a stump in the dusk, when my mind has been running upon bucks.”

“But my mind wasn’t running upon bucks, nor yet upon tall old men with long white beards,” returned Nidia, sweetly. “But the face! oh, it was too awful in its expression. I don’t believe the thing was of this earth.”

“I expect it’s some one in the same boat as ourselves.” And John Ames lighted his pipe—for he had obtained a stock of tobacco from Shiminya’s store-hut as well as matches—and sat silent. The prospect of falling in with another fugitive was anything but welcome. It would not even add to their safety, rather the reverse, for it was sure to mean two skippers in one ship. Such a fugitive too, as Nidia had described this one to look like, would prove anything but an acquisition. But—was that all?

No, not quite. He was forced to own to himself that he had no desire to hurry the end of this idyllic and primitive state of existence, certainly not at any price less than Nidia's entire safety. He would have welcomed a strong patrol, though with mingled feelings. He certainly would not welcome at all the appearance of a fellow refugee, which would end the idyll, without the compensating element of rescue.

"He had no gun, you say?" he went on.

"No. At least, I don't think so, or I should have seen it. What can it have been?"

"As I say, some one in the same boat as ourselves. He'll be walking up to our camp directly. And—I would rather he didn't."

"Would you?"

"Wouldn't you?"

Nidia laughed.

"I believe I would. But what if it is some poor wretch who is lost? Oughtn't we to try to help him?"

"At our own risk? Your description of this individual does not make one precisely yearn for his society, Nidia. Indeed, I gather from it that we should not be at all likely to get on, and I never heard that two skippers in one ship tended to enhance the safety of that craft. On the whole, I think we will leave the interesting stranger to his own devices. If, as you surmise, he really is off his chump, why, for that very reason the Matabele won't hurt him, and for the same reason he will be the reverse of an acquisition to us."

Then they talked on about other things—the times of their first meeting, and the Hollingworths, and Bulawayo, and presently Nidia grew sleepy. But, as she lay down, her last thought was a drowsy, half amused recollection that the apparition of the mysterious stranger seemed to have much the same effect upon her companion as the footprint in the sand had upon Robinson Crusoe.

He, for his part, sat thinking hard, and gradually growing drowsy. Suddenly an idea struck him, an idea that started him wide awake with a smothered whistle, expressive of mingled surprise and dismay. Rising, he took off the blanket which had been wrapped round him, and going over to the sleeping girl spread it softly over her, for there was a chill edge in the atmosphere. Then, taking his rifle and cartridges, he went to the

entrance of the cave, and with his back against the rock, prepared to spend a wakeful and a watchful night.

Now, a seated posture, with one's back against a hard and uneven surface of rock, in the open air, and that air with a particularly keen edge upon it, is not conducive to sleep unless the sitter is there with the object of being on the watch; which paradoxical deduction may for present purposes be sufficient to account for the fact that, as the night hours followed each other one by one, John Ames began to grow very drowsy indeed. Still, by reason of his enforced attitude, he could not yield; at least, so he would have said but for the fact that in that dead dark hour which just precedes dawn he was awakened—yes, awakened—by the weird instinct which warns of a presence, although neither by sight nor sound is that presence suggested. Something brushed past him as he sat there, and with it his ear caught a sound as of a stealthy human footfall. He started to his feet. Yes, his gaze was true. It was a figure—a tall figure disappearing in the darkness.

"Stand, or I fire!" he called.

But there came no reply.

He stood thus for a moment. There was nothing to be gained by discharging his piece at a venture in darkness like this. It might be heard anywhere, and furthermore would startle Nidia out of her wits. No, he would not fire.

"Who is it?" he called again, clear but low, so as not to be heard by the sleeper within.

For answer there came a far away, mocking laugh, harsh and long-drawn. Then silence.

With every drop of blood tingling in his veins, John Ames sprang within the cave again, for an awful idea had seized him. This thing must have been, right inside their hiding-place. His hand shook so that he could hardly get out a match and strike it. He bent down over the sleeping girl. She still slumbered—breathing softly, peacefully, but with brow slightly ruffled as though by dreams. He gazed upon her unconscious face until the match burned out, then turned away, filled with unutterable relief. No harm had happened to her, at any rate.

Then the first grey of dawn lightened upon the mountains.

Chapter Twenty.

Alone.

"I think we'll move on a little further to-day, if you feel equal to it, Nidia."

She looked up in surprise.

"Certainly, if you think it advisable," she answered.

"Well, to tell the truth, I do. It's not a good plan to remain too long in the same place. My notion is to work our way gradually to the northern edge of the range, where we can reconnoitre the open country between it and Bulawayo. It'll be that way we shall be most likely to strike a patrol."

John Ames was occupied in plucking the guinea-fowls he had brought in yesterday. Nidia had just lighted the fire and was engaged in making it burn. The sun had just risen upon a glorious day of cloudlessness, of coolness too, judging from the keen edge which still ran through the atmosphere.

"John," she said, looking up suddenly, "is it because of what I told you yesterday?"

"The proposed move? N-no. Yet, perhaps a little of that too. You would never feel easy if left alone here again. But I have other reasons—that smoke, for instance, I saw yesterday. It may mean natives. There may have been fighting down Sikumbutana way or on the Umgwane, and they may be taking to the mountains. We had better get further on."

"Do you know, I am glad you have come to that conclusion. What I told you yesterday has rather got upon my nerves, and, now we are going to move, I'll tell you something more. I dreamt of it—dreamt that awful face was bending over me looking into mine. You know—one of those dreams that is horribly real, one that remains with you after you wake, and, in fact, that you remember as though it had actually happened. Are those birds ready?"

"Yes. Never mind. I'll fix them," he replied; and in a moment, fixed on a deft arrangement of sticks, they were hissing and sputtering over the fire. His mind was full of Nidia's dream. But was it a dream? That shape, brushing past him in the darkness—the hollow, demoniacal laugh? Had the being, whatever it was, actually entered the cave, passing him seated there on guard? Was it a dream, indeed, or was it the actual face which she had seen? The latter seemed far more like it. Then he remembered that even

if such were the case, it was too dark for features to be distinguishable. He was fairly puzzled. And by way of finding some solution to the mystery he went down to the spot which Nidia pointed out to him as the scene of the first apparition, and examined the ground long and carefully. There was not a trace of a human footmark—not a stone displaced. He felt more puzzled than ever.

But not to Nidia was he going to impart his misgivings. With a change of camping-place she would forget this rather unpleasant mystery, if only it did not take to following them, that is—and indeed they would be fortunate if they met with no more material cause for alarm.

"On the whole it's rather lucky we struck old Shiminya's place," he remarked, as they were seated at their primitive breakfast. "Blankets, matches, everything we have—and that's not much—we owe to him, even the rifle and cartridges. When I cleared from Sikumbutana, with nothing on earth but a pipe, a sword-bayonet, and a bunch of keys, I felt pretty helpless, I can tell you. What must you have felt, when you first found yourself adrift?"

"It was awful. That night—shall I ever forget it? And how strange we should have met like that. The very next day I was going to send over to let you know I was at the Hollingworths'. I only heard from Mr Moseley that you were so near. Would you have come to see me?"

"Have you forgotten that last long day of ours, down by the sea, that you can ask such a question?" he said gravely, his full, straight glance meeting hers. Nidia was conscious of ever so slight a flush stealing over her face. "How ingenious you are," intently examining one of the wooden forks which he had roughly carved for her as they went along. "You must let me keep these as a memento of this wandering of ours."

"How many are there?" he answered. "Three—may not I keep one of them? I want a memento, too."

"Am I getting irremediably freckled and tanned?" she said. "And tattered? Yet one would be in absolute rags, but for that thorn-and-fibre needle and thread of yours."

"I never saw you look better in my life. There are no freckles, and the brown will soon wear off, if you want it to. Though really it's becoming—makes the eyes larger. So make your mind easy on that score. As for tatters"—looking at his own attire—"I'm afraid we are rather a ragged pair. By the way, I wonder what your people in England would say if they could see you now."

“I know what they’d say to you for the care you’ve taken of me,” she answered seriously, “what they will say, I hope, one of these days.”

He turned away suddenly, and bending down, began busying himself over the rolling up of their scanty kit.

“Oh, as to that,” he rejoined, speaking in a tone of studied carelessness, “where should I have been all this time without you? Nice cheerful work it would have been romping about the mountains alone, wouldn’t it?”

“You would have been in safety long ago without myself as a drag upon you.”

“Possibly; possibly not. But, speaking selfishly, I prefer things as they are. But it’s rough on you, that’s what I’m thinking about. By the way, old Shiminya isn’t quite such a rip as I thought. I was more than half afraid he’d have given us away when they cut him loose. But he doesn’t seem to have done so, or we’d have heard about it before now.”

This apparently careless change of subject did not impose upon Nidia. She saw through and appreciated it—and a thrill of pride and admiration went through her. Whimsically enough, her own words, spoken to her friend on the day of that first meeting, came into her mind. “I think we’ll get to know him, he looks nice.” And now—he had impressed her as no man had ever before done. Full of resource, strong, tactful, and eminently companionable as he had shown himself, she was intensely proud of the chivalrous adoration with which she knew he regarded her, and all manifestation of which he was ever striving to repress. What would she do when they returned to safety, and their ways would lie apart? For somehow in Nidia’s mind the certainty that they would return to safety had firmly taken root.

“Perhaps they haven’t cut him loose yet,” she suggested.

Her companion gave a whistle, and looked scared. Only for a moment, though.

“Bad for him in that case. It would have been better for him and safer for us—to have given him a tap on the head. I couldn’t prove anything against him, though I’ve had my eye on him for some time—besides, he seems to have taken some care of you. But he’s sure to have been found. He’s one of these Abantwana ’Mlimo, and too much in request just now.”

“Is there anything in that Umlimo superstition, do you think, John?”

“There is, to this extent. From what I can get out of the natives it is of Makalaka origin, and manifests itself in a voice speaking from a cave. Now I believe that to be effected by ventriloquy. There is a close ‘ring’ of hierarchs of the Abstraction, probably most of them ventriloquists, and they retain their power by the very simple but seldom practised expedient of keeping their eyes and ears open and their mouths shut. That is about the secret of all necromancy, I suspect, from its very beginning.”

“Then you don’t believe in a particular prophet who talks out of a cave?”

“No; if only for the reason that the cave the Umlimo is supposed to speak from is one that no man could get into or out of—at least, so the Matabele say. No; the thing is a mere abstraction; an idea cleverly fostered by Messrs Shiminya and Co. They shout up questions to the cave, and ventriloquise the answers back.”

What was it? Did the speaker actually hear at that moment a shadowy echo of the mocking laugh which had been hurled at him from the darkness, or did he imagine it? The latter, of course. But here, in the very home of the superstition they had been discussing, could there, after all, be more in it—more than met the eye? He could not but feel vaguely uneasy. He glanced at his companion. She had altered neither attitude nor expression. He felt relieved.

Over less forbidding looking ground their way now lay. The grey chaotic billowings and craters of granite blocks gave way to table-land covered with long grass and abundant foliage. Here they advanced ever with caution, conversing but little, and then only in whispers. Indeed, after the rest and comparative safety of their late refuge, it was like entering into all the anxiety and apprehensions of peril renewed. Not very fast, however, could they travel, for Nidia, though a good walker, felt the heat, and John Ames, although, as he declared, he had “humped” a heavier “swag” than that comprised by their load, yet it demoralised him too.

A fireless camp amid the rocks, then on again in the cool of the morning. And as their way lay over high ground, the sun rose upon such a sea of vast and unrivalled wildness—castellated peaks and needle-like granite shafts, here a huge grey rock-dome, smooth, and banded round by a beautiful formation of delicate pink; there, and all around, cone-like kopjes of tumbled angular boulders, as though the fire whirlpool beneath earth’s surface had swept round and round, throwing on high its rocky billows, leaving in the centre this great dome, smooth and unriven. Doves cooed among the greenness of the acacias, whose feathery sprays gleamed bright against the background of grim rock in sombre masses.

“Yes, it is about as wild a bit of scene as you could find anywhere,” said John Ames, in reply to his companion’s cry of amazement and delight. “You will have something to talk about after this; for you can safely say you have been where very very few whites have ever set foot. Even now there are parts of the Matopos which have never been explored. The old-time hunters avoided them because there was no game—as we, by the way, know to our cost; the traders because there were no natives—as we know to our advantage; and the prospectors because granite and gold don’t go together.”

The foliage grew more abundant as they advanced; the “marula” and wild fig, and omnipresent acacia. Winding around the spurs of the great hills every turn of their way would reveal some fresh view of exquisite wildness and beauty.

“Look over there, Nidia. That might be the cave of the Umlimo himself,” said John Ames, pointing to a great granite cone which rose up from the valley bottom some little distance off. It was apparently about two hundred feet in height, and in the centre of its face yawned a great square hole, black and darksome.

“I wonder is it?” she said, gazing with interest at what was in fact a sufficiently remarkable object, “If it isn’t, it ought to be.”

“Look,” he went on. “Imagine it a bright moonlight night, and that valley bottom crowded with about half the Matabele fighting-men, all ranged in crescent formation, looking up at the cave there. Then imagine the oracle booming forth its answers from the blackness of yonder hole. Wouldn’t that make a scene—eh?”

“Yes, indeed it would. But—how could anybody get up there? It looks quite inaccessible.”

“So it probably is. But there would be no necessity for anybody to get up there. Messrs Shiminya and Co. would take care of that part of the entertainment, as I was telling you the other day. Well, we won’t camp near it on the off chance that it may be the real place.”

The spot they did select for a camp-ground was some little way further on, and a wild and secluded one it was, right in among rocks and trees, and well up on the hillside. This elevated position was of further advantage in that a reedy swamp wound through the valley bottom; two water-holes of oval formation, gleaming like a pair of great eyes from its midst.

“I’m afraid ‘skoff’ is running low, Nidia,” remarked John Ames, surveying gravely a pair of turtle-doves and a swempi, the latter a small variety of partridge, which he had knocked over with stones during their journeying. “A brace of record pedestrians can’t

afford to let themselves run down in condition. The English of which is that I must go out and kill something—or try to."

"Mayn't I go with you?" she asked, rather wistfully. He looked doubtful.

"I wish you could," he answered slowly. "But—you have walked enough the last couple of days; and apart from the discomfort to you, it is essential you should not overtire yourself. In fact, it might become a matter of life or death. No. Be good now, and remain perfectly quiet here, and rest. I'll be back before dark. Good-bye."

What impulse moved her to put out both her bands to him? He took them.

"Good-bye," he said again. One second more of their eyes thus meeting and his resolution would be shattered. With a farewell pressure he dropped her hands and was gone.

It was early in the afternoon, and warm withal. Left alone Nidia grew drowsy and fell into a doze. When she awoke the sun was just going off the valley beneath, and she was still alone. She sat up congratulating herself upon having got through those lonely hours in sleep. He would be back now at any moment. Rising, she went over to the runnel of water which trickled down the rocks just behind their resting-place, and bathed her face in one of its clear basins. Then she returned. Still no John Ames.

The sun was off the valley now—off the world. In the brief twilight the stars began to rush forth. A terrible loneliness came over her. Oh, why was he so late? The two water-holes in the valley glared up at her with a lack-lustre stare, as of a pair of gigantic eyes, watching her loneliness. Still he came not.

Was he uncertain of the place? They had but just arrived there, and he might well be. Fool that she was not to have thought of it, and now her hands trembled with eagerness as she collected some dry grass and sticks together, and caring nothing what other eyes might see it if only his would, kindled them into a bright blaze.

How her hearing was strained to its uttermost tension! Every rustle of a leaf, every snapping of a twig, sent a thrill of anticipatory joy through her being, only to give way to sickening disappointment. An hour went by, then two. Faint and exhausted, she had not even the energy to prepare food. The one consciousness of her appalling loneliness here in this scarcely trodden waste seemed to sap and paralyse all her facilities. The weird voices of the night held a different meaning now that she was lying out alone on the hillside. Below, in the swamp, the trailing gleam of will-o'-the-wisps played fitfully, and the croaking of frogs was never stilled.

Had anything befallen him? It must be so. Nothing short of that could have kept him from returning to her. And she? She could do nothing to aid him. She was so absolutely helpless.

“Oh, darling! why did I ever allow you to leave me, my own, my true chivalrous love?” she murmured to herself amid a rain of tears, confiding to herself the secret of her heart in the agony of her distress and terror. And still the dark hours wore on, one upon another, and he—the companion, protector—lover—did not return.

The night she had spent hiding in the river-bank after the slaughter of the Hollingworths could hardly be surpassed for horror and apprehension, Nidia had thought at the time. Now she recognised that it had been as nothing to this one. Then she had hardly known the secret of her heart—now she had discovered it. But—too late.

Yet, was it too late? Harm might not have befallen him, after all. He might have missed his way in the darkness. In the very earliest dawn he would return, and then the joy of it! This hope acted like a sedative to poor Nidia’s overwrought brain. The night air was soft and balmy. At last she slept.

It was grey dawn when she awoke, but her awakening was startling, for it was brought about by a loud harsh shout—almost in her ear. Nidia sprang to her feet, trembling with terror. Several great dark shapes fled to the rocks just overhanging her resting-place, and, gaining them, faced round again, uttering their harsh, angry shout. Baboons? Could they be? Nidia had seen here and there a dejected looking baboon or two chained to a post; but such had nothing in common with these great fierce brutes up there, barely twenty yards distant, which skipped hither and thither, champing their great tusks and barking savagely. One old male of enormous size, outlined against the sky, on the apex of a cone, looked as large as a lion. Others came swarming down the rocks; evil-looking horrors, repulsive as so many gigantic spiders.

Wild-eyed with fear, Nidia snatched up a blanket, and ran towards them, waving it, and shouting. They retreated helter-skelter, but only to skip forward again, mowing and gibbering. Three of the foremost, indeed, great males, would hardly move at all. They squatted almost within springing distance, gnashing their tusks, hideously threatening.

Then, as by magic, the whole gnome-like troop wildly fled; but the cause of this change of front was hard and material. “Whizz—Bang—Whack!” came a succession of stones, forcibly hurled, splintering off a rock like a bullet, thudding hard upon simian ribs. Yelling and jabbering, the whole crew skipped and shoggled up the rocks, and Nidia, with a very wan and scared smile upon her pallid face, turned to welcome her

companion and protector—turned, to behold—not John Ames at all, but a burly savage—a tall Matabele warrior, barbarously picturesque in the weird panoply of his martial adornments.

Chapter Twenty One.

Trapped.

His mind aglow with the recollection of that farewell, his one thought how soon he should be able to return, John Ames strode forth upon his quest, and as he did so it is probable that the whole world could not have produced another human being filled with such a rapturous exaltation as this refugee from a fiendish massacre, hiding for his life in the grim fastnesses of the Matopo Hills.

That last look he had discerned in Nidia's eyes, that last pressure of her hands, could mean but one thing, and that the one thing to obtain which he would have laid down his life again and again. She was beginning to care for him. Other little spontaneous acts of cordiality during their enforced exile, had more than once stirred within him this wild hope, yet he had not encouraged himself to entertain it. Such he had of course deemed to be the outcome of their position. Now, however, the scales seemed to fall from his eyes, and he could read into them a very different meaning.

These last few days! Why, they seemed a lifetime. And when they should be over—what then? Was not his resolution a quixotic one; now, indeed, an impossible one? He almost made up his mind to abandon it, and on his return to ascertain once and for all how matters stood. As against that, what if he were mistaken, or partially so? There was such a thing as being too precipitate. Would it not be better to wait until he had brought Nidia safely and triumphantly through the multifold perils which still overhung their way?

How casual had been their meeting in the first instance, how marvellous and providential in the second. If anything seemed to point a significant augury, this did. But what of the more practical side? What would Nidia's own people have to say in the matter? From things let drop he had gleaned incidentally that they were people of very considerable wealth, whereas he himself had little beyond the by no means princely salary wherewith the Chartered Company saw fit to remunerate his valuable services. Well, he would not think of that just then. Time enough to do so when they were safely back in prosaic civilisation once more. Let him revel in his happiness while it was his.

And it was happiness. Here he was—enjoying advantages such as rarely fall to the lot of the ardent lover. The daily intercourse, for all present purposes, each representing all the world to the other, beyond the reach of officious or intrusive outsider; she dependent upon him for everything—protection, companionship, even the very means of subsistence—what a labour of love was all this.

A slight rattle, as of stones, above his head, brought his mind back to the object of his quest; and lo! there stood the aforesaid means of subsistence personified, in the shape of a klip-springer, which from its boulder pedestal was regarding him with round-eyed amazement and distrust. Dare he use his rifle? There was no other way of securing the little buck. It was out of throwing-range, and in any case would be nimble enough to dodge a kerrie. He thought he would risk it. Game was alarmingly scarce.

But the question was decided for him. The animal suddenly sprang from the boulder, and in a couple of bounds had disappeared among the rocks. What—who—had scared it? The answer came—and a startling one it was. A score of Matabele warriors rose from among the long grass, and, uttering their fierce vibrating war-shout, flung themselves upon him. So intent had he been upon his thoughts, and on watching the klip-springer, that, crawling like snakes in the grass, they had been able to surround him unperceived. So sudden was the onslaught, that not a moment was given him for defence. His rifle was knocked from his grasp by a blow with a kerrie which he thought had shattered his wrist. Assegais flashed in front of his eyes, battle-axes were flourished in his face, his ears were deafened with the hubbub of voices. Then arose a great shout.

"Au! U'Jonémi!"

They had recognised him. Did that account for the fact that he was still alive? He had expected instant death, and even in that brief flash of time had crossed his mind a vision of Nidia left alone, of her agony of fear, of her utter helplessness. Oh, fool that he was, to have been lulled into this false security!

As though satisfied with having disarmed him, they had so far refrained from offering him further violence. No, he dared not hope. Others came swarming up, crowding around to look at him, many of them recognising him with jeers.

"Au! Jonémi! Thou art a long way from home!" they would cry. "Where are thy people—the other Amakiwa—and thy horses?"

"No people have I, nor horses, amadoda. I am alone. Have I not always wished well and acted well towards you? Return me, therefore, my rifle, and let me go my way in peace."

It was putting a bold face on things; but, in his miserable extremity, as he thought of Nidia it seemed to John Ames that he was capable of any expedient, however insane. The proposal was greeted with shouts of derisive laughter by some. Others scowled.

"Wished well and acted well towards us?" echoed one of these. "Au! And our cattle—whose hand was it that destroyed them daily?"

This was applying the match with a vengeance.

“Yea—whose?” they shouted. “That of Jonémi.”

Their mood was rapidly growing more ugly, their demeanour threatening. Those who had been inclined to good humour before, now looked black. Several, darting out from the rest, began to go through the performance of “gwaza,” throwing themselves into every conceivable contortion of attack or defence, then, rushing at their prisoner, would make a lightning-like stab at him, just arresting the assegai blade within a foot of his body, or the same sort of performance would be gone through with a battle-axe. It was horribly trying to the nerves, dangerous, too, and John Ames was very sick of it.

“Keep the gun, then, if you will,” he said. “But now I must go on my way again. Hlalani-gahle ’madoda.” And he made as if he would depart. But they barred his way.

“Now, nay, Jonémi. Now, nay,” they cried, “Madúla, our father, would fain see his father again, and he is at hand. Come now with us, Jonemi, for it will be good for him to look upon thy face again.”

The words were spoken jeeringly, and he knew it. But he pretended not to. Boldness alone would serve his course. Yet his heart was like water within him at the thought of Nidia, how she would be waiting his coming, hour after hour—but no—he must not think of it, if he wanted to keep his mind. Madúla, too, owed him a bitter grudge as the actual instrument for carrying out the cattle destroying edict, and was sure to order him to be put to death. Such an opportunity of revenge was not likely to be foregone by a savage, who, moreover, was already responsible for more than one wholesale and treacherous murder.

“Yes,” he answered, “Madúla was my friend. I would fain see him again—also Samvu.”

“Hau! Samvu? There is no Samvu,” said one, with a constrained air. “The whites have shot him.”

“In battle?” said John Ames, quickly.

“Not so. They found him and another man sitting still at home. They declared that he had helped kill ‘Ingerfiel,’ and they shot them both.”

“I am sorry,” John Ames said. “Samvu was also my friend. I will never believe he did this.”

A hum, which might have been expressive of anything, rose from the listeners. But this news had filled John Ames with the gravest forebodings. If the chief's brother had been slain in battle, it would have been bad enough; but the fact that he had been shot down in cold blood out of sheer revenge by a band of whites, with or without the figment of a trial, would probably exasperate Madúla and his clan to a most perilous extent, and seemed to aggravate the situation as regarded himself, well-nigh to the point of hopelessness.

They had been travelling all this while, and John Ames noticed they were taking very much the direction by which he had come. If only it would grow dark he might manage to give them the slip. But it was some way before sundown yet.

Turning into a lateral valley, numerous smokes were rising up above the rocks and trees. Fires? Yes, and men came crowding around the newcomers. Why, the place was swarming with rebels; and again bitterly did John Ames curse his fancied and foolish security.

He glanced at the eager, chattering faces which crowded up to stare at him, and recognised several. Might not there be among these some who would befriend him, even as Pukele had done before? He looked for Pukele, but looked in vain.

He strode up to Madúla's camp to all outward appearance as unconcernedly as when he used to visit the chief's kraal before the outbreak. His line was to seem to ignore the fact of there being an outbreak, or at any rate that these here present had anything to do with it.

He found Madúla seated against a rock smoking a pipe, and tricked out in war-gear. With him sat Zazwe, and another induna named Mayisela. And then, as if his position were not already critical enough, a new idea came to John Ames. These men had been seen by him under arms, in overt rebellion. Was it likely they would suffer him to depart, in order hereafter to bear testimony against them? Indeed, their method of returning his greeting augured the worst Madúla was gruff even to rudeness, Mayisela sneeringly polite, while Zazwe condescended not to reply at all. Of this behaviour, however, he took no notice, and sitting down opposite them, began to talk. Why were they all under arms in this way? He was glad to have found Madúla. He had wanted to find Madúla to induce him to return to his former location. The police officer and his wife had been murdered, but that had been done by policemen. It was impossible that Madúla could have countenanced that. Why then had he fled? Why not return?

A scornful murmur from the three chiefs greeted these remarks. Madúla with great deliberation knocked his pipe empty on a stone, and stretched out his hand for tobacco, which John Ames promptly gave him. Then he replied that they had not “fled.” He knew nothing of Inglefield, and did not care. If his Amapolise were tired of him they were quite right to get rid of him. They had not fled. The time had come for them to take their own land again. There were no whites left by this time, except a few who were shut up in Bulawayo, and even for these a road was left open out of the country. If they failed to take it they would soon be starved out.

This was news. Bulawayo, at any rate, had not been surprised. It was probably strongly laagered. But they would give no detail. All the whites in the country had been killed, save only these few, they declared. Yet he did not believe this statement in its entirety.

John Ames, as he sat there, talking, to all outward appearance as though no rebellion had taken place, knew that his life hung upon a hair. There was a shifty sullenness about the manner of the indunas that was not lost upon him. And groups of their followers would continually saunter up to observe him, some swaggering and talking loud, though in deference to the chiefs, not coming very near, others quiet, but all scowling and hostile. Nothing escaped him. He read the general demeanour of the savages like an open book. Short of a miracle he was destined not to leave this place alive.

The day was wearing on, and now the sun was already behind the crags which rose above the camp. It would soon be dusk. Every faculty on the alert, always bearing in view the precious life which depended upon his, he was calculating to a minute how soon he could carry into effect the last and desperate plan, the while he was conversing in the most even of tones, striving to impress upon his hearers the futility, in the long run, of thinking to drive the white man out. They had done nothing overt as yet. Let them return, and all would be well.

What of their cattle which had all been killed? they asked. It was evident Makiwa was anxious to destroy the people, since cattle were the life of the people. So John Ames was obliged to go all over the same ground again; but, after all, it was a safe topic. He knew, as well as they did, that the murder of the Hollingworths, of the Inglefields, and every other massacre which had surprised and startled the scattered white population, was instigated and approved by these very men, but this was not the time to say so. Wherefore he temporised.

The first shadow of dusk was deepening over the halting-place. Already fires were beginning to gleam out redly.

“Fare ye well, Izinduma” he said, rising. “I must now go on my way. May it be soon that we meet again as we met before. Fare ye well!”

They grunted out a gruff acknowledgment, and he walked away. Now was the critical moment. The warriors, standing in groups, or squatted around the fires, eyed him as he passed through. Some gave him greeting, others uttered a jeering half laugh, but a sudden stillness had fallen upon the hitherto buzzing and restless crowd. It was a moment to remain in a man’s mind for life—the dark forms and savage, hostile faces, the great tufted shields and shining assegai blades, and gun-barrels, and this one man pacing through their midst, unarmed now, and absolutely at the mercy of any one of them.

He had passed the last of them, uttering a pleasant farewell greeting. In a moment more the friendly gloom would shut him from their view. His heart swelled with an intense and earnest thankfulness, when—What was that long stealthy movement, away on his right? One glance was sufficient. A line of armed savages was stealing up to cut him off.

On that side the boulders rose, broken and tumbled, with many a network of gnarled bough or knotty root. On the other, brushwood, then a wide dwala, or flat, bare, rock surface sloping away well-nigh precipitously to another gorge below. One more glance and his plans were laid. He started to run.

With a wild yell the warriors dashed in pursuit, bounding, leaping, like demon figures in the dusk. Down the slope fled the fugitive, crashing through long grass and thorns. Now the dwala is gained, and he races across it. The pursuers pause to fire a volley at the fleeing figure in the open, but without effect, then on again; but they have lost ground.

They soon regain it, however. In this terrible race for life—for two lives—John Ames becomes conscious that he is no match for these human bloodhounds. Thorns stretch forth hooked claws, and lacerate and delay him, but they spring through unscathed, unchecked. They are almost upon him. The hissed forth “I—jjí! I—jjí!” is vibrating almost in his ears, and assegais hurtle by in the gathering gloom. His heart is bursting, and a starry mist is before his eyes. The cover ends. Here all is open again. They are upon him—in the open. Yet stay—what is this? Blank! Void! Space! In the flash of a moment he takes in the full horror of the plunge before him, for he cannot stop if he would, then a sickening whirr through empty air, and a starry crash. Blank—void—unconsciousness!

And a score of Matabele warriors, left upon the brink of the height, are firing off excited comments and ejaculations, while striving to peer into the dark and silent depths beneath.

“Au! He has again escaped us,” ejaculated Nanzicele. “He is tagati.”

Chapter Twenty Two.

"Accidents will happen."

Nidia stared at the savage, her eyes dilated with the wildest dismay. The savage, for his part, stared at her, with a countenance which expressed but little less astonishment than her own. Bringing his hand to his mouth, he ejaculated—

"Whau! Umfanekiso!" (The picture.)

Her glance fell upon the naked sword-bayonet which lay on the ground between them. She made a movement to seize it, with a desperate idea of defending herself. The savage, however, was too quick for her. He promptly set his foot on the weapon, saying in English—

"No take it."

By now Nidia's first fear had begun to calm down. She had been in the power of some of these people before, and they had not harmed her; wherefore she tried to put on a bold front towards this one.

"Who are you?" she said, speaking slowly to facilitate the man understanding her. "You frightened me at first; not now."

"Ikonde, (baboon) he flighten much more," was the answer made with a half laugh. Then Nidia noticed that this Matabele had by no means an unpleasant face; indeed, she could hardly believe that he belonged to the same race as the fiends who had slaughtered the Hollingworths.

"No be flighten," he went on. "I see you before—one, two, tlee—much many time."

"Seen me before?" echoed Nidia in astonishment. "Where?"

"Kwa Jonémi."

"Jonémi?" she repeated, with a start. "You know him?"

The warrior laughed.

"Oh, yes, missis. I know him. I Pukele. Jonémi his boy."

“Ah; now I see. You were his servant? You are the man who saved his life, when the others were all murdered?” For Nidia had, of course, heard the whole story of the tragedy in Inglefield’s quarters.

“I dat man, missie,” said the other, with a grin that showed a magnificent set of teeth. “Umlimo he say kill all Amakiwa—white people. Pukele say, No kill Jonémi. Amapolise dey kill Ingerfiel, and missis, and strange white man. I not help. I go wit amapolise. I save Jonémi. See,” lifting his foot off the sword-bayonet, “I give him dis.”

“And for that you will never be sorry, I promise you,” said Nidia. “Listen, Pukele. For that, and that alone, you shall have what will buy twenty cows. I will give it you when we are safe again. Only—you must never tell Jonémi.”

The man broke into extravagant expressions of delight, in his own tongue, once he had begun to grasp the burden of this promise, declaring that Jonémi had always been his “father,” and he was not going to let his “father” be killed, even at the bidding of ten Umlimos—looking round rather furtively however, as he gave utterance to this sacrilegious sentiment.

“You said you had seen me at Jonémi’s,” went on Nidia; “but I have never been there. It must have been somewhere else.”

“No somewhere else. I see missie on bit of paper, hang on de wall. Jonémi he have it in hut where he sleep. He often stand, look at it for long time.”

A soft flush came into Nidia’s face, accompanied by a pleased smile.

“And you knew me from that?” she said. Then all her anxiety coming back upon her—for she had momentarily lost sight of it in the feeling of safety engendered by this man’s appearance and identity—she exclaimed—

“But where is Jonémi? He went out yesterday—not much after midday—and should have been back by sundown. You must find him, Pukele.”

The man uttered some words to himself in his own tongue, which from the tone were expressive of like anxiety. Then, to her—

“Which way he go?”

She pointed out, as best she could, the way John Ames had proposed to take. Pukele shook his head.

“No good dat way. Much Matabele dere. ’Spose he fire gun, den Matabele hear him for sure.”

Nidia’s face blanched, and she clasped her hands together wildly.

“You don’t think they have—killed him?” she said slowly.

In his heart of hearts Pukele thought that nothing was more likely; but he was not going to say so.

“I tink not,” he answered, “Jonémi nkos’nkulu. Great master. He aflaid o’ nuffin. Matabele much like him.”

“Listen, Pukele,” said Nidia, impressively. “You must go and find him.”

“But what you do, missis? You be flighten, all alone. Suppose Uconde—bobyaan—he come again, you much flighten? I be away till sun, him so,” pointing to the western horizon.

“I’ll be frightened of nothing,” she answered emphatically. “Leave me one of your long assegais, and go. Even if you have to be away all night, don’t come back. I’ll get through it somehow. But—find Jonémi.”

With many injunctions to her not to wander far from this spot, where to hide in the event of any Matabele chancing to pass that way, and promising to be back by sundown, Pukele took his departure. Once more Nidia was alone. This time, however, loneliness in itself no longer oppressed her. Intense anxiety on behalf of another precluded all thought of self.

True to his promise Pukele returned at sundown, and he had learned something. Jonémi had fallen in with the Matabele, even as he had expected. He had talked with the indunas, and having bidden farewell had walked away. That was about the same time last evening. But Pukele said nothing of the subsequent and stealthy pursuit, and the plunge from the height, for the simple reason that these were among the things he had not learned. The agents concerned in that last tragedy had their own motives for not advertising it abroad.

“Who were the indunas he was talking with?” asked Nidia, suddenly.

“Dey izinduna from Sikumbutana,” replied the warrior, as she thought, evasively; and in truth this was so, for although he would do anything to assist his former master, or one in whom his former master took an interest, Pukele’s native instincts were against revealing too much. There was always in the background a possibility of the whites regaining the upper hand, in which case it was just as well that the prime movers in the rising should not be known to too many by name.

“But if they were his own people they would not harm him?”

“Not harm him, missie. He walk away.”

“Then why is he not here, long before now?” Then, excitedly, “Pukele, you don’t think—they—followed him up in the dark—and—and killed him?”

This again Pukele thought was far from unlikely. But he dissembled. It was more probable, he declared, that Jonemi had taken a longer way to come back in order to throw off his track any who might be following. Or he might have discovered another impi and be forced to travel in the opposite direction to avoid it. He might be back any time.

This for her benefit. But in his heart of hearts the Matabele warrior thought that the chances of his former master being still in the land of the living were so small as to be not worth reckoning with. So he made up the fire, and cooked birds for Nidia and prepared to watch over her safety.

That night weird sounds came floating up to their resting-place, a rhythmical distant roaring, now subsiding into silence, then bursting forth again, till it gathered volume like the rolling of thunder. Fires twinkled forth, too, like eyes in the darkness, among the far windings of the hills.

“What is that, Pukele?” cried Nidia, starting up.

“Matabele make dance, missie. Big dance. Umlimo dance Matabele call him,” replied the savage, who was listening intently.

“Umlimo dance. Ah! I remember. Is there an Umlimo cave down there, where they are?” For she was thinking of the place John Ames had pointed out to her the day before, and his remark that if it wasn’t a real Umlimo cave, it ought to be. And these strange wild sounds seemed to proceed from about that very spot.

“An! Umlimo cave, what dat, missie?” inquired Pukele.

“A cave—a hole—where Umlimo speaks from,” she tried to explain. But the other became suddenly and unaccountably dense.

“Gave? Hole? Oh yes, missie. Plenty hole here. Plenty hole in Matopo. Oh yes. Big mountain, plenty hole.”

The great volume of savage sound came rolling up almost unintermittently till midnight. Then there was silence once more.

The next day, John Ames did not appear, nor the next. Then, in utter despair, Nidia agreed to Pukele’s repeated proposal to guide her out of the hills, and if possible to bring her into Bulawayo itself.

And right well and faithfully did this barbarian fulfil his undertaking. The rebels were coming into the hills now, and every step of the way was fraught with danger. He made her lie hidden during the day, always choosing some apparently inaccessible and least suspicious looking retreat, while he himself would wander forth in search of the means of subsistence. At night they would do their travelling, and here the eyes of the savage were as the eyes of a cat, and actually the eyes of both of them. And throughout, he watched over her safety with the fidelity of a dog.

One great argument which had availed to induce Nidia to yield to her guide’s representations, was that once she was safe in Bulawayo, he would be left free to pursue his search for the missing man. As to which, let him but succeed, she assured him, and he would be a rich man—as his people counted riches—for life.

Thus journeying they had reached the outskirts of the hills, and could now and then obtain glimpses of the open country. Twice had Pukele fallen in with his countrymen, from whom he had gleaned that it was so far open around Bulawayo, but would not be long, for the Umlimo had pronounced in favour of shutting it in, and the impis were massing with that object.

Pukele was returning from a solitary hunt, bringing with him the carcase of a klip-springer. He was under no restriction as to who heard the report of his rifle, and being a fair shot, and as stealthy and active as the game itself, he seldom returned from such empty handed. Moreover, he knew where to find grain when it was wanted, wherefore his charge suffered no disadvantage by reason of short commons. He was returning along the base of a large granite kopje. The ground was open immediately in front, but

on his left was a straggling line of trees and undergrowth. Singing softly to himself he was striding along when—

Just the faintest suspicion of a tinkling sound. His quick ears caught it. At any other time he would have swerved and with the rapidity of a snake would have glided and disappeared among the granite boulders. Now, however, he stood his ground.

Three mounted men—white men—dashed from the cover, with revolvers drawn. Pukele dropped his weapons and held forth his arms.

“Fire not, Amakiwa!” he said, in his own tongue. “I was seeking for such as ye.”

But the mounted volunteers, for such they were, understood next to nothing of that tongue. They only saw before them, a native, a savage, a rebel, fully armed, with rifle and assegais, and in war-gear.

Pukele being a native, and having such an important communication to make as that a refugee white woman was under his charge whom he desired to place under theirs, it was not in him to make it in three words, nor would these have understood him if he had. He, however, stood waiting for their answer. A fourth trooper dashed from the bush.

“What are you waiting for, you blanked idiots?” he yelled. “Here’s a bloody nigger, ain’t there? Well, then—Remember Hollingworth’s!”

With the words he discharged his revolver almost point-blank into Pukele’s chest. Another echoing the vengeful shout, “Remember Hollingworth’s!” fired his into the body of the faithful protector of the only survivor of Hollingworth’s, which slowly sank to the earth, then toppled forward on its face.

The troopers looked upon the slain man with hate and execration. They, be it remembered, had looked upon the bodies of their own countrymen and women and children, lying stark under all the circumstances of a hideous and bloody death. Then the first man who had fired, dismounted and seized the dead warrior’s weapons, administering a savage kick to the now motionless corpse. So Pukele met with his reward.

“Get into cover again. There may be more of ’em!” he enjoined. And scarcely had they done so than the rest of the troop—for which these had been acting as flying scouts—having heard the firing, came hurrying up.

The affair was reported. Those in command jocosely remarking that it seemed a devil of a waste of ammunition to fire two shots into one nigger, who was neither fighting nor running away. Orders were given to keep a sharp look-out ahead, in case the slain man should be one of the scouts of an impi, and the troop moved on. It was, in fact, a relief troop which had been formed to search for and rescue such whites in the disturbed districts who had not already been massacred, and of such it had found and rescued some. Now it was returning.

Soon it was reported that the scouts had descried something or somebody, moving among the granite boulders of an adjacent kopje. Field-glasses were got out.

"By George, it's a woman. A white woman!" cried the officer in command, nearly dropping his glass from his hand. "She looks the worse for wear too, poor thing. Another of these awful experiences, I'll bet a dollar. She's seen us. She's coming down off the kopje. But we don't want to scare her with all our ugly faces, though. Looks like a lady too, in spite of her tatters, poor thing," he went on, with his glass still at his eyes. "Moseley, Tarrant—you might step forward and meet her, eh? We don't need all to mob her in a body."

"We've met her before, I think, colonel," said the latter, who had also been looking through his field-glasses. "And that was at Hollingworth's."

"No!"

"Fact. When we got there she had disappeared, leaving no trace. Great Heaven, where can she have been all this while? Come along, Moseley."

Great sensation spread through the troop, as it got abroad that this was the girl whose unknown fate had moved them all so profoundly. Several were there, too, who had been present at the discovery of the murdered family, and whose cherished thoughts of vengeance had been deepened tenfold by the thought of this helpless English girl in the power of the very fiends who had perpetrated that atrocity.

Under the circumstances, it was little to be wondered at if the voices of Moseley and Tarrant were a little unsteady as they welcomed the fugitive, and if indeed—as those worthies afterwards admitted to each other—they felt like qualified idiots, when they remembered the bright, sweet, sunny-faced girl, with the stamp of daintiness and refinement from the sole of her little shoe to the uppermost wave of her golden-brown hair. And now they saw a sad-faced woman, wistful-eyed, sun-tanned, in attire bordering on tattered dishevelment. Truly a lump gathered in their throats, as they stood uncovered before her and thought of all she must have gone through.

“Welcome, Miss Commerell. A hearty, happy welcome,” was all that Moseley could jerk out, as he put out his hand. “Thanks. Oh yes. We have met before,” with a tired smile, in answer to Tarrant’s rather incoherent greeting. “But—where are the rest of you? Ah—I see—over there.”

Soon the officer in command was welcoming her, and the troopers gradually edged in nearer, for curiosity was great and discipline by no means rigid.

“And I am among friends at last, and safe?” looking from one to the other, in a half vacant way, “But where is Pukele?”

“Who is ‘Pukele,’ Miss Commerell?” said Moseley.

“A Matabele. He has guided and taken care of me for the last week. Where is he? Isn’t he here? Didn’t he bring you to me? He went out to find game. I thought I heard him fire two shots, just lately, and came out to see. Then I saw you all. Where can he be?”

Where indeed? A strange, startled look was now on the faces of several of her listeners, including those in command. “Went out to find game.” And the native just shot was in possession of a klip-springer.

Dreamily Nidia continued—

“I feel so tired. Where am I, did you say?” Then passing her hands over her eyes, “How dark it seems” (it was mid forenoon). “I think—I’ll—rest.” And she sank down in a deathly swoon.

“Jee-hoshaphat, Jack!” a trooper in the background was saying. “That was her nigger you chaps bowled over. And now she’s asking for him.”

“What did the fool run up against our guns for, in that cast-iron hurry?” sullenly grumbled the other, who was really sorry for the mistake. “It wasn’t our faults, was it?”

“Of course not, old man,” rejoined the other. “It was nobody’s fault—only the nigger’s misfortune. Accidents will happen.”

Such the epitaph on the faithful, loyal savage, who having watched over the helpless refugee for days and nights that he might restore her to friends and safety, had found his reward. Shot on sight, by those very friends, when in the act of consummating his loyalty, such was his epitaph. “Accidents will happen!”

Chapter Twenty Three.

Entombed.

When John Ames at last returned to consciousness, the first thought to take definite shape was that he was dead. There was a rock ceiling overhead. He had been dragged into a cave, he decided, a favourite place of sepulture for natives of rank. His enemies had accorded him that distinction. He could not move his limbs. They had been bound round him.

Then there returned in dim confused fashion the events of the day; the surprise; the visit to Madúla's camp; the crafty pursuit; the sudden ending of the ground beneath his feet; the plunge through empty air; then—starry void; and remembering it all, the supposed funeral ligatures took the form of a blanket, which, wrapped tightly round him, impeded the use of his limbs. He was not dead, only dreaming, suffering from a bad nightmare. The blanket—the rock overhead! What a blessed relief! All the events, terrible and tragic, he had just gone through, were parts of a dream. Nidia was not left alone in that savage wilderness, but here, within a few yards of him. He was lying across the entrance of her retreat, as usual, that none might imperil her save by passing over him. Filled with an intense thankfulness, he lay and revelled in the realisation that it had all been a dream. Still it should act as a warning one. Never would he be so confiding in their security again.

The light grew and spread. The grey rock above him became less shadowy, more distinct. Whence the languor that seemed to attend his waking hours, the drowsy disinclination to move? Yet there it was. Well, he must combat it; and with this idea he suddenly sat up, only to fall back with a cry of acute anguish. His head was splitting.

For some time he lay, unable to move, thinking the while whether his cry had disturbed Nidia. No; she had not moved. At last an idea took hold of his confused brain. Their camping-ground this time was not a cave. It was in the open. Whence, then, this rock—this rock which somehow seemed to weigh upon him like a tombstone? And—Heavens! What was that over there? A table?

A table! Why, a railway engine would have been no more phenomenal at that moment. A table! Was he dreaming? No. There it stood; a sturdy, if unpretentious four-legged table, right up against a tolerably perpendicular rock-wall.

He stared at it—stared wildly. Surely no such homely and commonplace object had ever been the motive power for such consternation, such despairing, sickening disappointment before. For it conveyed to him that the events of the previous day had

been no dream, but dire reality. Where he now was he had no idea, but wherever it might be, it was certainly not in the place where he had parted from Nidia and she would still be undergoing all the horrors of utter solitude. Again he tried to leap up; but this time an invisible hand seemed to press him down, an unseen force to calm and hypnotise him, and in the result everything faded into far-away dimness. Nothing seemed to matter. Once more he dropped off into a soothing, dreamless slumber.

How long this lasted he could not have told. On awakening, the frightful brain agony had left him. He could now raise his head without falling back again sick with pain. The first thing he noticed was that the place was a rock-chamber of irregular shape; the further wall nearly perpendicular, the ceiling slanting to the side on which he lay. A strange roseate light filled the place, proceeding from whence he knew not. But now he became conscious of a second presence. Standing within this light was a human figure. What—who could it be? It was not that of a native. So much he could see, although the back was towards him. Then it turned. Heavens! though he had not seen it before, the recognition was instantaneous. This was the apparition at their former camp. The tall figure, the weather-worn clothing, the long white beard, and—the face! Turned full upon him, in all its horror, John Ames felt his flesh creep. The blasting, mesmeric power of the eyes, surcharged with hate, seemed to freeze the very marrow of his bones. This, then, was petrifying him. This, with its baleful, basilisk stare, was turning his heart to water. What was it? Man or devil?

There was a spell in the stare. That glance John Ames felt that his own could not leave. It held him enthralled. At all risks he must break the spell. “Where am I?” he exclaimed, astonished at the feebleness of his own voice.

“In luck’s way this time. Perhaps not,” came the reply, in full, deep tones. “What do you think of that, John Ames?”

“You appear to know me; but, I am sorry to say, the advantage is all on your side. Where have we met before?”

The other’s set face relaxed. A ghastly, mirthless laugh proceeded from a scarcely opened mouth. There was that in it which made the listener start, such an echo was it of the mocking laugh thrown back at him out of the darkness when challenging that shadowy figure at their former camp.

“Where have we not met?” came the reply, after a pause. “That would be an easier question to answer.”

“Well, at any rate, it is awfully good of you to have taken care of me like this,” said John Ames, thinking it advisable to waive the question of identity for the present. “Did I fall far?”

“So far that, but for a timely tree breaking your fall, you would hardly have an unbroken bone within you now.”

“But how did I get here? Did you get me here alone?”

“A moment ago you were deciding that curiosity might sometimes be out of place. You are quick at changing your mind, John Ames.”

The latter felt guilty. This was indeed “thought-reading” with a vengeance.

“Yes; but pardon me if it seems to you inquisitive—it is not meant that way,” he said. “The fact is, I am not alone. I have a friend who will be terribly anxious—in fact, terribly frightened at my absence. I suppose you are in hiding, like ourselves?” Again that mirthless laugh.

“In hiding? Yes; in hiding. But not like yourselves.”

“But will you not join us? I know my way about this sort of country fairly well, and it is only a question of a little extra care, and we are bound to come through all right.”

“Such ‘little extra care’ as you displayed only yesterday, John Ames? Yet an evening or so back you thought my presence hardly likely to prove an acquisition.”

The cold, sneering tone scarcely tended to allay the confusion felt by the other at this reminder. This, then, was the apparition seen by Nidia, and he had been able to draw near enough to overhear their conversation with reference to his appearance. The thought was sufficiently uncomfortable. Who could the man be? That he was an eccentricity was self-evident. He went on—

“You were right in saying that your ‘friend’ would be terribly frightened. She has gone through such a night as she hopes never to spend again, and her fears are not over, but this time they are very material, and are for herself. There are shapes stealing upon her down the rocks—dark shapes. Natives? No. Human? No. What then? Beasts. She screams; tries to drive them off. They grow bolder and bolder—and—”

“Heavens alive, man, don’t drive me mad!” roared John Ames, whirling up from his couch, forgetful alike of aching bones and bruised and shaken frame. “What, is it you see—or know? Are you the devil himself?”

But the face of the seer remained perfectly impassible. Not so much as a finger of his moved. His eyes seemed to open wider, then to close; then to open again, as one awakening from a trance. Their expression was that of slight, unperturbed surprise.

“Look here, now,” said John Ames, quickly and decidedly. “You have taken care of me when I was in a bad fix, and most likely saved my life. I am deeply grateful, and hope we shall get to know each: other properly. But just now I must not lose a moment in going back to my friend, and if you won’t go with me, I’ll ask you to put me into my bearings.”

The stranger did not move in his attitude, or relax a muscle.

“You can’t go from here now,” he said; “nor, in fact, until I allow you.”

“Can’t? But I must!” shouted John Ames. “Heavens! I don’t see how you can know all you have been saying; but the bare suggestion that she may be in danger—all alone and helpless—oh, good God, but it’ll drive me mad!”

“How I can know? Well, perhaps I can’t—perhaps I can. Anyway, there’s one thing you can’t do, and that is leave this place without my aid. If you don’t believe me, just take a look round and try.”

He waved his hand with a throw-everything-open sort of gesture. In feverish strides, like those of a newly caged tiger, John Ames quickly explored the apartment, likewise another which opened out of it. His mind fired with Nidia’s helplessness and danger, he gave no thought to the curious nature of this subterranean dwelling; all he thought about was means of egress.

At the further end of the apartment in which he had been lying yawned a deep shaft like that of a disused mine. Air floated up this; clearly, therefore, it gave egress. But the means of descent? He looked around and above. No apparatus rewarded his view—not even a single rope. He explored the further chamber, which, like the first, was lighted by a curious eye-shaped lamp fixed in a hole in the rock-partition wall. Here too were several smaller oubliette-like shafts. But no means of exit.

The while, his host—or gaoler—had been standing immovable, as though these investigations and their results had not the faintest interest for him. John Ames, utterly baffled, gave up the search, and the terrible conviction forced itself upon him that he

was shut up in the very heart of the earth with a malevolent lunatic. Yet there was that about the other's whole personality which was not compatible with the lunatic theory; a strong, mesmeric, compelling force, as far removed from insanity in any known phase as it could possibly be. Power was proclaimed large in every look, in every utterance.

"Was I right?" he said. "But patience, John Ames; you must be pitifully wrapped up in this—'friend' of yours, to lose your head in that unwonted fashion. Unwonted—yes. I know you, you see, better than you do me. Well, I won't try your patience any longer. Had you not interrupted me it would have been better for you; I was going on to say that while I saw danger I saw, also, succour—rescue—safety."

"Safety? Rescue?" echoed John Ames, in almost an awed tone, but one that was full of a great thankfulness and relief. "Ah, well, my awful anxiety was deserved. Forgive me the interruption."

Even then it did not occur to him, the level-headed, the thinking, the judicious, that here was a man—a strange one certainly—who had just told him a cock-and-bull story about events he could not possibly know, with the result of driving him perfectly frantic with anxiety and a sense of his own helplessness. Why not? Because the narrative had been unfolded with a knowledge stamped upon the narrator's countenance that was as undeniable as the presence of the narrator himself. Strange to say, not for a moment did it occur to him to question it.

He looked at the seer; a steadfast, penetrating, earnest glance. The face was a refined one; handsome, clear-cut, furrowing somewhat with age and hardness; but it was the face of one who had renounced all—hence its power; of one who, for some reason or other, was a bitter hater of his species, yet which as surely bore traces of a great overwhelming sorrow, capabilities of a vast and selfless love. Who was this strange being? What his tragic past? John Ames, thus striving to penetrate it, felt all his repulsion for the other melt away into a warm, indefinable sense of sympathy. Then he replied—

"In using the expression 'wrapped up in,' you have used the right one. If harm were to befall her I should feel that life had no more value."

"Then how will you face the—parting of the ways?"

The question chilled upon its hearer. Was it a prophecy?

"The parting of the ways?" he echoed slowly, comprehending the other's meaning. "Why should there be any parting?"

“Because it is the way of life.”

And with the harsh, jeering, mirthless laugh which accompanied the cynicism, the stranger’s countenance became once more transformed. The stare of hate and repulsion came into it again, and he turned away. But in the mind of his hearer there arose a vision of that last farewell, and he felt reassured—yet not. Coming from any other, he would have laughed at the utterance as a mere cynical commonplace, but from this one it impressed him as a dire prophecy.

“There will come a time when you will look back upon these rough wanderings of yours—the two of you—as a dream of Paradise, John Ames. Hourly danger; scarce able to compass the means of existence; unknown country swarming with enemies; what a fearful experience it seems! Yet—how you will look back to it, will long for it! Ah, yes, I know; for your experience was once mine.”

“Once yours?”

“Once mine.” Then, with sudden change of tone and demeanour—“And now, be advised by me, and restore Nature a little. You will find the wherewithal in that chest, for you may need all your strength.”

Had it been anybody else, John Ames might have thought it somewhat unhostlike of the other to leave him to do all the foraging for himself, but somehow in this case it seemed all right. He could hardly have imagined this strange being bustling about over such commonplace work as rummaging out food. So he opened the chest indicated, and found it well stored with creature comforts. He set out, upon the table which had so startled him at first, enough for his present wants, and turned to speak to his host. But the latter was no longer there. He looked in the other apartment. That, too, was empty!

Weird and uncanny as this disappearance was, it disconcerted John Ames less than it would have done at first. In was in keeping with the place and its strange occupant, for now, as he gazed around, he noted that the rock in places was covered with strange hieroglyphics. He had seen Bushman drawings in the caves of the Drakensberg, executed with wonderful clearness and a considerable amount of rude skill. These, however, seemed the production of a civilised race, and that in the dim ages of a remote past, probably the race which was responsible for the ancient gold workings whereof the land showed such plentiful remains. At any other time the investigation of these hieroglyphics would have afforded him a rare interest, at present he had enough to think about. But if his host—or gaoler—chose to disappear into the earth or air at will it was no concern of his, and he had not as yet found any great encouragement to curiosity in that

quarter. Meanwhile, he set to work to make a hearty breakfast—or dinner—or whatever it might be, for he had no idea of time, his watch having been smashed in his fall.

Strangely enough, a feeling of complete confidence had succeeded to his agony of self-reproach and anxiety as to Nidia's safety. Stranger, too, that such should be inspired by the bare word of this marvellous being who held him, so far, in his power. Yet there it was, this conviction. It surprised him. It was unaccountable. Yet there it was.

Among other creature comforts he had found in the cupboard was a bottle of whisky. He mixed himself a modest "peg." But somehow the taste brought back the terrible tragedy in Inglefield's hut, that, perforce, being the last time he had drunk any, and a sort of disgust for the spirit came over him.

So did something else—a sadden and unaccountable drowsiness, to wit. He strove to combat it, but fruitlessly. Returning to his couch, he lay down, and fell into a deep and heavy sleep.

Chapter Twenty Four.

What was Disclosed.

When he awoke, John Ames found himself in the dark; not the ordinary darkness of night, wherein objects are faintly outlined, but black, pitchy, impenetrable gloom—an outer darkness which weighed upon mind and spirits with a sense of living entombment.

Breathed there a mystic atmosphere in this weird place which affected the mind? This darkness seemed to unnerve him, to start him wide awake with a feeling of chill fear. Light! That was the first requisite. But a hurried search in every pocket revealed that he was without the means of procuring that requisite. He could find no matches. Had he by chance put them on the table, and left them there? He had no recollection of doing so, but in any case dared not get up and grope for them, bearing in mind the shaft-like pit at one end of the room. Nothing would be easier than to fall into this in the bewildering blackness. Equally nothing was there for it but to lie still and await the course of events.

More and more did the walled-in blackness weigh him down. The air seemed full of whispering voices—indistinct, ghostly, rising and falling in far-away flute-like wailings; and there came upon him a vision. He saw again the great granite cone with the black hole, dark and forbidding, piercing its centre; but not as he had pointed it out to his fellow-fugitive in the sunlight gold. No; it was night now, and there, around its base, a mighty gathering occupied the open, and from this arose a roar of voices—voices in supplication, voices in questionings, voices singing fierce songs of war. Then there would be silence, and from the cavern mouth would issue one voice—denunciatory, reproachful, prophetic, yet prophesying no good thing. And the voice was as that of the strange being in whose power he lay.

Louder and louder boomed the roar of the war-song. It shook the air; it vibrated as in waves upon the dense opacity of the darkness, echoing from the walls of this mysterious vault, for he was conscious of a dual personality—one side of it without, a witness of the scene conjured up by the vision; the other still within himself, still entombed and helpless within the heart of the earth. And then again the whole faded, into sleep or nirvana.

Once more came awakening. He was no longer in darkness. The rose-light threw quivering shadows from the objects about the place, and he was no longer alone. His host—or gaoler stood contemplating him.

“You have had a long sleep, John Ames.”

“And strange dreams, too,” was the reply, made with a certain significance. “When I woke up in the dark—”

“Are you sure you did wake up in the dark? Are you sure you did not dream you woke up?”

“Upon my word, I can’t tell. I sometimes think that in these days I can be sure of nothing.”

“Well, you shall hear what will give you something to rejoice over. The ‘friend’ you were taking care of is safe.”

“Safe?”

“Yes. I told you exactly what had happened. And now she will be in Bulawayo as soon as yourself.”

“As soon as myself?”

“Yes, for you will soon be there. You see, I have a use to turn you to. I have a message for the outside world, and you shall be the means of transmitting it.”

“That will I do, with the greatest of pleasure. But what if I do not get through? The Matabele seem to be taking to the hills in force, and it’s a long few days to get through from where we are—or were, rather, should I say, for I’m not at all sure where I am now.”

“Quite right, John Ames. You are not. Still you shall get through. And then, when you rejoin your ‘friend’—the girl with the very blue eyes, and the quick lift of the eyelids, and the animated countenance changing vividly with every expression, and the brown-gold hair—I suppose you will think life holds for you no greater good?”

“I say, but you seem to have studied her rather closely,” was the rejoinder, with a dry smile. “Anybody would think you knew her.”

“I have watched her from far more closely than you dream of, John Ames. For instance, every step of your way since leaving Shiminya tied up in his hut, has been known to me and to others too. Your life—both your lives—have been in my hand throughout, what time you have prided yourself upon your astuteness in evading pursuit and discovery.

The lives of others have been in my hand in like manner, and—the hand has closed on them. You will soon learn how few have escaped."

The grim relentlessness succeeding to the even, almost benevolent tone which had characterised the first part of this extraordinary statement impressed John Ames. At the same time he felt correspondingly reduced. He had prided himself, too—in advance—upon bringing Nidia safely in, alone and unaided; now he was done out of this satisfaction, and others would take to themselves the credit. Then he felt smaller still because thoroughly ashamed of himself. How could he harbour such a thought amid the great glad joy of hearing that her safety was assured?

"Are you influencing these rebels, then?" he asked, all his old repulsion for the other returning, as he saw, as in a flash, the fell meaning of the words. "It seems strange that you should aid in the murder of your own countrymen."

"My own countrymen!" and the expression of the speaker became absolutely fiendish. "'My own countrymen' would have doomed me to a living death—a living hell—long years ago, for no crime; for that which injured nobody, but was a mere act of self-defence. Well, 'my own countrymen' have yielded up hundreds of lives in satisfaction since then."

"But—great Heavens! you say 'would have.' They would have done this? Why, even if it had happened, such a revenge as yours would have been too monstrous. Now I begin to see. Yet, in aiding these murderers of women and children, you are sacrificing those who never harmed you. But surely you can never have done this!"

"Ha, ha! Really, John Ames, I am beginning to feel I have made a mistake—to feel disappointed in you, in thinking you were made of very different clay to the swaggering, bullet-headed fool, the first article of whose creed is that God made England and the devil the remainder of the world. Well, listen further. To escape from this doom I was forced to flee—to hide myself. And with me went one other. We wandered day after day as you have wandered—we two alone."

In spite of his repulsion John Ames was interested, vividly interested. Verily here a fellow-feeling came in. A marvellous change had crept into the face of the other. The hard steely expression, the eyes glittering with hate, had given way to such a look of wondrous softness as seemed incredible that that countenance could take on.

"There is a lonely grave in the recesses of the Lebombo Mountains, unmarked, unknown to any but myself. I once had a heart, John Ames, strange to say, and it lies buried there. But every time I return thence it is with the fire renewed within me; and the flames of

that fire are the hate of hell for those you were just now describing as ‘my own countrymen.’”

The hopeless pathos, the white-hot revenge running side by side, silenced the listener. There was a fury of passion and of pain here which admitted of no comment. To strive further to drive home his original protest struck him now as impertinent and commonplace. For a while neither spoke.

“This is not the first time ‘my own countrymen’ have felt my unseen hand,” continued the narrator. “They felt it when three miles of plain were watered with British blood, and a line of whitened bones, as the line of a paper-chase, marked out a broad way from Isandhlwana to the Buffalo drift. They felt it when British blood poured into the swollen waters of the Intombi river, and when the ‘neck’ on Hlobane mountain was choked with struggling men and horses fleeing for dear life, and but few escaping. That was for me. They have felt it often since. That was for her. They felt it when the hardest blow of all was dealt to their illimitable self-righteousness a year later; and, in short, almost whenever there has been opportunity for decimating them this side of the equator, my hand has been there. They would have felt it three years ago, when they seized this country we are now in, but for a wholly unavoidable reason, and then even the strong laagers and parks of Maxims would have counted for nought. That was for her. The malice of the devilish laws of ‘my country’ drove me forth, and with me went that one. In the malarial valleys of the foothills of the Lebombo she died. I still live; but I live for a lifelong revenge upon ‘my countrymen’—and hers.”

Listening with the most vivid interest, John Ames was awed. The narrative just then could not but appeal to him powerfully. What if his own wanderings had ended thus, substituting Matopo for Lebombo? He shuddered to think that but for their signal good fortune in being blessed with fine dry weather, such might not inconceivably have been the case. The earlier and more tragic of the historical events referred to had taken place during the period of his English education, but now there recurred to his memory certain tales which he had heard on his return to his native colony of Natal, relating to the disappearance during the Zulu war of a border outlaw under circumstances of romantic interest. Could they have been authentic? Could this mysterious personage be indeed the chief actor in them? But, then, what must have been the strength and power of such a passion as had been this man’s, that he should cherish it full and strong after all these years; to the compassing of illimitable bloodshed, prosecuting the fierce and relentless hatred of his own countrymen to the extent of metamorphosing the memory of its object into a very Kali, sacrificing to that memory in blood! Of a truth it could be nothing less than a mania—a grim and terrible monomania.

“You are already beginning to lose your horror at what I have told you, John Ames,” went on the other, his keen, darting eyes reading his listener’s face like an open page. “Yet why should you ever have entertained it? Is not this blue-eyed girl you were taking care of for so many days all the world to you—more than life itself?”

“She is. She is indeed, God knows,” was the reply, emphatically fervent.

“Then what revenge could you wreak that would be too full, too sweet, upon whosoever should be instrumental in bereaving you of her for ever? You have not yet been tried, John Ames, and yours is a character outside the ordinary.”

Was the speaker right, after all? thought John Ames. He looked at the dark face and silvery beard, and the glitter of the keen grey eyes, and wondered. Yet as he looked, he decided that the owner of that face must be considerably younger than his appearance. Was he himself capable of such a hardening—of so gigantic and ruthless and lifelong a feud? One thing was incontestable. He certainly had lost the first feeling of repulsion and horror; indeed, he could not swear it had not been replaced by one of profound sympathy. The other continued.

“This is what you will do. First of all, you will give me your word to make no attempt to seek out this place, though it would be futile even if made. For remember I have saved your life, and the life of one who is more to you than life, not once, but many times, though unknown to you. Others sought escape in the same way as yourselves. Ask, when you are safe again, how many found it? I did not spare them. I spared you, John Ames, because your wanderings reminded me of my own. I watched you both frequently, unknown to yourselves, and doing so the past came back so vividly as to render me more merciless still towards others in the same plight. But you two I spared.”

“Then it was you I challenged that morning in the dark?”

“Even your vigilance was as nothing against me, John Ames, for did I not step right over you while you slept?”

The other whistled. There could be no doubt about that.

“Then you will take these two packets. The one marked on the outside ‘A’ you will open at once, and with every precaution will forward the enclosure it contains to the address that enclosure bears.”

This John Ames promised to do. He would register it if the post lines were still open. If not, he would take every precaution for its safety until they were.

“But they will be still open,” was the decided reply. “As for the next packet, marked ‘B,’ you will not open it—not yet. Keep it with you. The time may come when you will see everything dark around you, and there is no outlook, and life hardly worth prolonging. Then, and then only, open it. Do you promise to observe my instructions implicitly?”

“I pledge you my word of honour to do so,” replied John Ames, gravely.

“Then our time for parting is very near. Remember that you owe your life—both your lives—to me. Don’t interrupt. It is not unnecessary to remind you again of this, for you will meet with every temptation to reveal that which I charge you to keep to yourself—viz. all relating to my personality and what you have seen and heard.”

“One moment. Pardon my asking,” said John Ames, tentatively. “But have you ever told anybody else what you have told me?”

“Not one living soul. Why have I told you? Perhaps I had my reasons: perhaps the sight of you two wandering as I have wandered. It is immaterial. My work here is nearly done. This rising which has been so disastrous to your countrymen and mine—how disastrous you have yet to learn—my hand has fostered and fed. I have foreseen the opportunity. I waited for it patiently, and when it came I seized it. But there will be more work in other parts, and, mark me, John Ames, my unseen hand will again be there to strike.”

“Tell me one thing more. If it was through your influence the people spared us, how is it they tried to kill me that time I was leaving Madúla, when they drove me over the dwala, and I woke up to find myself here? That was a narrow squeak, I can tell you.”

“It was indeed, John Ames. But that was accidental, and was contrary to my orders.”

“Contrary to your orders? But,”—sitting up, with a stare of blank amazement—“but—who are you?”

“I am Umlimo.”

“What! You Umlimo? It cannot be. I have always held Umlimo to be a sort of fraudulent abstraction, engineered by innyangas like Shiminya and others. You the Umlimo?”

But to the startled eyes of the questioner the form of the questioned seemed to grow larger, taller, like a presence filling the whole place. The old relentless look of implacable hate transformed the features, and the deep eyes glowed, while from the scarcely opened lips boomed forth as in deep thunder-tones—

“I am Umlimo.”

A mist filled the place. The figure with its background of rock-wall seemed to lose form. A sudden stupor seized upon the brain of John Ames, as though the whole atmosphere were pervaded by a strong narcotic. Then he knew no more.

Chapter Twenty Five.

In State of Siege.

There can be no doubt but that, during the period of the rising, and especially during the earlier half of the same, the township of Bulawayo was a very uncomfortable place indeed.

The oft-recurring scares, necessitating the crowding of, at any rate, the bulk of its inhabitants into the laagers at night, contributed in the main to this. With instances of the fell unsparing ferocity which attended the rebel stroke—sudden, swift, and unexpected—fresh in the mind of everybody, citizens were chary of exposing themselves and their families to a like visitation. Private residences straggling over the surburban stands were abandoned for the greater security of the temporary forts which had been hastily but effectively formed out of some of the principal buildings in and around the township itself; and the comfort and privacy of home-life had perforce to be exchanged for an overcrowded, hotch-potch, barrack sort of existence; men, women, and children of all sorts and sizes herding together, hugger-mugged, under every conceivable form of racket and discomfort, and under the most inadequate conditions of area and convenience. Rumour, in its many-tongued and wildest form, filled the air, gathering in volume, and frequently in wildness, with the advent of every fresh batch of refugees. For from all sides these came flying in—prospectors, miners, outlying settlers with their families, some with a portion of their worldly goods, others with none at all, and fortunate in having escaped with their lives where others had not. For it soon became manifest that such events as the massacre of the Hollingworths and the Inglefields, and the fight and resolute defence at Jekyll's Store, were but samples of what had taken place—or was still going on—all over the country. Haggard fugitives, gaunt with starvation, stony-eyed with days and nights of deadly peril for close companionship, nerves shattered by the most horrible recollections, and apprehension worked up to the acutest phase thereby—continued to arrive, each and all bringing the same tale of treachery and ruthlessness and blood, deepening on every hand the gloom and anxiety of the situation—anxiety on behalf of those not yet accounted for, mingling with an apprehensive looking forward to how it was all going to end, and when. The necessaries of life went up to famine prices, and then the enemy began to invest the town.

Southward, crouching lion-like, among the Matyamhlope rocks; on the north, occupying the site of the old Bulawayo kraal, and in possession of the "Government" House which the presumptuous white man had erected upon the former seat of the departed king, overhanging, like a dark cloud, the township beneath, or again making fierce dashes upon traffic which should attempt the eastward way, he mustered in all his savage

might—an ever-present menace. But the way to the west, for some unaccountable reason, was left open.

Those in charge of the safety of the township had their hands full. They might sally forth in force, as they frequently did, with the object of rolling back the danger that threatened; an object sometimes accomplished, sometimes not, for the rolling back was not invariably all on one side. But whichever way the attempt would go, the wily foe was sure to be in position again almost immediately, whence, massed around the very edifice that symbolised the domination of those threatened, the defiant thunder of his war-song would reach their ears.

Of all the narrow escapes from the widespread massacre which at that time were in everybody's mouth, none perhaps commanded general attention so much as that of Nidia Commerell. It was so fraught with the dramatic element, being in fact not one escape, but a series of them. Her personality, too, imparted to it an additional interest; this refined and attractive girl, brought up amid every comfort, suddenly to be thrown by rude contrast from the luxurious appointments of her peaceful English home into the red surroundings of massacre and of death. Again, the circumstances of her wanderings appealed strongly to the romantic side, and people looked knowingly at each other, and pronounced John Ames to be a singularly fortunate individual—would be, at least, were it not for the fact that nobody knew whether he was alive or dead; indeed, the latter contingency seemed the more probable.

There was one to whom Nidia's reappearance was as little short of restoration to life for herself, and that one was Mrs Bateman, for to her the girl was more than all the world put together—far more than her own husband, and she had no children. When the first tidings of the outbreak, and the massacre of the Hollingworths, had come in, the poor woman had been simply frantic. The fact that Nidia had not been included in the tragedy, but had disappeared, brought with it small comfort. She pictured her darling in the power of brutal savages, or wandering alone in the wilderness to perish miserably of starvation and exhaustion; perhaps, even, to fall a prey to wild animals. Was it for this she had allowed her to leave her English home "for a peep into wild life," as they had put it when the much debated question had arisen? Not even the dreadful task of breaking the news to Nidia's relatives occurred to her now, her grief was too whole-hearted, too unmixed. Her husband came in for a convenient safety-valve, though. Why had he induced either of them to come near such a hateful country? He was the real murderer, not these vile savages; and having with admirable and usual feminine logic clapped the saddle on the wrong horse to her heart's content, and caused that estimable engineer mildly to wish he had never been born, she hunted him off with one of the relief forces, together with every man she could succeed in pressing into her service. Indeed, it used to be said that, could she have had her way, just about every available man in Bulawayo

would have been started off on that particular search, leaving all the other women and children, herself included, to take their chance. And then, when her grief had reached the acutest pitch of desperation, the missing girl had been found. Thenceforward nothing mattered. The place might be attacked nightly by all the Matabele in Rhodesia for all she cared. She had got her darling back again.

Back again—yes. But this was not the same Nidia. The bright sunny flow of spirits was gone, likewise the sweet equanimity and caressing, teasing, provocative little ways. This Nidia had come back so changed. There was a tired, hunted look in her eyes, a listlessness of speech and manner such as might have suited her twenty years thence, after an indifferent experience of life interim, but now was simply startling as a contrast. She talked but little, and of her escape and the manner of it, seemed to care to talk least of all. The part John Ames had borne in that escape she took care to make widely known, but when alone with her friend reference to him had the effect of causing her to burst into tears in the most unexpected and therefore alarming fashion. This seemed not unnatural. The terrible experiences the poor girl had gone through were calculated to unhinge her; nor was it strange she should grieve over the tragic fate which had almost certainly overtaken the man who had been her sole guide and protector during those terrible days, whose sagacity and resource had brought her in safety through every peril that threatened. It was in the nature of things she should so grieve, even had they not been on very friendly terms before. There was nothing for it but time, thought Susie Bateman—time and change of scene; and with a view to the latter she hinted at the advisability of risking the journey down-country, for, strange to say, the enemy had refrained from intercepting the coach traffic on the Mafeking road. This proposal, however, was met by Nidia with a very decided negative.

These two were fortunately exempt from the crowding and discomfort of the laagers, through the fact that the house owned by the absent Bateman was situated within about a stone's throw of one of the latter. Should occasion really arise, they would, of course, be obliged to take refuge therein; but in the mean time they could afford to ignore unsubstantiated scares, for there were not wanting those who made it—literally in some instances—a labour of love to keep extra and special watch over this particular household. Moseley and Tarrant, for instance, who were among the defenders of the township; Carbutt, the tall, good-looking man who had figured prominently in the fight at Jekyll's Store; and several others. Leave it to them, had been their assurance. If real necessity arose, they would see to it that the two ladies should be within the laager in ample time. Meanwhile they need take no notice of the ordinary regulation scare, but just sit still in peace and quietness.

They were thus sitting a few days after Nidia's return, when the latter startled her friend by an apparently insane proposal. "Let's go for a bike ride, Susie; a real good long one."

“Great Heavens! Is the child mad? Why, we’d run into those hateful black wretches before we’d gone a couple of miles. They’re all round us thick as bees. Why, we could see them no further than Government House only this morning.”

“That’s just the way I wanted to go. It would be such fun to see how near we could get, and then skim away downhill again. They’d look so sold.”

“Haven’t you had enough of that sort of thing yet, Nidia? If I had been through one-tenth of what you have, I’d never want to go adventuring any more.”

“Perhaps I’ve contracted a taste that way now,” was the reply, with a weariful laugh. “But anything rather than sit still as we are doing. I want a little excitement—a stirring up.”

The other stared in wild amazement. Was the child really going off her head? she thought again. But a knock on the open door announced the advent of visitors, and lo! two men bronzed and coatless, according to the fashion in Rhodesia, swept off their broad-brimmed hats and entered. They were, in fact, Tarrant and Carbutt, and at sight of them Nidia brightened up somewhat.

“Well, and what’s the latest in the way of scares?” she began, after the exchange of greetings.

“None at present, Miss Commerell,” replied Carbutt. “Things are slack. We shall have to go and have another slap at the niggers up yonder, to keep the rust off. They are getting altogether too cheeky, squatting around Government House its very self.”

“That’ll make a little excitement,” said Nidia. “We can watch your deeds of derring-do from here through the glasses.”

“Heavens, no!” said Mrs Bateman, with fervour. “I don’t want to see or hear anything more of those dreadful wretches, except that they’ve all been shot.”

“By the way, there is a small item in the way of the latest,” said Tarrant, carelessly. “Another man has rolled in who had been given up as a dead ’un.”

“Yes. Is it anybody we know?” asked Nidia, quickly.

“I rather think it is,” returned Tarrant, watching her face yet while not seeming to. “Ames of Sikumbutana.”

Nidia caught her breath with a sort of gasp, and her whole face lit up.

“Not John Ames?” she cried, as though hanging on the answer. Then, as Tarrant nodded assent, “Oh, I am glad!”

And then all of Nidia’s old self seemed to return. She poured forth question upon question, hardly waiting to be answered. How had he escaped? Where was he, and when was he coming to see her? and so on—and so on.

“He’s rather close on the subject, Miss Commerell,” Tarrant replied. “He has a yarn about being chevvied by niggers and tumbling over a dwala, and lying unconscious—and then some niggers who knew him piloting him in. He asked after you the first thing, just as if you had never been away from here; and the odd part of it is, he didn’t seem in the least surprised to hear you were safe and sound, and quite all right.”

But the oddness of John Ames’ lack of astonishment did not strike Nidia just then. She talked on, quite in her old way—now freely, too—on the subject of her escape and wanderings, making much of the humorous side thereof, and more of the judgment and courage and resource of her guide. Her voice had a glad note about it; a very carol of joy and relief seemed to ring out in every tone. Ever unconventional, it never occurred to her to make the slightest attempt to disguise her feelings. If she was glad that the man who had done so much for her had returned safe and sound, it was not in her to conceal that fact.

“Phew! she’s giving away the show,” Tarrant was thinking to himself. “That first shot of mine re John Ames was a plumb centre. I’ll have the crow over old Moseley now. Lucky John Ames!”

But at heart he was conscious of a certain not altogether to be controlled sinking. He was not without a weakness for Nidia himself; now, however, in a flash he recognised its utter futility, and was far too much a man of the world not to realise that the sooner he cured himself of it the better.

Upon one other the change in Nidia’s manner was not lost, and the discovery struck Susie Bateman with such wild amazement that she at first refused to entertain it. Here, then, lay the secret of the girl’s fits of depression and generally low spirits. Such were not due to her recent terrible experiences. She had been secretly grieving on account of the man who had shared them, or why this sudden and almost miraculous restoration which the news of his safety had effected? She recalled her half-playful, half-serious warning to Nidia during their earlier acquaintance with this man—a warning more than once repeated, too. That had been out of consideration for the man; but that it should

ever have been needed on Nidia's own account—oh, Heavens! the idea was ghastly, if it were not so incredible Nidia, who had renounced airily the most alluring possibilities more than once, now to throw herself away upon a mere nobody! Nidia, who had never taken any of them seriously in her life, to succumb in this fashion! No, it could not be allowed. It could be nothing but the result of propinquity, and danger mutually shared. She must be saved from this at all costs. And then the good woman recognised uneasily that John Ames would be rather a difficult person to defeat, once he had made up his mind to opposition. Ah! but she had one card to play, one weapon wherewith to deal a blow to which one of his mould would be peculiarly vulnerable.

The while she watched Nidia closely. But for the discovery she had made, she would have rejoiced to see her darling so completely her old self, all brightness and animation as she chatted away with the two visitors; now that very gladsomeness was as a poisoned and rankling dart to the dismayed observer, for it confirmed all her direst suspicions. Susie Bateman's Christianity was about on a par with that of the average British female, in that she would have looked sourly askance at anybody who should refuse to attend church, yet just then she would have given a great deal to learn that Tarrant's report was erroneous, and that John Ames was at that moment lying among the granite wilds of the Matopos, as lifeless as the granite itself, with half a dozen Matabele assegais through him.

Such aspirations, however, were as futile as they usually are, and the best proof of the truth of Tarrant's story lay in the real objective presence of the subject thereof; for hardly had the two men departed when they were replaced by a third—even John Ames him-self.

Chapter Twenty Six.

The Packet Marked "B."

With her usual frank naturalness and absence of conventionality, Nidia went to meet him in the doorway. Then, as he took her extended hands, it seemed as though he were going to hold them for ever. Yet no word had passed between them.

How well he looked! she was thinking. The light, not unpicturesque attire there prevailing, and so becoming to a good-looking, well-made man, suited him, she decided. She had first seen him in the ordinary garments of urban civilisation. She had seen him last a tattered fugitive, haggard and unshaven. Now the up-country costume—silk shirt and leather belt, and riding-trousers with gaiters—endowed his lithe well set-up form with an air of freedom and ease, and looking into the clear-cut face and full grey eyes, framed by the wide, straight brim of the up-country hat, she thought she had never seen him looking so well. "How glad I am to see you again!" she said, "Ten thousand welcomes. Do you know, I have been feeling ever since as if I were responsible for—for whatever had befallen you."

"Yes? Imagine, then, what I must have felt at the thought of you, alone in the mountains, not knowing what to do or where to turn. I wonder it didn't drive me stark staring mad. Imagine it, Nidia. Just try to imagine it! Words won't convey it."

"I did have a dreadful time. But I knew nothing would have kept you from returning to me, had you been able. And then your boy, Pukele, arrived, and took such care of me. I sent him out to find you, and he said you had been among the Matabele, but had been able to leave them again—"

"Who? My boy? Pukele?" repeated John Ames, wonderingly.

"Yes. He brought me out of the mountains. One day he went out to hunt. I heard him, as I thought, fire a couple of shots, and came up to find myself among friends again."

"Nidia," called a voice from within—a voice not untinged with acerbity—"won't Mr Ames come inside?"

John Ames started, and the effect seemed to freeze him somewhat. The coldness of the greeting extended to him as he complied, completed the effect. Instinctively he set it down to its true cause.

“We met last under very different circumstances, didn’t we, Mrs Bateman?” he said easily. “None of us quite foresaw all that has happened since.”

“I should think not. The wonder is that one of us is alive to tell the tale,” was the rejoinder, in a tone which seemed to imply that no thanks were due to John Ames that ‘one of us’ was—in short, that he was responsible for the whole rising.

“And do you remember my asking if there wasn’t a chance of the natives rising and killing us all?” said Nidia. “I have often thought of that. What times we have been through!” with a little shudder. “Yet, in some ways it seems almost like a dream. Doesn’t it, Susie?”

“A dream we are not awakened from, unfortunately,” was the reply. “We don’t seem through our troubles yet. Well, as for as we are concerned, we soon shall be. I want to take Miss Commerell out of this wretched country, Mr Ames, as soon as ever it can be managed. Don’t you think it the best plan?”

“I think you are both far safer where you are, since you ask me,” he answered. “Any amount of reinforcements are on their way, and meanwhile the laager here, though uncomfortable, is absolutely safe, because absolutely impregnable. Whereas the Mafeking road, if still open, is so simply on sufferance of the rebels. Any day we may hear of the Mangwe being blocked.”

“I disagree with you entirely,” came the decisive reply. “I hear, on first-rate authority, that the coaches are running regularly, under escort, and that the risk is very slight. I think that will be our best plan. I suppose you will be joining one of the forces taking the field as soon as possible, won’t you, Mr Ames?”

If there was one thing that impressed itself upon John Ames when he first entered, it was that this woman intended to make herself supremely disagreeable; now he could not but own that she was thoroughly succeeding, and, as we said, he had instinctively seen her bent. She was, in fact, warning him off. The tone and manner, the obtrusive way in which she was mapping out his own movements for him, stirred within him a resentment he could hardly disguise, but her suggestion with regard to disposing of those of Nidia struck him with a pang of dismay, and that accentuated by considerations which will hereinafter appear. Now he replied—

“My plans are so absolutely in the clouds that I can hardly say what I may decide to do, Mrs Bateman. I might even decide to cut my connection with this country. Take a run home to England, perhaps. What if I were so fortunate as to come in as your escort?”

This he said out of sheer devilment, and he was rewarded, for if ever a human countenance betrayed disgust, repressed wrath, baffled scheming, all at once, that countenance belonged to Susie Bateman at that moment Nidia came to the rescue.

“You have not told us your adventures yet,” she said. “I want to know all that happened since you left me. I only hope none of these tiresome men will come in and interrupt.”

All that happened! He could not tell her all, for he had pledged his word to the Umlimo. The latter had predicted that he would meet with every temptation to violate that pledge, and here was one of them. No, not even to her could he reveal all. But he told her of his fall from the dwala, his unconsciousness, and, leaving out that strange and startling experience, he went on to tell her what the reader has yet to learn—how he awoke in the broad light of day to find himself surrounded by armed natives, friendly to himself, however, who, of course, acting under orders from the Umlimo, had escorted him to within safe distance of Bulawayo.

Unconsciously their tones—he narrating, she commenting upon the narrative—became soft. Their glances, too, seemed to say something more than words. Both, in fact, were back again in imagination, roaming the wilds together, alone. They seemed to lose themselves in the recollection, oblivious of the presence of a third party.

The said third party, however, was by no means oblivious of them. Her ear weighed every tone, her keen eye noted every glance, every expression, and she grew proportionately venomous. Yet, looking at the man, she could hardly wonder at Nidia’s preference, and the uncomfortable consciousness was forced upon her that whoever might be the object of it, this man or any other, her own feeling would be just the same—one of acute powerless jealousy, to wit, that any should ever stand before herself in her darling’s preferences.

“Don’t go,” said Nidia, putting forth a hand to detain him, for his story had run on late, and he was rising with an apology. “Stay and have dinner with us. It’s siege fare, but even then a little more varied than our precarious ration under the rocks—not that one did not positively enjoy that at the time,” she added with a laugh. He joined in.

“Did you? I’m sure I did. Considering we were without any adjuncts, your cooking was marvellous, Nidia.”

“Nidia” again! Heavens! It had come to that, then! Susie Bateman’s hair nearly rose on end.

“Well, you shall see if it is any better now,” went on the girl, airily. “Oh, I do hope none of those stupid men will drop in. I want to have a nice long talk.”

“You haven’t found them so stupid up till now, Nidia,” struck in Susie Bateman. “Why, there isn’t an evening some of them haven’t been in to cheer us up.”

This for the benefit of John Ames, to whom the speaker divined it might in some way not be palatable. He for his part noted that she did not second the invitation, but he had reached that stage when he really didn’t care to consider any Susie Bateman overmuch. Wherefore he accepted. But the latter, for her part, was resolved to pursue the campaign, and that vigorously, and to this end she never left them for one moment alone together. Likewise was she rather oftener than necessary very emphatic in referring to “Miss Commerell;” and when, later on, some of “those stupid men” did drop in, her joy was unbounded, equally so that they stayed late enough to leave John Ames no pretext for sitting them out.

Resisting a pressing invite to finish up the evening at the Silver Grill, the latter went back to his quarters in by no means an elated frame of mind. Yet he had to some extent foreseen what had happened. Nidia had been kind and cordial to him, but there it was—as one of a crowd. There was no longer that sweet day-to-day companionship, they two isolated from the world. We repeat that he had foreseen this eventuality, yet now that it had arrived he liked it not one whit the more; nor was there consolation in the thought that here was another confirmation of the general accuracy of his forecasting faculty. Already he began to realise the Umlimo’s forecast: “There will come a time when you will look back upon these rough wanderings of yours—the two of you—as a dream of paradise.” Of a truth that strange being possessed the gift of prophecy to an extraordinary degree.

Now, too, and in the days that followed, he found subject-matter for some very serious thinking, and one of the main subjects of his thoughts was that of the Umlimo. No abstraction, then, was this cult, such as he and others had supposed. Probably it had been originally, but he who now used the title had seized the opportunity of turning it into a most formidable weapon against his enemies, in furtherance of one of the most ruthless, daring, and far-reaching schemes of vengeance which the mind of man could ever conceive and foster; and the object of this terrible monomania, the man’s own nationality. John Ames was in a quandary. Here he stood, possessed of most important knowledge, yet powerless to divulge it; cognisant of a fact of most vital moment to those who employed him, and whose pay he was receiving, yet tied and bound by his pledged word.

There was one way out of this difficulty, and that way, not being an unscrupulous man, he decided to take. He resigned his position in the service of the Chartered Company. Even then his mind was by no means at ease. There seemed still to be a duty to perform to humanity in general. Were he to keep this knowledge to himself, how many lives would be sacrificed which otherwise might have been saved? The capture or death of the Umlimo—would it not be effectual to stop the rising? and was he not in duty bound to further this end in the interests of his fellow-countrymen? Conscience told him he might do this; for with all the care and secrecy that had attended both his entrance to and exit from the cave of mystery, he could not disguise from himself that, by careful calculations as to time and locality, he might be able to find the spot again. But then would rise before him his pledged word. He had given it when in the power of this extraordinary being, when both his own life and that of Nidia had lain in his hand, and he could not now go back on it—no, not on any consideration. His countrymen must take their chance. He had done all that could reasonably be expected of him in resigning his position and its emoluments.

In doing this, however, it was pre-eminently a case of looking to virtue as its own reward. Certainly it brought him no nearer the realisation of his hopes; for so slender were his private means of existence, that only by the exercise of the most rigid economy could he get along at all, and the necessaries of life, be it remembered, were at famine prices. Decidedly, indeed, his prospects were looking blacker and yet more black.

And what of Nidia herself? As the days went by she seemed to draw no nearer. Seldom now was he suffered to be alone with her, and then only for a minute or so, when an ever-present feeling of gêne and flurry would be there to mar the effect of any opportunity he might have had to improve the occasion, and, indeed, he was beginning to regard matters as hopeless. The persistent hostility of Mrs Bateman was ever on the watch to defeat his every move; and as to this, even, there were times when it seemed to him that Nidia was a trifle too acquiescent in the latter's objectionable and scarcely concealed efforts at railing him off. Then, too, Nidia was constantly surrounded by a knot of men, many of them fine gallant-looking fellows, already distinguished for some feat of intrepidity. There was the commander of the relief troop which had brought her in, for instance, and Carbutt and Tarrant and several others. He, John Ames, so far from being the one to bring her in, as he used to pride himself would be the case, had merely imperilled her the more by his own sheer incautious blundering. Sick at heart, he would fain be lying where he had fallen—a battered, lifeless heap at the base of the great dwala.

From this his thoughts would wander to the mysterious rock-dwelling, and to him who inhabited it. Why, and with what object to serve, had the Umlimo spared and tended him? That he might deliver his message to the outside world? Well, he had done that. And then—and the very thought sent a thrill as of needles and pins throughout his whole

system. He had delivered the one message, but what of the other enclosure, the one which in some mysterious way concerned himself, the packet marked “B”? He got it out and eyed it. The Umlimo’s words were vividly imprinted in his memory. “The time may come when you will see everything dark around you, and there is no outlook, and life hardly worth prolonging. Then, and then only, open it.”

Solemn and weighty now did those words seem. Great Heaven! had not just such a time come? Was not everything dark enough in all conscience, and what outlook did life afford? Yes, he would do it. His heart beat fast as he undid the sealed oilskin wrappings of the packet. What would it contain, and how could such contents in any way conduce to his own welfare? The last wrapping was off, revealing an enclosure. Only a sealed letter, directed to the same names and address as that in the packet marked “A”—a firm in Cape Town—of solicitors or agents, he conjectured. One word of instructions accompanied this, one single word—

“Forward.”

“And that is all?” he said to himself, perhaps a trifle disappointedly, turning the enclosure round and round. “Well, that’s no trouble. I’ll go and do it.”

Chapter Twenty Seven.

The Fight Outside.

MacFurdon's troop, about two hundred strong, was sweeping up the long slope which ran northward from the township of Bulawayo, and the line it was taking would bring it out a little to the right of Government House and the site of the old kraal.

It was bitterly cold, for the dawn had not yet risen. The insurgents had waxed bolder and yet more bold. They were holding the ridge, and were in calm possession of Government House itself, and now the idea was to teach them that the time had come when they could no longer have everything their own way. To this end it had been decided to get well within striking distance of them at break of day.

MacFurdon's troop was rather a scratch concern, got together in a hurry, but consisting of good material. With it went many volunteers. It was, however, in this instance, as much a reconnoitring party as one for fighting purposes. On its right flank moved a contingent of the Cape Boy corps, feeling the ground towards the Umguza. This, too, was rather a scratch force, composed of every conceivable kind of South African native, but, like the other, of excellent fighting material.

"Say, Ames—what sort of show you think we got?" whispered one of the volunteers aforesaid, as they drew near the crest of the rise. "Now, if they was Indians, I guess we'd boost them out of yon White House of yours in no time, striking them in the dark so."

The speaker was an American, by name Shackleton, commonly called "The Major," by virtue of his having claimed to hold that rank in Uncle Sam's regular army. He likewise claimed to have seen service in the Indian wars on the Plains. In more peaceful times he was a prospector by occupation.

"Show? Oh, the usual thing," answered John Ames. "We shall get in touch with each other, and there'll be a big swap in bullets, and a general hooroosh. They'll all sneak away in the grass, and we shall get back into camp feeling as if our clothes all wanted letting out. If there are more of them than we can take care of all at once, why, we shan't be feeling so vast."

"That so? You ever fight Matabele before?"

"Yes. I was up here with the column in '93. That used to be the programme then."

The wind was singing in frosty puffs through the grass, bitterly cold. Riding along in the darkness, the numbed feet of most there advancing could hardly feel the stirrups. Then upon the raw air arose a sound—a strange, long-drawn wailing sound, not devoid of rhythm, and interspersed every now and then with a kind of humming hiss.

“They are holding a war-dance, so there must be plenty of them there,” whispered John Ames. “Listen! I can hear the words now.”

It was even as he said. They were near enough for that. Louder and louder the war-song of Lobengula swelled forth upon the darkness, coming from just beyond the rise—

“Woz ’ubone! Woz ’ubone, kiti kwazula! Woz ’ubone! Nants ’indaba. Indaba yemkonto—Jjí-jjí! Jjí-jjí!

“Nants ’indaba. Indaba yezizwe. Akwazimúntu. Jjí-jjí! Jjí-jjí! Woz ’ubone! Nants ’indaba. Indaba kwa Matyobane. Jjí-jjí! Jjí-jjí!”

(“Jjí-jjí” is the cry on striking a foe.)

A translation of the war-song:

“Come behold, come behold, at the High Place!
Come behold. That is the tale - the tale of the spear.
That is the tale - the tale of the nation. Nobody knows.
Come behold. That is the tale - the tale of Matyobane.”
The barbaric strophes rolled in a wave of sound, rising higher with each repetition, and to the measured accompaniment of the dull thunder of stamping feet, the effect was weirdly grand in the darkness.

“It makes something very like nonsense if turned into English,” whispered John Ames, in reply to his comrade’s query, “but it contains allusions well understood by themselves. There isn’t anything particularly bloodthirsty about it, either. That sort of hiss, every now and then, is what we shall hear if we get to close quarters.”

“Their kind of war-whoop, maybe. I recollect at Wounded Knee Creek, when Big Foot’s band made believe to come in—”

But what the speaker recollected at Wounded Knee Creek was destined never to be imparted to John Ames, for at that juncture a peremptory word was passed for silence in the ranks.

Now the dawn was beginning to show, revealing eager faces, set and grim, and rifles were grasped anew. Then what happened nobody seemed to know individually. A straggling volley was poured into the advancing troop from the crest of the rise, and the bugle rang out the order to charge. As John Ames had described it, there followed a sort of "hooroosh" in which each man was acting very much to his own hand, as, the troop having whirled over the ridge, the order was given to dismount, and the men stood pouring volley upon volley after the loose masses of flying savages.

This, however, was not destined to last. The first shock over of surprise and dismay, the Matabele dropped down into cover and began to return the fire with considerable spirit. They were in some force, too, and it behoved the attacking whites to seize what shelter they could, each man taking advantage of whatever lay to his hand, whether stone or bush or ant heap, or even a depression in the ground.

Then, for a space, things grew very lively. The sharp spit of rifles was never silent, with the singing of missiles overhead. The enemy had the advantage in the matter of cover, and now and then a dark form, gliding like a snake among the grass and thorns, would be seen to make a convulsive spring and fall over kicking. One trooper was shot dead, and more than one wounded, and meanwhile masses of the enemy could be descried working up to the south-west. Reinforcements? It looked like it, remembering that the force at first engaged was not inconsiderable. The word went forth to retreat.

This was done in good order—at first. But now appeared a great outflanking mass, pouring up from the northern side, and its object was clear. A long wire fence ran down from the apex of the rise. It was necessary to retreat round the upper end of this. Did this outflanking mass reach it first, the white force would probably be destroyed, for they could not get their horses through the wire, and would have crushing odds to overwhelm them. It became a race for the end of the fence, which, however, the cool intrepidity and sound judgment of the leaders prevented from being a helter-skelter one.

John Ames and "The Major" and a trooper were on the extreme left flank, now become the right one, all intent on a knot of savages, who were keeping them busily employed from a thick bit of thorn bush, and did not at once become alive to the retreat. When they did, they became alive to something else, and that was that by nothing short of a miracle could they gain the upper end of that fence in time.

"Your horse jump, Ames?" said the American.

"Don't know. Never tried."

“You got to try now, then, by God! Our only chance. Look!”

John Ames did look, and so did the other man. At the upper end of the fence a mass of savages were in possession, pouring a volley after the retreating troop. Below on their right the three men saw the other outflanking “horn” now closing in upon them, and a line of warriors coming through the grass and thorns in front at a trot. It was a strong impi, and a large one.

In that brief flash of time, John Ames was curiously alive to detail. He could see the ostrich-feather mútyas worn by the warriors, the parti-coloured shields and the gleam of spears, and decided this was a crack regiment. He could see, too, the township of Bulawayo lying in its basin below, and the retreating horsemen now already far away. He noted the look of fear on the face of the trooper, and that of desperate resolve in the keen eyes of the American.

“Now for it!” he cried. “Put your horses at it here. I’ll give you a lead.”

A wire fence is a trying thing to jump, with an uncertain steed. To his surprise, John Ames lighted in safety on the other side. Not so Shackleton. His horse’s hoofs caught the top wire, and turning a complete somersault, threw its rider heavily, but on the right side of the fence, while that of the trooper refused point-blank and trotted off, snorting idiotically, right down the fence into the very teeth of the advancing enemy.

John Ames turned, then rode back.

“Get up, Major, for Heaven’s sake!”

Shackleton had already been on his feet, but subsided again with a groan.

“Can’t. Ankle gone. Guess my time’s here—right here,” he panted. “You go on.”

“We don’t do things that way, damn it!” John Ames answered, in his strong excitement. “Here, get up on my horse.”

He had dismounted. Shackleton’s fool of an animal had already recovered itself and made itself scarce. The advancing impi was barely three hundred yards distant, pouring onward, shivering the air with its deep vibrating “Jjí-jjí!”

“You go on!” repeated the American. “I won’t be taken alive.”

John Ames said no more. He did. Shackleton, fortunately, was rather a small man, and light. The other seized him under the shoulders, and by dint of half lifting, half pushing, got him bodily into the saddle.

"Now go!" he shouted. "I'll hold on the stirrup."

All this had taken something under a minute.

They went. The impi was now pouring through the fence, whose momentary obstruction almost made a difference of life or death to the fugitives. How they escaped John Ames never knew. Sky, earth, the distant township beneath, all whirled round and round before him. Twice he nearly lost hold of the stirrup-leather and would have fallen; then at last became aware of slackening pace. Turning, dizzy and exhausted, he saw that the enemy had abandoned pursuit.

And what of the unfortunate trooper? Not much, and that soon over, luckily. Abandoning his mount, he made a rush for the fence, but too late. A very hail of assegais was showered upon him, and he fell, half in, half out, across the wire. With a roar of exultation the savages were around him. Assegais gleamed in the air, first bright, then red, and in a second nothing was left but a shapeless and mangled mass.

Such tragedies, however, come but under the simple word "losses," and these, all things considered, had not been great. On the other hand, the enemy had suffered severely, and if, by sheer force of overwhelming numbers, he had succeeded in driving them back, those forming the reconnaissance were not disposed to feel it acutely. They were quite ready to go in at him another day, and thus make things even.

But Shackleton, otherwise "The Major," was not going to let the thing down so easily. His sprained ankle kept him tied by the leg for some days, but on the subject of the fight and the retreat he became somewhat of a bore. On the subject of John Ames he became even more of one. He was never tired of extolling that worthy's readiness and nerve, and his self-devotion in risking his life to save a comrade.

"You British have got a little iron notion," he would say, "a thing you call a Victoria Cross, I reckon. Well, when you going to get it for John Ames? He boosted me on to his broncho like a sack right away, and run afoot himself. But for him where'd I be now? Cut into bully beef by those treacherous savages. Yes, sir."

But as these incisive utterances were invariably accompanied by an invitation to liquor, there were some who were not above drawing. The Major upon his favourite topic. To

most, however, he became a bore, but to none so much as the subject thereof. Said the latter one day—

"Do you know, Major, I begin to wish I had left you where you were. It's a fact that you're making a perfect fool of me, and I wish you'd drop it."

"Shucks! Now you quit that fool-talk, John Ames, and reach down that whisky over there—if you can call such drug-store mixture as your Scotch stuff by the same name as real old Kentucky. I'm going on at it until they give you that little nickel thing you British think such a heap of."

"But I don't want it, can't you understand?" he retorted angrily; "nor anything else either. I believe I'll get out of this country mighty soon. I'm sick of the whole show."

Shackleton looked at his friend, and shook his head gravely. John Ames petulant, meant something very wrong indeed with John Ames. Then an idea struck "The Major"—a bright idea, he reckoned—and in the result he seized an early opportunity of making a call, and during that call he retold his favourite tale to just two persons—to one of whom it was pleasant and to one of whom it was not. You see, he was a shrewd observer, was Shackleton, otherwise "The Major."

Chapter Twenty Eight.

The King and the Age.

“Do try and be serious a little while if you can, Nidia, if only that I have something very serious to say to you.”

“Drive ahead, then, Govvie. I promise not even to laugh.”

Susie Bateman looked at the girl as she sat there, with hands clasped together and downcast eyes, striving to look the very picture of be-lectured demureness, and tried to feel angry with her. Yet, somehow, she could not—no, not even when she thought to detect a suspicious heave of the shoulders which denoted a powerful fund of compressed laughter. With the absent object of her intended “straight talk” she felt venomously savage. With this one—no, she could not.

“Well, what I want to say is this,” she went on. “Nidia, is it fair to encourage that man as you do?”

“Which man? There are so many men. Do I encourage them?”

“Oh, child, don’t be so wildly exasperating. You know perfectly well who I mean.”

Then Nidia lifted her eyes with a gleam of delightful mischief in them.

“I have a notion you are ungrammatical, Govvie. I am almost sure you ought to have said ‘whom I mean.’ Well, we won’t be particular about that. But, as my American adorer, ‘Major’ Shackleton, would say, ‘Oh, do drive on,’ By the way, is he the man I am encouraging?”

What was to be done with such a girl as this? But Susie Bateman was not to be put off.

“You know perfectly well that I mean John Ames.”

“Oh! Now you’re talking, as my ‘Major’ aforesaid would rejoin. And so I encourage John Ames, do I? Poor fellow! he seems to need it.”

There was an unconscious softness wherewith these words were uttered. It drove the other frantic, “Need it indeed! On the contrary, what he needs is discouragement, and plenty of it. Well, he gets it from me, at any rate.”

“Oh yes, he does,” came the softly spoken interpolation.

“Well, but, Nidia, how much further is this thing to go? Why, the man comes here and talks to you as if you belonged to him; has a sort of taken-possession-of-you way about him that it’s high time to put an end to.”

“And if he had not ‘taken possession’ of me in that ghastly place on the Umgwane, and kept it ever since, where would I be now?” came the placid rejoinder.

“Yes, I know. That is where the mischief came in. It was partly my fault for ever encouraging the man’s acquaintance. I might have known he would be dangerous. There is that about him so different to the general run of them that would make him that way to one like yourself, Nidia. Yes; I blame myself.”

“Yes; he is different to the general ruck, isn’t he?” rejoined Nidia, with a softness in her wide-opened eyes that rather intensified than diminished the bitterness of her friend and mentor.

“Well, at any rate he is nobody in particular,” flashed out the latter, “and probably hasn’t got a shilling to his name; and now I hear he has resigned his appointment”—again that provoking smile, “Once for all, Nidia; do you intend to marry him?”

“Marry who? John Ames?”

“Yes,” with a snap.

“He hasn’t asked me.”

The innocent artlessness of the tone, the look of absolute and childlike simplicity in the blue eyes as the answer came tranquilly forth, would have sent a bystander into convulsions. It sent Mrs Bateman out of the room in a whirlwind of wrath. After her went the offender.

“Don’t get mad, Susie. I can’t help being a tease, can I? I was built that way. Come along out, and we’ll drop in on some other frightened and beleaguered female, and swap camp and laager gossip.”

But the other refused. She was seriously put out, she said, and never felt less like going anywhere. So Nidia, who understood her—at times, somewhat crusty—friend thoroughly, and managed her accordingly, put on her hat and went alone.

To do her justice, Mrs Bateman, from her point of view, was not without cause for concern. Nidia's father—she had lost her mother—was the senior partner of an exceedingly wealthy firm of shipowners, and had certainly a more brilliant future planned for his only and idolised daughter than an alliance with a penniless nobody; for so, with a certain spiteful emphasis, Mrs Bateman delighted to designate the object of her abhorrence. The girl had been allowed to accompany her only after long and much-expressed opposition on the paternal side, and now she felt simply weighted down with responsibility. And this was the way in which she had fulfilled her trust!

But fortune seemed inclined to favour her to-day. Scarcely had Nidia been gone ten minutes, than there came a knock at the door of their diminutive abode. John Ames himself! Susie Bateman snorted like the metaphoric warhorse, for she scented battle. She was about to indulge this obnoxious person with a very considerable fragment of her mind. Nevertheless she welcomed him pleasantly—almost too pleasantly, thus overdoing the part. But she had no intention of sending him off at a tangent, as she knew full well would be the result of letting him know that Nidia was not in.

Observing him keenly, she noted the quick shade of disappointment as he became alive to the fact that the room was empty save for herself. She knew exactly what was passing in his mind, and found a cruel enjoyment in observing every sign of expectation evoked by this or that sound outside, for she had not told him that Nidia was out, and knew that he was still hoping she might only be in another room. At length he enquired.

"Miss Commerell has gone out," she replied. "She went round to see some people; I didn't even hear who they were. She won't be back till lunch-time, if then; and perhaps it is just as well, Mr Ames, for I have been wanting to have a little quiet conversation with you. Now we can have it."

"Yes?" he said enquiringly. But tranquil as the tone was, she had not failed to note the scarcely perceptible start of conscious dismay evoked by the announcement. Yet now it had come to the point, she for her part hardly knew how to begin, and he was not going to help her. Besides, his tranquil self-possession was somewhat disconcerting. However, she started in at it, characteristically, headlong.

"Now, you must not be angry with me, Mr Ames; but I want to talk to you as a woman of the world to a man of the world. In short, about Miss Commerell."

"Such a subject cannot but be interesting, Mrs Bateman."

"She is under my charge, you know."

“Yes. You are to be congratulated on the delightful nature of such a charge.”

“But you admit that it is one which entails a grave responsibility?”

“The gravest responsibility,” he replied.

“Well, then, the gravity of that responsibility must be my excuse for what I am about to say. Don’t you think you come here rather often?”

She was exasperated by his imperturbability. She could see he meant fencing, wherefore she clubbed him without further preliminary.

“Do I?” he answered, in the same even tone.

She could hardly restrain her wrath, and her voice took a higher pitch.

“Do you?” she echoed somewhat stupidly, because fast losing her temper. “Well, when I tell you people are beginning to talk about it?”

“Yes; they would be sure to do that. You see, they have so little to talk about, all crowded up together here.”

She was taken wildly aback. The unparalleled impudence of the man, taking everything for granted in this way!

“Well, I can’t have Miss Commerell talked about, and I won’t. And that’s all about it.”

“Oh, it’s about Miss Commerell they are talking? I understood you to mean it was about my coming here.”

Then Mrs Bateman lost her temper, and, as women of her stamp usually do under such circumstances, she became rude.

“Bless the man, is he quite a fool?” she broke forth, fairly quivering with rage. “Don’t you, or won’t you, understand that you are the cause of getting Nidia talked about? You! And I won’t have it. Indeed, under the circumstances, your acquaintance with Miss Commerell had better cease. She is in my charge, remember.”

“Yes. But she is not a child. I should first like to hear Miss Commerell’s own views in the matter; indeed, shall do so before deciding on whether to fall in with yours or not, and

so I tell you frankly, Mrs Bateman. Of course this is your house, and I need hardly say I shall visit it no more."

"One moment. I have not quite done," she went on, for he had risen to go. "Again you must forgive me for plain-speaking; but let me advise you, as a friend, to entertain no hopes that can only end in disappointment. You are probably aware that Miss Commerell's father is a very wealthy man, and therefore you will not be surprised to learn that he has mapped out a brilliant future for his only daughter."

The speaker was alive to the slight stirring of dismay that passed like a ripple over the countenance of her hearer. She knew him well enough to be sure that the bolt had gone home, and at heart secretly respected him. In making this statement she had thrown her king of trumps.

"It is very painful for me to be obliged to speak like this, Mr Ames," she went on, deftly infusing a little less acerbity into her tone, "especially when I think of all you have done for Miss Commerell throughout a time of terrible danger. But as to this, you will certainly not find her people ungrateful; you may take my assurance as to that. Let me see. You have resigned your appointment, have you not? At least, so I have been told."

She paused. She had thrown her ace.

John Ames, his face white to the lips with this culminating outrage, replied—

"Pardon me if I decline to discuss my own private affairs with anybody, Mrs Bateman. For the rest, there is a pitch of perfection in everything, even in the art of plain-speaking, and perfection in that art I must congratulate you on having attained. Good morning!"

He bowed and left the house, with, at any rate, all the honours of war on his side; and this she could not but recognise, feeling rather small and uncomfortable as she looked after his retreating figure. But she had thrown her ace of trumps, anyway.

"How will you face the parting of the ways?"

The Umlimo's question came back to his mind as he walked away from the house in a very fury of turmoil. The Umlimo's predictions seemed to fulfil themselves to the letter in every particular. In his then frame of mind John Ames found his thoughts reverting to that strange personality with a kind of fascination, of deepened sympathy. He himself began to feel the same hatred of his kind, the same intuition that even as the hand of everybody was against him, so should his hand be against everybody. It was significant

that Nidia should have been out of the way. Could it be that she had deputed this cursed, parrot-faced, interfering woman to take up her part and so clear the ground for her? His part was played. He had been Nidia's Providence during that perilous flight, but now his part was played. She had no longer any use for him. The "brilliant future mapped out for her"—the words seemed burnt into his brain—what part or lot had he in such, he a mere penniless nobody? And then all the outrageous insult conveyed by the woman's words—a sort of patronising assurance that he would be compensated, yes, compensated—paid—why did she not call it? Faugh! It was sickening. Well, again, as the Umlimo had pronounced, it was the way of life. Black and bitter were his thoughts. All was dark—blankly dark. He knew not which way to turn. And at this juncture "The Major," otherwise Shackleton, his ankle now restored sufficiently to enable its owner to hobble about, barred his material way with a pressing invitation to come round and lunch. Lunch, indeed! Mentally he consigned that estimable American to the devil, and, leaving him astonished, went on to his own quarters, like a wounded animal, to hide his pain and heartbreak alone. Besides, he was sick of the story of his own "heroism." Damn such "heroism"! He thought of the luckless trooper who had been with them in their peril, probably conjured up by the sight of Shackleton, and envied him. Why had he not been the one to end his hopes and fears then in that swift and easy manner? That poor devil probably had plenty of life's sweets in front of him. He had none. That was all over and done with.

He gained his quarters. The post had come in, and on his table lay a pile of official-looking letters, most of them addressed to him by his late official style. He glanced through them listlessly, one after another, and then—What was it that caused his hand to shake and the colour to leave his face, and started him bolt upright? He stared at the sheet again and again. Yes, there it was. He was not dreaming. The sheet of paper was material, substantial; the words on it, written in a somewhat flourishing, clerkly hand, were plain enough, and they were to the effect that there had been placed to his credit, and lay at his disposal, in the Standard Bank in Cape Town, the sum of twenty-five thousand pounds.

Twenty-five thousand pounds! At his disposal! Heavens, what did it mean? Some hoax? Some practical joke? Of course. But with the bank communication was an enclosure. This he opened with trembling fingers, and thus it ran—

"In carrying out my instructions, John Ames, as you have done to the very letter, you have rendered me a service beyond any money value. Go now and be happy with her whom you love, and this end the accompanying communication will materially further. Do not spoil your happiness by any cursed foolish pride, or insane ideas of being under an obligation, for this sum is less to me than a five-pound note would be to you probably at this moment"—again that well-nigh superhuman gift of forecast—"and take no more

risks, but go in peace while you, or rather while ye, may—the road is still open—and by your lifelong happiness continue to justify the forecasts of:—

“Umlimo.”

This, then, was what meant the opening of the packet marked “B.”

Chapter Twenty Nine.

...And the Odd Trick.

John Ames stared at this communication till his eyes were dizzy, and a wild rush of joy surged through his being. Its genuineness he could not doubt. The bank paper, the bank seal—even the signature of the letter he knew by name. Now he was no longer a penniless nobody, but the possessor of what was really a small fortune. Why, indeed, should any false pride stand in the way of his acceptance of it? People received bequests, even from unknown testators—received them thankfully; why should not he? The testator was living, yet practically dead to his kind. Again, there was a sort of appeal in the very wording of this strange communication. Why should he wreck his life's happiness upon any rock of false pride? He could now press his suit upon, at any rate, independent terms.

Then, to dash his exultation, in came that ugly thought again. Could it really be that that odious woman was deputed by Nidia? Horrible! What was this sudden access to competence in such a case? "A brilliant future mapped out for her." Even now, under his changed fortunes, such was not within his reach to offer her. John Ames was a proud man and a sensitive one. Could it be that his ideal had stopped down from her pedestal? Then, by a comic twist of thought, came back that conversation down by the blue sea at Camp's Bay. This pedestal to let! Yes, it was comical.

But again, by another twist of thought, came back that day in all its idyllic aspects; in all the golden glow of love and faith, and vague, indefinable hope. Came back also that parting in the solitudes of a grim wilderness, that pressure of the hands, that last long look into the eyes. Surely there was truth; there, far from artificial restraints, was the soul laid bare. John Ames became sane again.

Yet it was in no great exaltation of mind that he wended his way, a couple of days later, to the dwelling occupied by Mrs Bateman. He had declared he would enter it no more, but now, under the circumstances, he would do so once. He would be firm and decided, too, in the attainment of his object, and that was to see Nidia alone. He would take no denial.

This time, however, he was spared the necessity of further conflict. Nidia was there to welcome him, and she was alone. She looked at him searchingly, and her eyes were grave.

"What is the matter?" she said. "You are looking careworn and anxious. Why?"

“Am I? Oh, it’s nothing. Some active service will soon send that away.”

“Active service?”

“Yes. I’m going to volunteer.”

“Haven’t you had enough of that yet?”

“I haven’t had any. My active service up till now has been strictly confined to running away, and uncommonly ‘active’ service it has been, let me assure you.”

“Running away?” she repeated. “Yes; it is the sort of running away that one has a particular admiration for. Running away on foot, for instance, with about a thousand savages a hundred yards behind, so that a wounded comrade may ride away on one’s horse.”

He flushed. That wretched Shackleton had been firing off that stale yarn here too. Of course, it would look as though he himself had inspired it.

“Don’t look annoyed,” said Nidia, softly; “because I haven’t half done. ‘Running away,’ too, in order to take care of a certain helpless fugitive belonging to the helpless sex, who would otherwise certainly have been murdered, or certainly have come to some miserable end a dozen times over, is another kind of flight which appeals.”

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake leave that part of it! It was no thanks to me and my blundering asinine stupidity that you came in safe at all.”

“No. But, you see, I happen to hold a different opinion. And now, John, I have a little sore grievance against you, and I want to work it off. We don’t see much of you now. Why not?”

“Well, ‘we’ don’t want to. Do you happen to know that only a couple of days ago I was requested not to come here any more?”

“Do I happen to know? Why, of course I don’t. This is the first I’ve heard of it,” answered Nidia, speaking quickly and with some indignation. “I did not even know you had been here a couple of days ago. I only know how I have missed you since.”

“It is hardly fair, though, to give that as a reason. There may be others. One is, perhaps, that I thought you might have too much of a not very good thing; that you might have

had enough of me during all the time we were together, and change is congenial sometimes. Again, perhaps, it is that I have not been feeling particularly cheerful of late, and feared to inflict it upon you."

Nidia's face, which at first had taken on a hurt look, now grew very soft.

"What have you been troubled about? Can you not tell me? Me, remember?"

The very tone was a caress. But somehow it recalled the abominable hint thrown out by Mrs Bateman that very morning—the imputation that had stung and insulted him to the very core of his finest feelings—and the recollection hardened him.

"Whatever I have been troubled about will trouble me as long as life itself," he answered, looking her in the eyes full and straight. "But I did not come here to whine to you, trouble or not. I came to say good-bye."

"Good-bye?"

"Yes. I have volunteered for active service, and am under orders to be in readiness to take the field at a moment's notice."

"Then you may consider those orders cancelled. You are under orders to remain where you are until further notice."

"What?" he said, looking down at her where she stood, for he had risen preparatory to taking his leave. "To remain where I am? What do you mean, Nidia?"

"I mean that you can't go, and I don't intend that you shall. Heavens, what do you want to go getting yourself killed for? Wasn't it bad enough when you nearly did—when I—when we—all thought you were? You have got to stay here and take care of me."

What was this? Nidia's self-possession breaking down so signally? Were his eyes and ears utterly deceiving him? There was what sounded suspiciously like the catch of a sob in her voice, and in her eyes that same look of appeal, of wistfulness, he had seen there when they bade each other that last farewell in the wilds of the Matopos. His face flushed beneath its bronze, then went white; but his voice was firm as ever as he imprisoned her with his arms.

"To take care of you? Then I must do so for life, Nidia."

“Yes; I think you had better, as you know how to do it so well,” she replied, raising her lips.

It was their first kiss; but it was even as the welding of two souls. It was their first kiss, but for a very brief space the only one. With no further necessity for self-containment, John Ames seemed to pour forth his whole soul, his whole nature, in adoration of this girl, the first sight of whom had turned the whole current of his thoughts and inner life. All of this Nidia learned, and was infinitely, radiantly happy.

“Shall I tell you something—darling?” she said. “Strange as it may sound, I have never loved anybody before—have never felt the slightest inclination to. But when I saw you, I knew the possibility was there. You were—are—so different to everybody else. I missed you so frightfully when you left to come up here. There, I never told you that before. And all the time we were out together in the mountains I loved being with you—felt so safe with you, somehow, and—Oh!”

The last ejaculation was evoked by the appearance of a third party on the scene. In the doorway stood Mrs Bateman, speechless, her high-featured countenance livid with amazement, rage, and baffled spite.

“Come here, Susie, and say, ‘Bless you, my children,’” called out Nidia, a lovely blush coming over her face, as she realised the very near propinquity in which she stood to the other occupant of the room, who, for his part, said nothing.

But there came no answer. The other turned and walked away in silence. She had thrown her king and her ace, but the odd trick remained, and this John Ames held.

Shiminya, the sorcerer, was seated in his múti kraal on the Umgwane river, but he was not alone. With him sat Nanzicele, ex-sergeant of the native police.

From the tone of their voices they seemed not on very good terms. Not to put too fine a point upon it, they were quarrelling.

Now, the cause of the difference lay in the fact that Nanzicele aspired to join the ranks of the Abantwana ’Mlimo. Shiminya, on the other hand, was resolved that the hierarchy of the Great Abstraction would be better without him, and was breaking this resolve as gently as might be.

But Nanzicele had been drinking. He had obtained some gin among certain overlooked loot of a sacked store, and Nanzicele, foiled in his objects, and half drunk, was a very unpleasant customer indeed, not to say a sufficiently formidable one.

Now he was raising his voice threateningly, jeering Shiminya, and more than hinting that he was a rank impostor—he and all his cloth. The seer's snake-like eyes sparkled with vindictive hate, for he was no more fond of being reviled and insulted than other and commoner mortals.

Another consideration actuating this precious pair was that each was in a position to give the other away. Both knew that the result of the rising was but a question of time, and each had an idea that he might purchase safety at the expense of the other.

A large bowl of tywala was on the ground between them. Suddenly, as Shiminya stooped to raise this, his confederate whirled up his stick, intending to bring it down upon the sorcerer's head in such wise that the Umlimo would be without one of his most valuable myrmidons. But the move was not quick enough. The blow, instead of shattering skull, came down on shoulder, with numbing, crushing effect. Lithe as an eel, Shiminya twisted, and sprang to his feet. At him sprang Nanzicele. The sorcerer had no weapon to hand. The big Matabele, pressing him hard against the thorn fence, had him at his mercy.

Not quite. As the second blow descended, something entered Nanzicele's side, sharp, fiery, scathing. Then Shiminya fell, his limbs squirming in spasmodic quiver, and from his relaxed grasp there fell a small knife. This Nanzicele pushed aside with his foot, uttering a contemptuous grunt.

"Au! That does not kill," he growled, surveying his ribs, whence the blood flowed freely, but from a mere flesh-wound. Then shifting his knobstick into his left hand, the vengeful savage seized a broad-bladed assegai, and plunged it into the vitals of his prostrate confederate.

"Yeh-bo!" he cried. "Fare thee well, Shiminya. The Umtwana 'Mlimo can bleed as well as an ordinary man—can die! Hlala-gahle Umtwana 'Mlimo!"

The body of the sorcerer lay motionless. Gazing upon it for a moment, Nanzicele turned away to the huts. There was plunder there, plenty of it, and for some little while he turned his attention thitherward, finding and appropriating to his own use a good many things of vast value in his eyes, arms and ammunition, wearing apparel, tobacco, and what not. But as he opened one of the huts there darted out against his legs something grey and hairy and snarling, nearly upsetting him with the shock and the scare. Before he had recovered from his startled surprise the thing had vanished and now Nanzicele deemed it time to do likewise.

The sun's rays grew longer and longer, throwing shadows over the ill-omened abode of dark dealings, and the motionless body that lay there. Then the body was motionless no longer. The limbs moved; next the head was raised, but feebly. Shiminya sat up.

"Ah, ah! The Umtwana 'Mlimo is not so easy to kill, Nanzicele; and thou—for this thou shalt die a thousand deaths," he murmured.

He reached over for the tywala bowl, but it had been upset in the scuffle and was empty. Parched with a feverish and burning thirst, the sorcerer dragged himself on hands and knees to the hut wherein he knew there was more of the liquor. He reached it at length, trailing broad splashes of blood behind him. Creeping within, he found the great calabash. It was empty. Nanzicele had drained it.

In a tremble of exhaustion Shiminya sank to the ground. The cold dews of death were upon his face. The awful coldness throughout his frame, the result of a prodigious loss of blood, became an agony. Air! A great craving for air was upon him. His brain reeled, and his lungs gasped. He felt as though he could no longer move.

Then the door was darkened, and something brushed in. With a superhuman effort he collected his energies.

"Hamba, Lupiswana!" he gurgled. "Hamba-ke!"

But the brute took no notice of the voice before which it was wont to cower and tremble. It crouched, snarling. Then it put its head down and licked the blood-gouts which had fallen upon the ground from the veins of its evil master.

The latter began to experience some of the agonies he had delighted to witness in his victims. The savage beast had tasted blood—his blood. And he himself was too weak to have resisted the onslaught of a rat.

Again he called, trying to infuse strength into his voice. But the crafty beast knew his state exactly, it had learnt to gauge helplessness in the case of too many other victims, perhaps. It only crawled a little nearer, still growling.

For a while they lay thus, man and beast, mutually eyeing each other. The eyes of the former were becoming glazed with the agony of utter weakness but active apprehension. Those of the latter glared yellow and baleful in the semi-gloom of the hut. It was a horrid sight.

“Hamba, Lupiswana!” repeated the sorcerer, instinctively groping for a weapon. But with a shrill snarl the brute was at his throat, tearing and worrying, and, although a small animal, so furious was its frenzy over this new and copious feast of blood, that it shook the light form of the wizard, almost as it would have done that of a newly dropped fawn. And then in the semi-gloom was the horrible spectacle of a man with his throat half torn out, feebly battling with the enraged furious beast covered with blood and uttering its guttural snarls, as it tore and clawed at his already lacerated vitals. But the struggle did not last. The grim “familiar spirit” had triumphed over its evil master. Shiminya the sorcerer lay dead in his múti kraal, and the horrible brute lay growling and snarling as it gorged itself to repletion upon his mangled body.

And Nanzicele? Exultant, yet somewhat fearing, he decamped with his booty; but he did not get far. A dizziness and griping pain was upon him, and he sank down in the river-bed, by a water-hole. What was it? His wound was slight. Ha! The knife! Yes. A greenish froth was on the surface of his wound. The knife was poisoned.

His agonies now were hardly less than those of his slayer, and his thirst became intense. Crawling to a water-hole, he staggered over it to drink, then drew back appalled. He could not drink there, at any rate. It was the very hole into which he had helped throw the unfortunate girl Nompiza. Her decomposing lineaments seemed to glower at him from the surface of the water as he bent over to drink. With a raucous yell he flung himself back, and then, in a paroxysm of agonised convulsions, the rebel and treacherous murderer yielded up the ghost.

He too, you see, had thought to hold the trump card over his confederate, but it was the latter who held the odd trick. Yet better for both, swifter and more merciful, would have been the noosed rope of the white man’s justice than the end which had overtaken them.

Chapter Thirty.

Conclusion.

Golden August—a sky of cloudless blue softening into the autumn haze which dims the horizon; golden August, with the whirr of the reaping-machine, as the yellow wheat falls to the harvest, blending with the cooing of wood-pigeons among the leafy shades of the park; golden August, with its still, rich atmosphere, and roll of green champaign and velvety coppice, and honeysuckle-twined hedgerow, and dappled kine standing knee-deep in shaded pond; in short, golden August in one of the fairest scenes of fair England.

Here and there red roofs clustering around a grey church tower, whose sparkling vane flashes in the sun; here and there a solitary thatch. In front a lovely sward stretching down to a sunken fence, and a gap, revealing the charming vista of landscape beyond—such is the outlook from the library window of the beautiful and sumptuous home into which we will take a brief and only peep, for it has been for some years past Nidia's home, and is the property of her father. Has been? we said. That it should continue to be so, forms, as it happens, the subject-matter of the very conversation going on at that moment between them.

Nidia herself seems in no wise to have altered; indeed, why should she, unless to grow more charming, more alluring than before, that being the only alteration happiness is potent to effect? For on the third finger of her left hand a plain gold ring of suspicious newness proclaims that she is Nidia Commerell no longer. The other party to the conversation is her father.

"It is really good of you, child," the latter is saying, "to come back so soon to your old father, left all alone. Not many would have done it—at any rate, at such a time as this. But I don't want to be selfish. You had been away from me so long, and had been so near—well, being away altogether it would have been, I suppose, but for that fine fellow, John Ames—that—well, I did want to see my little girl again for a few days before she started on her travels, not in an infernal savage-ridden country this time, thank God!"

"Of course I wanted to see you again, dear—and just as much as you did me," returned Nidia, meaning it, too. "But even the 'infernal savage-ridden country' has its bright side."

"Meaning John Ames," said the old gentleman, with a laugh.

In aspect Mr Commerell was of about medium height, scrupulously neat in his attire. He wore a short white beard, and had very refined features; and looking into his eyes, it was

easy to see whence Nidia had got hers. In manner he was very straight to the point and downright, but it was not the downrightness which in nineteen cases out of twenty degenerates into mere brusquerie. He and John Ames had taken to each other wonderfully, and the old gentleman had already begun to look upon his son-in-law as his own son.

"What I have got to say, child, is this," he went on; "and mind you, I don't much like saying it. However, here it is. When you have done your round on the Continent, why not come back here and make this your home? I know the old argument against relations-in-law in the same house and all that, but here it's different. You should both be as free as air as far as I am concerned. You know I am not of the interfering sort—indeed, you could have your own set of apartments, for the matter of that. But when I bought this property to retire to in my old age, it was with an eye to some such contingency, and—um—well, it could not have befallen better. Well, what I was coming to is that it is a large property and wants some looking after, and John will find plenty to do in looking after it. He will have to look after it for himself and you when my time is up, so may as well begin now."

But Nidia took the old man's face between her hands as he sat, and stopped his utterance with a very loving kiss.

"Father, darling, don't say any more about relations-in-law and interfering, and all that—bosh. Yes, bosh. You interfering, indeed! And for the matter of that, I know that John is awfully fond of you; you get on splendidly together. Of course we will come back and take care of you, and we'll all be as happy together as the day is long."

"God bless you, Nidia, child! Hallo! here he comes."

"Who?" asked Nidia, with a ripple of mirth over the inconsequence of the remark—which certainly was funny.

"John, of course. He is a fine fellow, Nidia. Didn't know they grow men like that in those parts"—with a very approving gaze at the advancing figure of his son-in-law, who, strolling along the terrace, was drinking in the lovely panorama of fair English landscape, contrasting it, perchance, with certain weird regions of granite boulder and tumbled rock and impenetrable thorn thicket. And here it may be noted that, her present happiness notwithstanding, Nidia had by no means forgotten her sad and terrible experiences, and there were times when she would start up in her sleep wild-eyed and with a scream of horror, as she saw once more the mutilated corpses of the murdered settler's family, or found herself alone in the shaggy wilds of the Matopos. But the awakening more than made up for the reminiscence. She was young, and of sound

and buoyant Constitution, and the grim and ghastly recollection of appalling sights and peril passed through would eventually fade.

“Am I interrupting you?” said John Ames, as at his entrance the two looked up. “Nidia was going to stroll down to the bridge with me, Mr Commerell; but if you want her, why, I shall have to keep myself company.”

“Considerate, as few of them are or would be under the circumstances,” thought the old gentleman to himself. But aloud he said, “No—no. It’s all right. We’ve done our talk, John. You’d better take her with you, and she can tell you what it has all been about. Besides, I have some business to attend to.”

He watched them strolling along the terrace together, and a strange joyful peace was around the old man’s heart.

“God bless them!” he murmured to himself—his spectacles, perhaps, a trifle dim. “They are a well matched pair, and surely this is a Heaven-made union if such a thing exists. God bless them, and send them every happiness!”

And here we take leave to join in the above aspiration; for although ourselves no believers in the old-fashioned “lived-happy-ever-after” theory, holding that about nineteen such cases out of twenty, putting it at a modest proportion, are, in actual fact, but sparsely hedged around with the a “happy” qualification, yet here we think it possible that the twentieth case may be found, if only that all the circumstances attendant upon it go to make for that desirable end.

The End.