The Fire Trumpet A Romance of the Cape Frontier VOL-I

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Freeditorial

THE FIRE TRUMPET VOL.I

"A ROMANCE OF THE CAPE FRONTIER"

Chapter One.

A Queer Legacy.

"To my valued friend, Arthur Claverton, I bequeath the sum of nine thousand pounds."

He to whom this announcement was made could not repress a start of surprise. The only other occupant of the room paused and laid down the document from which he had been reading. The room was a solicitor's office.

"You hardly expected to be remembered, then?" said the latter.

"No. At least I won't say that, exactly; but nothing like to such an extent. I thought poor Spalding might have left me some trifle to remember him by—his pet breechloader, or something of the kind; but, candidly, I never expected anything like this!"

"Yet you saved his life, once."

"Pooh! Nothing at all. The weather was hot, and the swim did me good. If I hadn't gone in, the nearest Jack Tar would have, and have thought nothing of it; nor do I. Poor Spalding!"

The speaker is a man of about thirty to all appearance. His face, which is a handsome and a refined one, wears a look of firmness, not unmixed with recklessness. It is the countenance of one who has seen a good deal of the world, and knows thoroughly well how to take care of himself. The other man is more than twice his age, and looks what he is—every inch the comfortable, well-preserved family solicitor.

"I don't know about that, Mr Claverton," answered the latter. "The story our poor friend told me was something very different. The vessel was going at thirteen knots, the night being pitch dark, and a heavy sea running. And no one saw him fall overboard but yourself."

The other laughed in a would-be careless way. "Oh, well, I think you are making too much of it. But the job was a risky one, I admit, and at one time I did think we should

never be picked up. And now, Mr Smythe, I'm going to ask you a question that you may think queer. First of all, you knew my poor friend intimately for a good many years?"

"I did. When first I made his acquaintance, Herbert Spalding was a little chap in Eton jackets. I've known him tolerably intimately ever since."

"Well, then, didn't it strike you that latterly he had something on his mind?"

"Yes, it did. And I happen to know he had. The old story. He was jilted; and being one of those sensitive men with a high-strung nervous organisation, he took it to heart too much. I believe it shortened his life. Poor fellow."

"Well, whoever did it, has something to answer for, or would have had, at least; for, between ourselves, that time he went overboard he went of his own free will."

"I had suspected as much," said the lawyer, quietly. "That was on the voyage out, wasn't it?"

"It was. We first became acquainted on board ship, you know. He hardly spoke to any one on board till, all of a sudden, he took a violent fancy to me. We occupied the same cabin. In fact, I soon began to suspect there was a petticoat in the case, the poor chap was so down on his luck; but he didn't tell me in so many words, and it wasn't for me to pry into another fellow's private affairs. One evening I came into the cabin, and found him loading a revolver. There was nothing very astonishing in that, you know, because fellows often go in for revolver practice at sea—shooting bottles from the yard-arm, and all that sort of thing; but it was the way in which it was done. He hid the thing, too, when he saw me, and that looked fishy. However, I managed to get hold of it, unknown to him, and stuck it right away, and made up my mind to keep an eye on him. That very night, or rather morning, for it was in the small hours, I was awoke by something moving in the cabin. I sung out, but got no answer. Then I went over to Spalding's bunk, and, by Jove, it was empty. When a fellow has been kicked about the world as much as I have, he don't take long to think; consequently I was on deck in about a second, with precious little on but my nightshirt, and luckily so as it happened. It was pitch dark, and blowing half a gale. I didn't want to sing out if I could help it—wanted to avoid a fuss, you understand; so I peered about for Spalding. At last I made out a dark figure standing behind the wheel, looking astern. They don't use the rudder wheel, you know—steer from the bridge. I was just going to sing out quietly, when the figure disappeared, and I heard a splash that there was no mistaking. Then, you bet, I gave a war-whoop loud enough to wake the dead, as I went over the side after it. Fortunately for Spalding—for it was him all right—fortunately for us both, the quarter-master had his wits about him, and pitched over one of those fire-buoys that are kept handy for these occasions; but there

was a heavy, lamping sea on that nearly knocked the breath out of one. I wasn't long reaching Spalding; but he could hardly swim a stroke at the best of times, and at that time was simply helpless. But I can tell you I had my work cut out for me. By the time the ship was brought round to us again, and we were picked up, we had been nearer half an hour in the water than twenty minutes, and not many seconds more would have done for us. I was all right again next day, and, by way of explanation, I gave out that Spalding was given to somnambulism. The idea took; and no one suspected anything, or, if they did, never said so, and the affair created a deuce of a sensation on board."

"I should rather imagine it did," said the lawyer, who had been vividly interested in the other's narrative. "But you were with him when he died, weren't you—I mean at the moment?"

"Yes and no. After the affair I've been telling you about we became greater chums than ever. He seemed to pick up in health and spirits, and I began to think the poor chap was going to forget all about his troubles. We stayed in Sydney a little while, and then went up country, where we spent three or four months, knocking about from station to station, for Spalding had no end of letters of introduction. At last, as ill luck would have it, the mail—that curse of existence—overtook us even away up in the bush. I don't know what news he got; but poor Spalding became worse than ever. Nothing would satisfy him but we must return home to England immediately. I say 'we,' because I'll be hanged if I could make him see that I, at any rate, hadn't come to Australia for fun, but to try and find a means of livelihood. No; I must go back with him. He had influence and abundant means, and could get me a much better berth in England than I should ever find out there, he argued. He wanted my company on the voyage home, and was determined to have it; I shouldn't be out of pocket by it, and so on. We nearly had a tremendous row over it; but at last I yielded, partly to sentiment, for we were great chums and the poor fellow seemed utterly cut up at the prospect of my leaving him to go back alone, partly to carelessness, for, I reasoned, I should be no worse off than when I left England, and could always pick up some sort of a living anywhere. So we sailed by the first vessel we could catch, and a precious slow old tub she was. Before we had been a week at sea, Spalding got a notion into his head that he would never see England again, and all I could say or do to cheer him was of no use. Well, to cut the matter short, one evening about half an hour before sundown, we were sitting aft smoking our weeds. I left him, wanting to do a constitutional before dinner. I hadn't been gone five minutes when the quarter-master came to say that my chum didn't seem well. Back I went like a shot. There was Spalding sitting in his deck-chair just as I left him with his book in front of him. But his head hung forward queerly. I had only to take one look at him to know what was up. The poor chap was stone dead."

"Dear me—dear me!" said the lawyer.

Claverton paused a little—moved by the recollection. He had never told the story so circumstantially before.

“We carried him to the cabin, and the doctor made an official examination and all that sort of thing. Then the captain sealed up his effects, and the next evening our poor friend was buried. It was in the tropical seas, you know, where they don’t delay funerals longer than they can help. And, curiously enough, it could not have been far from the spot where the poor fellow made his nocturnal plunge on the voyage out. Yes; whoever she is, she’ll have something to answer for. The doctor called it heart disease; but heart-break would have been nearer the mark, I believe.”

There was silence for a few moments. It was at length broken by the lawyer.

“And you actually knew nothing of that codicil?”

“Nothing whatever. Hadn’t the faintest suspicion of anything of the kind. It’s all right, I suppose; can’t be disputed or upset—eh?”

“No. It’s perfectly in order—adequately witnessed and everything. If Spalding had been a solicitor in busy practice, he couldn’t have added that codicil more correctly. And he did it at sea, too!”

“What did he die worth?”

“It’s hard to say at present. Most of his property was landed—very extensive, but all entailed. He has bequeathed to yourself nearly all that it was in his power to bequeath to anybody; but—”

“Oh, I wasn’t thinking of that,” interrupted the other impatiently, and somewhat annoyed. “I merely asked out of curiosity. And, as I told you before, I never expected anything at all.”

“But, I was going to say, there’s a queer stipulation attached to your bequest. I don’t quite know what you’ll think of it,” went on Mr Smythe, with a dry smile. “You only profit by the bequest—which is funded—provided you remain single until the age of thirty-five. Should you marry before then you forfeit the whole, which, in that case, would pass to a distant relative. But I should think you will not have very long to wait. Three or four years, perhaps?” and he looked inquiringly at the other. “Of course you draw the interest from now,” he added.

“More likely eight years.”

“You don’t say so. I declare you look much older!”

“The conditions are queer, certainly,” said the legatee, with a smile. “I think I can see through it, though. Poor Spalding was played the mischief with so severely by a woman, that he thought the best kindness he could do me was to offer a counter inducement to me against making a fool of myself in that line. And, look, thirty-five is the age stipulated—his own age at the time of his death.”

“It’s singular, certainly,” said Smythe; “but there seems to be method in it. Probably he thought that he, not having arrived at years of discretion at that time of life, neither would you. As if a man ever does arrive at years of discretion where the sex is concerned! But I congratulate you heartily—at least, I suppose I must; for you look heart-whole enough at present, anyhow. But you are young—you are young.”

“Not too young to know the value of nine thousand pounds and its yearly interest, I can tell you, Mr Smythe,” said the other, with a laugh. And then he took his leave.

Chapter Two.

The Legatee.

If there is one quality in this world which its fortunate possessor is to be envied the enjoyment of, it is that of absolute insouciance. I don't mean the spurious article known as "putting a bold face on things," though this is a gift by no means to be despised; but that downright, thorough, devil-may-care way of taking the vicissitudes of life, in such wise as these interfere neither with the appetite, sleep, nor temper, which is well-nigh as rare—at any rate among us Englishmen—as the Little Bustard.

When Claverton entered Mr Smythe's office, he owned barely enough sovereigns in the world to make a creditable jingle in his breeches pocket; when he left the lawyer he walked out into the street a man of independent means. Yet the change, welcome and wholly unexpected as it was, in no wise disturbed his mental equilibrium. He was conscious of an increased feeling of complacency as he contemplated the world at large by the light of his own improved prospects; but he would permit himself no elation. While going through the hardest times he had known—and he had known some very hard ones indeed—he had cultivated the severest philosophy; and now it had become second nature to him. "Bad luck—no use growling, won't last; good luck—no use crowing, may not last," was his self-invented and favourite maxim.

At the time when we first make his acquaintance, Arthur Claverton stood absolutely alone in the world. I don't mean to say that he had no relatives, but they cold-shouldered him. A few of them were near relatives, others very distant; but the nearer they were, the more they cold-shouldered him. He was an only child and an orphan; his mother having died at his birth, and his father being killed in a railway accident sortie four years later, leaving him to the care of a guardian, one of the near relatives aforesaid. Near, too, in another sense of the word; for, though very comfortably off, and indeed wealthy, this conscientious and benevolent guardian impounded the scanty substance left for the orphan's start in life, on the ground that his family was a large one, and he could not afford the addition of his dead brother's child.

His family certainly was a large one, which is to say that it was a supremely disagreeable and discordant one. The boys, rough and unruly, worried the girls and their father. The girls, underhand and spiteful, tormented the boys and their mother. Wrangling and mischief-making was the order of the day. After this it will not be surprising to learn that it was a pious family, which is to say, that much attention was given to morning and evening prayers; and that Sunday, jocosely termed the day of rest, was to be employed getting up epistles and gospels by heart, with a slice of catechism or so thrown in, what time the whole master was not pent up in a square box undergoing edification at the lips

of a prolix and Geneva-clad Boanerges, who seldom said “And now to” within an hour and a quarter from the enunciation of his text. By an odd coincidence, the day on which this exemplary piety had its full scope—notably in the tabooing of all secular literature or any approach to levity of demeanour—the reign of strife, squabble, and jar seemed to reach its acme.

Such was the amiable family circle among which young Arthur’s earlier lot was cast. But somehow he never assimilated. He was a species of Ishmael when “at home,” which, by the way, was not often, for he spent most of his holidays at school. All things considered, a good thing for him? No. For it was not a nice school where his educational lines were cast. It was a very cheap and a very nasty school; one in which he learnt nothing but the art of getting into serious scrapes, and—perhaps the only useful thing he did learn—the art of getting out of them. A bringing up of this kind would have been the ruin of most boys; but it was not so with Arthur. He came of a splendid stock, and the wretched associations of his boyhood and youth, instead of destroying his character, had the effect of forming it. They hardened him. True, they rendered him cynical at an age when one looks for impulsiveness and generosity, and if they had inspired him with a disgust for religion, his mind was absolutely clear of cant. They had taught him utterly to despise sentiment, while leaving him capabilities of generosity and even geniality. And if any one showed him a kindness, he never forgot it.

One day, when he was seventeen, the second master of his school, the clever son of an army Scripture reader, had the unwisdom to strike him. In about ten seconds that ill-advised pedagogue was picking himself up in a corner with a bleeding nose and otherwise in receipt of grievous bodily harm. Expulsion was imminent; but Arthur did not wait for it. He took the first train, went straight to his guardian and told him he wanted to emigrate.

His guardian looked acidly at the tall, handsome stripling before him, and began a severe lecture. He also looked uneasily; for it was evident that Arthur had somehow got to learn that his father had not left him absolutely penniless, which meant that no appeal on the grounds of gratitude would lie—for the expenses of the orphan’s bringing up and education, such as it was, had by no means exhausted the sum which the dead man had left. Of this Arthur had gained a very shrewd idea; but he merely asked for sufficient to pay his passage and a small sum towards a necessary outfit, for he intended to go to one of our colonies.

Then his guardian, unlocking a desk, handed Arthur the sum of thirty-five pounds, and told him—metaphorically, of course, good pious man that he was, yet very plainly—to go to the devil.

He did not go to the devil; he went to the Cape.

Some of my readers may think this a distinction without a difference. Well, that is a matter of opinion. He turned his hand first to one thing, then another; but nothing seemed to answer for long, possibly because he was young and restless. At last a small "coup" at the Diamond Fields set him up with a few hundreds. But fortune changed round again; and, in disgust, he resolved to return to England previous to trying his luck in some other colony.

He landed in his native country after several years of a hard, adventurous life; but there was not a soul to welcome him. Not long did he stay; but, by the time he had taken his passage to Australia, not much remained of the proceeds of his Diamond Fields' enterprise. Then on that eventful voyage he fell in with Herbert Spalding, and the rest of his experiences we have heard from his own lips.

A few mornings after his interview with the lawyer, a card was brought up to Claverton as he sat in his rooms.

"Rev. George Wainwright," reading the name. "Now, who the deuce is the Rev. George Wainwright? Certainly not one of my kinsfolk or acquaintance."

There entered an elderly man with stiff, iron-grey hair, a very red face and fierce brown eyes, peering aggressively from beneath a pair of bushy brows. He wore clerical attire, and in his hand carried a tall hat like unto a stove-pipe. There was aggressiveness in his whole aspect, especially in the short, stiff bow with which he greeted Claverton. Farther, there was aggressiveness even in the knock and ring which had heralded his arrival.

"A country rector," mused our friend, mentally reading off his visitor. "In earlier life of the sporting order, now gouty and addicted to port. Domineering in his parish, tyrant in domestic circle. I know the breed. What the deuce can he want with me?" Then, aloud: "Pray be seated. Cold morning, isn't it?" and he drew a chair to the fire for his visitor.

"No doubt, Mr—er—Claverton, you will readily guess the object of my visit," began the other, brusquely, leaning both, hands on the knob of his umbrella, and staring his interlocutor straight in the face.

"Excuse me, but I hardly do."

"What! You don't? Why, about this will—this will of Spalding's?"

“Spalding’s will! My dear sir, I am afraid you have come to me by mistake. My poor friend’s solicitor is Smythe of Chancery Lane. I’ll give you his address in full.”

“No mistake at all—no mistake at all,” rejoined the other, abruptly. “I’ve just come from Smythe, it was he who referred me to you. I want to know about that preposi—er—that bequest—the bequest to you. Do you intend to avail yourself of it, may I ask?”

“Well, really, that is a most astonishing question—”

“You don’t. No—of course you don’t,” came the angry interruption. “No young man with any independence of spirit, could possibly take the money under such conditions. It would be preposterous if he did—preposterous.”

“But, Mr Wainwright, I do intend to take the money.”

“You do?”

“Every farthing of it—bar probate and succession dues.”

The wrath struggling for suppression exhibited in the old man’s countenance beggars description.

“Well, well,” he jerked out at last, “the case is a strange one—a very strange one. Wills have been upset on less fishy grounds than this. Here you take this unfortunate man across the world and come back without him, but profiting substantially by his death. Putting it mildly, what will be said? Eh, sir, what will people say—what will they say?” and, throwing out his hand, he glared at his interlocutor as if awaiting a reply.

“I don’t know what they’ll say. Equally certain is it that I don’t care. As you remark, Mr Wainwright, wills have been upset, but I hardly imagine there’s any chance of this one being so dealt with. Anyhow, I’m ready to take what chance there is. However, you have no doubt made yourself familiar with the conditions under which I inherit,” he went on good-humouredly, but with a wicked twinkle in his eyes. “Don’t you know, for instance, of some young woman attractive enough to induce me to pay forfeit? She must be very attractive, mind; not too young either—’teens mean selfishness; nor too passée—that carries temper. I incline to the dark style of beauty, or something between the two. And I should be sure to capitulate at discretion, if only because it would be in a sense forbidden fruit.”

The other sat speechless with anger. At last he exploded.

“I did not come here to trifle, sir. But, I tell you, this will bring you no good. Ill-gotten gains never do. Ill-gotten gains, I say.” And, with a final glare, he bounced out of the room.

“Poor old man,” thought Claverton, watching him from the window. “Dare say he’s rather sore, and it was a sin to chaff him. But then he brought it upon himself by his bumptiousness. Likely I’m going to cut my own throat for his benefit. The man must be a fool.”

Had he but known it, his late visitor was at that very moment of the same opinion, as, jolting along in the ’bus he had just hailed, a sudden idea struck him.

“By Jingo! What an ass I am! He thought I was the one who would benefit. I’ll go back. Hi! Conductor—stop—stop! No use, though. The fellow has no sense of honour. Still, if I hadn’t lost my confounded temper, I might have induced him to yield. No, I shouldn’t. The man’s a scamp any way—an utter scamp.”

Wherein the old gentleman was wrong. Had he entered upon the interview with a clear head and courteous manner, it is highly probable that the whole course of this not uneventful narrative would have been changed.

Having got rid of his choleric visitor, Claverton went out. His face was turned Citywards, and, as he walked, he pondered.

“Nine thousand pounds contingent on eight years of single blessedness. Well, the terms oughtn’t to be difficult. Why, many a fellow would give away double the amount for the same privilege, if I know anything of my world. But as I told that old parson in chaff just now—forbidden fruit is what attracts. Poor Spalding! What on earth made him clog the concern with such a condition? The only thing is to turn the lot over—capitalise and double it as soon as possible; and, fortunately, I’m not particular how. Grand thing, a careful training in a pious family.”

An hour’s walking, and he is in the heart of the City. Turning down a little lane out of Fenchurch Street, he looks about him carefully. Through a doorway, then a couple of flights of stairs, and he is hammering at a door labelled “Mr Silas B. Morkum.”

“Boss engaged,” said the sharp boy who appeared.

“Of course he is. Take that pasteboard in at once.”

Almost immediately the boy returned and ushered Claverton into an inner office. A thin, wiry-looking man, with a hooked nose and very keen grey eyes; advanced with outstretched hand.

“Well, Claverton, my boy,” he began, with a slight Yankee drawl. “Thought you’d turn up again some day. Devilish cold? Yes. Here’s some stuff, though, to counteract that,” and he produced a wicker-covered bottle and glasses. “Fill up—that’s right. Here’s to old times. Now what can I do for you?”

Claverton laughed drily.

“That’s so like you, Morkum. Can’t you imagine any fellow looking you up purely for the fun of the thing?”

“Well, not many do—not many,” answered the American in an apologetic tone. “But—”

“But this time you’ve hit the right nail on the head. There is something you can do for me, if any one can. You can put me in the way of doubling a given sum in the shortest possible time.”

“That all?” answered the other, almost disappointedly. “Reckon I can—and I’d do more than that for you—as you know. Silas B. Morkum ain’t the boy to forget—well, we know what. Now let’s hear all about it.”

Claverton told him. The tie of gratitude to which Morkum had referred went back to the time of the former’s earlier wanderings, when our friend had by the merest chance been able to do him a most important service, and the American had never forgotten it. He was a curious unit. By profession broker, money-lender, and half-a-dozen other things; in reality, such of his dealings as were most remunerative were known only to himself and to those immediately concerned.

“Well, then,” he said, reflectively, lighting up a long Havana and pushing the box across to his companion, “well, then—you want to turn over this sum and ain’t particular how?”

“Not in the least.”

“Then I can lay you on to something. But you are open to putting your hide pretty considerably in pawn?”

“Quite open. What is it? Mines in Sonora?”

“No. ’Tain’t that. Two years ago I sent a party on that lay. Twenty-three Western men, all well armed and mounted. Game chickens all round.”

“What then?”

“They are there yet. No one ever saw or heard of them again. Beckon the Apaches wiped ’em out. No. This is less risky; still, it is risky—tarnation so.”

“What is it?”

The other fixed his keen grey eyes upon Claverton for a moment. Then he delivered himself of just three words.

“The devil!” exclaimed Claverton, astonished, “I thought that game was played out long ago.”

“No, it ain’t; not a bit of it. And it’s sure profits, quick returns; but-all-fired risk.”

“Well, let’s hear all about it.”

The other left the papers which he had been sorting, and, drawing his chair to the fire, began to lay out his scheme. And at last the dingy office grew shadowy, and the boy came in to know if he shouldn’t lock up.

“Yes,” assented Morkum. “Come along and dine somewhere, Claverton, and you shall tell me what you’ve been doing all this time. We can talk business to-morrow.”

The clocks were chiming a quarter to twelve as they separated at King’s Cross Station.

“Going to walk home, are you?” said the American, reflectively. “Queer city, this. Many a man disappears, and is never more heard of by his inquiring relatives.”

“It would be a precious risky job for any enterprising spirits to try and conceal my whereabouts. They’d get hurt,” answered Claverton, with a meaning laugh.

“That’s right,” said the other, approvingly. “Never have your hand far from your coat-pocket, and you’ll do. Good-night.”

The wind howls dismally round a cosy old country rectory on this gloomy March evening, but, within, all is snugness and warmth. From one well-lighted room comes a sound of many cheerful voices; but passing by this, let us take a look into the library,

where sits a girl all alone. She is a lovely girl, as far as we can see by the uncertain firelight, and may be nineteen or twenty. Her well-shaped head is crowned with an abundance of soft, dark hair, tinted with strange lights as the flickering glow plays upon it. Her sweet, lustrous eyes are gazing pensively at the clock on the mantelpiece, while the rain rolls in gusts against the old-fashioned casement.

“Past six. Uncle George should be back by now. The train must be late. Ah, there he is!” as the sound of wheels is audible on the gravel outside.

She hears the occupants of the other room rush to the front door to welcome their father; but with a hasty kiss all round, the rector goes straight to the library.

“Here I am, Uncle George,” says the girl, meeting him in the doorway, for she heard him inquiring for her. “But do go and change first, you must be very wet.”

“No, I’m not, my dear; not in the least. Come in here and shut the door; I want to tell you about this.”

Then he hesitates, clears his throat, manages to knock down the tongs with a hideous clatter, and jerks out:

“I could do nothing.”

His niece waits for him to continue.

“Nothing. He says he intends to stick to the money, every penny of it. Why, when I put it to him fairly, he laughed in my face; made some ill-chosen jest about it being only a question of time. He’s a scamp, a downright scamp, and will come to no good. Mark my words.”

“Who is he, Uncle George? What’s his name?”

“Some adventurer. I was going to say low adventurer, but he isn’t that; the man’s a gentleman by birth, unmistakably. Name! Why, bless my soul, I’ve quite forgotten. What is it again? Clinton—Emerson—something like that—I forget exactly.”

The girl stood silently gazing into the fire, with one arm on the old man’s shoulder. She was an orphan niece, whom he had welcomed to his home, nominally until it could be decided what should be done with her; actually he had already decided this, and his decision was that that home should be a permanent one. He was a very soft-hearted man, was the Rev. George Wainwright, in spite of his quick temper and aggressive

exterior. But the girl, for her part, was equally determined in her own mind not to remain a burden on him. He had a large family of his own, and she must manage to earn her own livelihood. Then came the news of the death of her distant cousin, Herbert Spalding, and of the legacy which would revert to her, contingent upon the nuptials of a stranger. The rector, with characteristic hot-headedness, had voted the contingency absolutely monstrous. No man of honour, he had said, could possibly accept a bequest subject to it, especially as by doing so he would be robbing a penniless orphan—and had started for town there and then with the intention of inducing the legatee to forego his claim. In which laudable mission he had signally failed, as we have seen—a failure due in no small measure to his own hot temper and want of tact.

“Never mind, Uncle George; we are only where we were before, you see, and I think I shall get that situation I advertised for.”

“No you won’t, my dear. We shan’t let you go away from us.”

She kisses him affectionately. She is determined to carry her point, but does not press it to-night. “Now you must go and talk to the others, Uncle George; I’ve been keeping you from them quite long enough.” And with her arm still on the old man’s shoulder she leads him to the door, and they join the family circle in the cheerful lamplight.

Chapter Three.

The Slave Settlement.

"Idiot! Don't you see that the poor devil can't move an inch further to save his wretched life. Leave him alone. You're the greatest brute even in this bestial land?"

"Am I? And if I am, what's that to you?" is the defiant reply.

The first speaker is a young Englishman, whose face, tanned to a coppery brown by exposure to a torrid sun, bears a stamp of recklessness and determination. His bearded lips are set firm as he confronts the other, a powerful, savage-looking mulatto, and his eyes are ablaze with wrathful contempt. Around stretches a wide, sun-baked desert in Central Africa. A few palms, dotted about here and there, throw a faint pretence of a shadow, and not far from the cloudless horizon hangs the now declining sun. A gang of black men and women, weary and emaciated, and a few of them tied together, are standing wearily contemplating one of their number who lies prone upon the earth, sick, footsore, and unable to move another step. It is a slave-gang on the march.

"Here, you two," goes on the first speaker, addressing a couple of the strongest-looking among the slaves, "pick him up and carry him along."

The two fellows designated pause, and look hesitatingly from one to the other of their drivers. They stand in mortal fear of the ruffianly mulatto, and prefer to chance the wrath of the Englishman.

"Do you hear what I say? Let him alone, Sharkey," repeats the latter in a warning tone.

For all answer the ruffian addressed advances upon the fallen slave, and with a frightful grin, disclosing two pointed, shark-like teeth—whence his hideous sobriquet—curls his raw-hide lash round the naked body of the emaciated wretch. But a terrific blow full in the face sends him reeling half-a-dozen paces.

"There! Won't you listen?" And the Englishman stands between the miserable wretch and his smiter. With a growl like a wild beast, the latter springs up.

"Stand off, Sharkey!" cries his companion in a firm, warning tone. Too late. With features working in fury, and foaming at the mouth, the other rushes upon him knife in hand.

"Stand off, I say, or—"

Crack!

The savage makes one spring and rolls over and over at his slayer's feet, digging his knife into the hard earth in his death-throes.

"Dog! You would have it!" observes the Englishman, calmly reloading the discharged chamber of his still smoking revolver. "You won't bite again. Now then, you fellows, do as I told you just now—pick up that chap and—march."

They obey apathetically; and, with many a furtive glance backward, the slaves move wearily on, leaving the body of their late oppressor to the vultures and jackals of the desert.

And now, after a march of several miles further, the melancholy cortège arrives at its destination. In a natural clearing, surrounded by dense jungle, stand a few thatched shanties. In the centre is a large barracoon, and into this the miserable human herd is turned. The last rays of the sun have disappeared, and here and there in the open space a fire glows redly. Several men are standing about; awful-looking cut-throats, villainy personified. Half-a-dozen of them are Portuguese, the rest Arabs and negroes. They crowd up to inspect the slaves.

"Well, Lidwell," says one of the first nationality in good English, addressing the new arrival. "You've brought in a poor-looking lot. How many did you lose?"

"Two. Both died."

"And Sharkey—wasn't he with you? Where's he?"

"Dead."

"Dead? Nonsense! What killed him?" And the first speaker stares in amazement.

"A pistol ball, regulation calibre."

A gleam of triumphant malice flits across the other's swarthy features. He is young, and by no means bad-looking but for a chronic scowl.

"Comrade," he replies, "you have done a good thing in ridding us of that beast." But the man addressed as Lidwell has marked that exultant expression, and he knows that it means mischief. Sharkey has relatives in the camp who will certainly do their utmost to

revenge his death, and it is doubtful whether the ruffianly European element will have either the strength or resolution to stand out against these should they clamour for his slayer's blood. It is more than doubtful if they have the will; for this Englishman is both hated and feared by them. His coolness and daring in the pursuit of their lawless traffic has not only been the means of quadrupling their gains, but has twice saved the whole party from capture red-handed, for of late the Union Jack has been—to them—unpleasantly active in Zanzibar waters. Yes, they hate him bitterly. He has won largely from them at play, for they are great gamblers, and can they once get him into their power they are fully determined to make him yield up—by torture if necessary—the large sums which they know him to keep concealed somewhere. But then, his revolver is ever ready, and they are most of them cowards at heart.

Sternly he now looks the young Portuguese in the face.

"Juarez," he says, in a very significant tone. "Do you know, I always think I can never have enough revolver practice. It makes a man invulnerable, does this little bit of wood and iron."

The other turns away with an oily smile. He has his own reasons for not being fond of the Englishman.

The latter strolls leisurely into one of the huts, keeping his eyes about him, though, unobtrusively. Arrived there, he sits down for a few minutes to rest and think out his plans. For he is determined to take leave of his repulsive surroundings; and the sooner the better. Nearly two years of his life have been spent in this detestable traffic, and how sick he is of it, he himself hardly knows. He has amassed wealth with a rapidity little short of marvellous; but not for the ransom of an empire would he go through the experiences of those two years over again. Many and many a scene of human suffering has it been his lot to witness during that period—for he is a slave-dealer, a trafficker in human flesh. But he is guiltless of any single act of brutality or wanton oppression towards the unfortunate wretches who have passed through his hands. In his eyes mere cattle, yet he would never allow them to be tortured or ill-treated. More than once has he stood between the victim and the lash, occasionally at the risk of his life—as we have seen—or interfered to save some worn-out wretch from being abandoned to the beasts of the desert. More than once, even, during a long desert march when water was worth its weight in gold, has he shared his scanty stock of the priceless fluid with some toiling, parched, and exhausted slave, who, with tongue swollen and protruding, could hardly drag one foot after the other. Yet, what is he but a hard-hearted, self-seeking slave-dealer, coining money out of suffering flesh and blood?

The gloom deepens. Lidwell, sitting there in his hut, can make out a knot of his rascally confederates talking earnestly together by one of the fires. A strange instinct warns him. Unless he leaves this place to-night he will never leave it alive. Quickly he stows away a flask and some biscuits in his pockets. Already his gains are secured about his person, carefully sewn up in his clothes—a large sum, partly in gold, partly in the paper currency of several nationalities. For some time past he has been prepared for a sudden flight, and he has a canoe snugly concealed in a convenient place on the river bank. To-night he will cut the whole concern for ever, and woe betide the man who shall try to stop him.

He looks out of the doorway, carelessly. All seems quiet enough, and it is now quite dark. His sheath-knife is ready to his hand in case of need; so, too, is the brace of revolvers without which he never moves.

"Now for a start," he muses; "but—hang it—I must go round and say good-bye to Anita. Can't leave without seeing the little one again."

Down a narrow path through the shadowy forest a few hundred yards, and he reaches a small thatched dwelling, more substantially built than the rest. Within all is silence. But for a lamp burning in one of the windows the place would seem deserted. He imitates the cry of a jackal twice. A moment, and then a dark figure glides swiftly round the corner of the house and stands beside him.

"At last! I wondered when you were coming to see me. You have been back hours, and never came near me." The voice is low, soft, and musical; but there is resentment in it.

"Didn't I? Well, I came as soon as I could. Don't scold me to-night, little one."

And he looks down at her with a queer expression. Every moment lost is a nail in his coffin; yet he is wasting those precious moments gazing into a pair of dark eyes.

She nestles close to his side. "I hate it so when you are away. And I am always afraid you may get killed, or catch that terrible fever over there, and never come back to me at all."

"Listen now, Anita," he says, gravely. "I must go away again—now—to-night, or my life is not worth a pebble, and I don't feel inclined to throw it away for the benefit of those brutes." Then he tells her about the fate of Sharkey, and the unmistakable signs he had read among his associates of their deadly intentions towards him.

The girl trembles with horror and apprehension as she listens.

“You must indeed go, and immediately. You can do nothing against them, and there are so many of them; and—Ah, I may as well die,” she breaks off in a wail of despair.

“Don’t say that, little one. You will soon learn to do without me; but I am afraid you will forget all your English. And you were getting on with it so nicely, too.”

The girl is silent; but looks up at him with a stricken, hopeless expression that goes to his heart. She is very lovely, standing there in the starlight, lovely in the rich, southern, voluptuous type. She is quite young—barely sixteen—but the delicate arched features are fully formed. As regards education or mental culture, Anita de Castro is a wild flower indeed. Her father is the head of this slave-dealing colony. Formerly a merchant in the Portuguese settlement of Delagoa Bay, his rascalities have landed him in outlawry, and he has taken his daughter with him into exile. Such is the girl who had attracted the attention of the Englishman Lidwell, who in her had found the one redeeming feature in his present reckless life. He had to a certain extent, and in a desultory sort of way, educated this girl; at any rate had moulded her into something better than a mere mental blank; and the process had been to him a real recreation, a refuge from the disgust which he increasingly felt for his cold-blooded and lawless occupation. And she? Here, on the threshold of budding womanhood, this stranger, who looked upon her as a mere plaything, possessed her whole heart. How it was she could not tell, even had she asked herself the question. Juarez, her sworn admirer, was softer of speech and far more deferential; whereas Lidwell sometimes seemed to ignore her very existence. Yet she would with a heavy heart anticipate the absence of the latter on long and perilous expeditions, and look forward so anxiously and so joyfully to his return. And now he has returned only to leave again immediately, and well she knew that she would see him no more. Suddenly she throws herself on his breast in a fit of passionate weeping.

“Ah, love! I shall never see you again. Never—never.”

A wave of wild temptation sweeps over the man. Why should he not take her with him? She is beautiful enough in face and form, and it suddenly strikes him that she is not the child he has hitherto been wont to consider her. She is in his arms now. He has only to say the word and she will stay there. But Lidwell is gifted with a cool head, and a strong one. He knows the world well enough, and he also knows his own nature. He will not sacrifice this girl to a passing impulse, however powerful. So he resists the momentary temptation, and—it is the saving of his life.

He strokes back the soft hair from her forehead. “Anita, child—you must not grieve like this for me—I don’t say forget the times we have spent together. What I do say is, you are, made for something better than this kind of life; leave it as soon as you are able, and—”

“Hush!”

She has heard something. With a quick gesture she draws herself from him, and stands erect and listening intently. A glow suffuses the sky, and the golden moon peeps above the tree-tops. And now the sound of stealthy footsteps and smothered voices may be heard approaching.

“Go!” exclaims the girl, imprinting a shower of kisses upon his lips. “Go—quick. They are coming. You shall not die here. Good-bye, love. I shall never see you again. Go.” And, as she pushes him from her, the advancing voices are very near indeed. She has barely time to regain the house before several men are knocking at the door. Feigning to be half asleep, she opens.

“Well, father, what has gone wrong?”

“Oh, nothing, Anita. Has Lidwell been here? We want him down at the camp. He promised to help us through with the wine,” answers De Castro.

“The Englishman? No, he hasn’t been here. He must be in his own hut.”

A glance goes round the group.

“But he must have been here, señorita,” replies Juarez. “He was seen to come in this direction.”

A thought strikes the girl. She must gain time. So with an admirably-feigned glance of uneasiness at a side door leading into another room, she reiterates that she has not seen him.

“Ah, well, comrades, I have some old wine in here,” says her father, advancing towards this door. “We will try it.” He turns the handle; but the door is locked. “The key, Anita, the key!”

“The key? Oh, here it is,” and after a pretended search she finds the key. They throw open the door suddenly, and stand staring in stupid surprise into an empty room.

“Juarez,” said the girl, calling him apart from the rest—“keep quiet now. Do you want the Englishman? You shall take him.”

The other started, and his eyes lit up with savage triumph.

“How? Where? Where is he?”

“You shall have him. Listen, Juarez. He has been here, but if you try to find him now you will fail. I promised to meet him two hours after midnight at the corner of the cane planting. He thinks I love him, but I hate him,” she went on, working herself into a state of admirably-feigned fury. “He laughed at me and treated me as a plaything—now I shall have revenge. But listen. Go back to the camp. He is suspicious of you already; but he will come to me two hours after midnight. Then be in waiting, and you shall take him as easily as a leopard in a net. Don’t tell the others about it until the time comes, only get them away now.”

If Juarez felt a qualm of suspicion, she acted her part so well, that he fell headlong into the trap. With difficulty, he persuaded his fellow ruffians to abandon their quest for the present. He trusted Anita implicitly; and, full of elation at the speedy vengeance which would overtake his rival, he returned with the others to their carousals.

The hours drag their length, and silence reigns in the tropical forest. A damp, unwholesome mist rises from the river and spreads over the tree-tops. Now and again the shout of the revellers breaks upon the silence, or the deep bass of a bloodhound is raised in dismal bay at the moon. Still Anita sits there, gazing out upon the forest, and following in spirit every step of him whose life she has saved, further and further as each step takes him from her. At last she falls fast asleep, worn out with the excitement and tension of the past few hours. Then comes a loud, angry knocking at the door.

Opening it, she is confronted with her father. He is shaking with wrath, and behind him are nine or ten others all armed to the teeth.

“Where is the Englishman?” he roared. “Have you fooled us? It is nearly daybreak—and two hours after midnight we were to take him! Where is he?”

“Where is he?” echoed Anita, her voice as clear as a bell. “Where is he? Safe. Far away—leagues and leagues. You will never see him again. He is safe.” And her large eyes flashed upon the enraged and astonished group in scornful defiance as she stood in the doorway.

With the yell of a wild beast baffled of its prey, the old ruffian sprang at his daughter. She never moved. But his clenched hand was seized in a firm grasp before it could descend.

“Softly—softly, patron!” said Juarez. “You would not strike the señorita!”

De Castro struggled in the grasp of the younger man and yelled the most awful curses upon Lidwell, his daughter, and all present; but Juarez was firm. He was not all bad, and a glow of admiration went through him at Anita's daring, and the shrewd way in which she had outwitted them. Moreover, rivalry apart, he had rather liked Lidwell. The latter they would never see again, for had not Anita herself said as much. On the whole, therefore, it was just as well that he had escaped, and saved them the necessity of killing a former brave comrade. So he tried to pacify the old man.

"Patron," he said, "be reasonable. We are well rid of this English devil. Certainly, he has won a lot of our dollars; but then he will lose his share in the profits of the last expedition." Then, in a low tone: "And he has rid us of that turbulent beast, Sharkey. He is a determined devil, and while he was with us he served us well. Let him go."

The old slave-dealer fumed and raved, then fell in with things as they were. "Ah well," he said at last, "what is—is, and we can't help it. We will empty another skin of wine." Then they withdrew to drown their discomfiture in drink, though some of the party, less easily pacified, would fain have started in pursuit of the fugitive, but that they knew it would be useless.

Six weeks later the mail steamer from Zanzibar was securely docked in the port of London, and Lidwell, bidding farewell to a few fellow passengers, stepped ashore, and in a moment was lost among the busy crowd in the great restless city. He was now in easy circumstances for life.

Chapter Four.

Seringa Vale.

One round, black speck high up yonder on the stony hillside. There he sits—the large old baboon; wary sentinel that he is, keeping jealous watch over the safety of the nimble troop under his charge, which, scattered about amid the bush, is feasting upon succulent roots and other vegetable provender afforded by its native wilds. And from his lofty perch he can descry something unwonted immediately beneath—danger possibly, intrusion at any rate—and he lifts up his voice: "Baugch-m! Baugch-m?" The sun blazes in a blue, cloudless sky, darting down his beams with a fierceness and vigour somewhat premature this lovely afternoon of an early South African spring day, and all nature is at rest in the drowsy stillness now broken by that loud, harsh cry. A cliff rears its perpendicular face from amid the bush-covered slopes, which, meeting at its base, form a triangular hollow. From the brow of the cliff rises a rugged steep, thickly grown with dark prickly aloes, whose bristling shapes, surmounted by bunches of red blossom, sprout upwards from the dry, stony soil. The tiniest thread of a streamlet trickles down the face of the rock, losing itself in a pool beneath, which reflects, as in a mirror, cliff, and overhanging bushes, and blue sky. A faint cattle track leading down to the water betokens that in a land of droughts and burning skies even this reservoir, remote and insignificant, is of account at times; but to-day here are no cattle. The long-drawn piping whistle of a spreuw (of the starling species) echoes now and again from the cool recesses of the rock; the hum of bees among the blossoming spekboem and mimosa; the twittering of the finks, whose pear-shaped pendulous nests sway to and fro over the water as the light-hearted birds fly in and out—all tell of solitude and of the peace of the wilderness. Here a big butterfly flits lightly on spotted wings above the flowering bushes; there, stalking solemnly among the stones, an armour-plated tortoise seems to be in rivalry with a horny and long-legged beetle as to which of them shall be the first to reach the other side of the small open space.

"Baugch-m! Baugch-m!"

Two round black specks high up there on the stony hillside. The resounding call is answered, and the two guardians of the troop sit there, a couple of hundred yards apart, looking down into the sequestered nook below.

The sleeper moves, then rolls over on his back and draws his broad-brimmed hat right over his face.

Clearly he does not intend rousing himself just yet. The sun's beams strike full upon him, but he feels them not; evidently he is indisposed to let even the monarch of light

interfere with his siesta. A few minutes more, and, with a start, he raises himself on his elbow and looks around.

"By Jove, how hot it is! I must have been doing the sluggard trick to some purpose, for the cliff was full in the sun when first I pricked for the softest plank here, and now it's throwing out a shadow as long as an attorney's bill of costs. Past four!" looking at his watch. "Now for a pipe; then a start."

He picks himself up out of the pass, yawns and stretches. The tortoise, which had already stood motionless, its bright eye dilated with alarm, now subsides into its shell, hoping to pass for one of the surrounding stones; its scarabean competitor likewise is equal to the occasion, after its own manner, and falling over on its side, with legs stiff and extended, feigns death industriously. Meanwhile the aloe-dotted steep overhead is alive with the loud warning cries of the disturbed baboons, whose ungainly but nimble shapes—some fifty in number—may be seen making off helter-skelter up the hill, to disappear with all possible despatch over the brow of the same.

"Noisy brutes!" grumbles the wayfarer, shading his eyes to watch them. "But for your unprincipled shindy I could have done a good hour's more snooze with all the pleasure in life. If only I had a rifle here—even a Government Snider—it would go hard but that one or two of you would learn the golden art of silence."

Look at him as he stands there just six foot high in his boots—well-proportioned, broad-shouldered, straight as a dart. The face is of a very uncommon type, with character and determination in its regular, clear-cut features; but a look of insouciance in the eyes—which are neither grey nor blue, but sometimes one, sometimes the other—neutralises what would otherwise be an energetic and restless expression. The mouth is nearly hidden by a drooping, golden-brown moustache. In the matter of age the man would have satisfied a census collector by the casual reply, "Rising nine-and-twenty."

Colonial born you would certainly not pronounce him. Yet not a touch of the "rawness" of the greenhorn or "new chum" would you descry, even if the serviceable suit of tancord and the quality of the saddle and riding gear lying on the ground did not betoken a certain amount of acquaintance with colonial life on the part of their owner.

He draws a rough cherrywood pipe from his pocket, fills and lights it, sending forth vigorous blue puffs which hang upon the drowsy air. He stands for a moment looking at the sun, and decides that it is time to start.

“Now, I wonder what has become of Sticks. The old scamp is given to erring and straying afar just when wanted. When I don’t require his services he’ll fool about the camp by the hour.”

Sticks was his horse. That estimable quadruped had at one time been addicted to “sticking,” an inconvenient vice of which his present owner had thoroughly cured him.

Our wayfarer strolls leisurely to the ridge which shuts in the hollow, and looks around. Then a reddish object amid the green bush, some hundreds of yards further down, catches his eye. It is the object of his search; and, with one hand thrust carelessly into a pocket, he makes for the errant nag and returns leading his steed to the waterhole, where clouds of yellow finks scatter right and left, vociferously giving vent to their indignation at being thus invaded.

And now, having saddled up, he is on his way. Steeper and steeper grows the ascent; the bush meets here and there over the narrow path, nearly sweeping the rider from his saddle, and the horse, blinded now and then by a thick branch of spekboem flying back in his eyes, makes an approach to a stumble, for which he is not to blame, for the track is rugged enough in all conscience. At length the narrow path comes to an end, merging into a broad but stony waggon road.

But—excelsior! The bay steps out at a brisk walk, ascending ever the rough road which winds round the abrupt spurs of the hills like a ledge, mounting higher and higher above the long sweep of bush-covered slope, where, among the recesses of many a dark ravine, thickets of “wait-a-bit” thorn, and mimosa, and tangled underwood, afford retreat to the more retiring denizens of the waste—the sharp-horned bushbuck and the tusked wild pig, the hooded cobra, and the deadly puff-adder. And beneath those shades, too, in the still gloom, the spotted leopard creeps stealthily upon its prey, and the howl of the hyena and the shrill yelping bay of the jackal resound weirdly through the night.

“It’s waxing chilly. Up, old Sticks!” ejaculates the traveller, with a light tap of his riding-crop. The horse picks up his head and scrambles along with new zest. A few minutes more and he is standing on the top of the randt (the high ground or ridge overlooking the valley of a river) for a brief blow after his exertions, which his heaving flanks proclaim to have been of no mean order, while his rider is contemplating the fresh scene which opens out before his gaze. For the wooded country has been left, and now before him lies spread a panorama of broad and rolling plains, dotted capriciously here and there with clumps of bush. A lovely sweep of country stretches away in many undulations to the wooded foothills of a beautiful mountain range which forms a background to the whole view, extending, crescent-like, far as the eye can travel. The snow-cap yet resting on the lofty peak of the Great Winterberg flushes first with a

delicate tinge and then blood-red; many a jutting spur and grey cliff starts forth wondrously distinct, while the forest trees upon a score of distant heights stand soft and feathery, touched with a shimmer of green and gold from the long beams of the sinking sun as he dips down and down to the purpling west.

The stranger rides on, enjoying the glorious beauty of this fair landscape—never fairer than when seen thus, in the almost unearthly lustre of a perfect evening. A steinbuck leaps out of the grass, and after a brief run halts and steadily surveys the intruder. Down in the hollow a pair of blue cranes utter their musical note of alarm, and stalk rapidly hither and thither, as though undecided about the quarter whence danger threatens, and the cooing of doves from yon clump of euphorbia blends in soft harmony with the peaceful surroundings as in a vesper chant of rest.

And now a strange group appears over the rise in front. It is a Kafir trek. Two men, three women, and some children, driving before them their modest possessions in live stock, consisting of three cows (one with a calf), and a few sheep and goats. The men wear an ample blanket apiece thrown loosely round their shoulders, but other clothing have they none, with the exception of a pair of boots, which however, each carries slung over his shoulder, preferring to walk barefoot. The women are somewhat less scantily clad, with nondescript draperies of blanketing and bead-work falling around them. Each has her baby slung on her back, and carries an enormous bundle on her head, containing pots and pans, blankets and matting—the household goods and chattels; for her lord disdains to bear anything but his kerries, or knobsticks, and marches along in front looking as if the whole world belonged to him. Some of the elder children are laden with smaller bundles, and even the cows are pressed into the service as porters, each having a long roll of mats fastened across her horns, and two or three mongrel curs slink behind the group. All Kafir garments are plentifully bedaubed with red ochre, an adornment frequently extended to their wearers, giving them the appearance of peripatetic flower-pots.

“Naand, Baas!” (Note 1) sing out the men as they meet the traveller, and then continue in their own tongue, “Nxazéla.” (Tobacco.)

No bad specimens of their hardy and supple race are these two fellows as they stand there, their well-knit, active figures glistening like bronze in the setting sun. They hold their heads well up, and each of their shrewd and rather good-looking countenances is lighted by a pair of clear, penetrating eyes. The stranger chucks them a bit of the coveted plant, and asks how much further it is to Seringa Vale.

“Over there,” replies one of the Kafirs, pointing with his stick to the second rise in the ground, about two miles off. With a brief good-night the horseman touches up his nag

and breaks into a gentle canter, while the natives, collecting their stock—which has taken advantage of the halt to scatter over the veldt and pick up a few mouthfuls of grass—resume their way.

The sun has gone down, and the white peak of the Great Winterberg towers up cold and spectral to the liquid sky, as the horseman crests the ridge indicated, and lo—the broad roof of a substantial farmhouse lies beneath. Around, are several thatched outbuildings, and the whole is charmingly situated, nestling in a grove of seringas and orange trees. There is a fruit-garden in front of the house, or rather on one side of it, though it may almost be said to have two fronts, for the verandah and the stoep run round the two sides which command the best and widest view, while another and a larger garden, even more leafy and inviting-looking, lies down in the kloof. Close to the homestead are the sheep and cattle kraals, with their prickly thorn-fences, into one of which a white, fleecy flock is already being counted, while another, preceded by its voerbok (Note 2) is coming down the kloof, urged on by the shout and whistle of its Kafir shepherd. The cattle enclosure is already alive with the dappled hides of its denizens, moving about among whom are the bronzed forms of the cattle-herd and his small boys, who are busily employed in sorting out the calves and shutting them up in their pen for the night, away from their mothers, so that these may contribute their share towards filling the milk-pails in the morning. Behind the kraals stand the abodes of the Kafir farm servants, eight or ten beehive-shaped huts to wit, and stepping along towards these, calabash on head, comes a file of native women and girls who have been to draw water from the spring. They sing, as they walk, a monotonous kind of savage chant, stopping now and then to bawl out some "chaff" to the shepherd approaching with his flock as aforesaid, and going into shrill peals of laughter over his reply.

The traveller draws rein for a little while, till the counting-in process is accomplished, then rides down to the kraal gate and dismounts. A man turns away from giving some final directions to the Kafir who is tying up the gate—an old man, over whose head at least seventy summers must have passed, but yet stalwart of body and handsome of feature, with hair and beard like silver. He is dressed in the rough cord suit and slouch hat of the ordinary frontier farmer, and in his hand he carries a whip of plaited raw-hide. His clothes have a timeworn appearance, and his hands are large and hard-looking; but, in spite of the roughness of his aspect and attire, you need only look once into Walter Brathwaite's face to know that you were confronting a man of gentle blood.

"Good evening," he says, heartily, advancing with outstretched hand towards the stranger. But a curious smile upon the tatter's face causes him to pause with a half mystified, hesitating air, as if it were not unfamiliar to him. "Why, no. It can't be. Bless my soul, it is, though. Why, Claverton, how are you, my boy? Glad to see you back again in Africa," and he enclosed the younger man's hand in a strong grip. "But come in; the

wife'll be delighted. Here, Jacob," he shouted, in stentorian tones which brought a young Hottentot upon the scene in a twinkling, "take the Baas's horse and off-saddle him."

Passing through a hall, garnished with trophies of the chase, bushbuck horns, and tusks of the wild pig, and a couple of grinning panther-heads, they entered the dining-room, a large, homelike apartment, plainly but comfortably furnished.

"Here, Mary, I've brought you a visitor," said the settler, as they entered. "You remember Arthur Claverton?"

A tall old lady, whose kindly and still handsome face bore unmistakable signs of former beauty, rose from a sewing-machine at which she had been working, with a start of surprise.

"What! Arthur? Why, so it is. But I should never have known you, you're so altered. Ah, I always said we should see you out here again," she continued, shaking his hand cordially.

The stranger smiled, and a very pleasant smile it was.

"Well, yes, so you did, Mrs Brathwaite; but at least I have the faculty of knowing when and where I am well off," he said, really touched by the genuine warmth of his reception.

"So you've been all over the world since we saw you last—to Australia and back?" she went on. "And then the last thing we heard of you was that you had gone to America."

"I attempted to; but Providence, or rather the blunder-headed lookout on board a homeward-bound liner, willed otherwise."

"How do you mean?"

"Why! that the said idiotically-handled craft collided with ours, two days out, cutting her down to the water's edge and sinking her in thirteen minutes. I and twenty-four others were picked up, but the rest went to Davy Jones's locker. There weren't many more of them, though, for it was a small boat, and I was nearly the only passenger."

"Oh! And you didn't try the voyage again?" said Mrs Brathwaite, in subdued tones. She was colonial born, and in her own element as brave a woman as ever stepped. In the earlier frontier wars she had stood by her husband's side within the laager and loaded his guns for him, while the conflict waxed long and desperate, and the night was ablaze with the flash of volleys, and the air was heavy with asphyxiating smoke, and the

detonating crash of musketry and the battle-shouts of the savage foe, and had never flinched. But she had a shuddering horror of the sea, and would almost have gone through all her terrible experiences again rather than trust herself for one hour on its smiling, treacherous expanse.

"Well, no; I didn't," he answered. "I took it as an omen, and concluded to dismiss the Far West in favour of the 'Sunny South.' So here I am."

"Ah! well," put in the old settler. "Perhaps we'll be able to find you something in the way of excitement here, if that's what you were in search of, and that before very long, too. All isn't so quiet here as they try to make out. I've lived on the frontier, man and boy, all my life, and I can see pretty plainly that there's mischief brewing."

"Is there? I did hear something of the sort on my way up, now I think of it; but I had an idea that the days of war were over, and that Jack Kafir had got his quietus."

"Ha! ha! Had you really, now? Why, bless my soul, the Kafirs are far more numerous than ever; they outnumber us by fifty to one. They hate us as much as ever they did, and for some time past have been steadily collecting guns and ammunition. Now, what do they want those guns and that ammunition for? Not for hunting, for there's next to no game in all Kafirland. No, it is to put them on an equal footing with us; and then, with their numbers, they think to have it all their own way. There's mischief brewing, mark my words."

"It wouldn't mean a scrimmage among themselves, would it? They might be anxious to exterminate each other," ventured Claverton.

The other smiled significantly, and was about to reply, when the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of supper and—Hicks.

The latter was one of those young Englishmen often met with on colonial farms, learning their business in the capacity of assistant, or general factotum; and who may be divided into two categories: those who take kindly to the life and throw themselves thoroughly into it and its interests, and those who don't, and leave it after a trial. Our friend Hicks may be placed in the former of these. He was a strong, energetic, good-tempered fellow, who loved his calling, and was a favourite with everybody. He had served three years in the Frontier Mounted Police, and had been two with Mr Brathwaite, and, by virtue of so much hard, healthy, open-air life, was twice the man he had been when he left his father's Midlandshire parsonage five years previously.

“You were asking if the Kafirs might not be preparing for a fight among themselves?” resumed the old settler as they took their places at the supper-table, which looked cheerful and homelike in the extreme. He had got upon a favourite hobby, and was not to be diverted from a congenial ride. “There isn’t the slightest chance of it, because they know very well we shan’t let them. We prefer encouraging them to hammer away at us.”

“Pickling a rod for our own backs?” remarked Claverton.

“Just so. By patching up their tribal disputes we check just so much salutary blood-letting, and foster hordes of lazy, thieving rascals right on our border. Even if the sham philanthropy, under which we groan, obliges us to sit still while the savages grow fat on our stolen cattle and laugh at us, the least it could do would be to allow them to cut a few of each other’s throats when they have a mind to.”

“The Home Government, I suppose?”

“That’s it. A parcel of old women in Downing Street, ruled by Exeter Hall and the Peace Society. What do they know about the Colony, and what do they care? After British subjects have been murdered and plundered all along the border, an official is sent to inquire into it. Of course the chiefs all pretend ignorance, and throw the blame on somebody else. Then follows great palaver and buttering over. The chiefs are told to be good boys and not do it again, and are given waggon-loads of presents—and a treaty is made. A treaty! With savages—savages whose boast is that they are a nation of liars. Can’t you imagine the wily rascals sniggering in their blankets, and wondering how much longer they are going to allow themselves to be governed by such a race of milksops!”

His listeners could not forbear a laugh.

“I can tell you it’s no laughing matter to be burned out of house and home three times as I have been,” went on the old man, “and that through the sentimental cant of our rulers. No; coddling savages doesn’t do—never did do, and never will. Treat them fairly and with the strictest justice; but, if you are to rule them at all, you must do so with a strong hand.”

Walter Brathwaite had, as he said, lived on the frontier, man and boy, all his life; for he was a mere child when his father, tempted by the inducement of free grants of land, had transferred the family fortunes to the shores of Southern Africa in the early days of the settlement of the Cape Colony. His youth and earlier manhood were passed amid the hardships and obstacles of an emigrant’s life. And also its dangers—for the tribes infesting the rugged and difficult country which then was Kafirland, were wont to lay

marauding hands on the settler's flocks and herds—nor did the savages scruple about adding murder to pillage. Still the emigrants throve; for those were the days of good seasons and healthy flocks and herds—when pasturage was plentiful and succulent, droughts were infrequent, and disease almost unknown. Three successive wars at short intervals swept away the fruits of the unfortunate settlers' toil; but they managed to pick up again, and now, at this period of our narrative, it is twenty years since the last of these, and there are once more the same signs of restlessness among the tribes which the experienced remember to have heralded former outbreaks. So if Walter Brathwaite expresses strong distrust of his barbarous neighbours, it is not without ample justification. He has done good service, too, in the time of need; has fought valiantly and ungrudgingly on behalf of his adopted country, and whether in peace or in war has ever enjoyed the respect and good opinion of his fellows. In truth, right justly so. Gifted with strong, practical common sense; his straightforward nature abhorring anything in the shape of humbug or meanness; of a thoroughly kind-hearted, genial disposition and open-handed to a degree, he is a splendid specimen of the colonist who is also by birth and tradition a true English gentleman; and now in the latter years of his long, useful, and honourable life, he is an object of esteem and affection to all who know him—and they are many.

Note 1. Dutch, "Evening, master." Dutch is nearly always employed in the Cape Colony for intercourse with the natives, comparatively few frontiersmen, even, being well versed in the Kafir language.

Note 2. "The goat which goes before."—A goat is always used instead of a bell-wether on the Cape sheep farms, and so accustomed do the flocks become to their leader that it is a hard and toilsome business to induce them to enter their fold without it.

Chapter Five.

The Biter Bitten.

It was early when Claverton awoke on the following morning; but, early as it was, the occupant of the other bed had disappeared. He had "shaken down" in Hicks' room, and the two had talked and smoked themselves to sleep; and, early as it was, there were plenty of sounds outside, which told of the day's doings having begun.

The most epicurean of late sleepers will find it hard to keep up his usual luxurious habit in a frontier house. There is a something which seems to preclude late lying—possibly the consciousness of exceptional laziness, or a sneaking qualm over taking it easy in bed when every soul on the place has long been astir; but even the most inveterate sluggard will hardly find it in his conscience to roll over again, especially if a companion's long since vacated conch is staring him reproachfully in the face from the other side of the room.

Claverton, who was in no sense an epicurean, felt something of this, and lost no time in turning out. The sun had risen, but was unable to pierce the heavy mist which hang over the earth in opaque folds. He found his host busy at the sheep kraals, the thorn-fence dividing which had been broken through in the night, with the result of mixing the flocks. Three Kafirs were hard at work sorting them out again, and the dust flew in clouds as the flock rushed hither and thither within the confined space—the ground rumbling under their hoofs.

"Pleasure of farming!" remarked the old man, with a smile, after greetings had been exchanged. Both turned away their faces a minute as a pungent and blinding cloud swept past them. "The rascals might have avoided all this by simply putting a thorn tack or two in its place last night. You can't trust them, you see—have to look to everything yourself."

"Suppose so," replied Claverton, slipping out of his jacket. "I'm going to give your fellows a hand. The brand, though, is rather indistinct. Which come out?"

"All branded B, with the double ear mark."

"Right?" And he dived into the thick of the fun, with all the energy and more than the dexterity of the Kafirs, who paused for a moment with a stare of astonishment and a smothered "Whouw!" They did not know who the strange Baas was, but he was evidently no greenhorn.

Another hour's hard work and the flocks are separate again; but it is rather too early to turn them out to grass. So the two stroll round to the cattle kraal, whose denizens stand patiently and ruminatingly about for the most part, though some are restless and on the move, recognising with responsive "moo" the voices of their calves in the pen. Nearly all the cows are of good breed—the serviceable and hardy cattle of the country, crossed with imported stock, though now and again among them can be descried the small head and straight back of an almost thorough-bred Alderney. Milking is going on. There sits the old cattle-herd beneath a wild young animal properly secured, milking away and gossiping with his satellites as fast as he fills his pail—for Kafirs are awful gossips. Then he turns the frightened young cow loose, and, removing the foaming pail out of the way of a possible upset, proceeds in search of a fresh victim. He salutes his master in passing, and, with a rapid, keen glance at the stranger, extends his greeting to him.

Mr Brathwaite is very proud of his choice and well-bred animals. He knows every hoof of them like ABC, almost every hair; and as they walk about among the beasts he entertains his companion with the history of each, and where it came from, and the events of its career in life.

"Hullo! Who's this?" said Claverton suddenly, as two horsemen appeared on the brow of the opposite hill. "One's Hicks, the other looks like, uncommonly like, Jim."

"Yes, it is Jim," assented Mr Brathwaite. "What's brought him over this morning, I wonder?" The said Jim was his eldest son. He was a married man, and lived on a farm of his own some fifteen or sixteen miles off. A few minutes more, and the two horsemen drew rein in front of the cattle kraal.

"Hullo, Arthur!" sang out Jim, jumping to the ground. "Here we are again! Hicks told me I should find you here, of all people. Morning, father! Have Ethel and Laura arrived yet?"

"I believe so. I saw Jeffreys' trap coming over the hill about an hour ago, and he was to bring them. I was busy and couldn't go in then. My brother's children, Arthur," he explained, noting a surprised look in his guest's face. "They have come from Cape Town to stay a couple of months while their father is away up the country."

"Come to enliven us up a bit," said jovial Jim. "Ethel will lead you a life of it, or I'm a Trojan."

Jim Brathwaite was a fine, handsome fellow of thirty-five, over six feet in height, strong as a bull and active as a leopard. His bronzed and bearded countenance was stamped with that air of dashing intrepidity with which a genial disposition usually goes hand in

hand. He was a quick-tempered man, and his native dependents stood in considerable awe of him, for they knew—some of them to their cost—that he would stand no nonsense. Of untiring energy, and with all his father's practical common sense, he had prospered exceedingly in good times, and had managed to hold his own against bad ones. Shrewd and clear-headed, he was thoroughly well able to look after his own interests; and any one given to sharp practice or rascality—whether cattle dealer or Dutchman, Kafir or Hottentot—would have to get up very early indeed to reach the blind side of him.

Claverton had been on very intimate terms with the Brathwaites some years previously. They had been good friends to him in the earlier days of his wandering life, and he had a warm regard for them. It was more than pleasant, he thought, being among them again, laughing over many a reminiscence evoked by the jest-loving Jim as they strolled towards the house.

The long, low dining-room looked invitingly cool after the glare and heat outside. Mrs Brathwaite, who was seated at the table, scolded them playfully for keeping breakfast waiting. Beside her sat a girl—a beautiful creature, with large blue eyes fringed with curling lashes, and a sparkling, dimpled rosebud of a face made for capriciousness and kisses. The masses of her golden hair, drawn back from the brows, were allowed to fall in a rippling shower below her waist, and a fresh, cool morning-dress set off her neat little figure to perfection.

"Arthur. This is my niece, Ethel," said Mrs Brathwaite.

Claverton started ever so slightly and bowed. He was wondering where on earth this vision of loveliness had suddenly dropped from in this out-of-the-way place. And Mr Brathwaite had said, "My brother's children."

The girl shot one glance at him from under the curling lashes as she acknowledged the introduction, and a gleam of merriment darted across the bright face. Each had been trying to read off the other, and each had detected the other in the act. She turned away to greet her cousin.

"Why, what in the world has brought you here?" cried that jovial blade in his hearty voice. "We weren't expecting you for ever so long. Where's Laura?"

"The Union Company's steamer Basuto. Cobb and Co, and Mr Jeffreys' trap. Laura's in the next room. One question at a time, please."

Jim roared with laughter as he took his seat at the table. Between himself and Ethel much sparring took place whenever the pair got together.

“Sharp as ever, by Jingo,” he cried. “I say, Ethel, I wonder you haven’t been quodded for bribery and corruption. They say Uncle George only gets returned by sending you round to tout for votes.”

The point of this joke lay in the fact that her father was a fervid politician and a member of the Legislative Assembly. Before Ethel could retort, a diversion was created by the entrance of Mr Brathwaite and his other niece. Laura was her sister’s junior by a year, and as unlike her as it was possible to be. She was a slight, graceful girl, with dark hair and eyes, and as quiet and demure in manner as the other was merry and impulsive; and though falling far short of her sister in actual beauty, yet when interested her face would light up in a manner that was very attractive. So thought, at any rate, our friend Hicks, on whom, during her last visit at Seringa Vale, Laura had made an impression. Not to put too fine a point upon it, Hicks was very hard hit indeed.

“Really, those two are too bad,” said Mrs Brathwaite. “Beginning to fight before they have been five minutes together. Isn’t it too bad of them, Arthur?”

He appealed to, looked up just in time to catch Ethel’s glance of defiance which said as plainly as words: “You mind your own business.” She was not going to defer to the opinions of this stranger, and did not see why he should be called upon to decide in the matter. No doubt he had come out there with the notion that they were a mere set of half-civilised, ignorant colonials whom it was his business to set right. Those new arrivals from England always gave themselves such airs, and expected to have everything their own way. That might do with the old people and good-natured Jim, but it would not go down with her, Ethel Brathwaite, aged nineteen, and she intended to let him know it. She had taken a dislike to this new arrival, which he saw at once, and the idea rather entertained him.

“Uncle, I declare Jim gets worse and worse as he grows older. Yes—older, Jim, for you’re quite grey since I saw you last, you know. How are you, Mr Hicks?” she continued, as that tardy youth entered the room. “Have you shot your twenty backs yet? You know we said last year we should vote you out of our good opinion unless you could show as twenty pairs of horns fairly killed by your own gun when next we met?”

“Well, not yet,” was the answer, somewhat reluctantly given.

“As you are strong, be merciful,” put in Claverton, thereby drawing down upon himself another indignant glance.

Our friend Hicks, like many a greater man, had his weaknesses. One of these was a passion for sport. He would lay himself out to the most arduous labours in the heat of the day, and forego many an hour of well-earned rest at night, in the pursuit of his favourite pastime. Not that his efforts were always crowned with the success they deserved—indeed, it was the exception rather than the rule if they were so—but the mere pleasure of having his gun in his hand, expecting, Micawber-like, something to turn up, satisfied him. When he first came to Seringa Vale he had been in the habit of starting off in quest of game at times when by no possibility could he have obtained a shot, and under such circumstances had been known to empty his gun at such small fry as spreuws or meercats rather than not discharge it at all. But whatever he let off his gun at, it didn't make the least difference to the object under fire. He never hit anything, and much good-humoured chaff was habitually indulged in at his expense. "He couldn't hit a house, couldn't Hicks," Mr Brathwaite was wont to observe jocosely, "unless he were put inside and all the doors and shutters barred up." Which witticism Jim would supplement by two or three of his own. But the subject of this rallying was the very essence of good humour. He didn't mind any amount of chaff, and devoted himself to the pursuit of ferae naturae with a perseverance which was literally as laid down by the copy-books—its own reward.

"I move that we all go down and look at the ostriches," suggested Ethel, ever anxious to be on the move.

"Who seconds that?" said Jim, looking around. "Now, then, Arthur!"

"As junior member my innate modesty forbids," was the reply.

"That is meant satirically, Mr Claverton," cried Ethel. "You deserve to be voted out of the expedition, and if you don't apologise you shall be."

"Then I withdraw the innate modesty. What—that not enough? Then there's nothing for it but a pistol or a pipe. Of the two evils here goes for the pipe. Hicks, we haven't blown our cloud this morning." He saw how the land lay.

"Er—well, you see—er—that is—er—I mean," stammered Hicks, who, good-natured fellow, shrank from refusing outright. "Er—the fact is, I've got to go down and feed the ostriches some time, so I may as well go now."

"Well, I am surprised at you, Mr Hicks," said Ethel. "So the pleasure of our company counts as nothing. You deserve to be put on the stool of repentance too."

“But really that’s just what I meant—er—that is, I mean—it does, you know—but—” stuttered the unlucky youth, putting his foot in it deeper and deeper.

Laura had fled into another room under the pretext of finding her hat, whence a stifled sob of suppressed laughter was audible now and again. The originator of this turn of affairs was imperturbably sticking a penknife through and through a piece of card, and contemplating the actors in it as if he were unconscious of anything humorous in the situation, though in reality he was repressing, with an effort, an overpowering desire to go outside and roar for five minutes.

“Good-bye, Mr Claverton,” said Ethel, with a mock bow, and emphasising the first word. She was rather disappointed at his ready acquiescence in her ostracism of him, as it upset a little scheme of vengeance she had been forming.

“Say rather ‘Au reservoir,’ for your way, I believe, lies past the dam.”

“Oh-h!” burst from the whole party at the villainy of the pun, as they left him.

“I’m afraid your friend is a dreadful firebrand; Ethel and he will fight awfully,” said Laura to Hicks as they walked down to the large enclosure. These two had fallen behind, and Hicks was in the seventh heaven of delight. The mischief of it was that the arrangement would be of such short duration. Some twenty yards in front Ethel was keeping her aunt and Jim in fits of laughter.

“Let me carry that for you,” said Hicks, pouncing upon a tiny apology for a basket which was in her hand.

“No, no; you’ve got quite enough to carry,” she replied, referring to a large colander containing the daily ration of maize for the ostriches, and which formed his burden on the occasion.

“Not a bit of it. Look, I can carry it easily. Do let me,” he went on in his eagerness.

“Take care, or you’ll drop the other,” said she.

The warning was just one shade too late. Down came the colander, its contents promptly burying themselves in the long grass. The salvage which Hicks managed to effect was but a very small fraction of the original portion.

“There now, I’ve spilt all the mealies,” said he, ruefully, eyeing the scattered grain. He was not thinking of its intrinsic value, but that the necessity of going back for more would do him out of the two or three hundred yards left to him of his walk with Laura.

“Your friend would say ‘it’s of no use crying over spilt mealies.’ Never mind, we can go back and get some more.”

“What!” he exclaimed, delightfully. “Do you mean to say you’ll go all the way back with me? But really I can’t let you take all that trouble,” he added, with reluctant compunction.

“I mean to say I’ll go all the way back with you, and I intend ‘to take all that trouble’ with or with out permission,” she replied, looking up at him with a saucy gleam in her eyes.

Close to the storeroom they came upon Claverton. He was sitting on the disselboom of a tent-waggon smoking a pipe, and meditatively shying pebbles at an itinerant scarabaeus, which was wandering aimlessly about on a sun-baked open patch of ground about seven yards off.

“Well, has your sister thought better of it, and removed the ban?” asked he, as the two came up.

“No, she hasn’t,” answered Laura, “but I see you’re penitent, so I will do so on her behalf. You may come down with us,” she added, demurely. She knew he would do nothing of the sort, so could safely indulge the temptation to mischief.

Poor Hicks was on thorns. “Yes, come along, Claverton,” he chimed in, mechanically, in the plenitude of his self-abnegation fondly imagining that his doleful tones were the acme of cordiality.

“Well, I think I will,” pretended Claverton, making a feint at moving. Hicks’ countenance fell, and Laura turned away convulsed. “Don’t know, though; think I’ll join you later. I must go in and get a fresh fill; my pipe’s gone out,” and he sauntered away to Hicks’ great relief, as he and Laura started off to rejoin the others at the ostrich camp.

The male bird was very savage, and no sooner did he descry the party, than he came bearing down upon them from the far end of the enclosure.

“What a grand fellow!” exclaimed Ethel, putting out her hand to stroke the long serpentine neck of the huge biped, who, so far from appreciating the caress, resented it by pressing the stone wall with his hard breast-bone as though he would overthrow it,

and making the splinters fly with a vicious kick or two, in his futile longing to get at and smash the whole party. And standing there in all the bravery of his jet-black array, the snowy plumes of his wings dazzling white in the sun as he waved them in wrathful challenge, he certainly merited to the full the encomium passed upon him. Hicks emptied the contents of the colander, which brought the hen bird running down to take her share—a mild-eyed, grey, unobtrusive-looking creature. She stood timidly pecking on the outside of the "spread," every now and again running off some twenty yards as her tyrannical lord made at her, with a sonorous hiss, aiming a savage kick at her with his pointed toe.

"Oh, you odious wretch," cried Ethel, apostrophising the bird. "Mr Hicks, can't we give the poor hen some all to herself?"

"Behold the way of the world," said a voice behind her. "Every man for himself and—but I won't finish the saw."

She turned, and there was Claverton. A cherrywood pipe was in his mouth, and with one hand thrust carelessly into the pocket of a loose shooting-coat, he stood regarding her from beneath his broad-brimmed hat, looking the very personification of coolness and unconcern.

The sight of him angered her, but a thrill of malicious satisfaction shot through her, as she thought of the rude shock she would inflict upon that provoking imperturbability before he was an hour older.

"So you come down from the stool of repentance without permission," she said, severely.

"Couldn't stop away any longer," he replied, without removing his careless glance from her face. "Besides, your sister absolved me in your name."

"Then you may stay," she said, graciously, turning to look at the ostriches. The male bird was about fifty yards off, reluctant to leave the spot, and rolling his fiery eye towards them with a frequency that showed he had not quite given up all hopes of making mincemeat of some one of the party that day.

"Mr Claverton," suddenly exclaimed Ethel, even more graciously. "Do get me those red flowers over there, the ones on the long stalks."

"With pleasure," he answered, coming to her side. "Indicate them."

"There they are, those under that bush."

She pointed out ten or a dozen wiry-looking stalks with a few red blossoms that would not have overburdened one of them, but were injudiciously distributed amongst the group, which sprouted amid the undergrowth in a small clump of thorn-bushes right in the enclosure. To reach it about seventy yards of open ground, destitute of all cover save for a single mimosa bush growing half-way, must needs be traversed.

“Hold on, let’s get the bird away first,” said Jim, moving off with that intent.

“Never mind the bird, Jim, he won’t interfere with me,” quietly answered Claverton; and without even pocketing his pipe he climbed deliberately over the wall.

“Don’t go, Arthur. Good gracious, he’ll be killed!” cried Mrs Brathwaite, in dire trepidation. “Ethel, how could you?”

“No he won’t, auntie; you’ll see him run in a minute as for dear life. I wanted to make him run,” she added in a low tone, with a mischievous, scornful laugh.

I know of no more perfect exemplification of the old adage about familiarity breeding contempt than the case of the fall-grown male ostrich. In his wild state the most timid and wary of creatures, he is up and away the moment you appear on the skyline, and fleetness and endurance must be the character of your mount if you hope to overtake him. In a state of domesticity, however, his aggressiveness and pugnacity know no bounds. He will charge anything or everything, resistance only adding to his blind ferocity—and when it is understood that a single stroke of his sharp horny toe—for he kicks down, not out—will shatter a man’s skull, not to mention the possibility of a broken limb, it will not be difficult for the reader to realise that this gigantic fowl is a particularly awkward customer to deal with. Of course the bird is easily killed, or disabled, a very moderate blow from a stick being sufficient to break its leg. But it must be remembered that the creature is, so to say, worth its weight in gold, and any one would think more than, twice before slaying so valuable a possession, even in self-defence. So it is manifest that the expedition upon which Claverton had now embarked was by no means free from the element of peril.

Once over the wall he walked coolly forward, seeming altogether to ignore his foe’s existence. The ostrich, however, was by no means disposed to take matters so quietly, for before he had gone fifteen paces it bore down upon him with a savage hiss; but a couple of light bounds brought him to the small bash above mentioned, where he was safe for the moment. For the moment, because it was only a question which of the two would tire first, and they dodged each other round the precarious shelter which was only half-way to his destination.

Soon, however, besieger and besieged alike came to a complete standstill, and the situation began to wax rather monotonous. Then the ostrich, withdrawing a couple of yards, dropped down on its shanks, and contorting its neck, and at the same time fluttering its wings in defiance, produced a curious drumming noise, of which grotesque challenge its human antagonist took not the slightest notice, but waited on as calmly as ever. Suddenly it sprang up, and uttering its trumpet-like hiss, dashed right through the bush at him; then, while it was still blundering among the thorns, Claverton started off upon the remainder of his journey. This he could have accomplished with ease and safety, but that above all he intended to do it quietly. He knew why Ethel had sent him in there as well as she did herself, and that astute young lady should not have the pleasure of seeing him routed, or enjoying a laugh at his expense. Consequently he had not covered more than half the distance that remained to him, at a quick but easy walk, when the ostrich, now simply infuriate by reason of a few pricks from the sharp mimosa thorns, which had penetrated even its tough hide, was upon him. And very huge and formidable looked the ferocious bird, as, rearing itself up to its full height, its jetty plumage erect and bristling, its eye glaring, and its fiery red bill wide open, it rushed upon Claverton, hissing like a fiend. No cover was at hand; there he stood in the open, completely at the mercy of his savage assailant.

In vain Jim and Hicks ran into the enclosure shouting, to draw off the creature's attention; it manifested a fell fixity of purpose, from which it was not to be turned aside by any such puerile tricks. Mrs Brathwaite grew pale, and averted her head; even Ethel now saw that she had carried her practical joke rather too far; but still her gaze was riveted upon the combatants with a strange, eager fascination.

But Claverton's coolness always stood him in good stead. He suddenly advanced a couple of paces, thus forestalling the attack, and seizing his powerful antagonist by the lower part of the neck, swung himself nimbly aside, just managing to avoid a kick that would probably have ripped him up, and held on firmly to the creature's throat, half choking it. It plunged and stamped, its great feet going all the time like sledge-hammers, and to hold on was just as much as he could do, for it was as powerful as a horse. But hold on he did as for dear life; then, watching his opportunity, he flung himself off, and before the bird, half-dazed, had recovered from the effects of the choking it had received, he stood safe within the friendly shelter of the clump of bush, somewhat used up, but uninjured, except that his right hand was torn and bleeding from contact with the bird's claw. His pursuer, indisposed to venture again among thorns, walked quickly up and down before the entrance to the cover, flicking its wings about in baffled wrath at the unaccountable escape of its victim.

The first thing he did was to gather every one of the flowers he had come for. Then the spectators could see him standing against a tree doing something with a pencil and the back of an envelope.

“Hallo! what on earth are you up to now?” called out Jim. “Tell us when you’re ready, and we’ll get the bird away.”

“By no means,” was the reply. “I’m making a rough sketch of the situation, now that I’m master of the same. Then you may call it a drawing by one of the Masters.”

This sally provoked a laugh from all but Ethel. She was silent. To tell the truth, she was rather ashamed of herself.

In a few moments he put away his pencil and paper, and set to work to cut a couple of large thorn branches. This done, he issued forth from his refuge to return. The ostrich, apparently tired of the turn affairs had taken, had drawn off a little way; but no sooner was he in the open than it charged him again. This time, however, it was out of its reckoning; the chevaux de frise of thorns that Claverton held before him was not to be got over. With a powerful kick or two it beat down the branch, which, however, was immediately replaced by the other, and kick and hiss as it would, it could not get rid of the formidable array of prickly thorns which met its breast and unprotected neck whenever it pressed on to the attack. At last, convinced of the futility of the undertaking, the savage bird turned round and trotted away about fifty yards, and there stood, looking the picture of sullen defeat. Its cool opponent walked leisurely to the wall, and, abandoning his valuable means of defence, climbed over and joined the party.

“By Jove, but you did that well,” said Jim. “Why, man, I expected to see you most awfully mauled.”

“I don’t know. ‘Needs must where the’—but I won’t finish that quotation, either. Here are the flowers, Miss Brathwaite,” he said, handing her the innocent cause of all the pother. “By the way, Hicks, I forgot to tell you as I came down that there’s been a porcupine in the mealie-land during the night. We might set the spring-gun for him, eh?”

“Rather! We’ll set it this evening,” said Hicks, gleefully, his instincts of destructiveness coming again to the fore.

That evening, between nine and ten o’clock, they were all sitting indoors. Jim had left in the afternoon to return to the bosom of his family, after making them all promise to ride over in a day or two. Suddenly a dull, heavy report was heard.

“Pace the porcupine,” remarked Claverton.

“I say,” sputtered Hicks in his eagerness, “let’s go down and see if we’ve got him. We might set the gun again, you know, in case another came.”

“Let’s all go,” cried Ethel. “I’m dying to see the result of our trap-setting. Yes, our trap-setting, Mr Hicks—you know you’d have put that trigger too stiff if it hadn’t been for me.”

“But, my dear child,” feebly protested Mrs Brathwaite, “the grass is as wet as it can be, and—”

“And—there’s a path all the way down, and—it’s a lovely night—and—you’re a dear old auntie—and—we’re going,” she replied, with a hug and a kiss; then darting into the other room reappeared, looking inexpressibly killing, with a light-blue shawl thrown carelessly over her golden head.

“Well, then, don’t be too long, and don’t get into any mischief. Arthur, I shall look upon you as the responsible person. Keep them in order,” said the old lady, with her kindly smile.

“All right, Mrs Brathwaite, I’ll keep them well in hand, I promise you.”

“And—Arthur—just shy that old porcupine up in the air once or twice for Hicks to practise at,” sang out Mr Brathwaite jocosely as they left the room.

It was a perfect night, the moon was at half, and the whole earth slept in silence beneath its mantle of silver sheen, for a heavy dew had fallen. A grass fire or two shone forth redly upon the slopes of the far Amatola. Not a breath stirred the air, save for the faintest suspicion of a cool zephyr which now and again partly dispelled the light clouds of blue smoke which ascended from Claverton’s pipe. Hicks and Laura were on in front. Suddenly Ethel stopped.

“Mr Claverton,” she said. “Do you know I’ve been feeling quite ashamed of myself all day?”

“What about?” asked her companion.

“Why, for sending you after those wretched flowers this morning—I didn’t mean you to get hurt, you know; of course I thought you would easily be able to run away.”

“I see. But running away isn’t altogether in my line—I don’t mean under any circumstances—those who declaim most against the lawfulness of leg-bail at a push are generally the ones most prone to putting it to the test. In fact, I don’t mind telling you that I have ‘run away’ before now, having no alternative.”

“When I saw that dreadful creature coming at you, I declare I would have given anything not to have sent you in there. It was horrible.” And she shivered. “Do forgive me.”

“But I assure you the whole affair was fun to me. Keeps one in training for emergencies. Only—”

“Only what?”

“Only that I don’t know whether your uncle quite likes his prize ostrich being made the subject of a bull-fight.”

“And—we are friends?”

“I hope so.”

He looked with a trifle of wonder into the lovely eyes, now so soft in the moonlight. What an impulsive little thing it was, he thought. Then she said: “Do give me that drawing you made while the ostrich was waiting for you. It’s sure to be fun.”

“With pleasure. Here it is,” pulling the old envelope out of his pocket. “It about represents the position, though I’m no artist.”

It did. When Ethel examined it in her room half an hour later she found a very comical sketch reproducing the situation with graphic and whimsical distinctness. It was labelled “Cornered—or Brute Force versus Intellect.”

They found the other two standing over the mortal remains of a large old porcupine. The spring-gun had been set with the precision of clockwork, and no sooner had the luckless rodent entered the mealie-land than he ran his nose against the string and promptly received the contents of the infernal machine clean through his marauding carcase. There he lay—a spoiler who would spoil no more. Said Hicks:

“I’ll come down in the morning and get some of his best quills.”

Chapter Six.

In a New Line.

"Of course you know the place well?"

"Every inch of it. Two thousand morgen, rather over. What did you say Van Rooyen asks for it?"

"Three thousand. Probably he'd take less."

"Far too much. It isn't particularly good veldt; sheep don't do well there, and the place is nearly all bush. And then there's that stony hill right over the river, about one-fifth of the whole area. What sort of house is it?"

"A classic tenement meriting the veneration of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings."

"Humph! You'd better have nothing to do with the concern."

The above dialogue took place about three weeks after the events recorded in the former chapter, the speakers being Claverton and his host, who were returning from a ride.

"You have made up your mind to settle here, then?" went on the latter.

"Yes, I've taken rather a fancy to this part of the country."

"H'm! Well now, I'll tell you what I think. Don't you be in too great a hurry to buy; there's nothing like keeping your eyes open a bit first, and biding your time. Plenty of these fellows would be very glad to clear out. The Dutchmen round here are mostly a bankrupt lot, living from hand to mouth, and you'll soon be able to make your own terms and get a much better place than Springkaan's Hoek, which old Van Roozen, by the way, has done his best to spoil."

"But do you know of another place about here that would be likely to suit me?"

"Not at present—that is, not one that's in the market. But I've been thinking, why not stop on here a bit and help me? You'd get into practice and learn your craft, so to say. You see, at present you know precious little about it, though you're quicker at picking up wrinkles than most new hands who come out. I'm getting old now and am beginning to feel it, and can't look after things as much as I should like them to be looked after. As for

Hicks, he's a smart fellow enough, but then he can't be everywhere at once, and as it is he has his hands full. Now between you and him, all might be kept going, which would be a great help to me, and, as I said before, you would get the experience you want before setting up on your own account. And it's not enough to see things done, the great thing is to know how to do them yourself. We do a little of everything here, as you see, and I don't think you could be much better placed for learning to farm," added the old man, with a touch of pardonable pride.

Claverton readily closed with this offer. Already during his stay he had done many a hand's turn, helping Hicks to look up missing stock, or seeing to odd jobs about the homestead when that invaluable majordomo was out of the way; and his host's practised eye had gauged his capabilities, seeing that he had all the makings of a first-rate colonist. The advantage of this offer Claverton could tell at a glance was all on his own side.

"You see," pursued Mr Brathwaite, "farming now is not what it was. You needn't expect to make a fortune at it, but still you can always make a very decent living, and then the position is a thoroughly independent one, the life a free and healthy one, you are absolutely your own master and need care for nobody. Times are very far from what they used to be, I admit; stock is more expensive, and there are more drawbacks in the way of bad seasons, diseases, long droughts and used-up veldt; but even then a good farmer can always manage to keep above water, and in a fairly prosperous season can forge ahead. Look at me: I've been burnt out, stick and stone, by the Kafirs in three successive wars, and have had to begin life over again, yet I've always got on. The secret of it is to look after everything yourself. It won't do to set your people to work and go away expecting them to do it, you must off with your jacket and work with them. And you must be here, there, and everywhere at once, Kafirs want continual looking after; directly they begin to think the 'Baas' is getting careless, good-bye to anything going straight. I don't mean to say that you must always be finding fault with them, they are naturally stupid devils and you can't make them anything else; but you can let them see that you've got your eye on them and will stand no nonsense. The great thing is to keep your temper with them, and, above all, to treat them fairly but firmly. Then again, you must make up your mind to being out in all weathers. The heavier and the colder the rains, the more certain are the Kafirs to huddle in their blankets under a bush or before a fire, and leave the flock to take care of itself. With the result that at nightfall about a third of it is missing and remains out in the veldt for the benefit of the jackals and wolves; what these leave perhaps stray to some Dutchman's place, and when you get them again you find that they are covered with brand ziekte (scab) from his miserable brutes. As I say, there are drawbacks innumerable, but it rests with yourself to minimise them."

“Yes; I quite grasp the situation in all its bearings.”

“Very well, then, that’s settled, and I think you’ll have reason to see that my plan is the best.”

They were nearing home now, and the sun, which was about an hour above the horizon, shed a soft, golden lustre upon the broad, sloping plains and on shining cliff and undulating vale, with many a dark patch of forest here and there. The peak of the Great Winterberg, his snowy cap now removed—sleeping in a filmy haze against the horizon, and the lofty backs of his lesser satellites purple and gold as they stood in the shade or in the sun—formed a grand and effective background to the picture, the beautiful range stretching from east to west, far as the eye could travel. Beneath lay the homestead, reposing among its shadowy trees, looking the very abode of peace and prosperity. Scarcely a breath of wind to ruffle the balminess of the air, nor a sound to create one, save for the occasional droning hum of some insect, while now and again the soft mellow note of a hoopoe sounded through the slumbrous dimness of the far distance. Looking upon this vista of rest and stillness, and in the midst of its influences, it was hard to realise that the red tide of war could ever engulf this fair land, and its fierce and jarring clangour break rudely upon such quiet calm.

On their return they found a visitor awaiting them. This was one Will Jeffreys, a sturdy, broad-shouldered fellow of five-and-twenty, with rather a heavy expression of countenance bordering on the sullen. A man who was shrewd enough as regarded all matters directly in his line, but would have a difficulty in grasping a very ordinary joke, and who was totally deficient in appreciation of aught beyond the humdrum and practical. A man who might be a good fellow at bottom, but certainly was a crusty dog on the surface. He was the son of the neighbour referred to in the foregoing chapter, as having brought the girls to Seringa Vale, and was well-to-do. But in one respect, at least, Will Jeffreys wandered out of his natural groove. He had a genuine admiration for Ethel Brathwaite, whom he had met on previous occasions of her staying at her uncle’s, and though he had returned home only that morning, had saddled up his horse and ridden over, under pretext of consulting Mr Brathwaite about a certain span of oxen which he thought of buying—most transparent of pretexts, which his good-natured father saw through at once, and went into fits of laughter over as soon as his hopeful’s back was turned.

“Poor Will!” he would say to himself, “he’s only singeing his wings. He hasn’t the ghost of a chance in that quarter.”

“Poor Will” certainly had not the ghost of a chance, for Ethel in no wise reciprocated his admiration, though she would accept his homage carelessly and half unconsciously at

one time, and ruthlessly snub him at another, particularly when the admiration became too open and undisguised. Now it so happened that that afternoon they had been discussing the latest importation in all his bearings, with the result that young Jeffreys greeted Claverton with no great show of cordiality when the two were introduced. Nor was it increased by Ethel's remark: "At last, Mr Claverton! I thought uncle and you were never coming back. Why, you've been out nearly the whole day."

"Well, Will," said the old settler, heartily. "Had a good trip?"

"Yes, very good on the whole, thanks. It's rather dry up Colesberg way, and the locusts have been bad there, but my oxen were in good order, and I came through quick."

He had just returned from a transport-riding trip up the country.

"H'm! By the way, did your father manage to get back his horses?"

"No. He and Bob followed them as far as Tembani. The fellows had got a forged pass (Note 1) and walked through right under the agent's nose. After that the spoors separated; the thieves had taken two of the horses in the direction of the Tambookie country, the other towards Sandili's; and, of course, at every kraal they inquired at—for the spoor was soon lost—the headmen did their best to put them on the wrong track, although they set up to be no end sympathetic. We've got a spy down in the Gaika location, but a fat lot of good he'll do; he's sure to be in league with the rest," growled Will, who was not in the best of humours.

"No, you can't do much when the whole country is in league against you. We're quite at their mercy. I'm afraid you'll never see a hoof of them again," said the older man.

"Of course not. Three as good all-round horses as we ever had on the place, though Bles was a dev—er—a brute for bucking, at times. By-the-bye, Mr Brathwaite, there seems to be an awful lot of stock-lifting going on just now. Seven of Dirk van Heerden's best cows cleared off last week, and not a head of them has he been able to get back, except one which had dislocated its shoulder, and the niggers assegaied it to save its life."

"Well, it's time to count the sheep. You'll stay to night, Will?"

He was delighted.

"Er—thanks—I—er, that is—"

"All right. Better put your horse in the enclosure; only mind the bird."

“How tiresome that Will Jeffreys is getting!” remarked Ethel that evening, as some of them were standing outside in the garden. “Listen to him prosing away in there.”

“Ssh! He’ll hear you,” said Laura.

“I don’t much care. He comes over to see us, and instead of trying to amuse one he bores us with tiresome yarns about this Dutchman losing his cows and that Dutchman finding his horses.”

“But what on earth do you want him to tell you about?” asked Hicks.

“Why, some of the news, of course. The gossip, scandal, engagements, and so forth.”

“But he don’t know anything about that sort of thing, so how can he tell you about it?” said Hicks.

“Oh, you’re just as bad. Do go and join him and hear about Dirk van Heerden’s cows. Please take my part, Mr Claverton. Isn’t Will Jeffreys a bore?”

“Haven’t been long enough in his company to answer with any certainty. Will let you know later.”

“How provoking you are! Now I appeal to all of you. If you see me cornered by Will Jeffreys, come to the rescue.”

“The greatest bore I ever knew,” began Claverton, “was a lady—an elderly lady. She would volunteer instruction on any and every subject under heaven, from the precise length of Aaron’s beard, to the cost of soup-kitchens; and once she cornered you, you had to listen or pretend to. One day she cornered me. It was in the drawing-room, and there was no escape; but there was a clock opposite. It occurred to me to time her. For exactly twenty-one minutes she prosed on uninterruptedly, like a stream flowing over its bed; never stopped to take breath once. A sermon was a joke to it. Twenty-one minutes! Heaven knows how much longer she would have gone on, but for a lucky interruption.”

“What was she prosing about?” said Ethel.

“I haven’t the very faintest idea.”

“Well, I don’t believe a word of the story. I believe you made it all up.”

“You don’t believe a word of that story?” said Claverton, with a stare of amazement, while Hicks and Laura went into fits.

“No, I don’t; at least, I’ll say this much—you may have known such a bore, but if so it was a man, not a lady.”

“I’ve told you a bare fact, upon my honour. But if—”

They were interrupted by the appearance on the scene of Jeffreys himself; but Ethel was too quick for him. She had seen him coming, and was already on her way indoors. Then she began to sing duets with Laura, whom she had manoeuvred to the piano by some mysterious signal. Young Jeffreys, feeling very sulky and sore at his enslaver’s capriciousness and want of consideration, went and sat by himself at the other side of the room, whence he could watch the author of his discomfort. The old people, under no necessity to talk, waxed drowsy, and nodded through the music. Presently Laura left the piano and, in a trice, she and Hicks were deep in an animated conversation in a low tone and in a snug corner, under pretence of looking through a pile of music. Ethel the while was extracting wondrous combinations from the keys, under cover of which she was carrying on a sharp running fire of banter, or rather word-skirmish, with Claverton.

Jeffreys, watching them, was on thorns and tenterhooks. Who the deuce was this stranger? A month ago no one had ever heard of him, and now here he was, with his damned finicking ways and smooth tongue, thinking that all the world was made for him. A fellow, too, he’d be bound to say, that with all his easy-going blarney, couldn’t sit a bucking horse, or hit a haystack at ten yards. Yet there was Ethel carrying on furiously with this fellow, while he, Jeffreys, was sent to the wall. In reality, however, there was nothing that those two were saying that all the world—Jeffreys included—would not have been perfectly welcome to hear.

“Claverton,” suddenly exclaimed Hicks, as two hours later they were discussing the usual pipe before turning in. Jeffreys had joined them, but did not add much to the conversation. “I hear you’re going to stay on here.”

“Yes, I am.”

Jeffreys’ jaw fell at this announcement. He had been laying balm to his wounded spirit in the thought that this interloping stranger would soon be going, and then—well, the field would be clear again.

“Glad to hear it, old fellow, awfully glad. By Jove, it’s the best news I’ve heard for a long time.”

“The deuce it is! And why, may I ask?”

“Why? Only hear him! Haven’t I had to do everything by myself, and knock about by myself? No fellow to talk to at work, or to go out and sneak a buck with, or to blow a cloud with at night, and so on. Now we’ll have a rare good time of it together.”

“Especially when you go down to feed the ostriches,” said Claverton, with a mischievous laugh.

The other coloured and looked foolish, and was about to make some stammering reply.

“Never mind, Hicks,” said Claverton, in that wonderfully attractive manner which he now and then exhibited, “I don’t think you and I will quarrel. Now I’m going to turn in. Good-night. Good-night, Jeffreys.”

“I say,” inquired Jeffreys, after he had gone out. “Is that cattle-branding on to-morrow?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I think I’ll stay and give you a hand, if Mr Brathwaite doesn’t mind. Times are slack, and there’s nothing doing at home.”

“Rather—mind you do; we’ll be only too glad,” answered Hicks with a yawn, as he blew out the candle; and in five minutes more a mild snore or so showed that he was out of reach of any further conversation.

Jeffreys lay and ruminated. Here, at any rate, he would be in his element. What sort of a figure would that stuck-up, priggish fool—again, reader, pardon a jealous man—cut in the cattle kraal among the clashing horns and the charging of maddened beasts, and all the dash and excitement of a piece of very rough work, by no means unattended with danger? He was all there in the drawing-room; but where would he be at this? And Jeffreys dropped off to sleep with a sardonic grin upon his countenance, to dream of his rival—for so he had already begun to regard Claverton—losing nerve, and being tossed and trampled by the wildest brute in the herd. As to the fulfilment of which benevolent expectation the morrow would show.

Note 1. No native is allowed to remove stock from the colony without a pass granted by his late employer to certify that he acquired it lawfully. This pass is countersigned by the various magistrates and native agents along the road.

Chapter Seven.

The cattle-branding.

“Here they come. Is the whole of that lot to be done to-day, Xuvani?”

“Ja, Baas,” replied that worthy, swinging back the ponderous gate of the cattle enclosure where he and Jeffreys were standing.

For the ground echoes a low rumble, drawing nearer every moment. It is the trample of many hoofs, and Jeffreys and his swart companion fix their attention upon a troop of cattle coming up the kloof. They are mostly young beasts, and skittish. Now and then one will leave the rest and attempt to strike out a line for itself, but lo, one of the two horsemen riding behind is down on it like lightning; a shout and a crack of the whip, and the recreant is back in the ways of the herd again. Peradventure half-a-dozen will start off headlong down some well-known track, and with frolicsome bellow and heels tossed in the air away they go, refusing to hear the voice of the driver; but the spirited horse darts beneath the spur like a greyhound from the leash; over ant-heap and through rhinoster bush straight as an arrow he flies; and behold, suddenly, from around that clump of spekboem, appears the form of one of the drivers. A shout, half-a-dozen appalling whip-cracks, the errant beasts stop short, heads go up and eyeballs dilate upon the unlooked-for apparition with startled inquiry, then wheeling round they scamper back to their comrades, helter-skelter, and the unruly mass moves swiftly on, urged by the horsemen, eyes glaring, horns clashing, and now and again an aggrieved “moo” as some quarrelsome brute playfully prods his nearest neighbour, in the crush. One young bull especially, a fine, well-made animal with curving wicked-looking horns, and not a speck of alien colour on his glistening red hide, is inordinately given to leading the rest astray, nor does he take kindly to correction, but puts his head down and throws his horns about as if he had more than half a mind to charge his drivers; but he is not quite used to that terrible cracking whip, and thinks better of it.

“That brute’ll make things lively for some of us to-day,” remarked Hicks, as his companion fell behind after “collecting” it for about the twentieth time.

“Shouldn’t wonder. The interesting quadruped appears to be getting his hand in. That last time I had fully made up my mind for a roll, and should have got it too. ‘Sticks’ is an awful fool at getting out of anything’s way.”

“Well, we’re in now,” said Hicks. “Hey, Xuvani!” he called out, darting forward to head the animals into the kraal, “Look out over there!”

The Kafir gave a couple of bounds and threw up his arms. He was just in time; two seconds later and the whole troop would have streamed past him and galloped away across the veldt, which meant that a large part of the morning's work would have to be done over again. The animals stopped short, glared at the sudden obstacle, then looked wildly round on one side and on the other, but they were hemmed in; the rear part of the herd cannoned against the leaders, who at length made for the only egress open, and amid much crush and plunging, interlacing of horns, and starting eyeballs, the whole crowd poured through the wide gateway, the pungent dust rising in clouds from the trampling hoofs.

"Whew! that's warm work!" said Claverton, as Xuvani made fast the huge gate and drew a heavy beam across above the top of it for additional security. "Now for breakfast, I suppose. Hallo, Jeffreys. Good-morning."

"Mornin'," replied Will, shortly, as they turned towards the stable to off-saddle their horses.

Mr Brathwaite was somewhat unwell that day, and not at all sorry to have the assistance of Will Jeffreys in the morning's operations. So with many cautions to Hicks about this and that, more by way of showing that he didn't let everything slide because of a little indisposition, than for any misgivings as to his lieutenant's skill, he made up his mind to remain quiet in his room. Rheumatism is no respecter of persons, the only wonder being that the old farmer, after such a life of hardship and exposure, should be let down as easily as he was.

"Mr Claverton," said Ethel, as they were all seated round the breakfast-table, "Laura and I are going to see the branding, so I hope you'll show us some fun."

"Are you? That determination I should advise you to reconsider."

"But we won't. Aha, I know why you don't want us. You have never done that sort of thing before, and you don't want us to see you make a bad shot and run round the kraal with a cow after you. That's it, isn't it, Mr Jeffreys?" turning to him. She was in a bright, teasing mood, and looked bewitchingly pretty.

Jeffreys chuckled to himself at Claverton's expense, as he thought, and mumbled something about "it being dangerous for her."

"Dangerous! Not a bit of it. We shall stand outside and look over the gate, and we shall be perfectly safe."

Hicks looked up from his plate with a low whistle.

“Perfectly safe!” he reiterated. “Why, it was only last branding that that big black and white ox of Jim’s, after chevying Tambusa twice round the kraal and knocking him down, jumped the gate, charged a big hencoop that was pitched close by and threw it fifty feet in the air, and then streaked off to the bush like a mad buffalo.”

“What nonsense, Ethel! Of course you can’t go,” said her aunt, who had re-entered the room during this conversation. “Why, the things often break out of the kraal.”

“Very well, aunt, I don’t want to be a witness to poor Mr Claverton’s discomfiture;” and she cast at him a glance of petulance, mingled with compassion, whose effect upon the object thereof was absolutely nil.

A business-like appearance was that of the scene of operations. The animals were standing quietly about the large enclosure seventy yards in diameter, with its solid, bristling thorn-fence eight or nine feet high and its massive five-barred gate. In the centre burnt—or rather smouldered, for it was of the red-hot glowing order—a great fire, over which bent the bronzed form of Xuvani, the cattle-herd, superintending the due heating of the branding-irons and gossiping in subdued gutturals with the other “hands”—two Kafirs and a smart, wiry little Hottentot, who, with the penchant of his race for scriptural appellations, rejoiced in the time-honoured and patriarchal one of Abram. Xuvani was a man of between fifty and sixty, of middle height, and of powerful, almost herculean build; the muscles stood out upon his limbs like great ropes, and a blow from his fist—that is, if he had known how to make use of his fists, which Kafirs very seldom do know—would have sufficed to fell an ox. He was rather light in colour, and his beard and woolly head were just shot with grey; there was shrewdness in his rugged features, and a twinkle of satiric humour lurked in his eye. He had been a long time in the service of his present master, who had found him a cut above the average Kafir in honesty and trustworthiness. Moreover, he was greatly looked up to by the other natives, not only on account of his great physical strength, but also as one who had shown his prowess in a marked manner during the wars which have been alluded to. Although far from quarrelsome by nature, Xuvani never needed a second challenge. His kerries were all ready, as more than one party of Fingoes passing Seringa Vale in search of employment could testify, to its sorrow. Indeed, once he had expiated his share in one of these African Donnybrooks by a sentence of several months in gaol.

“Well, Xuvani!” sang out Hicks, as they slipped off their jackets and flung them on to the kraal fence—“Got the iron hot? All right, let’s begin. Now then, Piet—what the devil are you standing there for, grinning like a Cheshire cat? Lay hold of the reim and catch that heifer.”

Piet, a stalwart Kafir, grinned all the harder, and drawing out the running noose of the reim he made a cast, then, as the heifer ran over it, with a mighty jerk he drew it taut and the animal, noosed by the hind leg, fell. Before it could rise again they all threw themselves upon it, and in a trice its legs were securely bound while two men firmly held its head. In a second Hicks had taken the branding-iron from one of the Kafirs, and held it for half a minute lightly but firmly pressed against the fleshy part of the thigh. The poor brute groaned and struggled violently as it felt the hot iron; there was a sharp, hissing sound from the singeing hair, a foetid smoke arose, diffusing a smell of burnt flesh, and the operation was complete. Whatever danger there is in the performance generally falls to the lot of him who releases the victim, which not unfrequently, as soon as it feels its logs again, fiercely charges its emancipator, all the others having previously withdrawn themselves behind some of the other cattle standing about the kraal. The first animal, however, was not of an inherently vicious nature. Consequently, no sooner was it free than it ran off among its kindred, greatly scared and bewildered. All went merrily enough till they had got a fine black and white cow under the iron. She lay still, but there was rage mingled with pain in her groaning.

"She'll be at some of us when she gets up," said Jeffreys, exerting all his strength to restrain the frenzied plunges of her pointed horns.

They stood aside, as, with a rapid turn of the wrist, Xuvani deftly cast loose her bonds. She sprang to her feet in a twinkling, and, lowering her head, furiously charged the old cattle-herd, who, there being no room for dodging, was constrained to run, with his late victim after him, head down, all ready to fling him a dozen feet in the air. But the consummate coolness and agility of the Kafir was to the fore. He zigzagged as he ran, to avoid a charge, then, seizing his opportunity, he sprang aside, and placing one hand between the animal's shoulders he vaulted lightly over her back as she sped past him and got in among the rest. A cheer broke from the spectators at this splendid feat, but before it had time to die, a shout of "Look out, she's coming this way," sent them all scattering; and sure enough, singling out Jeffreys, she made at him like a streak of lightning. He just avoided her charge by dodging round the rear of a great trek ox, who was standing quietly wondering what the deuce all the hubbub was about. The furious charge of the maddened cow into his unoffending flanks may, or may not, have enlightened him on the point; anyhow, he resented the familiarity by lashing out with his heels, one of which coming in violent contact with the chin of his assailant had the effect of somewhat modifying that exuberant animal's spirits, and she slunk off in aggrieved fashion, all thoughts of vengeance at an end.

"By Jove!" said Claverton. "Xuvani's a smart fellow. That's one of the neatest things I ever saw done."

The old Kafir grinned a little, and they went on with the programme. After two or three more beasts had been branded, Jeffreys remarked:

“Now then, you fellows, there are lively times in store. It’s that bull’s turn. I’ve been watching him, and he looks wicked—devilish wicked.” He pointed to the young bull which had been troublesome in the morning.

“All right,” said Claverton. “That’s my speciality. I made up my mind to have the burning of that chap when I turned him back twenty-one times this morning.”

“The branding’s nothing; it’s the letting him up that’s the fishy part,” said Jeffreys, with a thinly-veiled sneer.

Noose in hand the Kafirs advanced towards the bull, who was standing in a corner of the kraal, pawing up the ground, with his head down, and rolling his eyes viciously.

“Look out,” warned Hicks, “he’s all ready for a charge!”

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth than the animal sprang forward as the noose was thrown down in front of him; then, as he rushed over it, the thong was tightened, and he fell sprawling on all-fours and roaring hideously. He plunged and struggled as for dear life, but another jerk of the reim threw him, and in ten seconds he was lying bound and helpless.

“Now then, Tambusa, bring the iron. Sharp’s the word!” cried Claverton; then receiving it, he deliberately imprinted a neat B upon his prostrate foe, whose frenzied roars drowned the hissing of burnt flesh, as the moist steam rose in clouds from his tortured thigh.

“By Jove, there’s a spree sticking out!” said Hicks, emphatically. “We shall have to mind our eye when he gets up. Are you ready, Xuvani?”

“No, he isn’t. I’m going to loosen the reim,” answered Claverton, preparing to make good his words.

“Bosh, old chap! Better let him do it, he’s used to it,” remonstrated Hicks.

“Devil a bit. Now! Stand aside!” and as the others made themselves scarce, he drew off the noose, and the bull, springing to his feet, vented his feelings in an appalling roar as he glared round in search of somebody to pulverise. As luck would have it, at this

moment a cow behind which Tambusa had taken refuge quietly walked away, thus disclosing that unfortunate aboriginal to the full view of the infuriated beast, which came straight at him there and then. Now Tambusa was a youthful Kafir, and naturally of a mild and unaggressive disposition, and when he saw the fierce brute making for him, he lost nerve and blindly fled. The kraal gate towered in front of him, and with the energy of despair he half leaped, half scrambled over it, and his foot catching the topmost bar he was hurled headlong, half-stunned and wholly bewildered, a dozen yards off upon the smooth green sward outside. His pursuer, without pausing, cleared the gate like a stag, and there he lay entirely at the mercy of the infuriated bull. Another minute, and he would be gored and torn in pieces. But a cool brain and determined heart was between him and certain death. Seizing his jacket from the hedge whereon it had been flung, Claverton was through the kraal gate in a twinkling, and not one second too soon, for the bull, who had been carried on some fifty yards by the impetus of his leap, had now turned, and with head lowered was thundering down upon his prostrate prey, "brilling" (Note 1) savagely. At this juncture Claverton darted in front of him, and throwing out his jacket, after the manner of the cappa of a torero, he succeeded in drawing off the headlong charge, which temporary respite Xuvani was able to make the most of by lugging his young compatriot through the gate again. Then the bull stopped, glared for a moment, and with a terrific roar came at Claverton again. This time he nimbly leapt aside, striking the animal across the eyes with the jacket. Had the bull charged at that moment it would probably have gone hard with him, for what with the violent exertion and the tension of the nerves, he was somewhat exhausted; but it did not. And what a picture was that upon the smooth sward. There stood the red savage brute, the sun glistening on his sleek hide and white horns, lashing his tail and pawing up the ground with his hoofs; the foam dropping from his mouth as with head lowered he gathered himself for one more terrific rush. Facing him ten yards off—his intrepid adversary, unarmed and exposed to his full fury. The spectators might well hold their breath. And yet as he slowly retreated step by step, and though he never took his eyes off the bull, Claverton was aware of every single movement that went on around him. He knew that the doorway leading into the garden was thronged, mistress and servant alike being attracted by the frenzied roars of the maddened beast. He saw Ethel faint dead away, and then summoning up nerve and strength for one final effort, he flung the coat right upon the gleaming horns of the ferocious brute, as with a new fury begotten of its short respite it made its deadly charge. Suddenly blinded, the bull stopped and began turning round and round in its efforts to free itself, for the jacket had caught firmly on its horns; but taking advantage of his dexterous coup de main, Claverton was over the gate again and safe, while his antagonist, having amused himself by tearing the garment to ribbons, trotted away down the kloof, growling in baffled wrath.

"Well, he can go, we've done with him this time, but Heaven help any nigger that has the ill luck to cross that chap's path within the next quarter of an hour," were Claverton's

first words. He was panting and breathless, but wanted to create a diversion from the string of congratulations which he knew was forthcoming; for, of all things, he hated a scene, and didn't see what there was to make a fuss about because a fellow had had a little spree with a bull, to divert his attention from a young idiot of a nigger who had been ass enough to tumble head-over-heels just at the wrong moment. Whatever his faults, there wasn't a grain of vanity in the man.

"Now then, Xuvani—Piet!" he went on sharply, as the Kafirs, with a chorus of emphatic "whouws," were gazing after the retreating form of the cause of all the shindy. "What the devil are you fellows staring at? Come on—fall to—we've lost enough time already."

They resumed operations. Now and then a beast, when it was let up, would run at the Kafirs, but in a bewildered, half-hearted sort of a way, and without doing any damage; and all the younger cattle were disposed of. There yet remained four or five large oxen who had come into their present owner's possession late in life, and who were to be sealed. These were not thrown down, however, but their heads made fast to a post by a reim round their horns, while with another reim the leg to be operated on was drawn out at tension. They were sober, sedate creatures who had undergone plenty of the troubles of life, common to their race, in the shape of heavy loads, scarcity of water and often of grass in dry seasons, but, as if to make up for it, a plentiful allowance of whip; and took this additional affliction philosophically enough.

The result of the day's doings was to open Jeffreys' eyes. His estimation of the other had undergone a considerable change since the previous evening. The dressed-up, finicking carpet skipper was fully his own equal in pluck, and in cool-headedness immeasurably his superior. This he could not but recognise, though he regarded Claverton with no increase of cordiality.

Yes, life would flow pleasantly enough in this unruffled fashion, thought Claverton, as they were all strolling in the garden towards sundown. After the stirring events of the day, the quiet and rest of a perfect evening seemed more than ordinarily grateful. All was so still, and calm, and soothing, and such sound as reached them seemed so softened and mellowed by distance as to harmonise rather than to disturb. A dove cooed softly from an adjacent thorn-brake, and bees returning to the old basket hive set in a nook in the wall, made a tuneful hum upon the sensuous air. Yonder a dragon-fly zigzagged on gauzy wing above the glassy surface of the dam, seeking its prey among the gnats whose chrysalids were hatched beneath the overhanging weeds. Suddenly this idyllic scene was invaded by a brace of Kafirs. They were Xuvani and Tambusa, and they began to accost Claverton.

“What on earth do they want? Something to do with that eternal bull, I suppose. I wish the brute had found its way into some butcher’s shop long ago! Here, Hicks I come and interpret, there’s a good fellow!”

“He says Tambusa is his sister’s child, and that you saved his life,” interpreted Hicks; “that is to say you saved his—Xuvani’s life, Kafir way of putting it, you know—and not only did you save his life, or rather both their lives,” went on Hicks, manfully unravelling the native’s long-winded oration; “but you nearly lost your own.”

“That all?”

“No—don’t interrupt him. He says that they are grateful—both he and the boy. That the future is uncertain, and that we never know what turn events will take—”

“He never spoke a truer word than that, anyhow.”

“And that if ever at any time he or Tambusa can render you any service they will do so, even should it be at the risk of their lives—a life for a life—and that they are glad to have looked upon such a howling big swell,” concluded Hicks, with the result that Ethel was obliged to turn away to stifle her laughter.

“Bosh, Hicks! He didn’t say that, you know.”

“He did, upon my word. At least, to be more literal, he said he was glad to have looked upon so great a chief. But my rendering was more euphonious—more poetical, don’t you see?”

Then Tambusa knelt down and kissed his rescuer’s foot, and the two Kafirs withdrew. Claverton looked after them with a curious expression.

“That’s all too thickly laid on,” he said. “Gratitude, ‘lively sense of favours to come,’ i.e. prospective ’bacco. H’m! much too thick!”

“What a dreadful person you are!” expostulated Ethel. “Why shouldn’t they mean what they say? I declare that speech of Xuvani’s was a perfect flower of savage poetry, and you don’t know what a good fellow he is. I think it’s quite horrid of you to throw cold water on him.”

“So it would be if I had. The noble savage don’t affect that fluid much as a rule in any state of temperature.”

Did the Kafir mean what he said? We shall see.

Note 1. Frontier term for the growling noise which is neither roar nor bellow, made by enraged cattle.

Chapter Eight.

Spoek Krantz.

It is Sunday.

Ride we behind the horseman who is picking his way down a stony path through the ever present bush, making for yon thatched building down there in the hollow. A low, rough shanty, built in the roughest and readiest fashion, and of the rawest of red brick. Three windows, cobwebbed and cloudy with many a patched-up pane of blue or brown paper, admit light and air, and a door made to open in halves. A smaller edifice hard by, with tumble-down mud walls and in a state of more or less rooflessness, does duty as a stable, and in front of the two an open space slopes down a distance of one hundred and fifty yards to the river, whose limpid waters dash and sparkle over their stony bed, between cactus-lined banks—the stubbornly encroaching and well-nigh ineradicable prickly pear. Opposite rises a great cliff, whose base and sides are set in the greenest and most luxuriant of forest trees, but whose brow, like its stern face, is bare of foliage and stands out in hard relief against the sky. There seems no reason why this cliff should be there at all, seeing that the hill would have been far more symmetrical without it, unless in its wild irregularity it were destined for the purpose alone of giving a magnificent—if a trifle forbidding—frontage to the ill-looking and commonplace dwelling-house. On all sides the towering heights rise to the sky, shutting in this beautiful and romantic spot which might be a veritable Sleepy Hollow, so far does it seem from the sights and the sounds of men. But it must be confessed that its beauty and romance are utterly thrown away upon its present occupant, who is wont to describe the place as "a beastly stifling hole out of which I'd be only too glad to clear to-morrow, by Jove; but then one can't chuck up the lease, you know, and it isn't half a bad place for stock, too." It rejoices in the inviting name of Spoek Krantz (Ghost Cliff), and is held in awe and terror as an unholy and demon-peopled locality by the superstitions natives, as well as by the scarcely less superstitious Boer; and gruesome tales are told of unearthly sights and sounds among the rocky caves at its base; shadowy shapes and strange fearful cries, and now and again mysterious fires are seen burning upon its ledges in the dead of night, while the most careful exploration the next morning has utterly failed to discover the smallest trace of footprint or cinder. Native tradition has stamped the spot as one to be avoided, for the spirit of a mighty wizard claims it as his resting-place. Even by day the place, shut in by its frowning heights, is lonely and forbidding of aspect.

But utterly impervious to supernatural terrors is he who now dwells in the haunted locality. The grim traditions of a savage race are to him as mere old wives' fables, and he laughs to scorn all notion of any awesome associations whatever. He would just like to see a ghost, that was all, any and every night you pleased; if he didn't make it lively for

the spectral visitant with a bullet, call him a nigger. Yes, he would admit seeing strange lights on the cliff at times, and hearing strange sounds; but to ascribe them to supernatural agency struck him as utter bosh. The lights were caused by a moonlight reflection, or will-o'-the-wisps, or something of that sort; and the row, why, it was only some jackal yowling in the krantz, and as for getting in a funk about it, that would do for the niggers or white-livered Dutchmen, but not for him. Tradition said that there was a secret cavern in the cliff, but the entrance was known to very few even among the natives themselves, and only to their most redoubted magicians. Certain it is that no Kafir admitted knowledge of this, and when questioned carefully evaded the subject.

And now, as the horseman we have been following emerges from the bush on to the open space surrounding the low-roofed, thatched shanty, a man is seated in his shirt-sleeves on a stone in front of the door, intently watching something upon the ground. It is a large circular glass cover, such as might be used for placing over cheese or fruit; but to a very different use is it now being put. For imprisoned within it are two scorpions of differing species—a red one and a black one—hideous monsters, measuring five inches from their great lobster-like claws to the tip of their armed tails, and there they crouch, each upon one side of its glass prison-house, both, evidently, in that dubious state aptly known among schoolboys as "one's funky, and t'other's afraid."

"Hold on a bit," called out the man in the shirt sleeves, but without turning his head, as the trampling of hoofs behind him warned of the approach of a visitor, "or, at any rate, come up quietly."

"Why, what in the name of all that's blue have you got there?" demanded Hicks, dismounting; for he it is whom we have accompanied to this out-of-the-way spot. "Well, I'm blest?" he continued, going off into a roar of laughter as he approached near enough to see the other's occupation.

"Tsh! tsh! Don't make such an infernal row, man, you'll spoil all the fun, and make me lose my bet."

"What's the bet?"

"Why, I've got five goats against that blue schimmel heifer of old Jafta's on these two beggars, that the black one'll polish off the red 'un; but they are to go at it of their own accord, and now I've been watching them for the last half-hour, but the beggars won't fight," replied the other, still without moving, or even so much as looking over his shoulder.

“Stir them up a bit,” suggested Hicks.

“Can’t; it’d scratch the bet.”

“Where’s Jafta?”

“Oh, he wouldn’t wait. Went away laughing in his sleeve. He’ll laugh the other side of his mouth, the old schelm, when he has to fork out.”

“Well, you must have been hard up for some one to run a bet with. A nice little occupation, too, for a Sunday morning,” replied Hicks, with sham irony.

“Sunday be somethinged. There’s no Sunday on the frontier. Hullo!”

This exclamation was the result of a change of attitude on the part of the grisly denizens of the glass. Slack began slowly to move round the circumference of his prison, in process of which he cannoned against red, and Greek met Greek. With claws interlaced, the venomous brutes plied their sting-armed tails like a couple of striving demons, till at length their grip relaxed, and red fell over on his back with his legs doubled up and rigid.

“Hooroosh! I’ve won,” called out our new acquaintance, jumping up gleefully. “Hi! Jafta, Jafta!” he bawled, anxious to notify his triumph over his sceptical retainer.

“Hold on; not so fast,” put in Hicks, “t’other fellow’s a gone coon, too, or not far from it. Look,” he added, pointing to the glass.

And in good sooth the victor began to show signs of approaching dissolution, which increased to such an extent, that in a couple of minutes he lay as rigid and motionless as the vanquished.

“Never mind, it all counts. He did polish off the other. Jafta, we’ll put my mark on that cow to-morrow.”

“Nay, Baas,” demurred that ancient servitor, who had just come up. He was a wiry little old Hottentot, with a yellow skin, and beady monkey eyes, and as ugly as the seven deadly sins. “Nay, Baas, the bet’s an even one; neither thrashed the other. Isn’t it so, Baas Hicks?”

“Well, as you put it to me, I think the bet’s a draw,” began Hicks.

“Oh, no, that won’t do,” objected Jafta’s master, “the black did polish off the red, you know. If he went off himself afterwards, it was owing to his uneasy conscience. That wasn’t provided for in the agreement. But never mind, Jafta, you can keep your old ‘stomp-stert’ this time.” (Note 1.)

The old Hottentot grinned all over his parchment countenance, and the numerous and grimy wrinkles thereof puckered themselves like the skin of a withered apple. He, and his two sons, strapping lads of eighteen and nineteen, constituted the whole staff of farm servants. No Kafir could be induced to stay on the place, owing to its weird associations; a circumstance which, according to its occupant, was not without its compensating advantage, for the marauding savage, in his nocturnal forays, at any rate kept his hands off these flocks and herds. The old fellow, however, was fairly faithful to his employer, though not scrupulously honest in all his dealings with the rest of mankind at large; the place suited him, and as for ghosts, well, he had never seen anything to frighten him.

And now the jolly frontiersman, who has been driven to so eccentric a form of Sabbath amusement, rises, and we see a man of middle height, with a humorous and gleeful countenance; in his eyes there lurks a mirthful twinkle, and every sun-tanned lineament bespeaks “a character.” And he is a character. Always on the look-out for the whimsical side of events, he is light-hearted to childishness, and has a disastrous weakness for the perpetration of practical jokes—a vein of humour far more entertaining to its possessor than to its victims—and game to bet upon any and every contingency. He is about thirty, and his name is Jack Armitage.

“Well, Hicks, old man,” said this worthy. “Taken pity on my lonely estate, eh? That’s right; we’ll make a day of it. Had breakfast?”

“No.”

“More have I; we’ll have it now. Er—Jafta!” he shouted, “Jafta! Wheel up those chops. Sharp’s the word.”

“Ya, Baas. Just now?” called out that menial, and from the kitchen sounds of hissing and sputtering betokened the preparation of a succulent fry.

“Just now! Only listen. Why, he’ll be twenty minutes at least.”

“Not he,” said Hicks; “he’s nearly ready, I can smell that much.”

“Nearly ready! Give you a dollar to five bob he’s twenty minutes from now. Is that on?” he inquired, putting out his watch to take the time. (Rix dollar, 1 shilling 6 pence.)

“No, it isn’t. I’m not going to encourage your disgraceful and sporting proclivities,” was the reply, as they entered the house. Three partitions boasted this domicile—a bedroom, a sitting-room, and the kitchen aforesaid. Of ceiling it was wholly guiltless, the sole canopy overhead being plain, unadulterated thatch; and the mud floor, plastered over with cow-dung, after the manner of the rougher frontier houses, gave forth a musty, uninviting odour, which it required all the ingress of the free air of Heaven to atone for. A large, roomy wooden press, and a row of shelves, with a green baize curtain in front, stood against the whitewashed wall, and in the middle of the room a coarse cloth was laid upon the wooden table, with a couple of plates and knives and forks. Armitage dived into the press and produced a great brown loaf, a tin of milk, and a mighty jar of quince jam.

“Hallo! the ants are in possession again,” said he, surveying the jar, whence issued an irregular crowd of those industrious insects—too industrious sometimes. “Never mind, we can dodge them; besides, they are fattening. Ah, that’s right, Jafta,”—as that worthy entered with a dish of fizzing chops in one hand and a pot of strong black coffee in the other. “Now we can fall to.”

“By the way, I shall have to go back soon,” said Hicks. “I only came to see if any of those sheep we lost had got in amongst Van Rooyen’s, and thought I’d sponge on you for a feed whilst I was down this way.”

“Oh, that can’t be allowed; I thought you had come to help a fellow kill Sunday. Hang it, man, don’t be in a hurry; stop and have some rifle practice, and then we can take out that bees’ nest down by the river. Ah, but I forgot,” he added, with a quizzical wink. “Never mind, my boy; I don’t want to spoil fun, you’ll be better employed at home.”

Hicks was sorely puzzled. He was a good-natured fellow, and could see that the other had reckoned upon his company for the day. Yet he had his reasons for wanting to get back. “Look here, Jack,” he said, at length, “I’ll tell you what we’ll do. I’ll hold on here a little and help you to get out that bees’ nest, then you can go back with me and we’ll get to Seringa Vale just nicely in time for dinner. Will that do?”

“All right,” assented the other, “that’ll do me well enough. I’ve had nothing but my own blessed company for the last fortnight, except for a Dutchman or two now and again, and a little jaw with my fellow creatures will do me a world of good. By the way, is that chap Claverton still with you?”

“Yes. How d’you like him?”

“Oh, he seems good enough sort, but about the most casual bird I ever saw. He was down here one day; did he tell you about it? No! Well, then, a couple of Dutchmen came in—Swaart Pexter and his brother Marthinus—and Swaart, who is one of your bragging devils and ‘down on’ a ‘raw Englishman’ like a ton of bricks, after yarning a little while points to Claverton, who was sitting over there blowing a cloud in his calm way, and says rather cheekily: ‘Who’s that?’ I told him. ‘Can he talk Dutch?’ was the next question. ‘Don’t know,’ says I. ‘How long has he been in this country?’ says he. ‘Tell him a year,’ says Claverton, quietly, without moving a muscle. I told him. ‘A year!’ says Pexter, turning up his nose more cheekily than before. ‘A year and can’t talk Dutch yet! He must be domm,’ (stupid). Thereupon Claverton looks the fellow bang in the eyes, and says in Dutch, ‘Can you talk English?’ ‘No!’ replies Pexter, with a stare of astonishment. ‘And how long have you been here?’ ‘Been here!’ says the other, with a contemptuous laugh at this—to him—new proof of the other fellow’s greenness. ‘Why, I was born here.’ ‘How old are you?’ goes on Claverton in a tone of friendly interest. ‘Forty-seven last May,’ says the Dutchman, wondering what the deuce is coming next. ‘Forty-seven last May!’ repeats our friend, calmly knocking the ash out of his pipe. ‘That is, you have been in this country forty-seven years, and can’t talk English yet. Well, you must be domm!’ I roared and so did Marthinus. ‘Got you there, old chap,’ says I. Swaart Pexter looked rather shirty and tried to laugh it off, but Claverton had him. Had him, sir, fairly—lock, stock, and barrel. Well, after a while we went outside and stuck up a bottle at four hundred yards to have some rifle practice. The Dutchmen are first-rate shots, and I—well, a buck or a nigger would be anything but safe in front of me at that distance—but I give you my word that none of us could touch that bottle. When we had fired a dozen shots apiece and nearly covered the beastly thing with dust, and ploughed up the ground all round it as if a thunderbolt had fallen, out saunters Claverton with a yellow-backed novel in his fist. ‘Doesn’t your friend shoot?’ asks Marthinus. ‘Suppose so,’ says I. ‘Have a shot, Claverton!’ ‘Don’t mind,’ says he, taking over my gun. I could see a malicious grin on Swaart’s ugly mug, and hugely was he preparing to chuckle over the ‘raw Englishman’s’ wide shooting. Claverton lay down, and without much aiming—bang—crash—we could hardly believe our eyes—the bottle had flown. By Jove it had. ‘Well done,’ says I, ‘but do that again, old chap’; yes, it was mean of me, I allow, but I couldn’t help it. ‘Don’t want to do for all your bottles, Armitage,’ says my joker as quietly as you please, as I sent the boy to stick up another, and I had just time to start a bet of five bob with Marthinus in his favour when—bang—and, by Jove, sir, would you believe it? that bottle shared the fate of the first. Well, we were astonished. ‘Aren’t you going to shoot any more?’ says Marthinus, handing over the five bob with a very bad grace. ‘Too hot out here,’ replies he, sloping into the shade of the house; and diving his nose into the yellow-back again, leaves us to our bottle-breaking or rather to our attempts at the same, for I’m dashed if we touched one after that. After the Pexters had gone I says, ‘Look here, old chap, we’ll have a quiet match between ourselves, five bob on every dozen shots—you shall give me odds.’ ‘My dear fellow,’ says he, ‘odds should be the other way about. I

shan't touch that bottle again three times if I blaze away at it the whole morning.' 'The Lord, you won't,' says I; 'never mind, let's try.' He did, and was as good as his word, and handed over fifteen bob at the close of the entertainment, having hit the mark twice to my seven times. 'And how the deuce did you pink it before—twice running can't be a fluke, you know?' I asked, when we had done. 'Well, you see, those louts were bent on seeing me shoot wide, so I held straight just to spite them,' was his cool answer. But didn't he tell you all about it?"

"Not a word," said Hicks. "He just said he had been down here, and a couple of slouching Dutchmen had looked in and tried to take a rise out of him, but didn't manage it."

"Well, he is a rum stick and no mistake. What's in the wind now?" and as the trampling of hoofs fell upon the speaker's ear, he got up hastily and made for the door, knocking over a wooden chair in his progress, and treading on the tail of a mongrel puppy which had sneaked in and was lying under the table, and which now fled, yelling disconsolately. "Here come two chaps," he went on, shading his eyes from the sun's glare and looking out into the veldt. "Dutchmen—no—one is—David Botha, I think; t'other's Allen—no mistaking him. Wheu-uw! Now for some fun, Hicks, my boy. We'll make him help us with the bees' nest, and if you don't kill yourself with almighty blue fits, call me a nigger."

The two drew near. The Boer with his stolid, wooden face, slouch hat (round which was twined a faded blue veil), and bob-tailed and ancient tail-coat, was an ordinary specimen of his class and nation. The Englishman, however, was not. He was rather a queer-looking fellow, tall and loosely-built, with a great mop of yellow hair and an absent expression of countenance. His age might have been five or six-and-twenty. He had not been long in the colony, and was theoretically supposed to be farming. On horseback Allen was quaint of aspect. His seat in the saddle would not have been a good advertisement to his riding-master, putting it mildly, and he invariably rode screws. Moreover, he was great on jack-boots and huge spurs.

"Good day, David," said Armitage, as the Boer extended a damp and uncleanly paw. "Hallo, Allen! you're just in the nick of time. We are just going to get out a bees' nest, and you must come and bear a hand."

"But—er—I'm not much use at that sort of thing. Botha will help you much better."

"Won't do, old chap—won't do," said Armitage, decisively. "In the words of the poet, 'Not to-day, baker!' So come along."

Allen's jaw fell. If there was one thing on this earth he hated, it was depriving the little busy bee of the hard-earned fruits of his labours, not on humanitarian grounds—oh, no—but the despoiled insects had a knack of buzzing viciously around the noses and ears of the depredators and their accomplices in a way that was highly trying to weak nerves, to say nothing of the absolute certainty of two or three stings, if not half-a-dozen. He glanced instinctively towards David Botha as though mutely to ask: "Why the deuce won't he do?" But that stolid Boer sat puffing away at his pipe, and showed no inclination to come to the rescue.

"Hicks, give Allen one of those big tins to put the honey in while I hunt up some brown paper to make a smoke with," said Armitage, as they went into the house. It had been arranged that Allen should hold the receptacle for the honey, otherwise he would inevitably have sloped off.

They went down to the river bank, Armitage leading the way. A keg fixed in the fork of a small tree constituted the hive, and the busy insects were winging in and out with a murmuring hum. Armitage divested himself of his coat so that the bees shouldn't get up the sleeves, as he said, and slouched his hat well over his face and neck; then with a chisel he removed the head of the keg, while Hicks ignited the brown paper and made the very deuce of a smoke.

"Not much in it—quite the wrong time of year to take it," said Armitage, as the waxen combs in the hive were disclosed to view. "Never mind, they'll make a lot more. Oh-h!" as one of the outraged insects playfully stung him on the ear. "Come a little nearer, Allen;" and he threw a couple of combs into the tin dish, while Hicks stood close at hand plying the smoke with all the energy of a Ritualistic thurifer.

"Oh-h—ah!" echoed Allen, in dismal staccato, as he received a sting on the hand, and another on the back of the neck.

"Hang it, man, don't drop the concern!" exclaimed Armitage, pitching another comb or two into the large tin; nor was the warning altogether ill-timed, for poor Allen was undergoing a mauvais quart d'heure with a vengeance, ducking his head spasmodically as the angry insects "bizzed" savagely around his ears, and all the time looking intensely wretched under the infliction.

And in truth the fun began to wax warm. Armitage's hat was invisible beneath the clusters of bees which swarmed over it, while others were crawling about on his clothes. Now and then he would give vent to an ejaculation, as a sting, inflicted more viciously than usual, told through even his hardened skin; but he kept on manfully at his task,

cutting out the combs and depositing them in the tin, while the air was filled with buzzing angry bees and suffocating smoke.

“Think we’ve got enough now,” he said at last, drawing his face out of the cask, and quickly heading up the latter. Allen, to whom this dictum was like a reprieve to a condemned criminal, gave a sigh of relief, and began to breathe freely again. But his self-gratulation was somewhat premature, for at that moment a bee insinuated itself into his thick, frizzly-hair just above the neck, and began stinging like mad. Crash! Down went the tin containing the honey-combs, while the victim danced and capered and executed the most grotesque contortions for a moment; then, in a perfect frenzy, away he rushed to the nearest point of the river—a long, deep reach—where he plunged his head into the water, and losing his centre of gravity, ended by incontinently tumbling in, while the spectators were obliged to lie down and indulge their paroxysms of uncontrollable mirth to the very uttermost.

“Oh, oh, oh-h-h!” roared Armitage. “P-pick him out, some one; I’m n-not equal to it.” And he lay back on the sward and howled again.

And in good sooth the warning came none too soon, for at that point the current flowed swift and deep, and poor Allen, what with his exertions and the weight of his jack-boots, was in a state of dire exhaustion, and a few moments more would have put an end to his hopes and fears. Hicks and the Dutchman, who had managed to recover themselves, ran down to the water’s edge, and shouted to him to seize a branch which swept the surface, and at length the involuntary swimmer was fished out and stood dripping and shivering, and looking inexpressibly foolish, on the bank.

“Oh-h, Lord! oh, Lord!” roared Armitage, bursting out afresh as he picked up the fallen tin, and gathered up the fragments that remained. “I never saw anything to beat that, by the holy poker I never did! Come along, old man. We’ll tog you out while I get out some of these stings. The brutes must have been under the impression that I was a jolly pincushion, and have used me accordingly.”

“Dud—dud—don’t think I’ll go up to Seringa Vale to-day,” stuttered Allen, as soon as he recovered breath. He feared the chaff which he knew full well awaited him on the strength of this latest escapade.

“Nonsense, man! We’ll tog you out in no time, and then we’ll all ride over together and have a jolly day of it,” said Armitage.

Allen yielded, and was speedily arrayed in various garments which didn’t fit him. The jack-boots were inevitably left behind, to the great concern of their owner, for there was

no possibility of their being dry before sundown at the earliest. Towards noon the horses were brought round and saddled, and having locked up the house the three started, while the Dutchman took his leave and rode off home to regale his vrouw and hinders, and his cousins and his aunts, with the story—highly coloured—of the "raw Englishman's" discomfiture.

Note 1. "Stump tail." Taillessness is frequent among colonial cattle—the result of inoculation.

Chapter Nine.

In Which the Reader Becomes a Party to More Chaff.

They rode merrily along, or rather two of them did, for ever and anon Allen's steed would drop behind, and its sorry pace wax slower and slower, till at length, taking advantage of its rider's abstraction, it would stop and snatch up a tuft of grass here and there by the way-side.

"What the deuce has become of that fellow again?" exclaimed Armitage for the fifth time since their start, as he rose in his stirrups and turned to look back. "Hi—Allen. Come on, man, we shan't get there to-night!" he bawled.

"All right," echoed feebly from afar; and the white top of a pith helmet, which had escaped its owner's immersion, hove in sight over the scrub like a peripatetic mushroom, as the laggard came trotting up.

"Come on! We thought you had got another bee in your bonnet," was Armitage's salutation. "Hi—Bles you schelm—hold up!" This to his horse, which started violently as something sprang up at its very feet; something lithe and red, with curious pointed ears, which darted away over the ground with lightning speed. "A rooi-cat (lynx), by Moses!" he went on, "after some of the late lambs. Hicks, where is that old shooting-iron of yours?" and thinking that though powerless to hurt the objectionable feline, at any rate he could frighten it, Armitage opened his mouth and gave vent to a true Kafir war yell, which certainly had the desired effect.

"Didn't bring it. Sunday, you know; must respect people's prejudices," replies Hicks.

"Oh, Lord! and I would have liked to have peppered that chap's hide," groaned Armitage.

They rode on over hill and dale. Suddenly the rasping cry of the wild guinea-fowl brought Hicks' heart into his mouth, and he certainly did not bless the good old-world prejudice in deference to which he had left his beloved gun at home on the first day of the week, and as a cloud of those splendid game birds rose from a grassy bottom within a few yards of them and winged away with their chattering note, poor Hicks fairly groaned.

"Look at that. Only look at that!" he exclaimed in tones of wrathful disgust. "Such a chance; did you ever see them rise like that! When a fellow has his gun and is all ready for them, blest if they won't run hundreds of yards before they'll get up, whereas—"

“I suppose they know it’s Sunday,” put in Allen, with a feeble attempt at chaff.

The other turned from him impatiently, without replying. Good-natured as he was habitually, there were moments when even Hicks felt justifiably cantankerous. This was one of them.

They continued their way without event, and, cresting the last ridge, descended into the long valley, at whose head stood the old farmhouse.

“Hallo! some one’s turned up,” said Armitage, indicating the white tent of a Cape cart, which stood outspanned before the stable-door, with the harness lying beside the swingle bars.

“Looks like Naylor’s trap,” said Hicks.

“Good. The more the merrier,” rejoined Armitage, as they cantered up and dismounted.

An air of perfect rest and peace seemed to enshroud the place, as though nature would supply the absence of all outward signs of the Sabbath. The gates of the empty kraals stood open, and save for a sickly sheep or two feeding about near the homestead, there was not a sign of animal life. Here and there a long rakish-looking hornet flitted beneath the leaves of a trellised vine, or sought the entrance of his pendulous paper-like nest in the verandah. In the garden a few butterflies disported, vying with the flowers in their bright colours; and big bumble-bees boomed in the burning glow of the noonday sun. There was that about the sultry stillness which warned of thunder in the air, a presage not unlikely to be borne out towards evening, judging from the great solid bank of clouds which loomed up blackly from behind the distant mountains.

Hicks was right as to the identity of the visitors, whose conveyance they had descried. Edward Naylor, Mr Brathwaite’s son-in-law, a jolly bluff frontiersman, whose weather-tanned face heavily bearded, was the soul of geniality, was seated on the disselboom of a waggon, discoursing on the state of the country with his host. His wife, a pretty, fair-haired woman of about thirty, was sitting with Ethel and Laura in the verandah, and was at that moment arbitrating, amid much laughter, in an argument which the former had started with Claverton, by way of passing the time.

“Hallo, Armitage,” said that worthy, as the new arrivals drew nigh. “I was expecting to be summoned to your funeral.”

“My funeral! What the dev—er—what d’you mean?”

“Well, you see, it’s such a time since I beheld the light of your countenance that I began to think you must be dead.”

“Wheuw! That’s what I call a cheerful greeting,” replied Armitage, shaking hands with the rest of the party.

The two who had been talking shop now appeared on the scene.

“How do, Armitage? Hallo, Allen, who’s your outrigger?” said Naylor, eyeing the unwonted garb of that luckless youth, which garb bore unmistakable appearance of makeshift from head to foot.

“Er—I stumbled into the river, and—”

“What; boots and all?” There was a joke about Allen’s jack-boots, which he was seldom seen without.

“‘What is good for a bootless bene?’” quoted Claverton. “Never mind, Allen, don’t you let them chaff you.”

Naylor was an inveterate joker. When he and Armitage got together the same room would hardly hold them, and when the two got Allen between them, then, Heaven help Allen. Now this is precisely what happened, for at that moment the dinner-bell rang, and all adjourned to the festive board, when, as luck would have it, the unfortunate youth found himself—partly owing to that curious practice which is, or was, so often found in frontier houses, of all the men hanging together on one side of the table, leaving the other to the fair sex—in the neighbourhood of his tormentors; but he was a good-natured fellow, and took chaff very equably.

“I say,” began Armitage, “here’s a riddle—a regular Sunday one.”

“Is there? Roll it up this way,” said Claverton, from the other end of the table, where he was seated between Mrs Naylor and Ethel, for he resolutely defied the dividing custom above mentioned.

“Here you are, then. Why is Allen like Moses?” asked Armitage.

“Oh, villainous!” laughed Claverton. “Don’t anybody attempt it. I really think you might trot out something a little more original, Armitage.”

Of course, every one then and there tried hard to solve the conundrum, and, of course, half of them gave it up, and, of course, the reply came even as was to be expected: "Because he was drawn out of the water."

"Oh-h!" groaned the whole party; while the object of the aqueous jest sat and grinned placidly, and made play with his knife and fork as though he were the perpetrator of it instead of its butt.

"I say, Allen," put in Naylor, on the other side, "has that shooting match between you and Hicks come off yet?"

"What are the conditions?" asked Armitage.

"Dollar a side—Target, the shearing-house door—Distance, five yards—Hicks to be allowed four yards on account of his want of practice. I'll bet on Hicks;" and the speaker roared at his own sorry wit.

"Eh! what's that about me?" called out Hicks from the other end of the table, which was longer than usual, by reason of the advent of the Naylors with their five olive-branches. He had just caught his name.

"Nothing, old man, nothing; we were only talking of those three guinea-fowl you shot this morning, coming up," replied Armitage, grinning mischievously.

"But bother it, I had no gun," said Hicks, thrown off his guard for the moment by this bare-faced accusation of Sabbath-breaking, and fairly losing his head as he caught a reproachful glance from Laura, which seemed to say: "Didn't you promise me you'd leave your gun at home when you went out this morning?" For he had confidentially imparted to her his intention to take the trusty shooting-iron, as he was starting so early that there would be no one about to be scandalised; and Laura, who had her own ideas of right and wrong, had peremptorily forbidden his doing anything of the kind.

"I say!" exclaimed Armitage, with admirably-feigned amazement. He had taken in the other's look of confusion, and, incorrigible joker as he was, resolved to turn it to his own mischief-loving account.

"But, confound it!" began Hicks, wrathfully; for that mute upbraiding glance made him really savage with his tormentor, who he thought was carrying the joke too far. Chaff was all very well, but this kind of thing went beyond chaff, and he would give him a piece of his mind by-and-by.

“Er—n-no—of course—you hadn’t a gun—I forgot—er—I—was thinking of yesterday,” rejoined Armitage, with the well-simulated air of a man who has “put his foot in it,” and is endeavouring to withdraw that unlucky member—and endeavouring deucedly badly, too.

“I say, Jack, what about the scorpion fight, eh?” and Hicks proceeded to narrate how he had found that unscrupulous joker in the thick of the useful and intellectual little amusement at which we saw him in the last chapter, thus drawing upon him the laughter and sallies of the assemblage, under cover of which he said quietly to Laura: “I didn’t really take the gun this morning, ’pon my word of honour I didn’t; it’s only that fellow’s lies. He might draw the line somewhere; chaff’s all very well, you know, but hang it, that’s beyond a joke.”

“Yes, I think it’s really too bad of him. I oughtn’t to have thought you did what you told me you wouldn’t do,” she replied, with an almost imperceptible stress on “me,” and a glance which Hicks thought fully compensated for the former doubt. Leave we them beneath the friendly shelter of the noise at the other end of the table, and turn to the rest.

“Don’t care, I won my bet,” Armitage was saying.

“What! And so you were betting on it, too—and on Sunday! I think it’s disgraceful of you,” said Ethel.

“He’s come up here to be reformed,” put in Allen.

“Oh, you needn’t talk,” said Armitage, turning off the attack on to the last speaker. “Miss Brathwaite, what do you think of a fellow who comes down to my place on a Sunday, and bothers me to take out a bees’ nest; on a Sunday, too!”

There was a great laugh at this. The notion of Allen bothering any one to take out a bees’ nest, Sunday or any other day, struck them all as ineffably rich. He would rather travel twenty miles than embark knowingly in that lively enterprise. And then the joke about the stings, and the plunge into the river came out, and poor Allen was roasted unmercifully on the strength of it, and the fun grew apace, when a vivid flash darting in upon them, and playing upon the knives and glasses with a blue steely gleam, brought the conversation up with a round turn.

“We shall have a storm,” said Mr Brathwaite, glancing at the window. The deep azure of the heavens had become dark and overcast, and even as he spoke there pealed forth a long, angry roll of thunder.

A general move from the table now took place, and every one adjourned to the verandah, which looked out on the wide sweep of country constituting the great charm of the situation of the house. But now the joyous sunlight had disappeared, and the earth slept in a dread and boding stillness. Tall pillars of cloud, black as night, moved steadily on, their jagged edges taking the forms and faces of hideous and open-mouthed monsters. All nature seemed waiting for the battle of the forces of the air, the discharge of the pent-up cloud artillery which was to strike the awed surface of earth with its blasting fire. Then, athwart the hot, listening deadness of the atmosphere comes a dazzling flash, bathing the valley in a sea of flame; and a roll of thunder, long, loud, and close at hand, makes the expectant group, which is standing on the verandah to watch the storm, involuntarily start, and the silence is more intense than before. And now a great chain of fire shoots from the blackness immediately overhead, and before you could count one, an appalling crash shakes the solid old house to its very foundations, while the windows rattle like castanets.

"Let's go inside," suggested Ethel; "I don't like this."

"It's getting wicked," said Armitage. "It was just such a shot as this that killed old Simmonds. That was up in Kaffraria, where the storms are about as bad as anywhere. He and I were standing in the doorway watching the fun; I went in to light my pipe, and while I was fumbling about for the matches something knocked me clean over, and I heard a bang and a crash enough to wake the dead. At first I thought I had upset the crockery shelf on top of me; but no, there it stood; then my head felt queer, and there was a smell of burning about the place. Then I remembered, and got up and went to the door. There lay poor Simmonds, half in and half out, as dead as a log. The lightning had caught him bang on the head, burnt his coat and waistcoat to rags, and mauled him about horribly. I can tell you it wasn't a nice thing for a fellow to see, having just narrowly escaped the same luck himself—Ah!"

Again a sheet of flame darts down, and a roar and a crash as of the discharge of a dozen eighty-one-ton guns follows upon it. This time they beat a retreat indoors; and when they had a little recovered from the momentary shock, Armitage goes on.

"Well, as I was saying, poor Simmonds was so knocked about, that his early sepulture became a matter of necessity; besides, the first thing to do was to get him into the house. He was enormously heavy, and I couldn't get a Kafir on the place to give me a hand. Not for the cattle upon a thousand hills will they so much as touch anything that has been killed by lightning with the end of their little fingers, and the nearest neighbour was twenty miles off. However, I managed to lug the poor fellow in, and the next day we buried him."

“That’s a cheerful old yarn of yours, Jack, and well calculated to reassure Miss Brathwaite,” struck in Claverton.

“I believe he’s only trying to frighten us,” said Ethel.

“’Pon my word of honour, every word of what I told you’s true,” protested Armitage; and with that love for the horrific implanted in the human breast, one story led to another, and the storm raved and flashed without, and a few preliminary hailstones rattled at intervals upon the roof.

Chapter Ten.

Caveant!

"Well, you'll have a fine day for your ride. Hicks, leave a buck or two up at Jim's in case I should be coming over. I suppose you'll all be back the day after to-morrow. Good-bye."

The speaker was Mr Brathwaite; the spoken to, an equestrian group of four, consisting of Claverton, Hicks, and the two girls, who were starting on a long-promised visit to Jim Brathwaite's place, where a bushbuck hunt was to be organised on the following day. It was the morning after the narrow escape of the luckless Allen from a watery demise—he and Armitage had returned home to fetch their guns, and were to rejoin the others at the farm of a certain Dutchman who abode half-way. The Naylors had gone on ahead in their trap, and the four equestrians were the last to start. And such a morning! The rain had cleared away, and the great deep vault overhead was unflecked by a single feathery cloud. The sun shot his golden darts from his amber wheel, and the outlines of the mountains slept in soft-toned relief beneath the liquid blue. A perfect day, with exhilaration in every breath of the fresh, healthy atmosphere, now cooled by the thunderstorm and rain of the previous evening. And the glorious freshness and radiant sunlight communicated itself to the spirits of the riders, as they cantered gaily along, chatting and laughing in thorough enjoyment of the unclouded present.

"Now, Mr Claverton," cried Ethel, as their horses bounded along over a smooth level stretch, "we'll have our race—I'm to have a hundred yards start, you know. Shall we begin?"

"On no account. I received strict injunctions from your aunt not to let you do anything rash, and I intend exerting my authority to the uttermost."

"Do you? Well now, why don't you say you're afraid of being beaten? You are, you know. I'll tell you what. You shall have the hundred yards start. We shall easily walk in before that lazy old 'Sticks,' shan't we, Springbok, my beauty?" she said, banteringly, patting the neck of her steed, a light, elastic-stepping animal with blood and mettle in him, who arched his neck and shook his mane in response to the caress. She sat him to perfection, the little hand bearing ever so lightly on the reins; and in a habit fitting her like a glove, and a coquettish straw hat surrounded by a sweeping ostrich plume, beneath which the blue eyes danced and sparkled in sheer light-heartedness, she made as pretty a picture as ever one could wish to look upon. At any rate, so thought her companion.

"Well, Sticks is lazy—at times—I grant you; but there's method in his laziness. Don't abuse Sticks."

“Never mind, I know you’re afraid. Don’t think any more about it. Now I suppose you’re dying to. You men always want to do a thing directly you’re told not to.”

What will be the upshot, by-the-bye, of this standing arrangement of quartette? This is not the first ride by any means that those four have taken together. Together! It has been shown that one of the party, at any rate, had reached the “two’s company, three’s a crowd” stage—or for the present purpose four. Thus it followed that however often the group may have started together, it was bound to split up before going very far. Frequently Hicks would manage to drop behind with one, and that one was not Ethel. Frequently, also, Ethel would, manoeuvre to rush ahead in a swinging gallop, in which case she could not be suffered to ride alone, but whoever undertook to superintend her on these occasions, certainly it was not Hicks. Whether she was wont to execute these manoeuvres at Laura’s previous instigation, or whether her motives were less disinterested, deponent sayeth not. As for Claverton, he accepted the situation with, characteristic indifference. Yet what could be more fraught with elements of possible combustion? As for the man, he was perfectly unsusceptible, and wholly devoid of vanity. He looked upon his beautiful companion as a spoilt, pretty child, fond of teasing and chaff, and who amused him, and if he thought anything about himself in the matter, he supposed that he managed to amuse her. This is how he looked at it—but how did Ethel herself?

“Hallo! There goes a buck!” cried Claverton, suddenly. “May as well have a shot,” and he made a movement to dismount.

“No, don’t—please don’t! Springbok won’t stand fire, you know, and he’ll bolt with me.”

“Oh, all right. Then that lazy old Sticks has his good points after all?”

“Yes; a steady old arm-chair has its good points too. You can shoot from it,” she replied, scornfully.

“What a wooden comparison! Why not say a clothes-horse?”

Bang! The report of a gun behind them. “Hicks to the fore,” remarked Claverton, shading his eyes to watch the effect of the shot. But the buck held on its way, caring not a straw for the bullet which buried itself in the earth with a vicious thud some ten or a dozen yards behind.

In this way they rode on in the pleasant sunshine, and eventually drew rein in front of a prettily situated though roughly built house of red brick, with thatched roof and high

stoep. This was the abode of a Dutchman, Isaac Van Rooyen by name, and here they had arranged to stay and have dinner, for on the frontier a standing hospitality is the rule, and in travelling every one makes a convenience of his neighbour and is made a convenience of in turn. The Boer, a large corpulent man of about sixty, advanced to welcome them as the clamorous tongues of a yelping and mongrel pack gave warning of their approach, and consigning their horses to a dilapidated-looking Hottentot, they entered the house. A long, low room furnished with the characteristic plainness of such an abode; a substantial table, several chairs, on some of which none but a lunatic or an inebriate would venture to trust his proportions for a single instant. In one corner stood an ancient and battered harmonium, another contained a sewing-machine and a huge family Bible in ponderous Dutch lettering, while the walls were garnished with sundry grievous prints, high in colour and grisly in design, representing Moses destroying the Tables of the Law, Elijah and the prophets of Baal, and so on. The vrouw arose from her coffee-brewing as they entered—the absorption of coffee is a sine qua non in a Boer domicile on the arrival of visitors—and greeted them with stolid and wooden greeting, and a brace of great shy and ungainly damsels—exact reproductions of their mother at twenty and twenty-one—looked scared as they limply shook hands with the new-comers. But others were there besides the regular inmates, for the Naylors had arrived, as also Armitage and Allen, and our friend Will Jeffreys, and these were keeping up a laborious conversation with the worthy Boer and his ponderous vrouw, whose daughters, aforesaid, eat together in speechless inanity, now and again venturing a "Ja" or a "Nay" if addressed, and straightway relapsing into a spasmodic giggle beneath their kapjes.

"Doesn't Miss Brathwaite play?" inquired the Boer, with a glance at Ethel and then at the harmonium.

"'England expects.' Go now and elicit wheezy strains from yon venerable and timeworn fire-engine," said Claverton, in a low tone.

She drew off her gloves in a resigned manner, and was about to sit down at the despised instrument, when some one putting a book on the music-stool in order to heighten the seat, that fabric underwent a total collapse and came to the ground with a crash. Another seat was found, and she began to play—but oh! what an instrument of torture it was—more to the performer than to the audience. Every other note stuck fast, keeping up an earsplitting and discordant hum throughout; and the bellows being afflicted with innumerable leaks, were the cause of much labour and sorrow to the player.

"I can't play on this thing," she said. "Every other note sticks down, and the bellows are all in holes, and—I won't."

Naylor explained to the Dutchman that Ethel was a great pianist but was nothing at harmoniums, which excuse covered her somewhat petulant retreat from the abominable instrument, and just then dinner was brought in. Then it became a question of finding seats, many of the chairs being hors de combat.

“Here you are, Allen; come and sit here,” called out Armitage. In a confiding moment, and the table being full, the unsuspecting youth dropped into the seat indicated, and then—dropped on the floor, for the rickety concern forthwith “resigned,” even as the music-stool had done before it. A roar of laughter went up from the incorrigible joker at the success of his impromptu trap, and Allen arose from the ruins of the chair, like Phoenix from the ashes.

“I say, though, that’s better than the cruise down the river with the bee in your bonnet, isn’t it, old chap?” said Armitage, exploding again. Allen looked rather glum, and another seat, not much less rickety than the other, was found for him.

When he was settled, the Boer stood up and with closed eyes began a long, rambling oration, presumably to the Creator, which was meant for grace, and having discoursed unctuously on everything, or nothing, for the space of several minutes, he set the example of falling to.

“Going up to Jim Brathwaite’s for the hunt to-morrow, Oom Isaac?” asked Armitage of his host. (Note 1.)

“Ja,” replied old Van Rooyen. “Can he shoot?” designating Claverton—the popular idea on the frontier being that an “imported” Briton must necessarily be an ass in all things pertaining to field pursuits.

“He just can. Didn’t you hear how he licked the Pexters down at my place?”

“Yes, I did hear that; I remember now;” and the Dutchman looked at Claverton with increased respect.

“But that’s the fellow to bring down a buck at five hundred yards,” went on Armitage, indicating Allen, who, regardless of what went on around him, was making terrific play with his knife and fork, and who, although seated next the speaker, remained in blissful unconsciousness of being the subject of any chaff, by reason of his ignorance of the Dutch language.

“Is he now? I shouldn’t have thought that,” was the deliberating reply; the matter-of-fact Boer not dreaming for a moment that the other was gammoning him.

And the ball of conversation rolled on, and the unseasoned stew was succeeded by a ponderous jar of quince preserve, then another lengthy grace and the inevitable coffee.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the room, Van Rooyen, with the freedom of his countrymen, was discussing "present company."

"What a pretty girl she is!" he was saying, referring to Ethel. "Is she another of Mr Brathwaite's daughters?"

"No, a niece," replied Naylor, to whom the remark was addressed. "Her father is George Brathwaite, the M.L.A."

"'Ja,' I know him," replied the Dutchman. "He isn't a good man (in the sense of 'a good politician'). He voted against our interests in several things. But she's a pretty girl, a very pretty girl. And the Englishman's a good-looking fellow, too. Are they engaged?"

"Damned fool!" angrily muttered Claverton, who, while talking to Ethel, had overheard the above conversation and wondered whether Ethel had too.

"What's the matter now?" said she, and the frown left his brow as the question convinced him she had not heard. But he turned and suggested to Armitage that it was time to saddle up.

"Well, yes—I think it is," replied that worthy, who was busily debating in his own mind whether it would be carrying a joke too far if he inserted a burr or prickle of some sort beneath the saddle of Allen's steady-going old mare; and forthwith a general move was made for the horses, which were duly brought to the door.

"Now, Allen, old chap, keep those awful spurs of yours out of my horse's flank, or there'll be the deuce to pay," called out Armitage, as the absent-minded youth backed his steed violently into that of the speaker—whereupon a kicking match became imminent. Meanwhile Ethel was waiting to be put on her horse, and glanced half involuntarily and somewhat angrily in the direction of Claverton, who, whether by accident or of set purpose, was still on the stoep beginning to fill his pipe from Van Rooyen's pouch, and apparently as ignorant of his actual ungallantry as though the fair sex formed no ingredient of the party. With concealed mortification she resigned herself to Will Jeffreys, who advanced to perform that necessary office, and eagerly seized the opportunity of riding by her side.

“Mr Armitage,” she called out, speaking over her shoulder, “do tell me that story about Spoek Krantz.”

Armitage ranged his horse on her unoccupied side and began his narrative, enlarging to an appalling extent as he went on.

“Don’t take in all he says, Miss Brathwaite. He’s cooking up a yarn for the occasion,” said Jeffreys.

Armitage vehemently protested that nothing was further from his intention, but to the jocular recrimination which followed, Ethel hardly listened. She thought that Claverton should be punished for his neglect by being made to ride behind. A punishment to which, by the way, the delinquent seemed to submit with exemplary patience, for he puffed away at his pipe, discoursing placidly to Allen, whom he was just in time to prevent from inflicting himself on Laura, thereby rendering Hicks a substantial service. Nevertheless Ethel, before they had gone one-third of the way, began to wish that Armitage was less garrulously disposed, and would vacate the place to which she had summoned him, and once when he dropped behind a little to light his pipe, she half turned her head with a strange wistfulness, and her pulses beat quicker as she hoped that the hoof-strokes which she heard overtaking her were not those of his steed. But they were, and as that light-hearted mortal ranged up beside her and launched out into a fresh stream of chaff and jocularity, and the end of the ride drew near, it seemed to her that the sunshine had gone out of the day, although there was not a cloud in the heavens and the whole beautiful landscape was bathed in that wondrous golden glow which precedes a South African sunset; and shall it be confessed, she felt sore and angry, and snubbed poor Jeffreys, and irritably checked the flow of Armitage’s running fire of small wit, till at last they drew rein at Jim Brathwaite’s house and were received by its jovial occupant in person.

“Hallo, Ethel; so you’ve come to help us shoot a buck. But where’s your gun?” chaffed he. “Keep quiet; get away you schelms,” he went on, shying a couple of big stones into the midst of some half-dozen huge rough-haired dogs, which rushed open-mouthed towards the equestrians, baying furiously. The rude but serviceable pack, stopped in their career, thought better of it and turned back, one of their number howling piteously, and limping from the effects of another “rock” hurled by Jim’s forcible and practised hand. “Well, Arthur,” as the other two came up, “we’ll show you some fun to-morrow. But come inside; I’ll send Klaas round to off-saddle.”

Note 1. “Uncle.” Among the Boers, “Oom” and “Tanta,” “Uncle” and “Aunt,” are used as complimentary prefixes when addressing elderly people, though these stand in no relation whatever to the speaker.

Chapter Eleven.

Venatorial.

It is early morning, and a party of mounted men, consisting of our friends of the previous day and their genial host, is riding along the high ground away from Jim Brathwaite's homestead. All carry guns, mostly of the latest and most improved pattern, though one or two still hold to the old-fashioned muzzle-loader, and a pack of great rough-haired dogs, the same which greeted our travellers with such hostile demonstration last evening, careers around and among the party, now and then getting a paw or a tail under the horses' hoofs, and yelping and snapping in consequence. The horses step out briskly in the fresh morning air—for the sun is not yet up—which briskness will, I trow, have undergone considerable abatement when they return at the close of the proceedings, laden with a buck apiece—perchance two—and their riders to boot. And the dogs break out afresh into a mighty clamour, leaping and curvetting, and each striving to outbay his fellow as he realises more and more fully the important part which is to be his in the coming destruction; and as the full-mouthed chorus rings over hill and valley, many a graceful spiral-horned antelope starts in his dewy lair far down in the tangled brake, where yet a white curtain of mist hangs, waiting till the rising beams shall disperse it into warmth and sunshine, and listens, it may be, apprehensively to the distant baying.

"Here. Spry! Tiger! Shut up that infernal row, you brutes. A fellow can't hear himself speak!" And loosening a strap from his saddle, Jim makes a sudden cut with the buckle-end at one of the chief contributors to the shindy, who, starting back hurriedly to avoid the infliction, unwarily places his tail beneath the descending hoof of Naylor's horse, and yells in frantic and heartrending fashion for the next five minutes.

"Noisy devils, they'll scare away all the bucks in the country-side before we get near them," remarks that worthy, shading a match with his hand and lighting his pipe without reining in.

"They haven't had a hunt for some time now, you see. I've been away a good deal, and now they're letting off steam a bit," says Jim. "Hallo, Allen! Look out! If you dig your heels into that horse like that, he'll have you off as sure as his name's Waschbank."

For Allen, whose weedy nag had gone lame, is now bestriding a mount which his host has provided for him—a youthful quadruped, given to occasional bucking. And at the time of the needed warning the playful animal is going along with his back stiffly and ominously arched.

“Then it’ll be a case of Allen washing the bank with his tears—to say nothing of tears—for he is bound to rend his ‘bags’ if he falls among these stones,” strikes in Armitage.

“Jack, Jack! I trust I may yet live to see you hanged,” says Claverton. “Jim, I put it to you as a man and a brother. Can any success possibly attend the steps of a hunting-party in whose midst is the perpetrator of so outrageous a sally?”

“Name isn’t Sally,” promptly replies the joker; “I was christened Jack, not John, mind—Jack; and Jack I’ll live and die.”

A laugh is evoked by this repartee, and they break into a canter, while Allen’s steed, the exuberance of whose spirits is in a measure let off in the increased exercise, ceases to cause his rider more than a dormant uneasiness. And now the sun is rising slowly and majestically over the eastern hills. Birds are twittering, and the dewy grass shines beneath and around. Then the great beams dart forth over the rolling plains, bathing them in first a red, then a golden light, and the firmament is blue above, and the earth glows in a warm rich effulgence, the glory of a new-born summer day.

Seated under a bush are three persons evidently awaiting the approach of our party. Their horses saddled, and with bridles trailing on the ground, are cropping the short grass hard by. The conversation is being carried on in Dutch for the benefit of half the group, which owns to that nationality, being in fact our portly friend, Isaac van Rooyen, and one of his sons. The other one is Thorman, a bearded, surly-looking fellow, little given to conversation, but greatly addicted to the use of strong language when he does speak. He is a neighbour of Jim Brathwaite’s.

“Well, Jim,” began Thorman, in response to the other’s greeting. “At last! We’ve been waiting here a whole damned half-hour.”

“Never mind, old fellow,” laughed the other, “patience is a virtue, you know—especially in these piping times.”

“And you’ve had an opportunity of seeing a most splendid sunrise,” added the incorrigible Jack.

“Sunrise be damned,” growled Thorman, surlily.

“I thought we were to begin by sunrise, and now we’ve wasted half the damned day. Better get to work at once,” and he turned away to catch his horse.

The others took no notice of his ill-humour, and chatted among themselves. Then with its fresh addition the party moved on a quarter of a mile or so lower down, where, in an open space in the bush, about thirty Kafirs—boys and men—were assembled. These were the beaters, and many of them were accompanied by their dogs—slim greyhounds, rough-haired lurchers, and curs of all shapes and sizes, and of nondescript aspect. The natives stood up and saluted the new arrivals, and forthwith plans were laid for the operations.

"Now then, Jolwane," said Jim, addressing one of them, who, from his age and standing, had constituted himself, or been constituted, head of his countrymen there assembled, "we'll sweep down this bush first," indicating the long deep kloof which sloped away in front of them. "Send half your fellows on the other side and I'll take my dogs and beat this. We'll take it straight down."

"Ewa 'nkos," (yes, chief), replied the Kafir, and he straightway issued directions to his followers, involving much discussion and voluminous explanation.

"Now then—confound it all, are you fellows going to stand jawing all day?" said Jim, testily. "Off you go," and the Kafirs gathering up their kerries—a few of them carried assegais as well—moved off in twos and threes, still chattering volubly. "Jeffreys," he went on, "take Arthur where he'll get a shot; better go on to that open place yonder, that'll be exactly where I shall be driving down, and a buck always runs out there. Naylor, you put Allen up somewhere, better go the other side. The rest of you can voerlay (lie in wait) anywhere down in the bottom. Thorman, you know the place as well as I do, so can go where you like."

"Ik zal mit you ryd, ou kerel," (I shall ride with you, old fellow), said Isaac van Rooyen. "The younger ones want all the shots."

"All right, Oom Isaac," replied Jim. "Now then, look sharp and get to your places, and we'll begin."

All move off as directed, making a détour to get well round the tract to be driven, so as not to alarm the quarry; and at length, now cantering, now scrambling down some awfully steep and stony bit of ground, they reach a tolerably open space about one thousand yards from where they started. Here they leave the horses, and, descending the steep hillside, they separate. A cordon of shooters is thus formed across the valley, each man ensconcing himself in some snug ambush, where he lies in wait with piece cocked and ready, silent and alert, waiting for the quarry to break cover.

And now the whole ravine echoes with loud and discordant voices, the yelling of the native curs in full cry mingles with the deeper bay of the larger dogs; and the shouts of the Kafirs and the crashing of the underwood as they force their way through it, beating to right and to left with their sticks, draw nearer and nearer. Bang! The report of a gun in the thick of the scrub is answered by a terrific yell from the dogs, who rush to the spot. A buck has got up in front of Jim, who, with the Dutchman, is riding through the bush, hounding on his pack. The path here is fairly open, consequently the animal has not gone many yards before it falls in a heap, for an unerring eye is behind the barrels that covered it.

"Got him," says Jim, putting a fresh cartridge into his smoking barrel. "Bring him on, some of you fellows, I must go on driving;" and the Kafirs, beating the dogs off the fallen animal, perform in a trice the necessary preliminaries, while a loud exultant whoop, from one to the other of them, tells that blood has been drawn.

"Look out, Allen," says Naylor, in a quick warning whisper, "there's something coming out by you." They were about a dozen yards apart, Allen being of the two far the better placed, as his range commanded a large open space, a clear sixty yards beneath him, across which something was almost sure to run, while Naylor's only covered a higher bit of ground where a snap shot was all he could hope for; but like a good-natured fellow he had placed the other in the better position.

Allen starts, rigidly grips his gun in his excitement, and eyes the brake in front of him. The crashing of the underwood draws nearer and nearer, and a large bushbuck ram breaks cover. As it does so it catches sight of Naylor half hidden behind a tree, shears off at a tangent, and comes charging down nearly on the top of Allen, whose heart is in his mouth, and he wildly bangs away with both barrels point-blank, as the animal bounds past him within a yard, missing it clean. In a moment it will have reached covert, the dread open safely crossed, when—Crack! the buck rolls over and over with three or four loopers from Naylor's shot barrel fairly in his carcase. But "many a slip"—he recovers himself, leaps up and bounds away into the bush.

"He's hard hit," says his slayer, running to the spot; "it was a devil of a long shot, though. Look what a lot of blood he's dropped! We'll put the dogs on him directly. He's a gone coon, anyhow."

"I can't make out how I managed to miss him," is Allen's doleful remark. He is terribly mortified, poor fellow.

“You didn’t get a fair shot at him. I thought he was going clean over you. Never mind, you’ll get a better chance soon,” says good-natured Naylor. He thought the other rather a muff, but was too good a fellow to say so.

Bang! Bang!

Who is in luck’s way now? Bang, bang! again. A couple of bucks have dodged the ambushed shooters, and are making off along the high ground outside the line, making for the adjacent kloof, and Armitage and the younger Dutchman, who are nearest to them, are having rifle practice at long range. Four hundred yards—then the sights are altered to five. Bang! bang! the animals still keep on, though the last shot has thrown up a cloud of dust perilously near the hinder one. Then the six hundred yards is reached. Another minute and they will be over the hill and safe, at any rate for the present, when a ball from young Van Booyen’s rifle strikes the hindermost, which halts in mid course with a spring and a shudder, and rolls over, dead as a door-nail.

“Well done, Piet. By George, that was a good shot!” exclaimed the unsuccessful competitor.

“Ja, kerel,” replied the Dutchman, with a complacent grin, as he fished out his tobacco-pouch.

Claverton is standing where he and Jeffreys had been directed to. He has refused to avail himself of his privilege of guest and to take the best place, so they have split the difference by standing near each other. It is a fine open bit which promises two or three shots at least, for whatever comes out on that side of the kloof is bound to break cover there. At last Jeffreys gets tired of waiting; he is of opinion that everything has run across, and all the fun is on the other side, so he makes for his horse and announces his intention of waiting up above for Jim. Claverton however, remains. He is standing under a mimosa tree and is partly sheltered from view by a large stone, and has a beautiful clear space for at least eighty yards on either side of him.

Haow!—ow—ow! The shouts of the Kafirs come nearer and nearer, and the loud-mouthed chorus of the dogs in one incessant clamour which is never suffered to die, so quickly is it taken up by fresh throats, rings from the steep hillsides as the rout sweeps down the kloof. A gentle rustling approaches, and a graceful animal bounds into the open, and its ambushed foe can mark the glint of its soft eye and the shiny points of its straight horns. It is a young bushbuck ram, and as it crosses the open Claverton waits till it has just passed him and fires. It is scarcely twenty-five yards from him, yet it is unharmed, and disappears in the opposite cover with a rush and a bound.

Claverton shakes his head and whistles softly. “What a shot!” he says. Then he looks up and catches sight of Will Jeffreys watching him with a sneering smile upon his face, and the sight angers him for a moment.

“Look out—look out, Arthur,” sounds Jim’s voice close at hand. “There’s a buck coming out, right at you.”

He starts, throws open the breech of his gun, but the cartridge jams half-way, and will neither come out nor go in again, and at that moment another antelope breaks cover and crosses the open, if anything rather nearer than the first. It is a female and hornless, and its dappled skin gleams in the sun like gold as it bounds along. Immediately afterwards Jim emerges from the bush.

“How is it you didn’t shoot?” he asks, wonderingly, reining in his horse. “Why, the buck ran right over you.”

“Look at that!” showing the state of the defaulting piece, in which the cartridge was yet jammed.

“Oh! What a nuisance! And didn’t you get the first one?”

“No. Missed him clean. You see, Jim, you build all your bucks eighteen inches or so too short hereabouts.”

Jim laughed. Jeffreys, who had also come up, did likewise, but sneeringly. “Well, you’ve had the two best shots of the day,” said the former.

“My dear fellow, I’m aware of the fact. Spare my blushes,” answered Claverton, nonchalantly.

And now dogs and beaters straggle out of the bash, the latter vehemently discussing the ins and outs of the recent undertaking. Kafirs are inveterate chatterboxes, and when a number of them get together the amount of promiscuous “jaw” that goes on is well-nigh incredible—and the shooters assemble, preparatory to making a fresh start.

“How many came out?” says Jim. “Let’s see—two went up above, one of them we got—two passed Claverton—one I got inside, and one went out by Naylor—six. Not bad for the first draw. How is it Naylor didn’t get his?”

“He did,” said the voice of that maligned person at his elbow. “Just bring some of the dogs up—there’s a blood spoor as wide as a footpath. It’s a thundering big old ram, too.”

They put the dogs on the track and followed as quickly as they could, for the bush was thick, but before they had gone far an awful clamour and a frenzied scream told that the quarry had been found. The bushbuck is the largest of the smaller antelopes, the male standing higher than a large goat. When wounded and brought to bay he is apt to prove dangerous, as his long, nearly straight horns, from twelve to fifteen inches in length, can inflict an ugly enough wound. This one was striking right and left with his horns as they came up, but being weakened by loss of blood was soon pulled down, though not before he had scored the sides of a couple of his canine foes with a nasty gash.

"By Jove, that is a fine fellow," said Jim, as he surveyed the brown-grey hide with its white specks, and measured the long, pointed horns. "Who hit him first?"

"I didn't hit him at all," said Allen, somewhat ruefully.

"Never mind. We've got him, anyhow. Let's get on again."

On the ridge, overlooking the next large kloof which is to be driven, Hicks joins them. He isn't best pleased, isn't Hicks, for the simple reason that he has seen nothing to empty his piece at, which to his destructive mind is a very real grievance indeed. It is quite likely that, had he seen anything, the animal or animals in question would have passed him unscathed, albeit rather startled by a double detonation; but he has not had the chance, and meanwhile is dissatisfied, wherefore he makes up his mind to strike out a line for himself. Again the bush is alive with the sinuous red forms of the Kafirs, and the dogs thread through the underwood, giving tongue and rushing hither and thither as they strike upon a passing scent, and the shooters ride off to voerlay at their various posts, but Hicks quietly slips away from them all and makes for a point far below, where the kloof merges into a number of others. It is a narrow defile, overhung with krantzes on either side; forest trees twined with monkey creepers rise apace, and beneath their shadow, in the gloom of the thick scrub, a tiny stream trickles along. Whatever leaves the kloof will pass this way, and our friend knows that he is likely to get several shots in the ordinary course of things.

He conceals his horse, fastening him up among the bushes, then, with piece all ready, he takes up his position in a cunning ambush, and waits for whatever may appear. At present all is still as death, except where the whistle of a spreuw sounds from the overhanging cliffs; but the sunbeams are focussed into the hollow as through a burning-glass, and the distant shouting of the beaters, and an occasional shot, now and again breaks the silence. Nothing moves in grass or brake, and at last Hicks begins to wax impatient.

“Whew! how hot it is!” he exclaims, taking off his hat to wipe his forehead. “They’ll be a long while yet. I’ll have a drink so long.”

He finds out a place where the stream runs through a deep, limpid basin, and lying flat on the ground, takes a long and refreshing pull at the cool water. Then he rises, and something on the ground catches his eye.

“By Jove! Wild pig, I do believe;” and he examines the furrows and ruts in the grass, which has been rooted up by the tusks of something, and not long ago either. “Wild pig or baboons? No, it’s pig all right; there are two distinct spoors. If only I could get quietly among them.”

By this time he has worked his way through the bush about a dozen yards, following up the spoors, and finding fresh “sign” at every step. “If only I could get in among them,” he repeats, bending over the traces.

His wish is gratified. A fierce grunt right at his elbow makes him look up, startled by its unexpected proximity; and within six paces, half out of a bush, are the head and shoulders of a huge old boar, who, with every hair of his dirty red-brown hide erect and bristling, and his wicked little eyes scintillating, stands fearlessly confronting the intruder, while on each side of his hideous snout his great white tusks are champing and churning in an unpleasantly suggestive manner.

Hicks just has time to bring his gun to his shoulder; but the suddenness of the encounter has a trifle thrown him off his equilibrium, and as he discharges his piece, point-blank, instead of rolling the animal over, the ball—for he has fired with his rifled barrel—merely scores its flank, and with a scream of fury it comes at him. Dropping his gun he swings himself into the branches of a small tree under which he is standing, as the ferocious brute rushes by, snapping viciously at empty air, which within a fraction of a second ago was occupied by our friend’s legs.

Hicks draws a long breath of relief. “Sold again, old Baas,” he says, derisively, contemplating the infuriated boar, who is running backwards and forwards beneath the tree, the blood flowing freely from his wounded flank. “Only stay there a little longer, and I’ll use your tusks for a hat-peg yet.”

The brute shows no signs of leaving him, for it charges the tree in which he has found refuge, ripping off great pieces of bark in its fury; and from his vantage ground, Hicks can see other wild swine making off in the distance through the bushes. And now the voices of men and dogs are drawing near—very near—and the old tusker, wise in time,

throws up his head, sniffs the air a moment, and makes off into the cover with a disappointed grunt, while Hicks shouts lustily for assistance.

“Here—Tiger—Punch—Erdwacht—Sah! Sah—in, boys—Sah—Sah!” he calls out, descending from his prison, as several of the larger dogs come running up. Then as they strike the scent of the wild pig, they rush off on the spoor with full-throated chorus.

“What is it, Hicks?” sings out Jim, riding slowly through the bush.

“Pig—pig—He’s hit, too!” replies Hicks, wild with excitement, as he drags out his horse and springs into the saddle.

“Pig! Come along; we’ll have him,” says Jim, spurring up; and the two dash off in the wake of the dogs, whose clamour may be heard far ahead. The bush is thick, and here and there they meet with a check; but thorns and brambles are nothing when such quarry is in view, and Hicks hardly notices a gash left in his ear by a specially wicked wacht-am-bietje spike as he is half dragged through the thicket by his horse.

“He’s at bay, by Jove!” says Jim, as the clamour becomes stationary just in front of them. “Come on; here he is!” And in an open glade, in an angle formed by two bushes of bristling thorns, stood the boar, the dogs springing and snapping around him, but none of them quite liking to tackle him.

“Wait! I can get a good shot at him now,” said Jim, dismounting. “Better let me do it; it’s a ticklish shot, and you might hit one of the dogs. Besides, it’s all the same; he’s yours anyhow. You drew first blood.”

The creature is hard pressed now, and the foam lies on him in flakes as he chums with his tusks and snaps at his crowding, yelling foes. Crack! He sinks lifeless, the blood pouring from a hole in his forehead where Jim’s bullet has found its mark; and then the dogs throw themselves on the carcase, snarling and tearing in their excitement.

“Off, you brutes, off!” sings out Jim, coming up.

“Off! You’re plucky enough when the pig’s dead. Maarman—Spry—you schelms! What’s come over you?” And dispersing them with a kick or two, he and Hicks proceed to inspect the quarry.

“I’ll make something out of those tusks,” says Hicks. “No, I won’t, though; I’ll keep the whole skull.”

“It’s devilish lucky you had that tree handy,” says Jim. “He’d have cut you to ribbons.”

“Hullo! Where’s the pig?” asks Armitage, who, with the others, appear on the scene; and the Kafirs, standing round the defunct animal, fire off a volley of astonished “whaows,” and Thorman is heard to mutter something about “not having got a shot the whole damned morning, and that the damned Britishers seem to get all the fun.”

“By Jove! Those brutes of dogs have wallowed in all the water!” exclaimed Jim, in consternation, as the party arrived at their midday halting-place. “Faugh! It’s quite spoilt,” he added, surveying the fluid in question, which at no time specially inviting to any but a very thirsty man, was now positively nauseous, as the tired animals had rolled and splashed in it before any one had come up. “What will we do? Wait—there may be a little in the hole higher up; let’s go and see. Ah! it’s all right?” he called out, his exploration having proved satisfactory. “Jolwane, keep the dogs away from this, whatever you do.”

“That’s fortunate,” said Claverton. “On a day like this, brandy without water is pretty much the same as mustard without beef.”

They sat down to eat their lunch in true hunter fashion. Mighty sandwiches, hastily rolled in a bit of newspaper, strips of biltong (Note 1), and hunks of cheese, began to make their appearance from the capacious pockets of shooting-coats, while the contents of the spring were rendered more palatable by the addition of those of sundry flasks which passed from hand to hand.

It was a picturesque scene enough. The roughly-clad group lying and sitting about in various attitudes, their guns resting against a tree, and in rows upon the grass were the spoils, prominent among which was the huge carcase of the boar. Dogs lay panting in the shade, a few of them sitting on their haunches behind the hungry sportsmen, waiting for stray scraps which might be thrown them, and in the background squatted the red forms of the Kafirs, whose deep voices kept up a continual hum as they chattered among themselves and smoked their quaint, angular pipes, or devoured a mess of cold mealies, while their kerries and assegais lay on the ground beside them. Above, a great cliff towered in rugged masses; around stretched the evergreen bush.

“Have a sopje (dram), Oom Isaac?” said Naylor, holding up a big flask, and filling out a substantial measure, as the Dutchman replied in the affirmative.

“Ach! Det is alto lekker,” (that’s awfully good), said old Van Rooyen, drawing his sleeve across his mouth, and Naylor replenished the cup for the benefit of the youthful Piet.

“So you got a buck after all, Arthur?” said Jim.

“Yes, just now—up there.”

“He thinks the bucks here are all eighteen inches too short,” struck in Jeffreys, with half a sneer.

“That was only in the first kloof, Jeffreys. They’re longer about here, you see,” replied Claverton, filling his pipe. “Give us a light, Jack.”

“Here you are, old Baas. One good turn deserves another, so just throw that flask at me—thanks. Fancy Hicks treed by a pig—eh!”

“You shut up,” called out that worthy. “Didn’t I see you turn tail when that buck ran right over you?”

“No—you didn’t—so help me Moses. But Hicks, you ought not to have missed the pig at no yards.”

The other retorted, and so they went on, bandying chaff and fighting the morning’s battles over again, till at length it became time to resume operations. Horses were caught and saddled, and the Kafirs calling their curs, started off to beat the bush again—but not with the same spirit as before, for the day was piping hot and the dogs were beginning to flag—some would hardly be induced to enter the bush at all, but trotted along with lolling tongue, panting in the heat, and by the time they had swept down a couple of bits of bush it became obvious that most of the sport was already behind their backs.

“We’ll just drive this kloof through and then knock off,” said Jim. “Now then, here’s every one’s last chance. Allen, you haven’t got your buck yet.”

They resumed the drive, and the slumbrous calm of the quiet valley was broken now and again by a ringing shot, and the blue smoke curled up through the golden haze in the still, summer afternoon; and every living thing was routed out of its hitherto secure retreat before the advancing line of beaters, to run the gauntlet for its life, to fall before its ambushed foe, or haply to escape until some future field day.

Note 1. Biltong is meat which has been dried in the sun till it is quite hard. It is usually made of venison or beef.

Chapter Twelve.

A Wild Night.

The morning after the hunt was gloomy and dispiriting, for the weather had undergone a complete change daring the night, and now, instead of blue sky and a sunny landscape, a dense vaporous curtain hung over the kloofs, everywhere thick, heavy and impenetrable, while from the dull grey sky fell a continuous and soaking drizzle.

"I say, but it'll be poor fun riding back in this," exclaimed Hicks, contemplating the spongy ground splashed by the drippings from the iron roof. "We shall have to wait until it clears."

"Shall we? Speak for yourself, Mr Hicks. We are not made of sugar," said Ethel, mockingly. She was in high spirits this morning and brimming over with mischief.

"Now that is rational," put in a voice behind her. "Hadn't we better start at once?"

She turned. "Oh, so you are afraid of the elements, too. Then out of consideration for you two, we shall have to wait. Or shall we go on and leave them, Laura?"

"They deserve it," said Laura. Then dubiously: "It's a nuisance, though, because I know aunt will be expecting us back."

"Now look here," rejoined Claverton, quietly. "Your aunt specially authorised me to see that you did nothing rash. Getting wet through under circumstances totally unnecessary is an eminently rash proceeding. Wherefore I am constrained to lay an embargo on anything of the kind. More especially as by two o'clock there will not be a cloud in the sky."

"Won't there? Two to one there will. What shall it be?" cut in Armitage.

"Jack never bets. At least I heard him not many days ago striving hard to convince a Methodist parson of that fact," said Claverton, appealing to the company in general.

"Wanted to throw him off his guard and book the devil-dodger for a venture. Besides, it wasn't a parson, it was only that humbugging old Garthorpe, who goes about preaching, and—"

"I should have thought you had found out he wasn't such an ass as he looked, Jack," said Naylor, significantly.

Armitage looked rather foolish at this; and one or two who knew the joke tittered slightly.

“Hallo, what’s the jest? Trundle it up, Naylor, we don’t often catch Jack napping,” said Claverton.

“Oh, I’ll tell you myself,” exclaimed the victim of it, airily. “Well, you know, I was down at Thorman’s place one evening, and old Garthorpe came jogging up on that spindle-shanked nag of his. It was just about feeding time, so he off-saddled and got his head well into the trough in no time. Daring the evening we were talking a lot about the war scare, and the old chap stuck out that it was all bosh, in fact insinuated that we were a pack of funks. He wasn’t afraid of the Kafirs, he said, not one of them would hurt him, and so on. This rather put our backs up, you know; there was myself, and Johnson, and Gough, and a couple of Dutchmen, so we hit upon a little scheme to give the old fellow a bit of a funk when he left. It was as dark as pitch—”

“‘And smelt of cheese,’” put in Claverton. “Why not do justice to the quotation?”

“Confound it, if you can spin the yarn better than I can, do so, by all means,” retorted Armitage, in mock dudgeon.

“He wants to get out of it,” said Ethel. “It won’t do, though, we insist upon hearing it.”

“Well, then, as I was saying, when that fellow interrupted me, it was as dark as pitch, but the moon would soon be up. I and Johnson laid our heads together, and arranged that we two and Gough should blacken our faces and go and waylay old Garthorpe in the drift about half a mile from the house. Well, we slipped out one by one and got ourselves up in style, red blankets and all, looked as thorough-paced cut-throats as ever you clapped eyes on—”

“Can quite believe it,” murmured the former interrupter.

“There he is again,” exclaimed Armitage, wrathfully. “Well, we got down into the drift and soon we heard the horse’s feet, and old Garthorpe came mooning along, concocting some sermon or other for the next day, which was Sunday. The moon had just risen, but was not bright enough to betray our identity. We jumped out of the bush. Johnson collared the bridle, and the other two of us drew up in line across the path. What does the old chap do, but quick as lightning pull out a revolver and poke it into Johnson’s face. He dropped the bridle like a hot potato and skipped into the bush, and then old Garthorpe levels it dead at us. We looked sharp to follow Johnson’s example, and then

the old chap rode quietly on, chuckling to himself. Gough swears he heard him say 'somethinged scoundrels,' but that may have been part of the sermon he was concocting. Anyhow, he turned the tables on us most completely."

"Probably the revolver wasn't loaded," suggested Claverton.

"Revolver! Sorra a bit. It was a pipe-case. We three skedaddled for our lives before a preaching old humbug at the fag-end of an old pipe-case."

A roar went up from his auditors at the picture.

"Fact," repeated Armitage. "Tell you what, though; that thing looked plaguey like a pistol in the moonlight. Besides, it's just the sort of thing a fellow would bring out, you know, under the circumstances. Old Garthorpe went bragging about it all over the shop, and very soon the joke got wind. But this is all very well. How about our bet, Claverton?"

"Oh, all right, I'll take you. Two to one in half-crowns there won't be a cloud in the sky by two o'clock."

"Done," said Armitage. "Any one else game?"

But no one was. "We are not going to encourage anything so disreputable as that betting mania of yours," said Ethel.

"Well, good people," called out Jim's jovial tones, as he swung himself out of his dripping mackintosh, and stamped and scraped to rid his boots of the mud before entering, "how about a start this morning? Not much chance of it, is there, unless you are ready to swim for it."

"Well, we must," said Naylor; "I must be home to-day. I'm expecting Smith round my way about those slaughter-oxen this afternoon, and if I'm not there, away goes a good bargain."

"Besides, we shall be all right in the trap," said his wife. "Laura, why not come with us, if you are in a hurry to get back? We could manage to make room for you and Ethel, and your horses could be led."

"Thanks; but I don't think we ought to desert our escort in that way," she answered. The plan suggested in no wise fell in with her views—nor, we may add, with those of Ethel.

“It’ll be outrageously shabby of you if you do, and in fact we shan’t allow it,” said Claverton.

“The damned Britishers are made of salt—afraid of a little rain,” growled Thorman, in a low tone, at the other side of the room.

Jeffreys, to whom the remark was addressed, and who had reasons of his own for abhorring the “imported” element, acquiesced in the sneer, and just then they were summoned to breakfast. It cleared in the afternoon with startling suddenness, and as the equestrians started for home, the blue sky was without a cloud.

“This is lovely,” exclaimed Ethel, as they cantered along; “but,”—and the bright laughing face clouded—“isn’t it a nuisance? Will Jeffreys is going back with us.”

“What, all the way?” said Claverton. “I thought we were going to choke him off at Van Rooyen’s, where we picked him up.”

“No such luck. He’s going back to Seringa Vale; at least, so Mr Armitage says.”

“Oh, that may be only Jack’s chaff; but—”

He checked himself as something seemed to strike him. “Bosh!” he thought, “Jack only sees that she rather hates the bullet-headed fool, and is trying to take a rise out of her.” Then aloud: “That fellow Jack is a confounded nuisance at times, and yet on the whole I think he’s an acquisition.”

“Oh, yes; he makes one laugh so often, which is a great thing. Just look at him now, for instance.”

Both turned to watch the interesting object of their discussion, who was evidently about to keep up his reputation—for Allen, whose decrepit steed had gone dead lame, and was incapable of carrying him, had received the loan of the volatile Waschbank, which sprightly quadruped was evidently rather more than a handful to him. Armitage perceiving this, delighted to get behind and by dint of sundry clicking noises, softly articulated, to induce the already excited animal to plunge and shake his head frantically, and make violent attempts at bolting, to the dire discomfiture of the rider, who clutched the bridle spasmodically with both hands, holding on, as it were, “by the skin of his teeth.”

“It’s rather a shame,” mused Claverton, as they contemplated the performance. “Why can’t he let the poor devil alone, even for half an hour? Allen isn’t a bad fellow, although he’s an ass in some things.”

“Look out, Allen. Hold on, pay out your rein, or, by George, he’ll have you off!” Armitage was saying, while Jeffreys rode behind sardonically enjoying the other’s discomfiture. And the warning came none too soon, for Waschbank, finding the increased pressure of the rather sharp curb, which his rider was bearing on more and more heavily, defied his frantic attempts at a bolt, sought to vary the entertainment by suddenly rearing. Then as Allen, in a panic, quickly slackened the reins, grasping at the same time a bit of the mane, away went Waschbank with a rush and a snort, his rider still clinging on like grim Death. But this was not to last long, for one of the said rider’s long spurs digging violently into his flank, the animal put down his head, and springing into the air, all four feet at once, promptly shot the hapless Allen into space and a thorn-bush which grew handy. Then after vainly endeavouring in the course of half-a-dozen more “bucks” to rid himself of his saddle, the amiable brute gave a loud snort and started for home at a hand gallop.

“Hallo, Allen!” cried Claverton, dismounting to haul him out of the bush. “Jump up, old man. Not hurt, are you? That’s it?” as the other staggered to his feet groaning and wincing; as well he might, for his “continuations” were stuck as full of thorns as a well-stocked pincushion is of pins. “Better thorns than broken bones, you know. What’s to be done? At the rate that brute’s going he’ll be within a hundred yards of Buffel’s Kloof by now, or we might have exchanged. Sticks is as quiet as a village scold on board the ducking-stool.”

“Plenty more thorn-bushes,” sneered Jeffreys, in a load aside. “But it’s a safe enough offer now that Waschbank’s gone home.”

“I say,” began Jack, in mock concern, “what are we to do? Toss up who shall pursue the absconding Waschbank with a pinch of salt, eh?”

“Humbugging apart, though,” said Claverton, “we are only about a mile from Van Rooyen’s; the best thing for Allen to do will be to walk on there, and the Dutchman will be able to rig him out with some sort of a mount to take him home.”

This was arranged, and they rode on.

“I think Jack carries his jokes too far sometimes,” remarked Claverton. “He’ll find his level some day.”

They soon arrived at Van Rooyen's, and the Dutchman, having enjoyed a hearty laugh over poor Allen's mishap, sent for the steadiest old roadster in his paddock and mounted the dethroned hero thereon; and after resting an hour, which somehow had nearly dragged itself out to two, the party were in the saddle again, bound for their respective homes. But it is the Seringa Vale quartette—for the obnoxious Jeffreys had, after all, left them at Van Rooyen's—whom we shall now follow. It was late when they left Buffel's Kloof, and now, as they rode over the rising ground which shut the Dutchman's farmstead from sight behind, the very short gloaming of a South African day was already drawing in.

"I don't know how it is; as a rule I enjoy a ride at night," said Ethel, "but this evening I can't help wishing we were safe at home, I feel quite low and nervous;" and she shivered.

"I know how it is. You've caught cold," replied her companion. "It's a particularly warm evening, and you're shivering as if it were mid-winter. Here—wait a bit—and put this on."

In a trice he had unstrapped an ample waterproof cloak from his saddle, and, dismounting, wrapped it twice round her, tightly and securely, yet so as not to impede the management of the reins.

"Thanks. No, I wasn't cold—it's very absurd—but I feel as if something dreadful was going to happen. A kind of presentiment."

"Nonsense, child. You have been catching cold; but we shall both be catching it hot soon for being so outrageously late. Come along, here's a nice level bit, and those two are a good mile ahead."

"Yes, it's too absurd of me," she said, as they cantered on; "but—I felt a drop of rain."

They looked up. Sure enough the sky had suddenly clouded over, and several large raindrops splashed down upon the road.

"We are in for a shower, I'm afraid," said Claverton. "Nothing for it but leg-bail. However, that ancient garment will keep you as dry as a chip, unless it has suddenly performed the feat in physiology which Holy Writ associates with the Ethiopian."

They rode on with heads bent forward, for a fierce gust drove the rain, which had now increased to a deluging shower, right into their faces.

“Look at that!” exclaimed Ethel, in a terrified voice, as a vivid flash played around them, causing the horses to start and swerve. It was followed by a deep roll of thunder—long, loud, and startlingly near.

“Who’d have thought it?” said her companion. “It may be just a passing flash or so, and we shall ride through it in a minute.” He spoke cheerfully; nevertheless, there was anxiety in the quick, half-furtive glance which he cast upwards and around.

“Do you think so? It may not be much, after all; and I’m an awful coward,” she answered, trying to laugh; but her voice shook with apprehension, and her face was pale in the vivid gleam which fell around them, and faded, leaving the gathering gloom almost pitchy from contrast. “Do let’s go back,” she added.

“Too late. It would take almost as long to get back to Van Rooyen’s, as to reach home. Besides, we should get into the thick of it—it’s all behind us.”

They rode on. The path lay along a high ridge, and the surrounding veldt looked indescribably desolate as a furious blast tore and howled over the wild waste, driving the rain into their eyes. But suddenly wind and rain alike ceased; and lo! a great stream of jagged fire shot down upon the road in front, accompanied by a terrific crash—a crash as though the earth had yawned asunder and they were floating in a sea of flame. The horses, affrighted by the appalling sight and the strong smell of burning which was plainly perceptible, snorted and plunged, and then stood still, trembling in every limb.

“We had better leave the road,” said Claverton. “We shall be safe enough down in the kloof; though here it is a trifle nasty.”

“Shall I dismount?” she asked.

“No; sit still and follow me. Can you steer your horse all right, or would you rather I led him?”

“Oh, no; I can manage.”

They went down and down, deeper and deeper through the long, wet grass and dripping bushes; and now and again a flash would light up the far depths of the great, dark kloof with a blue gleam, and the thunder roared and reverberated among the rocks and krantzes beyond. Before they had gone far, Claverton dismounted and kept a firm hand on his companion’s bridle, for the horse slipped and stumbled over the wet stones on the steep side of the kloof. Ethel did not speak, but her lips would convulsively tighten with fear as each vivid lightning-flash played around them, with its terrific accompaniment.

She was horribly afraid of thunderstorms, even when safe at home, but to be benighted thus in the open veldt, in the midst of such a one as this, was simply appalling.

“At any rate we are safe enough here, though it is infamously wet,” said her escort, reassuringly; “and—by George, we are in luck’s way—there’s a house!”

A roof became apparent at the bottom of the ravine, and in a few minutes they had reached it. But disappointment was in store, for the welcome haven of refuge turned out to be an old disused shanty, formerly run up for the accommodation of some road party, or possibly had served as an out-station for those in charge of grazing stock. Nevertheless, though a tumble-down and sorry-looking tenement, yet it would afford a tolerably substantial shelter from the drenching fury of the storm. Claverton lifted his companion from her saddle, and pushing open the mouldering door, which creaked with an unearthly noise on its rusty hinges, they stood inside.

“Not exactly the marble halls of the poet’s dream—deuced cold they must have been at times—but it’s wet outside and dry in here, which makes all the difference,” he remarked, as he struck a match and surveyed the interior of the sorry apartment. The dilapidated thatch hung in cobwebbed festoons, throwing out ghostly, waving shadows in the flickering light; and a cockroach or two, alarmed by this sudden intrusion, scurried along the worm-eaten beams. “Wait half a second,” he went on, “while I just go and hitch up the horses, and then we’ll proceed to make ourselves as comfortable as circumstances will allow.”

“Oh, Arthur, don’t leave me alone, even for a moment! I am so frightened!” she exclaimed, clinging to his arm. The name slipped out in her terror, but she was quite unhinged, and noticed it not.

“Frightened? You foolish child,” he answered, reassuringly; “there’s nothing to be afraid of now—Look. We can afford to laugh at the storm here, and will be as snug as anything directly.”

“But it’s so dark, and—”

“Dark. Well, yes; unfortunately the last tenant forgot to leave any candles for our benefit, which was uncivil of him, to say the least of it. However, ‘the Heaven above’ is kindly doing its best to supply the deficiency, and we’ll meet it half-way by starting a famous blaze.”

So saying, he gathered together some old bits of board which lay about, and, chipping them into small fragments, built up a fire well in the middle of the room—for the

fireplace was choked up with dust and fallen bricks—and, lighting it, the flames darted up, crackling and sputtering, and diffusing a genial and revivifying warmth.

"There. The smoke will go out through the thatch, and at any rate it won't be worse than in a Kafir hut. You're not very wet, are you? No, I thought my old poncho hadn't lost its cunning. And now you won't be afraid to stay by yourself a minute while I look after the horses. It's dark as pitch outside, and the brutes will be wandering Heaven knows where if I don't make them fast at once."

He went out, and leading the horses round to the back of the house proceeded to secure them in a sheltered place. While thus engaged a low scream, emanating from the room he had just quitted, fell on his ear.

Left alone, Ethel drew the cloak tighter round her, and crouched over the bright, dancing flames; but in spite of their cheery glow she shivered. How long would it be before he came back? He had hardly been gone a minute, and it seemed an age. Then a flash and a loud thunderpeal made her start, and her face blanched, and she hid it in the ample cloak, and cowered down in mortal dread. How long would he be? Supposing the horses had strayed, and he had gone after them, and had lost his way, and should be unable to find the hut again. Oh, horror of horrors! if she were to be left alone there all night, alone, in the silence of that deserted place—a silence only broken by an occasional and mysterious rustle or creaking—and at the very thought of it her brain reeled and sickened, and the muffled patter of the rain upon the thatch sounded like the dull roar of many waters, and—Oh, Heavens! what was that?

For a growl, as of some wild beast, fell upon her terrified ears. She dared not raise her head, and again that grisly sound arose—long, low, and menacing.

Opposite to where she sat was a doorway leading into another compartment of the hovel. This was nearly concealed when the door by which they had entered stood open, being behind it; but now that the entrance was shut the gap yawned, dark and shadowy. And as Ethel glanced towards it, her gaze fell upon two glaring eyes in the blackness beyond. Was she dreaming? No, there they were—two scintillating green stars—their awful gaze fixed upon her with a terrible stare. The blood curdled in her veins; she tried to scream, but her tongue refused to fulfil its office; her limbs shook, and had she been standing she would have fallen to the earth prone as a log. And still that piercing, baleful stare shone through the blackness—and—God!—was she going mad? Her heart beat as if it would burst; every second was a lifetime; every pulsation of her throbbing temples seemed like the blow of a sledge-hammer, and her glance was fixed upon those terrible orbs with basilisk fascination. Then the sound of Claverton's voice outside

apostrophising the horses, broke the spell, and she uttered the scream of helpless terror which caught his attention.

Quickly, yet quietly, the door was opened, and he stood beside her.

“What is it?” he asked, in the calmest of tones.

“Look!” was all she could reply; but there was no necessity for following the direction of her dilated eyes, for at that moment the dreaded sound came through the doorway louder than ever.

“Oh!—That all?” he said. “Now, look here, child, don’t be in the very least afraid, there’s nothing to be afraid of, and we’ll soon put an extinguisher on that. It’s only some half-starved Kafir mongrel that’s got in.” His ear detected fear rather than rage in the snarl which to her overwrought senses had sounded so dread and menacing. He stretched out his hand towards the gun, which he had placed against the wall on entering. “Now, sit still, and don’t be afraid,” he reiterated; but before he could bring it to bear, there was a loud yell and a rush; something large and heavy sprang into the room, cannoning against his legs, and nearly overturning him, then sped out through the half-open door into the rain and the darkness, while poor Ethel, who had had as much fright as she could stand, fell backward in a dead faint.

Quickly he held his handkerchief beneath the dripping thatch before the door, and in a moment it was soaked through and through. Then, supporting her head, he placed the cold wet bandage upon her temples, and drawing forth his pocket-flask, which was about a third full of brandy and water in equal proportions, he poured a little of the potent mixture between her lips. A deep sigh of returning consciousness, the long lashes unfolded, and the blue eyes looked wonderingly into his. Then, with a start, she made as if she would rise, but he restrained her.

“Don’t be in a hurry,” he said. “Take it easy for a little while longer—there’s lots of time.”

She shivered. “Oh, I’ve had an awful fright! What was it?” she said, with a shudder.

“Nothing. Nothing whatever, except that your too-lively imagination ran riot with you. Anyhow, it’s all right now, so what you’ve got to do is just to keep perfectly still until I tell you to move. By-and-by I’m going to read you a lecture.”

“But you won’t leave me alone again,” she entreated.

“No, not as long as you do what I tell you!”

She was silent, for she felt very weak and helpless after her fright.

“Take some more of this,” he said.

“No, thanks.”

“But you must.”

She obeyed him passively. Then revived by the invigorating spirit, she sat up.

Her companion looked at her.

“Ethel,” he said, “you’re an awful little coward. You’re worse than any town-bred English girl, getting into such a fright about nothing—absolutely nothing—upon my word you are. I shouldn’t have thought it of you, you know, I shouldn’t, really.”

He spoke in a serio-jesting tone of expostulation, not actually meaning what he said, or that she had had no real cause for alarm. But he did not want her mind to revert too much to what had happened; wherefore he treated the occurrence as a mere hallucination. The line he adopted had the desired effect, for a gleam of her old self shot from the blue eyes as she answered:

“You had no business to leave me all alone, then. And, do go and see that there’s nothing in that other room.”

“All right,” and he got up to comply; but she followed him.

“I can’t remain here by myself,” she pleaded.

“Can’t you? Well, but you see, you can’t go with me. So we’ll solve the difficulty by fastening up both doors, and we’ll make ourselves comfortable here till that jolly old sun sneaks up again;” and in a moment he had secured the doors, and was beside her again.

“But—I am so hungry,” she laughed.

“H’m, that’s unfortunate, because there’s nothing to eat unless we fall to on the stirrup-leathers. Wait a bit, though. By Jove!” He fumbled in one of the numerous pockets of his shooting-coat, and produced a packet done up in whitey-brown paper, which being unfolded, disclosed a large and somewhat demoralised sandwich, considerably the worse for wear. “Not a very inviting morsel,” he remarked, surveying the battered

comestible. “Yet it may do at a pinch to keep the wolf from the door. Though,”—he added to himself—“that amiable quadruped is likely to give the door a deuced wide berth considering the mortal funk he was in when he shot through it just now.”

The girl laughed, quite in her old joyous, light-hearted way. “I should think so,” she cried. “We’ll go halves.”

“We’ll do nothing of the sort,” said her companion. “I’ll give you ten minutes, and if there’s a crumb left of that antique sandwich by then I’ll—well, I’ll go out again and see how the horses are getting on.”

“But—”

“No ‘buts.’ Really I’ll go.”

This awful threat was effective, and being ravenously hungry, Ethel speedily made short work of the sandwich, protesting to the last against the other’s decision. But he was firm.

“Two people under one umbrella, both get wet,” he observed, sententiously. “What will feed one will starve two. I’m going to have a pipe instead. Lucky that greedy beggar Jack didn’t know I had any more provender yesterday, or he would inevitably have cadged it. I had forgotten it myself till this moment.”

“I wonder what has become of the others,” said Ethel.

“Safe at home, long ago. They’ll think we went back to Van Rooyen’s,” he replied.

“But we might, you know; the storm seems to be over now.”

“Not to be dreamt of,” answered he, decisively. “It’s pitch dark, and raining in a way that would set the patriarch Noah spinning yarns about old times if he were with us. We should be wandering about the veldt all night, instead of being snug by a good fire.”

“I suppose so,” acquiesced the girl, “and, do you know, I’m getting so sleepy.”

“Glad to hear it,” was the reply; and placing one of the saddles near the fire, Claverton arranged a corner of his ample cloak over it so as to form a pillow. “Lie down here,” he said, “you can imagine yourself in a railway carriage or anywhere else that’s infamously uncomfortable;” and as she obeyed he wrapped the cloak well round her, and returned to his former place.

Presently she opened her eyes—“Arthur.”

“Well?”

“Promise you won’t leave me—or I shan’t be able to sleep a wink.”

“Why, I thought you were fairly off. It’s twelve o’clock.”

“No—I’m not—Promise!”

“All right—I won’t budge.”

“Thanks;” and in a few moments her regular breathing told that she had forgotten her troubles in sleep.

Claverton piled some more wood on to the fire and drew in closer, shivering slightly, the fact being that he was nearly wet through—having given up his cloak as we have seen. Then he proceeded to fill his pipe.

“Poor little thing,” he mused, contemplating the slumbering form of his companion in adversity. “What a fright she was in—and small blame to her. Wonder what the beast could have been,” and getting up, he went and examined the soft ground by the door to see if it had left any spoor. “Yes—I thought so: a wolf, and a damned big wolf, too.” (Note 1.)

He returned to his seat by the fire and sat dreamily smoking. “What a pretty picture she makes,” he thought; and in good truth she did, as the long lashes lay in a dark semicircle on the rounded cheek, while the full red lips were parted ever so lightly, and the firelight danced and flickered with a ruddy glow on the golden head of the sleeper.

“Very good fun now, no doubt, that is if it were not so infernally cold,” he went on, “but the situation may begin to look awkward in the morning, when we are besieged by the kind inquiries of friends. However, the gentle sex knows devilish well how to take care of itself, that’s one comfort. ‘Self-preservation is the first law of woman,’ I truly believe to have been the original rendering of the proverb—the reason of its alteration is but too obvious. But assuredly the child would have been dead, or deuced near it, by morning if we hadn’t found this place, whereas now, in half-a-dozen hours’ time she’ll wake up fresh as paint, and probably abuse me like the prince of pickpockets, and swear it would have been much better to have slept out in the veldt all night. That’s the way of them.”

A flash of lighting lit up the room with a fitful gleam, and a loud roll of thunder shook the old house to its very foundations. The storm, as frequently happens in those regions, had been travelling in a kind of circle, and was now returning in all its former fury.

"Will it wake her? She has had enough scare for one night," he thought, uneasily glancing towards her. But no; thoroughly wearied out, Ethel never moved as the rickety casements rattled to the fierce gusts which howled round the building, and Claverton felt relieved. Presently he got up and went to the window. All was pitch dark outside, but every now and then the sky would be ablaze with a sudden flash—blue, plum-coloured, and gold, in its vivid incandescence—the hill tops stood out as if cut in steel against the misty background, while beneath yawned the intersecting rifts of black, chasm-like kloofs, every leaf and twig wet and shining, as clearly definable as at noonday. A panorama of weirdness and desolation. Then pitchy blackness and the long heavy roll of the storm king's artillery. Claverton resumed his seat, and the thunder crashed and roared outside, the lightning played in vivid gleams, and the rain fell in torrents with a noise like the rush of many waters; but within, silence, only broken by the soft, regular breathing of the sleeper, and the plash of a big drop on the floor, for the tattered thatch was not so watertight as might be wished. And the night wore on. The fire burnt low, leaving the angles of the ghostly old room in shadowy darkness, while now and again a scratching noise might be heard as some creeping thing made its way through the thatch or along the beams. The storm lulled, and then passed, and, save for the murmur of falling rain, perfect silence prevailed outside, and still the chilled watcher sat there, upright and motionless. Then he fell into a doze. The dismal bark of a jackal was now and again borne from the lonely bush; but not a sound escaped him as he sat there, till at last the first faint shiver of dawn thrilled upon the hushened air; a red glow in the east, then a blood-coloured streak on the few light clouds which,—but for the soaked earth, were the sole traces of a night of fierce tempestuousness.

Claverton rose and went out softly, so as not to arouse his companion, to where he had tied up the horses. Those long-suffering animals pricked up their ears and whinnied at his approach, and, except that one of them had got its leg over the reim, were just as they had been left the night before. Then he went back to awaken Ethel. A smile was upon her lips, and as he stood over her a gleam of sunlight shot in at the open door and played upon the beautiful face. He lingered a few moments, for he could hardly bring himself to arouse her; but time was flying, the sun was up, and they must be going. So he said, quietly but distinctly: "Time to be off, Ethel."

The girl started slightly, opened her eyes, then started again in bewilderment. He watched her with an amused expression.

“Where am I?” she exclaimed, sitting upright and looking round. “Oh, I remember. I thought it was all a dream.”

“Well, we must be getting home. I’m just going to take the horses down into the kloof and give them a drink, and then we’ll make tracks.”

He went out, and Ethel got up and looked around. “What a selfish little wretch I am!” she thought, as her eyes rested on the relics of the night’s doings, the dying embers of the fire, beside which lay the empty pocket-flask, and the bit of paper and string whence the opportune sandwich had been extracted, and then on the cloak which she had just thrown off. “I took everything from him, and left him to sit there all night, cold and wet and hungry. I wish it had to come all over again, that I might sit out in the rain and the thunder and lightning all night. That’s what I’d do, I swear I would,” she ended, vehemently.

A trampling of hoofs outside showed that the object of her meditations was returning.

“Now then, I’ll just put the saddles on and we shall get home in nice time for breakfast,” he said; “but, first of all, we’ll see how our friend of last night got in.”

“What, did that actually happen? I thought I dreamt it.”

Claverton laughed. “I intended you should,” he said. “It would never have done for you to have thought about it all night long; but it was a fact, nevertheless. Come and look here.”

He pointed out three great footmarks just inside the doorway, left by the terrified animal as it rushed out; then bursting open the door of the other room, they went in.

“There’s no outlet,” he said, looking around. “Stay—yes, here’s a hole behind the fireplace; but it could never have got in there. No; here’s the key to the mystery,” as they came upon the mangled carcase of a half-grown kid. “This little brute must have got in somehow, and the wolf, attracted by its yelling, charged through that door,” showing one which opened into the room from without; “then it must have banged to and caught him in a trap. Pity I wasn’t able to shoot the scoundrel!”

Ethel shuddered at the recollection. “Let’s start,” she said, turning towards the door.

He put her into her saddle and they left their opportunely-found shelter. The sun was now up, and, as they ascended the side of the kloof, the whole landscape sparkled and glowed beneath the scorching beams, every leaf and blade of grass studded with

diamonds; and the birds carolled forth gaily in the glad morning air, and doves shook out their soft plumage, and cooed to each other on the wet sprays, and it was difficult to realise such a culmination to a night of storm and terror. Just before they reached the road a strange fancy moved Claverton to turn and look back upon their late haven of refuge, and then a clump of bush hid it from view. He little thought when and under what circumstances he should see it again.

“What was the joke just now, when I woke you up?” he asked, as they rode along.

“Joke? Why—when?” she exclaimed, wonderingly.

“Oh, only that you were having a downright good laugh all to yourself. I thought it a pity to disturb you, so had the grace to give you a few minutes longer, in reward for which I claim to know what it was about.”

She looked at him curiously for a moment, and a faint flush suffused her cheek; then she broke into a ringing laugh. “I don’t believe I was laughing at all,” she said; “and, if I was, I intend to keep the fun all to myself this time. But what will uncle and aunt say when we get home?”

“Say? Oh, that the very best thing we could do was to have—gone back to Van Rooyen’s—got under cover like sensible people,” answered he, in a cool, matter-of-fact tone.

Ethel was silent for a few moments. She was not quite easy in her mind. “I was in a great hurry to get home last night, but now it doesn’t seem quite so delightful,” she thought, with a sort of strange bitterness; and she wondered how in the world she could ever have allowed herself to be so frightened. But meanwhile there was Seringa Vale, and the adventure, or misadventure, was at an end.

Greatly to Ethel’s relief, neither anxiety nor surprise were manifested on their return.

“Hullo!” sang out Hicks. “You were fortunate in being so far behind. We thought of going back, too; but it seemed no use, so we rode on as hard as we could, and got here in the thick of the storm, wet through.”

“Ethel doesn’t like Dutch houses, but she had to sleep in a worse one than Van Rooyen’s once,” said Mrs Brathwaite. “There were only two rooms, and five of us had to turn into one, while all the men took possession of the other. But it was such a place! We couldn’t sleep all night.”

“I suppose not,” said Claverton. If they were at cross purposes, it was not his business to go out of his way to enlighten them, especially as, in this instance, cross purposes were best.

And Ethel evidently thought so too.

Note 1. The large striped hyaena is called “wolf” in South Afrioa, just as the panther is always referred to as “tiger.” Both terms are, of course, zoologically erroneous.

Chapter Thirteen.

"Like Thunderbolt from a clear sky."

"Drive on, Piet, Mopela! Sharp's the word; don't give them time to think. Look alive, now!"

The speaker is Mr Brathwaite; the scene the wash-pool. A long line of fleecy backs is moving over the veldt, propelled by the shouts of three or four Kafirs, whose naked bodies glisten in the sun as they advance swiftly behind the flock, brandishing their red blankets and whistling shrilly. For it may be that the leaders of that sturdy mass of fat wethers, over a thousand in number, may take a sudden freak into their woolly heads, and refuse to go any further when once within that cul de sac of thorn-fence gradually narrowing down to an outlet, and that outlet the water—which will mean that each particular animal must be thrown in separately, not once, but four or five times. Therefore they must be kept on the move and run down as quickly as possible. Once they begin jumping all will follow, but should the foremost happen to jib, then the morning's work will be a hard one indeed.

A pleasant spot is this; bush and open veldt about in equal proportion. Yonder, across the river, rises a ridge of high ground whose slopes are well wooded, and over the wash-pool, which consists of a long, smooth reach, the finks are flitting about their pendulous, swaying nests, and twittering in the sunshine; while that shadowy krantz overhanging the stream further down echoes back the long-drawn piping of spreuws and the "coo" of a solitary dove.

Mr Brathwaite and his two lieutenants are evidently got up for business—rough shirts and trousers and broad-brimmed hats, the last a very necessary safeguard, for the morning, though still young, is unconscionably warm.

"Don't think these will give us any trouble, they always take to the water like ducks. It's the next lot, the ewes, that are brutes to funk; and once on that tack the devil himself won't make them jump. Bles, you schelm!" he exclaims, with a crack of his whip to hasten the decision of the voerbok, who is slackening pace dubiously at the entrance to the cul de sac. The old goat gives a start and resumes his course, trotting down towards the water; the sheep stream after him, and before he has time to think better of it, even if so disposed, his woolly followers press so closely upon him that there is no help for it; he springs from the rock into the water, about two feet and a half beneath, and the whole flock hastens to follow by threes and fours, and swimming across emerges dripping on the other side. Indeed, so fast do they press forward that it becomes

necessary for some one to stand at the water's edge and check them, lest they should injure themselves or their neighbours by jumping upon each other's backs.

"That's how I like to see them jump. Fine sheep like that ought never to want throwing in," says the old farmer, watching his well-bred flock with some pride.

On they come, their drivers keeping them well at it, and in a short time the last jumps in. The whole lot are through and scattering slowly over the veldt on the other side, the steam arising in clouds from their dripping fleeces.

"Bring them on again," calls out Mr Brathwaite, after a little time has been given them to rest and get warm again. The animals are driven through at a shallow place lower down the river, and brought round to the jumping place again. Then they are headed once more for the water, going through this time even better than the first.

"Hallo!" cries Hicks, running down to the edge and scrutinising the surface all alive with panting heads and spongy fleeces. "One's down. Yes, there it is," pointing to four kicking legs above the surface, but which immediately disappear. "In with you, Mopela—Piet—look sharp!" The first addressed pretends not to hear, but Piet, throwing aside his kaross, takes a header, and as he reappears he just catches sight of the drowning animal. In a twinkling he has seized it, and holding its head above water, he strikes out for the bank, dragging his cumbersome and struggling burthen. The animal had been suddenly taken with a fit and gone under—an occurrence which now and then happens, and but for Hicks' promptitude would have been drowned. As it was, it lay upon the ground, and after some gasping staggered to its legs, tottered a little way, then lay down again, and finally picked itself up and began nibbling a little grass, and in a few minutes had quite recovered.

The operation is repeated in precisely the same way as at first, and after the flock had been through four times, it wore a very different appearance to what it had done before; every fleece looking almost snowy white by contrast as the animals are slowly driven off to their ordinary pasturage, nibbling as they go.

"Piet, go and tell Umgiswe to bring on his lot," says Mr Brathwaite. "There are under five hundred, and it won't take us very long," he adds, for the benefit of his lieutenants, "that is if they jump well. 'Tisn't twelve o'clock yet, so there'll be lots of time for them to dry."

Twenty minutes' rest, and then a sound of approaching bleating told that the other flock was at hand.

Then arises a deafening and hideous din as the sheep are driven into the cul de sac. Yelling, and shouting, and whistling, white and black alike contributing towards the general row, waving karosses, cracking whips, and beating the ground with branches. The voerbok spasmodically rushes on ahead, plunges into the water and swims through; but the sheep, suddenly deserted by their leader, stop half-way down the passage, and, in spite of the pressure from behind, and the earsplitting shindy, steadfastly refuse to budge.

"We've bungled it somehow," says the old farmer, in a cool, matter-of-fact tone. "No use bothering them any more just now. Bring round the goat, and we'll try again."

Two of the Kafirs start off on that intent, but it takes some time to "collect" the truant, who runs hither and thither, bleating idiotically. At last he is brought back to his post of honour at the head of the flock; the driving and the row recommences, and the goat leaps into the water manfully; but he is leading a forlorn hope, indeed, for not one of the sheep will follow him—devil a sheep—though they are on the brink of the water. There they stick, firmly and stubbornly.

"Come on, Claverton, we must pitch some of them in," cries Hicks, and the two promptly shove their way through the closely-wedged flock, which stands packed like sardines, wheezing and panting in the heat. In a twinkling they have seized half-a-dozen of the obstinate brutes and shied them in; but the rest show no signs of following, and so they go on, till at last they pause, breathless and bathed in perspiration, for two of the Kafirs to take their places; and finally, by relays of labour, the whole flock is through.

"Whew! but that's warm work," exclaims Claverton, as, after a short rest, the word is given to bring them on again. "Perhaps they'll jump this time."

His conjecture proves correct. Whether it is that they find their plunge cool and refreshing on this hot day, or that they are tired of resistance, or a little of both, is uncertain; but as again, amid whistling and din, the stupid animals are driven down to the water's edge, they follow their leader, at first gingerly and by twos and threes, and then so fast that Hicks takes up his position at the jumping place to check them; in process whereof, having imprudently got too near the edge, he is upset bodily into the water, and disappears from mortal view, to emerge, spluttering and puffing and making awful faces, as he scrambles up the bank, dripping like a half-drowned rat.

I know of nothing more funny than the sudden and unexpected descent of any one into deep water. The utter woefulness, combined with an indignant air of injured innocence, which the sufferer's countenance invariably assumes on emerging, should make a cat laugh; anyhow, nothing human can stand against it. And the savagely furious way in

which the patient hisses between his chattering teeth, “What the devil is there to grin at?” While the tout ensemble, his garments clinging to his shivering carcase, is in no wise calculated to invest his just exasperation with the majesty of outraged dignity.

Poor Hicks formed no exception. Everybody was convulsed; one of the Kafirs to such an extent, that he could do nothing but roll on the ground in the exuberance of his glee, though he managed to recover sufficiently to dart out of the way just in time to avoid a mighty kick aimed at his nether quarters by the infuriated object of his mirth.

“There’s something for you to grin at, you sooty son of a Cheshire cat!” exclaimed Hicks, savagely; but, as we have seen, he missed his aim, and in a minute had recovered all his wonted good humour.

The sheep gave no more trouble, but went through after that as if they liked it. Two or three turned over in the water, and were rescued as previously described, while one died; but these accidents were inevitable, and soon the flock was straggling away across the veldt to its feeding ground—white, clean, and freshened up.

When they reached home, the dining-room table was strewn with letters and newspapers. The postbag, which was fetched from the nearest agency once a week, had just arrived, and as they entered, Mrs Brathwaite was reading a letter aloud for the public benefit. The writer stated her intention of profiting by an unexpectedly early opportunity, and availing herself of a long-standing and oft-repeated invitation to visit them at Seringa Vale, in about a fortnight from then, and subscribed herself: “Lilian Strange.”

“Poor thing!” said Mr Brathwaite. “We’ll soon bring the roses back to her cheeks. A couple of months of this splendid air, and she’ll be that strong and sunburnt they Won’t know her when she goes back.”

And the kindly, hospitable old couple went on discussing their prospective visitor and her joys and sorrows, past, present, and to come; projecting all manner of schemes for making her stay an enjoyable and a happy one.

There was one present whom this letter had set thinking, and that was Claverton. The name seemed familiar and yet not, for he couldn’t for the life of him fit it to an individual.

“Lilian—Lilian Strange—Lilian,” he kept repeating to himself. “Now where the deuce have I come across that name before? Lilian—it’s a pretty name, too. No, I can’t remember for the life of me.” He could see the writing as the letter lay open on the table.

It was rather large and very distinct, but not masculine. But neither it nor memory seemed to aid him, and he gave it up.

“What is she like, aunt?” asked Ethel. “And what sort of age is she? Young or middling?”

The old lady laughed. “Young or middling? Gracious me, child. She’s only twenty-three, is sweetly pretty, and has the loveliest eyes I ever saw.”

“Present company excepted—ahem!” cut in Hicks, thinking he had said an excessively smart thing, and colouring and looking an ass on the strength of it.

“We must make her enjoy her visit,” went on Mrs Brathwaite. “Poor girl, I feel so sorry for her. Her mother is dead, and her stepfather was a country gentleman in England and a wealthy man. When he died all his property went to his own family, and Lilian was left without a penny. Her relations on the stepfather’s side were not kind to her, and she was thrown on the world to get her living as best she could, and now she’s teaching.”

“Universal refuge for the destitute,” murmured Ethel. “What brought her out here?”

“A ship,” chimed in Hicks, intent on being funny. But Ethel looked angrily at him, and he collapsed.

“She came out as a companion to some lady,” answered Mrs Brathwaite. “Then the McColls at Port Elizabeth engaged her to teach their children, and a nice handful she must find them. I fancy her health has rather broken down. She looked anything but strong when we saw her last June.”

“It’ll be a great nuisance,” said Ethel afterwards to her sister when they were alone together, “to have to be always trundling this girl about. She’ll probably give herself no end of airs and try to patronise us all.”

“I don’t know,” answered Laura, “I have an idea she’ll be rather nice. Her letter reads like it.”

“Perhaps so,” rejoined Ethel, a little ashamed of her inhospitable speech; “let’s hope so, anyhow.”

In due course the shearers arrived, and all being ready, operations were begun at once. No more long rides or bushbuck bants or anything of the kind, time was too valuable; and for about three weeks Mr Brathwaite and his two lieutenants had their hands full in superintending and otherwise furthering that most important phase of farm routine—

shearing; and from rosy morn till dewy eve, and often till late within the latter, were they strictly on duty.

Yes, those were busy times indeed. There were the Fingo shearers to be set to their work and kept to it, wool bales to be pressed and sewn up, rationing to be attended to, and a hundred and one things, large or small, to tax the mind and employ the hand. Moreover, a sharp eye had to be kept on the natives aforesaid, lest in their laudable anxiety to make the largest possible tally, they should inflict grievous bodily harm upon the animals under operation, and haply remove the cuticle as well as the fleece. But those there employed were old hands at the craft, and gave no trouble to speak of. They would clip away by the hour, chatting among themselves in that seemingly disjointed way wherein these people are wont to exchange gossip. Now and then they varied the pastime by humming a barbarous tune on about three notes, whose terrible monotony would be distracting were it not that the ear gets accustomed to the wretched crooning, even as to the hum of a threshing machine or the ticking of an obtrusive clock, but through this, as through all other sounds, the clip, clip, clip of the shears went steadily on, from morning till night, from day to day.

“I’ve just had another letter from Lilian Strange,” said Mrs Brathwaite, one evening towards the close of the busy time above mentioned.

“What does she say?” asked the old settler, who was nodding in a roomy arm-chair, tired with the heat and exertion of the day.

“She says she won’t be able to come to us this week after all, because the McColls have put off their start. She may have to wait another ten days in consequence.”

“H’m. Don’t know that it isn’t just as well. It would have been difficult to send for her during shearing time—means two days away from home. Hicks might have gone to fetch her, or Arthur, but they are both wanted here. Naylor’s busy, too, and so is Jim. Yes, it’s just as well, as things go.”

“She thinks she will have an opportunity in about a fortnight, which will save us the trouble of sending.”

“Well, that’s better still. Besides, who’s going to bring her?”

“She doesn’t say,” answered Mrs Brathwaite. “She only promises to let us know.”

To one, at least, of the auditors of this dialogue, the postponement of the expected guest’s arrival was not a source of unmixed grief. That one was Ethel. She would not

own to herself that so commonplace a failing as jealousy had anything to do with it; still the fact remained that they were all very jolly together as it was. “Two’s company, three’s a bore,” applies in principle to circles, and now it was horribly likely that this Miss Strange would be, from Ethel’s point of view, de trop. Her aunt had spoken in warm terms of the other’s beauty and attractiveness. But Ethel herself was conscious of the possession of a larger share of those commodities than most people. Had the other been of the colourless and inane order she could have tolerated her—bore as she might be. As matters stood, however, it was not in feminine human nature that Ethel should be prepared to welcome the unexpected guest with open arms.

“What has become of Arthur?” asked Mrs Brathwaite, as they sat down to supper.

“Oh, he’ll be here in a minute,” said Hicks. “I left him yarning with Xuvani. He says the old chap’s teaching him Kafir, and I’ll be hanged if ever I knew a fellow pick it up so quickly. He didn’t know a word when he came here, but Xavani says he must have really, and was keeping it dark. He let drop two or three idiomatic expressions which showed that he must have known something about the language or the structure of it.”

At that moment the door opened, admitting the object of their discussion.

“Late, I’m afraid,” he said, sliding into his place. “That long-legged humbug, Ntyesa, swore he had left his jacket in the shearing-house, and I had to go and unlock it again for him. Awfully sorry.”

“Mr Claverton can’t tear himself away, even at half-past eight,” said Ethel, maliciously. “He will soon be quite glued to the wool bales.”

He glanced up with an amused look. “While there is light, there is work—in shearing time,” he replied.

“Bother shearing time!” rejoined she, pettishly. “I wish you’d be quick and finish it. We can’t get about at all, because there’s no one to take us. Laura and I have wanted to go over to Thirlestane, and to Jim’s, and a host of places, but we can’t. We are just as much shut up in here as you are in there. Aren’t we, Laura?”

“Ha—ha—ha,” laughed her uncle, with whom she was a prime favourite, and who spoilt her outrageously. “You’d better come and give us a hand, Ethel. You and Laura. We shall get it over ever so much sooner then. You shall have six shillings a hundred. Eh?”

“They oughtn’t to have more than five, because they don’t bring their own shears,” cut in Hicks.

“They’ve got nail-scissors, though,” murmured Claverton.

“Ah, I could see you were going to say something horrid,” cried Ethel.

“There are those two sparring again,” was Laura’s comment, “as usual.”

Now there was a good deal more underlying Ethel’s impatience with the shearing time than appeared on the surface. It deprived them of their usual escort on their journeyings abroad, even as she had said, and with her own particular body-guard on those occasions she found herself less and less able to dispense. And yet, as her sister had just remarked, they two were always at daggers-drawn. She had begun by cordially detesting this man, as she thought. In reality, there had been more of resentment than of dislike in the matter. She had resented his coolness, his utter indifference to her charms, his way of treating her like a spoilt child; laughing at her petulance, and turning off her most pointed shafts on an impenetrable shield of mild satire, mingled with surprised amusement. She, Ethel Brathwaite, at whose shrine, when she shone in the society of the capital, all crowded and fell down and worshipped, to be thus treated! She counted, among her sworn admirers, more than one whose name was in many mouths, who boasted much-prized decorations, well and fairly won, and yet here on the distant frontier this man, whom, in reality, no one had ever heard of, treated her with a sort of good-humoured indulgence! And in spite of it—shall we not rather say, because of it?—she was not angry with him. It was a new thing to find one who, instead of looking up at, if anything, looked down to her; and to the wilful little beauty the change was positively refreshing. Then how helpless she had been in his hands on one or two occasions—that of the storm, for instance, and the subsequent terrifying episode—and he had not been wanting. There were many men within and without the circle of her admirers whom she could snub capriciously and ruthlessly tyrannise over, but Arthur Claverton was not one of them, and this she knew full well. And now she had discovered that his society was becoming very necessary to her, and what had forced that discovery irresistibly upon her mind was the announcement, two weeks ago, of the arrival of a new character upon the stage whereon she and one other were the chief actors. Verily it seemed to Ethel as if a bomb had emanated from that harmless-looking postbag, and was destined shortly to explode in their midst.

Then had come the shearing, and, except on Sundays, from dawn till dark, Mr Brathwaite’s two lieutenants found the whole of their time taken up. In the middle of the day they would come in, by turns, to get their dinners, but it was a case of off again directly after. No more long rides home in the twilight, or quiet strolls in the sunny afternoon, at least not for some time to come, and then—another would have appeared on the scene, thought Ethel, with a dire presentiment that those times which now she

looked back on with a sinking kind of regret would never come round again. Will it be better for her—for both of them—if they do not? We shall see.

She is looking bewitchingly pretty to-night as she sits throwing her bright shafts of laughter and mockery at those around, and at Claverton in particular—at the latter, indeed, to such an extent as to call forth Laura's remark. But a very close observer might have detected a kind of latent wistfulness beneath the brilliant, lively manner, and only then if he had specially looked for it.

"So you have been trying your hand at shearing, I hear, Mr Claverton?" she said.

"I have."

"How did you get on, and how did you like it?" asked Laura.

"Hicks will best tell you how I got on. As for liking it, the occupation would be a wholly delightful one had a beneficent Providence but seen fit to arrange the small of one's back upon hinges. By the way, Armitage wasn't here to-day, was he? We could have sworn we heard that laugh of his; couldn't we, Hicks?"

"No; he hasn't been here—and a good thing too," rejoined Mr Brathwaite. "He'd only have got playing the fool, or something. He carries that habit of his rather far at times. You heard what he did over at Naylor's the year before last?"

"No. What was it?"

"Well, Naylor was hard at work with his shearing, and one day, in turning out a lot of old hurdles to fence in the yard with, they came upon a snake—a thundering big ringhals—and killed it. Jack Armitage dropped in just afterwards, and Edward showed him the snake, rather crowing over having killed such a big one. Jack said nothing at the time, but a little while after, when they were all in the shearing-house, they heard a yell, and a big black brute of a ringhals came scooting in among them all, and there stood that villain Jack in the door, grinning and chuckling, and nearly splitting his sides with laughter."

"The beggar!" said Claverton. "Did he scare them?"

"Didn't he! You never saw such a commotion as it made. The shearers gave one 'whouw,' dropped their sheep, and made for the door with a rush—they're mortally afraid of a snake, you know—and there were sheep rushing about the place half shorn, and kicking against the shears which the fellows had let drop, and making a most infernal clatter.

And the niggers were all crowding to get out, and raising a hubbub, and all the rest of it. The worst of it, though, was that they got so mad that they one and all struck work—flatly refused to come back—and it was some time before Naylor could persuade them to."

"The mischief! And what did Jack do?"

"Do? Jumped on his horse and rode away, laughing fit to kill himself. Naylor was very savage with him though, and now he vows he won't have Jack on the place at shearing time, not at any price. By the way, that long fellow, Ntyesa, was one of them. You ask him to-morrow if he remembers the snake in the shearing-house."

Chapter Fourteen.

Lilian.

"There. I'm quite ready now. I'm so sorry if I have delayed you, and I fear I have."

"Not at all. We are starting in very good time as it is, and have the whole day before us."

The place is the drawing-room of an hotel in Grahamstown; the time, rather early in the morning; and the first of the two speakers, a tall, beautiful girl, who has just finished fastening together two or three articles of light hand-baggage as the second enters to tell her that the conveyance is all ready at the door. She wears a close-fitting dress of cool white, which, though making her appear taller, sets off to the fullest advantage a graceful, undulating figure. Waves of dark hair, touched, as it were, with a glint of bronze, half conceal the smooth brow, and the beautiful oval face, with its straight, delicately-chiselled features, is most killingly and becomingly framed in a large garden hat, lined with soft lace. The eyes are of that difficult-to-determine hue which is best defined as green hazel, and a sensitive curve about the lips imparts to the whole face a tinge of melancholy when in repose. In fact, there is a trifle of coldness about its normal expression. But when it lights up—when its owner smiles—as she now does very sweetly upon him, who is to be her travelling companion and escort throughout that day—then its charm becomes dangerous, so inexpressibly captivating is it.

"Is sweetly pretty, and has the loveliest eyes I ever saw," had been Mrs Brathwaite's dictum. And Claverton there and then mentally acquitted the old lady of one jot of exaggeration as his glance rested for the first time upon Lilian Strange when she entered the room prepared for the journey—fresh, cool, and in all the composure of her stately beauty. She greeted him perfectly naturally and unaffectedly, and apologised for delay, real or imaginary, as we have seen.

He had called at the hotel the evening before, to deliver a note from Mrs Brathwaite, and to inform Miss Strange in person about her journey. In the latter object he was disappointed. Miss Strange sent down a message, apologising for being unable to see him, on the ground of fatigue. She would, however, be quite ready to start at the hour named. And Claverton, beyond a slight curiosity to inspect one who would be for a considerable time an inmate of the same household as himself, didn't care one way or another. Miss Strange would be there all right on the morrow, and he meanwhile would go and look up a friend at the very poor attempt at a club which the city boasted.

He had expected to see a pretty girl, possibly a very pretty girl, but nothing like this. As it has been said, he was not a susceptible man. In point of fact, he rather looked down on

the fair sex, a few individual members of it excepted. Yet now, as he handed his charge into the light buggy which stood waiting at the door, he was conscious of an unwonted quickening of the pulse. Not then was he able to analyse the subtle fascination of her beauty and of her manner, the extraordinary charm of her voice—such a voice as it was, too; low, rich, musical; the kind of voice that could not by any possibility have belonged to a plain woman.

"Thanks; they are not in my way in the least," said that bewildering voice as Claverton was making impossible efforts to move certain parcels in the bottom of the trap—impossible, because of the very limited space afforded by the confines of a buggy—at the same time keeping a firm hand on the rather fresh pair of horses which were bowling down the street at a fine pace. Early as it was, the streets were filling with traffic; huge loads of wool on buck-waggons from up the country crawling in behind their long spans of oxen; farmers' carts and buggies; horsemen; and everywhere the inevitable native, male and female.

"The worst of it is that the bare fact of coming to the town entails upon one multifold commissions, utterly regardless of space or carrying power," he answered. "Look at those bundles, for instance. Not a third of what I was to have fetched, and shall catch it for not bringing out."

Lilian laughed.

"Never mind. I'll bear witness in your favour. And now tell me, when do we reach Seringa Vale?"

"Not before sundown. I'm afraid you'll be dreadfully done up. It's very spirited of you to travel two days running like this. I wonder you didn't allow yourself a day here to rest after coming up all the way from Port Elizabeth yesterday."

"It was tiring, certainly. But I've had a good night's rest, and this sort of travelling is quite luxurious after the passenger-cart. Is it going to be very hot?"

"I'm afraid it'll be warm, but not dusty, which is something to be thankful for. The heavy shower in the night has done that much for us. Look! Grahamstown shows well from here."

A curve in the road brought the city into full view, lying beneath, embowered in its bosky gardens.

“Yes. But I don’t see anything to admire in these colonial towns. They are not even picturesque. Frightfully dusty, oppressively hot, and streets and buildings absolutely hideous.”

“I agree with you. Look at this one, for instance. That mound of baked clay, plastered up wet and left to dry, which we passed at starting and which can hardly be distinguished now, doesn’t look much like a cathedral, does it? Yet it is. Then that fifth-rate mongrel Corn Exchange you see—there—is the Eastern Districts Court, second temple of Justice in the land. That square barn-like wool-store, beyond the clay cathedral, is a Methodist chapel with a truly appalling front. It is the prize barracoon of that connexion, and its habitués fondly cherish the conviction that it is a second Milan. The building away there against the hill is to be admired, isn’t it? Built for a barrack it remains a barrack, though it is now a public hospital. The town is pretty, thanks to its situation and trees, but there isn’t a decent-looking building in it.”

“I want to see something of the country,” went on Lilian. “It ought to be lovely, judging from what I saw of it coming along in the post-cart yesterday. And I’ve seen nothing of it as yet.”

“Here we are, then. What do you think of that?” said her companion, as, having crested the hill which shut the city from view, he whipped up his horses and they sped merrily along an elevated flat, dashing aside the dewdrops which lay thickly studding the short grass like a field of diamonds. The sun was not long up, and a white morning mist hung here and there among the sprays of the bush, but overhead all was dazzling blue. The view was extensive. Wooded ridges melted away afar in the soft morning light, and in the distant background the crescent range of the Great Winterberg rose purple and dim.

“Oh, but this is lovely!” cried Lilian. “Don’t laugh at me, Mr Claverton, but it is like drinking in new life after being pent up in a dusty town.”

“I’d rather be shot than laugh at you,” he answered, with an earnestness very unwonted in him. “I am only too glad you should find anything to enjoy in what I feared would be to you a very tedious journey. Still more glad am I that it has been my luck to escort you.”

It was about the first genuine compliment he had ever paid to a woman in his life, and yet he seemed totally unconscious of intending any compliment at all. He could hardly take his glance off the beautiful, animated face beside him. And how was it that this same escort duty had fallen to his lot? When Lilian Strange found out at nearly the last moment that the opportunity on which she relied of getting to Seringa Vale had fallen through, Mr Brathwaite had made arrangements to go to Grahamstown and fetch her

himself. But a sharp attack of rheumatism precluded this, and Hicks, who otherwise would have been told off on this mission, and who had his own reasons for not wishing to be away from home two days, easily prevailed on his friend to go instead of him.

On they sped, now ascending a hill at a foot's pace, now bowling briskly down the next declivity, as the road wound over the rolling country. To Lilian the journey, so far from being a tedious one, was wholly delightful. She was vividly interested in everything. Even the little meercats, which sat upright on their hind legs a few yards from the road and then bolted into their burrows at the approach of the horses, came in for a share of her notice and admiration. A solitary secretary bird, stalking away down in the hollow, became the subject of numerous inquiries, and she gazed with awe upon a cloud of great white vultures soaring overhead bound for some defunct horse or sheep, appearing from nowhere and disappearing as mysteriously. To the English girl, with her keen love of Nature, even these insignificant representatives of wild African animal life were full of interest.

They passed a large ostrich farm lying beneath them on the slope, and she could hardly believe her companion's statement that the distant black specks at the farther ends of their respective enclosures were as formidable as the traditional mad bull, until a large troop of ten-months-old ostriches, under charge of herds, swept past, and he drew her attention to their size, and the strength of those long legs terminating in a sharp, horny toe, capable of ripping a man up. But the birds looked very handsome, very picturesque as they careered by, their snowy plumes extended and waving, and she was delighted with the picture they made, though her enjoyment was tempered with alarm as the horses showed signs of restiveness. But Claverton reassured her, and the ostriches and their keepers were soon left far behind.

"You live at Seringa Vale, do you not, Mr Claverton?"

"Well, yes; I do at present. I am jackarooing there, as they say in Australia, which is to say that I am imbibing instruction in the craft in consideration of my valuable services."

"And are you going to settle out here, then?"

"To settle! H'm! How do you know I wasn't born and bred out here?"

"I suppose because there's some sort of secret sign by which one importation can detect another," answered Lilian. "I don't believe you have been out here as long as I have."

"Do I look so thoroughly the 'new chum,' then? Point out the conspicuous sign of 'rawness,' that I may at once eradicate it, if it is worth eradicating, that is."

“No. I refuse to reveal my masonic sign,” she answered, gaily; “but I know I am right in my conjecture. I could tell the moment I saw you. Am I not right? Now confess!”

“Yes and no. That is to say, it is only three months since I left England this time; but before that I was out here in South Africa for several years.”

“Then I cannot claim seniority of standing, after all. Are there any more ‘importations’ at Seringa Vale?”

“Yes. Hicks. But he’s so thoroughly acclimatised that he don’t count. You and I are exiles and sojourners in a far country. I foresee we shall be talking British ‘shop’ to a grievous extent,” said Claverton, not that he cared a rush about England, or had any great reason to, for the matter of that, but it would establish an entente with his beautiful travelling companion, a something quite between themselves. He was surprised to notice a wearied and even pained expression flit across the lovely face, like the shadow of a cloud passing over the bright smooth surface of a mountain lake.

“I don’t know. I think I would rather forget all about England,” she replied, sadly. “It is a subject with no fascination for me. As I’m here in this country I want to like it, and it is highly probable that I shall, at any rate during the next two months. By-the-bye, what dear old people Mr and Mrs Brathwaite are!”

“That they are,” assented the other, heartily. And then for the life of him he could not help subsiding into silence. She had a history, then. She would fain forget the land of her birth. It was not wholly the stern law of necessity that had banished her to a distant land to fight the rough, hard battle of life. There was another cause, and glancing at her as she sat beside him, Claverton thought he could in a measure guess at the nature of that cause. His pulses were strangely stirred, and even then he was conscious of a longing to comfort her, of a wild, unreasoning resentment against some person unknown. Remarkable, wasn’t it, considering he had only seen her for the first time in his life that morning, and that now it was still far short of midday?

But two persons of opposite sexes, both young, both goodly to look upon, and under circumstances situated such as these two, will, I trow, find it difficult to preserve silence for long—seated side by side in the circumscribed space of a buggy. Lilian was the first to break it.

“What was that?” she asked, eagerly, as a loud resounding bark echoed forth from the hillside above them.

“Only a baboon. Look, there he is—that black speck up there; and the others are not far off.”

They were driving through a wild and narrow pass. High overhead great masses of rock cut the skyline in fantastic piles, castellated here, riven there, and apparently about to crumble in pieces, and hurl themselves down upon the road. Thick bush grew right down to the road winding along the side of the hill, which here and there fell straight away from it in rather an alarming and precipitous manner.

It was just at the most alarming of these places that a few puffs of dust and a crack or two of a whip betokened the approach of waggons, and the next moment the foremost of them appeared round a jutting corner of rock. Claverton muttered an imprecation as he noted that the oxen were without a leader, straggling across the very narrow road at their own sweet will, and bearing down upon him and his charge a great deal faster than he liked. The waggon, loaded sky high with wool bales, was still a couple of hundred yards off, but the road from it to the buggy was a brisk declivity; there seemed very insufficient brake on, and no sign of any one in charge. One of two things was likely to happen: either the buggy would be splintered into matchwood against the inner side of the road, or hurled into perdition over the outer one, by the ponderous mass now bearing down uncontrolled upon it. Claverton reined in his horses and hallooed angrily.

An ugly, mud-coloured head rose from the apex of the pile; then apparently subsided.

“Where’s your ‘leader,’ you schepsel?” he shouted in Dutch. “Get off and stop your fore oxen, or, by God, I’ll shoot them dead on the spot.”

The situation was critical, it must be remembered. A sooty imp of a boy glided to the front of the span, and succeeded in bringing them up just in time. The huge, unwieldy machine rolled creaking past the buggy, narrowly grazing it with the wool bales. The Hottentot driver raised his ugly head and leered insolently.

“Hey, you, Engelschman! Don’t you know how to pass a waggon yet?” he shouted.

Quickly Claverton stood up, and by dint of a dexterous “flick,” cut the fellow with his driving-whip in such wise as to chip a weal of skin out of his face, and then the pace of the passing vehicles carried him out of reach.

The Hottentot yelled and cursed with rage and pain; but there was something so threatening in Claverton’s face and the sudden movement he made as if to descend and make a further example of him that the fellow thought better of it, and dropped the

empty grog bottle which he had been about to shy after the trap. He solaced himself, however, with a shower of parting curses.

“Lord, Lord! To think that I should have to sit still and be cheeked by a dirty drunken Tottie,” said Claverton to himself yet aloud, as if oblivious of his companion. Yet he had to. He could hardly drop the reins and leave her there in the middle of an excessively narrow and dangerous bit of road, with a pair of very fresh and somewhat restive horses on hand, while he went to wreak further vengeance on the impudent rascal whose carelessness might have been productive of a serious catastrophe. He was handicapped altogether.

It was an earnest of real life. By himself, with only himself to think of, he could take care of himself. In charge of another, would he not have to swallow tons and tons over and above the traditional peck of “matter in the wrong place” without a murmur? He would be handicapped altogether. Philosopher as he was, it was hardly likely that such a consideration should obtrude at this moment.

The other waggon was engineered by a couple of quiet-looking and civil Kafirs, who gave them plenty of roadway and the good-morning as they passed.

Claverton stole a glance at his companion’s face. She had been not a little startled, he could see that, yet she kept her composure, and the fact pleased him. Most women under the circumstances would have let fly exclamations of alarm, perhaps shrieked, possibly even might have grabbed convulsively at the reins—that most blindly idiotic and utterly exasperating phase of feminine scare upon wheels. This one, however, only changed colour ever so little, but did and said nothing.

“Here we are at an ‘hotel,’ as they call it in this country,” he remarked, pointing out a seedy-looking domicile, like unto a fifth-rate Dutch farmhouse, which hove in sight before them. “We can either stop there, or drive on a little farther and outspan in the veldt, whichever you prefer.”

“Oh, do let us outspan in the veldt,” answered Lilian, gleefully. “The drive is lovely, and a picnic in the middle of it will be quite the right thing.”

“Of course it will—or rather two picnics, for we shall have to outspan again. Look, we don’t lose much by giving that barracoon the go-by,” he went on, as they passed the edifice in question. “Goat chops very tough, pumpkin and rice, and Cape sherry, are about the only items in its bill of fare, I venture to predict.”

“Horrible!” declared Lilian, with a laughing grimace.

They drove on a little farther, and halted in a beautiful spot, by a pool of clear, but brackish water, thickly overhung with bush and trailing plants, where Lilian was delighted with the colony of pendulous finks' nests swaying to and fro as their startled occupants dashed in and out, chirping volubly. Claverton took the horses to the water, then knee-haltered and allowed them to roll while he placed on the ground one of the couple of bundles of oat-hay which were carried in the buggy for their benefit. Then he returned to his charge.

"I must apologise, Miss Strange. The rule of the veldt is not that of society. Here it is, 'horses first.'"

He spread the wraps, which kind, thoughtful Mrs Brathwaite had sent for Lilian's use, under a shady tree, making her a comfortable seat. Then he unearthed the commissariat, of which the staple articles were a chicken and a bottle of Moselle.

"But this is far too luxurious," protested Lilian, her beautiful face sparkling with animation. She was thoroughly enjoying the unconventionally of the whole thing. "I declare it does not seem like camping in the bush if we are to revel in luxury."

"Take it easy while you can. That's the secret of true philosophy. The goat chops and pumpkin and rice will come, all in good time."

She laughed gaily. Then she threw off her large straw hat, and pushed up her dark hair as if to ease it of the weight. Not a detail of the movement or its effect escaped her companion. He had not yet seen her without her hat. It is surprising what a difference this outdoor appendage makes in the appearance of some women. He noted, without surprise, that Lilian Strange looked equally beautiful either way.

"Mr Claverton, why don't you smoke?" she asked, as, having lunched, there was a dreamy pause in the conversation.

"I thought you might object. But—how do you know I indulge in the chimney trick?"

"Object? No, I'm not so selfish as that. And as for how I knew, I might answer all men do, but I won't. The fact is, you made a quite unconscious and mechanical dive at your pocket, and brought out half a pipe. I'll give you credit that the move was quite unconscious."

"It was, upon my honour. What a magician you are—you notice everything."

It has been stated that Lilian Strange possessed an extraordinarily dangerous and captivating smile. She was in one of her softest moods now, thoroughly enjoying the fresh air and wild, extensive scenery; and the drive, the impromptu picnic à deux, and above all her late emancipation from distasteful drudgery amid uncongenial surroundings, and the prospect of two months' rest from the same. Then she had taken a great liking to her travelling escort; short as had been the period of their acquaintance. So that now as she lay back, laughing over the quaint dryness of the said escort's remarks, it could not be but that her winning and attractive spell should weave itself around him to the full. This girl was something quite new in Claverton's experience. The soft, sweet tones of her voice, her glorious beauty, her very ways and movements, seemed to cast a glamour over him such as he had never known before in the course of his life. Bright, teasing Ethel Brathwaite, blue-eyed, sunny, impulsive, seemed poor clay when contrasted with this new arrival with the lovely, expressive face and the undulating, sensuous form—so stately and yet so unaffected and appreciative—so cold of demeanour, at times, and withal so sweet and considerate. Yet nineteen men out of twenty would have given the preference to Ethel; but then it may be that this other one would have favoured the nineteen with the coldness devoid of the consideration.

Be this as it may, Claverton was certainly the twentieth in both senses, and, as they sat there, resting in the golden sunshine, the drowsy air around them made musical by the whistling of spreuws and the hum of summer insects, he, at any rate, found himself wishing that that hour might last throughout an eternity.

And the curious part of it was that he had not known her for hours enough to make a double figure.

But time cannot be trifled with, and they were due at Seringa Vale before dark. So the horses were put to in a trice.

"Can't I help you in any way?" said Lilian. "It seems so hard that you should have all the trouble while I sit still and look on."

"It's no trouble at all," answered the other, tugging vigorously at a refractory strap. "I wouldn't let you bother about this sort of thing for the world. In fact, I am only too glad that you are not tired to death with the long, hot ride. And I think we'll put the hood up, for there's no shade between this and the next outspan."

Now came the hottest stage of the journey. The full glare of the sun focussed down into the broad valley, beat fiercely upon the tent of the buggy, and, but for the rapid movement creating its own draught, there was not a breath of air. Lilian began to feel drowsy and could have pleaded guilty to an incipient headache, but she did not

complain. Her companion, however, detected the tired look in her eyes, and was greatly concerned; but she laughed it off. She would be all right again when it got cooler, she said. It was really very silly of her, but she was just a trifle below par.

On this point he rather vehemently reassured her. Why, he himself often felt as if about to get a sunstroke riding through these long, hot valleys, just in the middle of the day—and he was a tolerably well-seasoned traveller. But it is to be feared that, for once in his life, he forgot to spare the horses in his anxiety to reach the end of that stage.

Lilian, however, forgot her fatigue, as after the next outspan they wended up the rugged, but picturesque bush-road, in the golden light of the waning afternoon. They were in shade for the most part now, and the air grew cooler as they ascended gradually out of the stifling valley, where the river they had crossed a little while ago, flowed sparkling in the sun like a silver thread. Opposite, a row of stiff euphorbia reared their plumed heads, their stems, straight and regular as a line of organ-pipes, standing out from the darksome, rocky glen behind them like the bars of a gloomy cage enclosing some ferocious beast. There, a great cliff, overhung with lichens and monkey ropes, starting capriciously from among the greenness, and everywhere a shining sea of bush; not silent, either, but resounding with evidence of animal and insect life. Far away, almost inaudible, the harsh bark of the sentinel baboon; close at hand, oppressive in its vociferation, the shrill chirrup of crickets. Hoopoes were softly calling to each other from the tangled recesses of some cool and shady nook; and a bright louri, in all the pride of his crimson wings and glossy plumage, darted across the road.

When they arrived at Seringa Vale, all its inmates were at the door to welcome Lilian.

“I hope Arthur took great care of you, my dear,” said Mrs Brathwaite, the first genial greetings over.

“I have to thank Mr Claverton for taking the greatest possible care of me,” answered Lilian, flashing at him one of her sweetest smiles.

For a brief second their eyes met. One standing there noted both those glances and read them like an open book—read in one, possibility; in the other, certainty. And Ethel was forced to admit that her aunt’s description of their visitor’s attractions was not one whit exaggerated.

And it had all come about in a single day.

Chapter Fifteen.

In a Single Day.

"Mopela, what on earth have you been doing all this time? I sent you for that water half an hour ago."

There is menace as well as wrath in the tones of the speaker as he confronts the individual addressed, who is calmly squatting on the ground between two pails containing water just drawn out of the dam. It is midday, and a blazing sun pours down upon them, to the delectation of certain mud turtles basking on the hard, cracked surface of the baked ooze, and who, alarmed by the sound of angry voices, scuttle away into the water as fast as their legs can carry them; while, in the noontide stillness, the smooth surface of the reservoir glows like copper beneath the burnished rays. Again Claverton—for it is he—repeats his question in a more irate tone than before.

Mopela rises and eyes his interlocutor in a manner that betokens mischief. He is a huge Kafir, tall and broad-shouldered, and his bronze, sinewy frame, whose nudity shows the development of great muscular power, looks formidable enough. He hates Claverton, who has more than once had occasion to be "down on" him for careless herding, or other derelictions, and never loses an opportunity, whether by covert insolence or neglect of orders, of showing it. And for some time past the relations between the two have been—in the language of diplomacy—a trifle "strained."

"I haven't been half an hour," he replies, defiantly, "I only stopped a minute to light my pipe."

"You infernal blackguard, do you mean to give me the lie direct?" says Claverton; and his voice shakes with pent-up fury as he advances a pace nearer the last speaker. "Take up those buckets and get away at once!"

The savage gives an exclamation of disgust, and his eyes glare. Then throwing back his head contemptuously, he says with an insolent sneer: "You are not Baas here."

"The devil I'm not!" Crack!—woof!—a right and left-hander straight from the shoulder, and the huge barbarian goes down like a ninepin. "You dog! you've played the fool with me long enough, and now you've come to the end of your tether. Get up," he continues, spurning with his foot the prostrate man, from whose mouth and nostrils a red torrent is gushing. "Get up, and I'll floor you again!" His fierce temper is now completely beyond his control, and for the moment he is as thoroughly a savage as the dusky giant lying at his feet.

How it will end Heaven only knows, but at this juncture a low cry of horror behind him causes him to turn, and what he sees brings a hot flush to his face, up till now livid with rage. For there stands Lilian Strange, and her white face and dilated eyes betray that she has been a terrified witness of the whole scene.

Claverton started as if he had been shot.

“I fear you have been dreadfully frightened,” he said. “Needless to explain I had no idea of your presence.”

He felt very concerned, and his face flushed hotly again as he thought what an awful ruffian he must seem in her eyes. This was the second time within twenty-four hours that she had seen him lose his temper, though yesterday, anxiety for her own safety had been the justification. His clothes were plentifully splashed with sulphur and lime, in which salutary decoction he had been dipping sheep when the fracas occurred. At his feet lay the hulking form of the Kafir, breathing stertorously and bleeding like a pig. Yes, what a cut-throat he must seem to her!

But Lilian could not have been of this opinion, for the startled expression faded from her eyes and a delicate tinge showed in the warm paleness of her cheek.

“I had been for a walk in the garden, and came suddenly upon you. I couldn’t help seeing it all. He seems badly hurt; can’t we do anything for him?” she pursued, going up to look at the prostrate barbarian, and again growing pale at the sight of the blood. For Mopela lying there, with all the results on his countenance of the punishment he had received, was not an exhilarating object to gaze upon.

“Do anything for him? Oh, no; he’s all right. Look.”

The Kafir opened his eyes stupidly and staggered to his feet. Then, with a glance of deadly hatred at his chastiser, he took up the buckets and walked away, his gait rolling and uneven.

“You don’t know what I’ve had to put up with from that bru—that rascal for some time past. Well, he’s got it now, at all events. I knew it was only a question of time. The only thing I regret is that it should have been at so inopportune a time,” he added, in tones of deep concern. He was exceedingly vexed and disgusted with himself. Mopela might have inflicted upon him a whole vocabulary of impudence before he would have afforded Lilian such an exhibition had he but foreseen.

“I suppose you find these natives very trying?” she said.

“Not as a rule. On the contrary, I always pull well enough with them. But that chap’s defiance had reached such a point that one of us had to knuckle under. It would never have done for that one to have been myself.”

“I suppose not,” answered Lilian, with a little smile at the idea of her escort of yesterday “knuckling under” to anybody. “And now I must not delay you. I see you are busy—but—would you mind walking back to the house with me? I am easily frightened, and these savages do look so dreadful when they are angry.”

“Would I mind? But don’t you mind being seen in such ragged company?” he added, drily, with a glance at his rough and besplashed attire.

“In Bond Street it is just possible that I should. On an African sheep farm the escort is appropriate,” she answered, with a flash of merriment in her lovely, changing eyes.

The distance to the house was not great, but Claverton contrived to render it as great as possible.

“How is it you are out all alone?” he asked, as they walked along.

“Oh, the fact is, Mrs Brathwaite and the girls were busy, very busy. I wouldn’t for the world abuse my guest’s privilege, so I slipped off on a solitary voyage of discovery.”

“And a pretty sort of discovery you made! By-the-bye, I have had no opportunity of asking if you had quite recovered from yesterday’s fatigue, and it has been lying heavily on my conscience. You did not appear at breakfast, and we have been desperately busy all the morning.”

There was a tender ring in his tones as he made this very commonplace observation which could hardly have escaped the other. She answered very sweetly:

“I am afraid I was dreadfully lazy. But I was a little tired this morning. It shan’t occur again; there!”

“You must rest to-day, then, because they are getting up a dance to-night in your honour. You are literally to make your début here. Didn’t they tell you?”

“Now I think of it, they did. Here we are at the house, Mr Claverton. Thanks, so much, for accompanying me.”

“And now I shall catch it. The dear old man hates any of us to thrash a nigger. Stand by and support me under my castigation.”

Claverton had seen Mr Brathwaite in the hall, and lost no time in telling him what had happened. The old settler shook his head as he listened.

“It won’t do,” he said. “You’ll never get any good out of them if you take to hammering them. They cut off to the district town and lay an information against you, and you’re summoned before the magistrate, and put to no end of bother. And that’s not all. It has a bad effect on the others. They know they’ll get the better of you in court, and invariably do get it; and once a black fellow thinks he can get the better of you in any way, then good-bye to your authority. Besides, it earns you a bad name among the Kafirs, which means a constant difficulty in obtaining labour, and when you do obtain it you only get the refuse. There’s Thorman, for instance. He used to lick his Kafirs for the least thing, and he never kept a decent servant on his place two months at a time. I advised him to knock off that plan, and he did; but for years afterwards he suffered from its effects, in the shape of a constant lack of decent labour. No; it doesn’t pay, take my word for it.”

“Well, but you’ve no idea how cheeky that fellow was, and has been for some time past,” urged Claverton.

The other merely shrugged his shoulders with the air of a man unconvinced, and repeated as he turned away: “It doesn’t do.”

Claverton shot a glance at his late companion as much as to say; “There, I told you how it would be,” and caught a bright, rapid smile in return. Then he went back to his work.

Hard by the scene of the recent row was the dipping tank, oblong in shape, fifteen feet by five and about eight in depth. It was two-thirds full of a decoction of lime and sulphur, and into this the sheep were dropped, and after swimming about for a couple of minutes or so were suffered to emerge, by the raising of a sliding door at one end. This end, unlike the other, was not perpendicular, but the floor was on a sufficient slope to enable the animals to walk out, which they did, and stood dripping in a stone-paved enclosure also with a shelving floor so that the liquid that drained off them should run back into the tank. At the other end was a larger enclosure containing several hundred sheep, which four or five Kafirs, among them the recreant Mopela, were busy catching for the purpose of dipping them in the unsavoury but scab-eradicating mixture. Over which operation presided Hicks and Claverton, each with a forked pole in his hand, wherewith to administer the necessary ducking to the immersed quadrupeds. At last Hicks proposed that they should knock off, and come back and finish after dinner.

“Not worth while, is it?” was the reply. “Let’s finish off now we’re at it, then we can take things easy, clothed and in our right minds. We can hardly go inside the house, even, in this beastly mess.”

Claverton carries his point, as he generally does. So they work on and on in the heat and the dust, and the air is full of splashes as the kicking animals are dropped into the tank, and redolent with the ill savour of sulphur and lime and perspiring natives; and the contents of one of the great cauldrons simmering over the fire are thrown in to replenish the medicinal bath, and the number of sheep left undipped waxes smaller and beautifully less, till at length the last half-dozen are disposed of and the job is at an end.

Then Hicks suggested a swim in the dam, and the proposal was soon carried into effect. After which, in renewed attire and presentable once more, they appeared among the rest of the household.

To some at least in that household has come among them a change; an element of upheaval certainly not even dreamed of by all whom it shall concern. A change. The acquisition of a beautiful and agreeable young lady visitor by this circle? No, something more than that.

Mrs Brathwaite playfully upbraided Claverton for being the unconscious cause of frightening her visitor on the first morning of her arrival. Then Lilian came to the rescue. If she had been startled it was her own fault or ill fortune for going where she was not wanted. Here vehement protest from him whose cause she was pleading. Then, she urged, he who had been the means of startling her had made all the amends in his power by seeing her safely home, coward as she was to need it. Here more vehement protest.

What does this vehemence mean on the part of a man to whose nature it is wholly foreign, who is calmness and equability itself?

This question—partly its own answer—flashed through Ethel’s mind. She was to all appearances deep in discussion with Laura and Hicks as to certain debatable arrangements for the coming festivity. In reality she was performing that extremely difficult feat, keeping an ear for two distinct conversations. In the course of which difficult feat Ethel was wondering how it was that these adventuresses (yes, that is the word she used) with nothing on earth to recommend them, should have the power of taking everybody by storm in the way their visitor seemed to be doing.

Lilian was wondering how it was that her visit seemed likely to be far more pleasant and enjoyable than she had at first anticipated, which was saying a great deal. Also what there was about this man, now talking so unconcernedly to herself and her hostess, that raised him on a pedestal considerably above the residue of the species.

Claverton was wondering how it was, that his life seemed to have been cut in two distinct halves since yesterday.

And Ethel again read both faces like an open book. And this time she read in the one, greater possibility; in the other, absolute certainty. Such was the situation.

And it had all come about in a single day.

Chapter Sixteen.

"Mingle Shades of Joy and Woe."

The long dining-room is in a blaze of light, such as it has not sparkled with for some considerable time, and only then on rare and special occasions such as the present one. The polished floor reflects the glow of numerous candles, and, as Hicks vigorously puts it, the decks are thoroughly cleared for action. Expectant groups stand about the room or throng the doorways—for the fun has not yet commenced, and meanwhile talk and laughter goes on among the jovial spirits there foregathered, and the graver ones, when not the subjects of rally, are intent on contemplating the floor, the ceiling, the fireplace, or anything or nothing. The party might be an English one to all appearances. You may descry the usual phases in its ingredients. There is shy humanity, confident humanity, blatant humanity, fussy humanity, even pompous humanity. There, however, the resemblance ends. Of stiffness there is none. Everybody knows everybody, or soon will—meanwhile acts as if it does. Then, in the little matter of attire, many of the "lords of creation" are arrayed in orthodox evening costume and white-chokered, others in black coats of the "go-to-meeting" order, while three or four Dutchmen, bidden to the festivity on neighbourly grounds, sport raiment fearfully and wonderfully made, whose effect is enhanced by terrific neckties, varying in shades from scarlet to green. The company is composed almost entirely of the settler class. Jolly old fellows who have come to look on at the enjoyment of their extensive and well-looking families in various stages of adolescence, and who, in spite of their white hair and sixty or seventy summers, seem more than half inclined not to remain passive spectators of the fun. One or two of these, by the way, judging from nasal rubicundity and other signs, will, I trow, be found more frequently hovering around the charmed circle where flows the genial dram, than in the immediate neighbourhood of the giddy rout. Middle-aged men, bronzed and bearded, looking serious as they contemplate what is expected of them, for assuredly we English, in whatever part of the world we be, "take our pleasures sadly." Young settlers are there, stalwart fellows, several of whom have ridden from far, carrying their gala array in a saddle-bag, and who by the time they return will have been three days away from home. But distance is nothing; their horses are strong and hardy, and the roads are good, and if not, what matters? Life is nothing without its enjoyments, and accordingly they intend to enjoy themselves, and do.

Of the fair sex there is a goodly muster—though fewer in proportion to that of the men, as is frequently the case at frontier dances—consisting of the wives and daughters of the settlers. Some are pretty, some plain; some are bright and lively, and nicely dressed; others again are badly attired, and neither bright nor lively; and at present they are mostly gathered together in the room opening out of the one which is to be the scene of the fray.

“Now then, Hicks, Armitage, some of you fellows, let’s set the ball rolling,” cried the jovial voice of Jim Brathwaite, as a volunteer pianist (the orchestral department must be worked entirely by volunteer agency) sat down at the instrument and dashed off a lively galop. “Come along, Arthur, give these fellows a lead,” he went on.

Claverton was standing in the doorway. He turned as Jim addressed him. “Well, if it’s all the same, I think I’ll cut in later. Fact is, I’m not much of a dancer. Besides, it’s a ridiculous exercise.”

“Aren’t you! ‘England expects,’” said Ethel, maliciously, as she floated by, a dream-like vision in pink gauziness. Her golden hair, confined by some cunning device at the back of her head, flowed in shining ripples below her waist, and the deep blue eyes flashed laughingly into his as she made her mocking rejoinder.

“Does it? Expectations are notoriously unsafe assets,” was the quiet reply.

“Well, we must make a start or we shall never get these fellows to begin,” said Jim. “Come along, Ethel, you promised me the first dance. If you didn’t you ought to have.”

They glided off, and Claverton stood and followed them mechanically with his glance; but, as a matter of fact, he hardly saw them. He was wondering what on earth had become of Lilian Strange. The dance wore on, and then the next, still Claverton stood in the doorway, which coign of vantage he held conjointly with an uncouth-looking Dutchman and a burly but bashful compatriot, and still she did not appear. At length, while crossing the inner room with a vague idea of putting an artless and roundabout inquiry or two to Mrs Brathwaite as to why Lilian did not appear, he heard himself hailed by his host. Turning quickly he perceived the latter sitting in confab with a contemporary in age, but vastly different in appearance.

“Arthur, this is an old friend of mine, Mr Garrett.”

Then arose a queer-looking old fellow, short, rotund of person, and whose exceeding rubicundity of visage betokened, I fear, anything but aversion for ardent spirits. Running one stubby hand through his bristly grey hair, he extended the other to Claverton.

“’Ow do—’ow do? Not been long in the country, have you? My word, but it’s a fine country, this is—fine country for young fellers like you.”

Claverton thought the country contained also some advantages for the speaker; and he was right. Here was old Joe Garrett, who never knew his father, if he had one, and who, having early in the century deserted from a two-hundred-ton merchant brig lying in Algoa Bay, had started in colonial life as a journeyman carpenter. By hook or by crook he had made his way, and now, by virtue of the four fine farms which he owned, he deemed himself very much of a landed proprietor, and every whit the equal of Walter Brathwaite, "whose ancestors wore chain-armour in the fourteenth century," as some one or other's definition of a gentleman runs.

"I was jest such a young feller as you once," went on this embodiment of colonial progress. "I landed in this country in nothin' but the clothes to my back, and look at me now. Now, I'll tell you what I did," and the oracle, slapping one finger into the palm of the of her hand, looked up into his victim's face with would-be impressive gravity, "I worked; that's what I did—I worked. Now, you may depend upon it, that for a young feller there's nothin' like a noo country—and work!"

"I suppose so," acquiesced Claverton, horribly sick of this biography.

"Now a noo country," went on the oracle, "a noo country, sez I, ain't an old one. 'Ere you're free; there," flinging out a stubby hand in the imaginary direction of Great Britain, "nothing but forms and sticklin'. Now, 'ere I can sit down to dinner without putting on a swallow-tail-coat and a white choker, for instance. No; give me a noo country and freedom, sez I."

"Quite right, Mr Garrett. A swallow-tailed coat plays the mischief with the digestion, and science has discovered that a white choker tarnishes the silver. Something in the starch, you know—arsenic, they say."

"No! You don't say so now?" returned the other, open-mouthed, and not detecting the fine irony of his banterer's tone.

"Yes, of course. And now excuse me. I must go and find my partner."

"Certainly—certainly. You young fellers! I was a young feller once, ha, ha, ha!" And old Garrett winked, and contorted his visage in the direction of his recent interlocutor in such wise as should mean volumes.

"This is ours, Miss Strange."

Lilian had just come in. She had passed close behind the speaker while he was talking to old Garrett, and her entrance did not remain long undiscovered.

“Do you know, I had quite begun to fear you were not going to appear to-night—that you were tired or unwell,” he said, as they made their way to the dancing-room.

“Bight and wrong. I was tired, and so rested instead of dressing earlier. Now I am all right again, and never felt so well in my life.”

“Nor looked it.”

It slipped out. The slightest possible flush came into Lilian’s face.

“You must not pay me compliments, Mr Claverton,” she said, gravely, but with a smile lurking in her eyes. “They are what you men call ‘bad form.’”

“But consider the provocation.”

“Again? What am I to do to you? I know. I shall scold you. This is the second time to-day that you have reproached me for being late. This morning and now.”

Certes the provocation was excessive. She was looking surpassingly beautiful this evening, in creamy white, with a velvety rose of deepest crimson on her breast; another bud, a white one, nestling among the thick coils of her bronze-tinted dark hair. Many a glance of astonished admiration greeted her entrance, and followed her about the room; but the quiet repose of the lovely face was devoid of the least sign of self-consciousness.

“By Jove!” remarked Armitage to his partner, a chubby little “bunch” with big blue eyes and a button mouth. “Claverton’s a sly dog. That’s why he was in no hurry to begin. Oho, I see now.”

“She is pretty. How well they look together!” was the reply, as the two stood against the wall to watch them.

Ethel, whirling by with the Civil Commissioner’s clerk, caught the last remark. She would have given much to have been able to box poor little Gertie Wray’s ears severely, then and there. That young lady babbled on, utterly void of offence.

“I say, though,” said her partner. “She cut you out. Claverton was just on his way to ask you when she came in. He was, really.”

“Was he? Then he should have asked me before. My programme’s full now.”

Meanwhile let us follow the pair under discussion.

“Who was that poor old man you were chaffing so, just now?” Lilian was saying.

“Only a curious specimen of natural history. But how do you know I was chaffing anybody?”

“Because I heard you. Who is he?”

“What perception you have got! ‘He’ is old Garrett, hight Joe, who migrated hither in the year one, to escape the terrible evil of having to dress for dinner.”

Lilian could not speak for laughing.

“Fact, really; he’s just been telling me all about it. Bother! This dance is at an end. We are down for some more together, though.”

“Too many.”

“I claim priority of right. I claim your sympathy as a fellow sojourner in a far country. I appeal to your compassion to rescue me from standing out in the cold, in that you are the only one with whom I can gravitate round this festal room without peril to my neighbours’ elbows and shins, and they know it, and shunt me accordingly.”

“I don’t believe a word of it,” laughed Lilian. “It is you who shunt them.”

“No, I am telling you solemn truth. And now have I not made it clear to you that it is your bounden duty to take pity on me and help the proverbial lame dog over the ditto stile?”

“Well then, I’ll see what I can do for you. Now find me a seat—there, thank you—and go and ‘victimise’ some one else,” she added, flashing up at him a bright, mischievous glance.

“Not yet. Have pity on—the public elbow and shin. I want to rest, too, after discharging my recent heavy responsibility without disaster;” and he made a move towards the seat beside her.

“No. You are not to shirk your duty. Go and do as I wish, or I shall consider it my duty to lose my programme. That means a new one, blank, and then memory is not a trustworthy guide.” And as at that moment some one came up to ask her for a dance,

Claverton was constrained unwillingly to obey, or rather, partially to obey, for he fell back on his old position in the convenient doorway, whence his eyes followed her round and round the room, to the complete exclusion of the other score of revolving couples.

“Mr Claverton, do prove a friend in need, and save me from the clutches of that awful Dutchman bearing down upon me from over there,” said a flurried, but familiar voice at his elbow. “I promised him in a weak moment, and now he’s coming. Say you’ve got me down for this, and persuade him it’s his mistake. Quick! here he comes.”

“All right. But you told me once you’d rather go round with a chair, you know, than with me.”

“Did I? Never mind; don’t be mean and rake up things,” replied Ethel, and away they went, while the defrauded Boer, thinking his own sluggish brain was at fault in the reckoning, adjourned to a certain corner of the other room in order to solace his wounded feelings with a sopje (dram).

“How about England’s disappointment?” said Ethel, maliciously, during a pause.

“That affliction has been indefinitely averted. By the way, I never thought to see Allen so screwed.”

“Er—I’m not screwed,” mildly objected that long-suffering youth, who had pulled up with a swaying jerk alongside of them.

“Aren’t you? My good fellow, a man who is capable of mistaking my substantial and visible means of support for this exceedingly well-polished floor, must be in a critical condition.”

“Oh—ah—er—was that you I trod upon? I didn’t know—I’m awfully sorry.”

Half-a-dozen bystanders exploded at this, and the dance over, Claverton began to think he had done a considerable share of duty, and sought an opportunity of claiming an instalment of the promised reward; but his turn had not yet come. Presently he overheard a girl near him say:

“What do you think of that Miss Strange?”

He recognised in the speaker one Jessie Garrett, a daughter of Joe of that ilk.

“Well, she’s very pretty, there’s no doubt about that,” answered her partner, a stalwart young ostrich-farmer from the Graaff Reinet district.

“Should you admire her as much as Ethel Brathwaite?”

“No; I don’t think she’s a patch on Miss Brathwaite; but there’s something awfully fetching about her, for all that.”

“Well, there’s no accounting for tastes. I think she’s too colourless—washed-out looking,”—a fault the speaker herself could in no wise plead guilty to. She was a pretty girl herself, in the florid, barmaid style, but as different a creature to Lilian Strange as a plump dabchick to an Arctic tern.

Claverton’s lips curled as he looked from the offending couple to the object of their remarks.

She to be discussed according to the clod-hopping ideas of louts and scullery-maids. He turned away disgusted. Suddenly he heard himself hailed in loud and jovial tones, and, looking up, found himself in the vicinity of the refreshment table, where three or four ancient settlers were exchanging reminiscences, and occasionally clinking glasses. Prominent among them was old Garrett, his rubicund visage now nearly purple.

“I sh-shay, C-Claveringsh!” called out this worthy. “C-come and have a what-sh-may call a eye-opener—hic!”

“All right.”

“Thas righ’sh. Told yer ’ee ain’t proud,” cried the old fellow, beaming triumphantly on the rest, and attempting to bestow upon Claverton a friendly slap on the back, which the latter quietly evaded. He contemplated the individual before him with vast amusement, and speculated as to how soon this worthy’s early retirement would become imperative.

The rout went on, and presently Naylor and his violin were pressed into the service to second the piano. In the passage outside a number of the Hottentot servants, emulative of their betters, had got up a dance of their own and waxed merry, and laughed and chattered exceedingly, till at last Jim Brathwaite, hearing the row, sallied forth and cleared them all out summarily.

The hours wear on apace. In the silence of the garden the air is fragrant with the cool breaths of night distilling from the myrtle and the flowering pomegranate. High in the heavens hangs a gold half-moon whose lustre pierces a leafy canopy, scattering a

network of filmy light upon the shaded earth. In and out of the gloomy shadows of the orange trees a firefly or two trails in mid air a floating spark. All is rest. Now and again a burst of voices and music is borne from the house, yet here it penetrates but feebly, and Night—silver, moon-pierced, star-studded Night—is queen amid the mysterious silence of her witching court.

Two figures wandering down the orange walk in the alternate light, and gloom, and dimness. Listen! That low, melodious voice can belong to no other than Lilian Strange.

“I am so glad we came out here for a little. I had no idea there could be such a night as this except in books.”

“Perhaps it strikes you the more, contrasted with the row and junketing indoors,” said her companion.

“No. In any case it would be delicious. And yet there is something of awe about a night like this—don’t laugh at me—it always seems a mysterious shadow-land connecting us with another world.”

“Laugh at you! Why won’t you give me credit for a capability of entering into any of your ideas?”

“But I do. You are more capable of it than any one I know. There.”

“Thanks for that, anyway.”

“Don’t stop my rhapsodies, but listen. Doesn’t it seem—standing here in this stillness—as if the world lay far beneath one’s feet; that all the littlenesses and prosaic worries of every-day life could not enter such an enchanted realm? Ah-h!”

She uttered a little cry and instinctively drew closer to him as the sudden, yelping bark of a jackal sounded from the bush apparently within fifty yards of them, but really much further off, the stillness and a slight echo adding loudness to the unlooked-for and ill-sounding “bay.”

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, reassuringly. “It’s only a jackal. What would you have done if it had been a wolf?”

“I should have been dreadfully frightened. What a coward I am!”

“At any rate, this time I am not the author of the scare, which is subject-matter for gratulation,” he said.

She laughed. “No; but the interruption came in most opportunely, in time to stay my flights. Here am I, inveighing against, and thinking to rise superior to the prosaic commonplaces of life, when a sound, a mere sound, fills me with an overwhelming impulse to rush headlong back into the despised prose. What a step from the sublime to the ridiculous!”

“I was thinking something of the kind,” replied Claverton, with a half smile; and his voice grew very soft as he looked at her sweet, serious face. “But don’t be in the least afraid. A jackal is about as formidable or aggressive as a tabby cat, though he does make a diabolical row; and as for wolves, they are very scarce, and even more cowardly; and a yet bolder animal would flee from two such unwonted apparitions in the South African bush,” he added, with a laugh, as he glanced at the regulation “evening-dress” of his companion and himself. “Come this way.”

He opened a small gate in the high quince hedge, and they passed out into a narrow bush path which, wound along through the spekboem and feathery mimosa.

“Don’t be in the very least afraid,” he repeated, as they wandered on. “I want you thoroughly to appreciate and enjoy about the most perfect night I ever knew—and I’ve seen a good many—and you can’t do so if you’re expecting a wolf or a tiger to spring out of every bush.”

She laughed. “I’ll try and be less of a coward, and keep my too-vivid imagination under control.” Yet the light hand which rested on his arm seemed to lean there with ever so increased a pressure of trust or dependence, or both.

Is it the movement of bird or beast in the adjoining brake, or is it the tread of a stealthy foot, that makes Claverton suddenly turn and gaze behind him? “I could swear I heard some one,” he thinks to himself; but not a word of this does he say to his companion. Then he laughs at himself for a fool. But he sees not a tall, shadowy figure standing back beneath the shelter of a mimosa tree, watching them over the sprays of the lower scrub. He hears not again that cautious footfall following—following silently as they wend their way along the moonlit path. And what should be farther from his thoughts than danger, real or imaginary?

Presently the plash of falling water is heard, and they emerge from the path on to a high, open bank. Beneath, the moon is reflected in the depths of the still, round pool, whose rocky sides throw a black shadow on the surface, while a small cascade slides from a

height of ten or twelve feet, and, glancing like a silver thread through festoons of delicate maidenhair fern fringing the polished face of the rock, plunges, with a bell-like plash, into the glassy depths.

“That’s pretty, isn’t it?” said Claverton. “In the daytime it isn’t much to look at, but by moonlight it shows up rather well.”

“It’s lovely! A perfect picture!”

“I thought you’d like it. Sit down there,” he continued, pointing to the smooth, sloping sward, which he has narrowly scrutinised to make sure that no noxious reptile, whether serpent or centipede, is at hand. Yet may he have overlooked the presence of deadlier foe than serpent or centipede, ay, and wolf or leopard, in that peaceful retreat. “How do you think you’ll like being here?”

“Very much. I like it already. It is so different to any kind of life I have ever known before—so strange, and wild, and interesting. And then every one here is so kind. Why, I might be a very near relative instead of only a recent acquaintance! The worst of it is, I fear it will spoil me by the time I have to go back to my work.”

Her listener bit his lip until the blood flowed. His quick perception had detected the faintest possible sigh of wearyful import which escaped her.

“It shall be no fault of mine if you do go back to that same miserable drudgery,” he thought. But it was too early yet to utter the thought aloud, even he felt that. So he only said—and there was a world of tender sympathy in his tone:

“I’m afraid you have been working much too hard, and I don’t believe you are in the least fitted for it.”

“You must not try and make me discontented, Mr Claverton,” was the answer, with a sad little smile. “The fact is, I do feel the change a great deal more than I ought. Only lately I had a very dear and happy home, now I am entirely alone in the world.”

Again that irresistible impulse came over her auditor. Was it really too soon? Why, it seemed as though he had known her for ages. Yet forty-eight hours ago he had not set eyes upon her. For a few moments he could hardly trust himself to speak. Then he said, gently:

“Tell me about your old home.” The bush behind them parts, suddenly, noiselessly. A head rises; a great grim black head, with distended eyeballs rolling in the moonlight. Then it sinks again and disappears, but they have not seen it.

“I suppose I have no right to feel leaving the old place as I did,” went on Lilian. “We were in a way interlopers, for it belonged to my stepfather, not to our family. I lived there, though, ever since I can remember, and my mother died there. We were very happy but for one thing: I had a stepsister about my own age who detested me. In short, we couldn’t get on together, hard though I tried to like her. So when Mr Dynevard died—”

“Who?”

“Mr Dynevard. My stepfather,” repeated Lilian.

“Of Dynevard Chase, near Sandcombe?”

“Yes. Why, you don’t mean to say you know it?” cried Lilian, lost in wonder.

“I wish I did. I’m afraid my utmost acquaintance with it lies in having driven past the place once or twice. Some distant relatives of mine lived not far from Sandcombe years ago. So that’s where you used to live?”

“Yes. This is a surprise. I shall make you talk to me such a lot about it,” she cried, gleefully. “You will soon be heartily tired of the subject, and will wish you had preserved a discreet silence.”

Claverton remembered the reluctance to dwell upon home topics which she had expressed when the two of them were driving up from the town, and it was with an extraordinary sense of relief that he did so. There was nothing more behind it than the painfulness of her change of circumstances to a proud and sensitive nature.

“After my stepfather’s death,” went on Lilian, “I thought it best to relieve Eveline Dynevard of my presence, and did so. There you have the whole of my history.”

“And then you struck out a line for yourself, and thought to open that miserably hard old oyster, the world, with the blade of a miniature penknife. How enterprising of you!”

“No, not at once—at least—at the first, that is—” and she hesitated slightly and the colour rose to her face, as at some painful recollection. Her trepidation was not lost upon her listener, on whom it threw a momentary chill.

Again that grim head rises from the bushes, ten yards behind the unsuspecting couple, followed this time by a pair of brawny dark shoulders bent forward in an attitude of intense watchfulness—the attitude of a crouching tiger. Again the moonbeams fall upon a fierce visage and eyes glaring with vengeful hate. They fall on something more—on the gleaming blade of a great assegai, and then the mighty frame of a gigantic savage slowly begins to emerge from the covert.

Claverton sees not the baleful stare of his deadly foe, for he is too intent upon gazing at the lovely preoccupied eyes before him, and wondering what is their exact colour, changing as it ever does in the varying light. His companion sees it not, for she is living again in the past. And no zephyr quivers through the silvered leaves or ruffles the pool at their feet, no cloud comes over the calm, fair beauty of the night, no shadow warns of a secret and terrible death hovering over those two, who sit there beneath the witching influences of restful calm, of moonlight, and to one of them—of love.

"Confound it!" angrily exclaims Claverton, half rising as the sound of approaching voices and laughter is borne upon the stillness. The threatening form of the watcher disappears—but they have not seen it—and the voices draw nearer. "Our retreat is a retreat no longer. The whole lot of them are bearing down upon us. Always the way."

"Always the way." So it is. As in small things so in great; we see not the finger of Providence in fortune's hardest knocks. Yet it must be admitted that these seldom wear the guise of blessings, and we mortals are weak—lamentably weak—and our foresight is simply nil. You two, who resent the intrusion of your fellows into this slumbrous retreat, you little reck that that intrusion is the saving of the life of at least one of you.

"But anyhow we must be going back now. As it is they will be wondering what has become of as," said Lilian, rising.

"I suppose we must," assented her companion, ruefully. He thought he could have sat for ever in that enchanted glade, gazing into the beautiful face and listening to the modulation of that low, tuneful voice. "Ah, well. Now for the madding crowd again."

He wrapped her shawl around her, and they wandered back along the narrow path and beneath the orange trees again. Then as they gained the last gate and the sound of music and laughter betokened that they were close to the house, Lilian lingered a moment to look back towards the moonlit pool.

"It is a sweet place, and we have had a lovely walk," she said. "I did enjoy it so. Thanks so much for bringing me."

What did she mean? Was she blind? He paused with his hand on the half-open gate, and glanced at her with a curious expression.

A small runnel of water coursed along at their feet, shining and glowing in the moonlight, and she was standing on the single plank that spanned it. Was she blind, that she failed to read even one-tenth of what that look expressed? But he made some ordinary remark, and they passed on.

“Why, where in the world have you two been?” said Mrs Brathwaite as they entered.

“Playing truant. Miss Strange had a slight headache, and I recommended fresh air as a counteracting influence. Then we discovered that we had been near neighbours for some years without knowing it, and got talking English ‘shop’,” answered Claverton. The latter half of his statement was not strictly historical, but the speaker salved his conscience with the trite reflection that “all’s fair in love and war.”

“How curious!” said the old lady, in her interest in the coincidence losing sight of the delinquency and forgetting mildly to scold him therefor. “But it’s astonishing how small the world is, when one comes to think of it.”

“Mr Claverton,” said Lilian, reproachfully, an hour later. “I’m surprised at you. How could you say we were neighbours for ‘some years’ when you knew we were not?”

He laughed. “Were we not? Then we ought to have been. It was the merest accident of time and place that precluded it.” He could not make to her the excuse he had made to his own conscience—at least—not yet.

Pass we again to the silence of the garden. Who is this leaning against yonder fence alone and gazing with stony, set face straight in front of her? Can it be Ethel? Yes, it is. The laughing, saucy lips, so ready with badinage and repartee, are closed tightly together, and the blue eyes, erewhile flashing and sparkling with light-hearted mirth, now start forth with a hard stare. Must we, in the interests of our story, partially withdraw the curtain from her reflections? Even so, let us do it as gently as possible.

“He never looked at me like that,” she murmured, referring to the two on the little plank bridge. “Ought I to have betrayed my presence? I don’t know. I couldn’t, somehow; and they weren’t saying anything. But that look—how plainly I saw it! O, God! if only it had been given to me—to me,” she went on, passionately, “I would cheerfully have died at this moment.”

She paused, and slowly the tears welled to the swimming eyes, and glistened in the moonlight. “All the walks and rides we’ve had together; all the time we have been thrown together! Good God! if I could but live it over again! Since the very moment I saw him come in, and he looked me up and down in that calm, searching way of his—it seems only like yesterday. He never thought of me but as something to amuse him—a pretty plaything—to be thrown aside for a better. No, I am wronging him; never by word or look did he deceive me. It is I who am a fool—an idiot—and must pay the penalty of my folly; but—how could I help it?”

And the sounds of revelry came ever and anon from the lighted windows; and, without, all nature slept in a tranquil hush, and the pale stars gleamed in the sky—gleamed coldly down upon the lonely watcher.

“How I flouted you, and said hard, sharp things to you, darling; every one of them goes through me like a knife as I remember it. Yet that was at first, and—how could I tell?” and a great sob shook the delicate frame. “But help me, my pride! Oh, love, you will never know. The same roof will cover us, and I must talk and even laugh with you as before—and see you and her together; but—you will never know. Ah! what a deal it takes to break one poor little heart! And—how I hate her!”

A voice intrudes upon her reflections, quick, gruff, and horribly familiar. “Oh, there you are, Miss Brathwaite,” it says, “I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

The voice acts upon her even as the trumpet blast upon the proverbial charger. Not a trace of any recent emotion is visible as she turns and faces her persistent but unwelcome admirer, Will Jeffreys.

“And you’ve found me. What can I do for you?”

The young fellow is staggered. The fact is that, warmed by the exhilarating exercise and the yet more exhilarating stimulant which he has imbibed pretty freely in the course of the evening, he has screwed up his courage to the sticking point, and intends to throw the dice of his fate with Ethel before the said exalted quality has time to cool, which process of refrigeration, it may be remarked, has already begun.

“Well, there is something you can do for me,” he says.

“What is it? Do you want a partner for the next dance?—because, I’ll be in directly,” she asks, quickly.

The very tones of her voice ought to have brought home to Jeffreys the inexpediency of pursuing his subject for the present; but some persons are singularly deficient in a sense of the fitness of things or of times, and he was one.

“No; it isn’t that. I want to say something—something about me—and about you,” he blunders, lamely; but she will give him no help, “and—I must—say it—to-night—Ethel!” he jerks out.

“For goodness’ sake don’t say it to-night, or at any other time,” replies she, decisively, putting out her hand, with a gesture as if to stop him. It has the desired effect. Even Jeffreys’ dull wits are alive to the conviction that his is not merely a losing game, but a lost one; and the reflection exasperates him.

“Oh, I might have known,” was the sneering reply. “Of course—no one has been fit to speak to since that fellow Claverton came.”

She turned upon him, her face white with wrath in the moonlight. “Wilfred Jeffreys, you are a brave fellow. You have found me here alone, and have taken the opportunity of insulting me. Now what do you think I am going to do?”

“What?”

“I am going in to ask uncle to put away the brandy decanter,” said she, in tones of bitter scorn; and without another word she walked away, leaving him standing there looking and feeling, from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, a thorough fool.

Within doors the fun is kept up with a zest characteristic of such entertainments. There are no shy ones left now, all are merged in the ranks of the confident.

Crash!

Down comes Hicks like a felled tree, right in the middle of the room. Matters are at a momentary standstill, and the unlucky one slowly and shamefacedly picks himself up, red and wrathful and covered with confusion. He is muttering maledictions on the head of the guileless Allen, which ass, he declares, not content with cannoning against him, tripped him up.

“Never mind, jump up. Lucky it’s before supper,” laughs jovial Jim Brathwaite.

“Hicks, old man, I told you to draw the line at that fourth glass,” says the irrepressible Armitage in a mighty stage whisper as he whirls by, grinning with malicious delight. The

truth being that Hicks is the most abstemious wight in the world. But the remark does not pass unheeded, and a laugh, varying in tone from open guffaw to suppressed titter, further exasperates and discomfits the luckless stumbler, who vows vengeance on his tormentor.

Then comes supper, which must be attended to in relays, space being limited. A Dutchman is desperately anxious to make a speech, and is with difficulty quelled; while Jack Armitage, who has a bet on with some one that old Garrett being too far gone to detect the fraud, he will make him drink three tumblers of water under the impression that it is grog, is using the noble spur, emulation, to induce that worthy to swallow the third, and winks and grins triumphantly at the loser as he succeeds. Meanwhile piano and violin never flag, till at length the waning summer night begins to hint pretty broadly that it is time to knock off.

Then a great deal of inspanning and saddling up; of hunting for stray saddle-cloths and bridles which have gone adrift; not a little wrangling among the coloured stable hands belonging to the place or to the guests, and finally most of the latter are gone. The residue will tarry for a shakedown and a rest.

“Good-night—at sunrise!”

A pressure from a soft, taper hand; a sweet glance from a pair of rather tired eyes, and the door closes on a tall vision in soft creamy draperies.

The recipient of that pressure of the hand, that playful glance, turns away like a man in a dream. Half instinctively he makes his way to Hicks’ quarters. Here he is enthusiastically hailed.

“Hallo, Arthur. Come and blow a cloud before you turn in. All these chaps are asleep already.”

“All right,” was the reply, and the speaker, picking his way among several slumbering wights who rolled in blankets had compassed impromptu shakedowns on the floor of Hicks’ room, seated himself at the foot of the latter’s stretcher. “Give us a fill.”

Chapter Seventeen.

Baulked.

"Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall," is a good and safe maxim in other senses than the theological, for it goes to the very root of human nature.

Here was a man in the zenith of his strength, at an age when the fire of youth would be tempered and steeled by rare physical powers of endurance; a man to whose lot had befallen stirring and eventful experiences beyond the lot of most men, and in befalling had hardened; a man of cool judgment and keen, clear, reasoning powers far beyond his years; a man to whom the other sex would accord a full share of attention, and who hitherto has been utterly unsusceptible to any such excusable weakness, has hitherto never known a quickened pulse in response to soft glance or welcoming smile. And this man has now surrendered at sight—absolutely, and without the smallest reservation.

And it had all come about in a single day.

Just so. It is your apparent icicle that annihilates itself with the most startling rapidity when suddenly touched by the scorching beam of the unlooked-for sun. It is the unsusceptible one who goes down forehead to the earth, not pausing to spread rug or carpet in the way, when the self-constituted idol appears. And oh, how frequently too, not the feet only, but the head, the hands, and the heart of the image prove to be of the veriest clay!

To-morrow!

Who among us ever gives a thought to this commonplace word? Not, I mean, when we are passing through some momentous crisis of our lives, some care, some expectation for good or for ill, which may either make us, or crush us well-nigh out of existence. Not then, but when our lives are flowing on, smooth and undisturbed, then it is that we practically ignore the possibility of to-morrow bringing with it anything eventful, or being, in short, other than a mere twenty-four hours' repetition of to-day.

To-morrow!

We go to bed lightly with the word on our lips, our arrangements for it are all mapped out, all ordered for the next twenty-four hours, ay, and beyond them, as though there existed not in the sublime philosophy of the Wise King that most portentous of all warnings: "Boast not thyself of the morrow, for thou canst not tell what a day may bring forth."

For an exemplification of both warnings behold it perfected in him who rides abroad this morning. A single day, and his life has been cut into two halves. Nor is it even a day that has wrought this change, nor yet an hour, nor a minute. A moment, a brief flash of time, just so long as that presence took to appear before him, and he was conquered. One look, and he fell prostrate, to rise again a slave. And this man, till the day before yesterday, had not a care in the world.

He rides slowly on. On the high ground which will directly shut the homestead out of sight, he turns for a moment to gaze upon the quiet old place sleeping embowered in trees; to gaze upon it with a lingering and reverential gaze, as pilgrim taking a last look at some deeply venerated shrine. Then he urges his horse along a narrow track which leads down into the wildest part of the farm. Dark bush covers the valley on either hand, broken only by a beetling krantz, frowning down as it were upon great jagged rocks which, hurled at some remote period from its face, lie embedded beneath. Yonder, in a sequestered glade, a couple of spans of fine trek-oxen are grazing, the sun glistening on their sleek hides; a bushbuck ewe stalks timidly across an open clearing, and the alarmed note of a pheasant sounds close to the horseman; but he who rides abroad thus early is neither on business bent nor on the pleasures of the chase. He is only thinking—ruminating.

Mechanically his hand grasps the reins, as his steed, which he makes no attempt to guide, steps briskly out, skilfully avoiding the sweeping boughs which here and there overhang the path. Monkeys grin and gibber at him among the branches, and a large secretary bird floats away from its nest of sticks hard by. In the dewy webs which quiver from the sprays of the bushes, and sparkle in the sun like strings of gems, he reads but one name, one name written as it were, in delicate gossamer characters, and the breaths of morning in this fresh cool retreat are fraught with a faint but thrilling harmony—the music of low, tuneful notes which are something more than a recollection, so clearly present are they in the fancy of the thinker.

Then he ponders over the three months which have slipped by in such calm, easy fashion since he cast in his lot here, and found among these kindly and genial friends a home in its best and truest sense. It seems to him a marvellous thing that he could have enjoyed, so much contentment until this new star suddenly blazed forth in the firmament of his life. He was not susceptible, never had been. How much had not he and Ethel Brathwaite been thrown together, for instance! Ethel with her sunny spirits and laughing, wayward moods, and her capacity for working havoc among his own sex. They had been thrown daily, hourly, together, from sheer force of circumstances, yet never a pulse of his had been stirred in the faintest degree by any spell of hers.

“Too soon.”

He is again seated in imagination by the moonlit pool while that shade of unhappy recollection steals across his companion’s beautiful face. Again the longing is upon him to clear up the mystery and learn his own fate. In but a couple of days! Ridiculous! And half aloud he utters his thoughts:

“Too soon!”

Zip!—

A metallic ring on the stones behind him. Something lies gleaming on the sun-baked slope of the hill. It is an assegai.

From the weapon, which has missed his body by about six inches, his glance darts searchingly in the direction whence it came. All his coolness has returned, and now his sole idea in life is the discovery of his hidden assailant. Yet he is unarmed; it is highly probable that there are more spears where the first came from; the spot is a lonely one, and for all present purposes as far removed from human aid as the centre of the Great Sahara.

“Ah, I thought as much. I see you, Mopela, you skulking vagabond. Come down here, you dog, and I’ll brain you.”

For a head had appeared from behind a low rock some eighteen or twenty yards from the speaker, and after watching him for a moment, half the body of its owner followed. A strip of thick bush lay between him and Claverton, who he guessed was unarmed, as no weapon was levelled at him.

“Whaow!” mocked the savage, as he poised another assegai. “Whaow! Lenzimbi (Note 1). Yesterday I; to-day, you. What do you say? Can your fists reach me here? You are as good as dead, and then Mopela will hang you to a tree by the hind leg, and in an hour the aasvogels will be tearing away at your carcase;” and springing upon the rock he again levelled his formidable spear.

Claverton never moved in his saddle, but sat confronting his deadly foe as calmly as though he were asking the road; and there, above, stood the athletic form of the huge barbarian, who, entirely naked, and smeared from head to foot with red ochre, which glistened in the sun, looked a very demon of the forest. He knew that the other’s words were true, and that the chances were a hundred to one that in five minutes he would be a

dead man. He was quite unarmed, and his adversary still had two assegais. Yet he replied quite unconcernedly:

"You're a fool, Mopela. You can't hurt me, and, moreover, let me tell you this—you're a damned bad shot."

His coolness rather disconcerted the other, who laughed mockingly. "Can't I? Mopela's assegais are too sharp for Lenzimbi's 'charm,' and his God is asleep; He can't help him. Look, I have two more assegais, one for Lenzimbi, and one for his God. His God is asleep, I say."

"Is he? Look there!" exclaimed Claverton in a sharp, warning tone, pointing behind the other. The superstitious Kafir turned his head, for the moment completely thrown off his guard; quick as thought Claverton slipped from the saddle, and, wrenching off one of the stirrups, dashed into the bush and made straight for his enemy. He was just in time, for the other, having recovered himself, launched an assegai with such unerring effect as to graze the seat of the saddle; the horse, startled by the unwonted proceedings, threw up his head, snorted and backed, and finally trotted off by the way he had come. The Kafir, secure in his point of vantage, awaited the onset, grasping his remaining assegai. Claverton knew better than to hesitate, and, rushing at his adversary, dealt him a violent blow on the leg with the stirrup-iron. Maddened by the pain, Mopela sprang upon him with a wild beast's roar, but Claverton was ready. Dropping the stirrup he clutched the other's wrists, and they struggled like fiends. The athletic savage, twice the Englishman's match for sheer muscular strength, strove with might and main to free the hand which held his assegai; but the other, knowing full well that his very life depended on his not doing so, held firm—firm as iron. Their breath came in quick, short gasps, and every muscle was distended and rigid. Then the savage, with a hyaena-like howl, opened his great teeth and made a mighty snap at his antagonist's face, but Claverton lowered his head and the other's teeth met in his slouch hat; then, taking advantage of Mopela being off his guard, he drove his right knee with all the force he could muster into the Kafir's stomach. The game was now his own. His gigantic foe staggered back ten or a dozen yards, then fell gasping for breath, and dropping his weapon as he rolled and writhed among the bush below. With a fierce shout, Claverton seized the spear and rushed upon his enemy, but it was too late. Mopela had had as much as he could stomach in more ways than one, and hastened to make himself scarce; moreover, the trampling of approaching hoofs was heard and a horseman appeared, leading Claverton's defaulting steed.

"Hullo! What the very deuce is the row? Is that you, Claverton?"

"It is. Five minutes ago the chances in favour of the same being fact were infinitesimal."

“Well, you are a cool hand,” began the new arrival, when a shout far above them in the bush interrupted him and drew both their attention. They looked up and beheld Mopela.

“Gough, have you got a revolver?” asked Claverton in quick, eager tones. “He’s a long way off, but I think I can pink him. No? Haven’t you? I’d give 50 pounds for a single shot at the beast.” Then, raising his voice: “Aha, Mopela, you dog; whose god is asleep now, eh? Come down here again,” he went on, jeeringly; “come down and have another thrashing; I’ll give you one—I alone. The other Baas will see fair play. You won’t? You’re not such a fool as I thought, then. Only, look here, the next time I come across you, wherever it may be, I’ll kill you—kill you, by God. So keep out of my way.”

The savage shook his hand towards the speaker with a menacing gesture. “Whaow!” he called out. “The next time we meet Lenzimbi will sing to a different tune. When the land is red with the blood of the abelúngu (whites), and their sheep and cattle are in our kraals, Lenzimbi shall yet hang by the heels, and Mopela will, with his own hand, put out his eyes with a red-hot firestick before he is roasted—Haow! Then the warriors of the Amaxosa will have great sport in hunting out the last of the whites from their hiding-places, and all the white men will be dead; but there will be plenty of white women—ha! ha! ha!—plenty of white women,” went on the savage, in his great mocking tones. “And the dark lily of Seringa Vale,” (jerking his thumb in the direction of that locality), “when Lenzimbi’s body and spirit is burnt up in the slow fire, she and Mopela will—Ha!” He disappeared suddenly, for with a furious oath Claverton plunged into the bush in pursuit; but he might as well have searched for the proverbial needle as for the crafty savage, who simply dodged him in the thick covert, laughing in his sleeve the while. In less than half an hour he returned to his wondering companion.

“Where are you bound for, Gough?”

“Thorman’s—I’m thinking of buying that horse of his.”

“All right. I’ll go part of the way with you and get back round by the vij-kraal (Note 2). But let’s pick up these carving-knives first.” He gathered up the three assegais, all well-made weapons with keen blades and long, tapering handles; then, as they mounted and rode off, he told his companion what had happened.

John Gough was a young man of about twenty-three, who had migrated to the colony about a year before in search of employment. This he had found in the capacity of tutor to Naylor’s children—four healthy young romps, as disinclined for their books as frontier children usually are. He was of a quiet and retiring disposition, but a good fellow. For some reason or another he rather disliked Claverton, but was too good-

natured to show it; and now, as they rode along in silence—for Claverton had relapsed into a fit of taciturnity—he began to think he had done him an injustice.

"Well, I think I shall turn here," said that worthy, when they had gone a little way further. "Gough, I'm going to ask you to do me a favour."

"What is it?" inquired the other, somewhat surprised.

"To oblige me by not mentioning this little shindy to any one—will you?"

"Yes, certainly, if you wish it," answered Gough, rather reluctantly. He was disappointed as well as surprised; topics of conversation were scarce, and such a jolly row as Claverton had just had would be nuts; even as it was, he had been thinking how he would entertain the Thormans with an account of it, and now it was to be kept dark. Well, Claverton was a queer fellow, but it was his own business. So he gave the required undertaking.

"Thanks; I knew you would. I don't fancy that scoundrel will come near me again. Good-bye." They shook hands, and went their respective ways.

A few hundred yards further, and a blue smoke reek above the bush betokened a dwelling. In an open space stood two huts, dome-shaped, and constructed of thatch, and hard by, a thorn enclosure at that moment full of sheep. This was one of the out-stations, where one of the flocks was wont to be kept. A mangy and spindle-shanked cur rushed yapping forth, roused by the tread of the horse's hoofs. A mighty crack of the rider's whip, however, caused it to beat a precipitate retreat, and also had the effect of bringing a head to the small, beehivelike entrance of one of the huts. The head was promptly followed by its owner, who stood up and saluted Claverton.

"Well, Umgiswe, it's some time since any of us have been down here to count, so I'll do so now. Turn them out."

"Ewa 'nkos," (yes, chief), replied the Kafir, curiously eyeing the assegais which the other carried; and opening the kraal he threw off his red blanket and began driving out the sheep, while Claverton stood at the gate and counted.

"Eighty-one—eighty-three—eighty-seven—ninety—ninety-two—ninety-three—six hundred and ninety-three. Why, how's this, Umgiswe? There are three missing?"

The old Kafir shrugged his shoulders and muttered something to the effect that they had died in the veldt. Then he fumbled about with the fastenings of the gate.

“Now, look here, Umgiswe! When sheep die they don’t melt into air. If these three are dead, I must see their skins. Do you hear? If they are not dead they must be found. I shall come down to-morrow and count again; then they must be here,” said Claverton, decisively, looking the man straight in the eyes.

He was a quick linguist, and, during the short time he had been on the frontier, had mastered enough of the Kafir language in its tortuous verbosity, combined with what he had picked up during his former sojourn in the colony, to be able to converse with tolerable ease, an acquirement which added in no small degree to his influence with the natives, who always hold in greater respect a European who can discourse with them in their own tongue.

“Ewa ’nkos,” said the Kafir again. “They shall be found.” Then he asked for some tobacco.

“You shall have some, Umgiswe, you shall have some—when the three sheep are found.”

The man’s countenance fell. Then he asked, quietly and respectfully enough, where the assegais came from.

“I picked them up. Good spears, are they not? Do you know the owner, Umgiswe? If you do, tell him to come and claim them, and the sooner he comes the better.” Then nodding in response to the other’s farewell greeting, Claverton touched his horse with the spur and struck into the bush path. The Kafir stood gazing after him.

“He is a wizard; he knows everything,” said Umgiswe to himself; and then he turned away, intending to restore the two sheep he had hidden away so securely till it should be safe to send them off to his kraal in the Gaika location, there to swell the fruits of his pickings and stealings, and planning how he could doctor up the skin of the one which he and a boon companion had devoured two nights ago, so as to make it appear that the animal had died a natural death.

Note 1. One with the qualities of iron. Kafirs are fond of bestowing nicknames, though frequently of a less complimentary nature than this.

Note 2. An outlying fold for flocks whose range is at a distance from the homestead.

Chapter Eighteen.

"At the Full of the Moon."

Midnight.

The silence of desolation. The river, plashing on its sandy bars, makes faint, tuneful murmur. At intervals the wild weird hoot of an owl, high up on the wooded hillside, breaks startlingly upon the dead, solemn stillness. The air hangs heavy down here in this silent hollow, and above, the dark face of the haunted cliff rises, stern and tremendous, in clear outline against the stars.

What are those shadowy figures ranged in a semicircle round the hollow, motionless as the grave? Are they of earth? Not a whisper, not a movement in that terrible phalanx. Only two hundred pair of eyes fixed upon vacancy, with strained and expectant stare, show that these ghostly shapes have life, or had. But what are they? Grim phantom warriors gathered there to re-enact the tragedy of blood which the dim legend of savage tradition associates with the spot.

And now a glow suffuses the sky, faint at first, then spreading nearly to the zenith. A great golden disc peers above yonder bush-clad height, and slowly mounting upward, soars majestically into space. Half of the valley beneath is flooded with light, but the face of the haunted cliff is still in gloom, casting a long black shadow upon the plashing river whence the mist is rising in white wreathe.

"At the full of the moon."

A dull, moaning sound is heard in the cliff, seeming to come from the very heart of the rocky wall, now rising, now falling, awesome and mysterious. It is as the voices of the spirits of the dead. There is an overpowering and mesmeric influence in the very atmosphere. Then gleams forth a flickering green light which plays on the face of the rock like a corpse candle. Suddenly the whole of that crouching phalanx starts up erect. A deep-toned murmur, sounding like a muffled roar, goes forth from the throats of two hundred dark warriors, and the ghostly light glints on a forest of bristling assegais.

"At the full of the moon."

Small wonder that the orb of night, about which poets love to rave, should be constituted the presiding goddess at the gruesome rites of savage and superstitious races all the world over; that its changing quarters should be endued with power to sway their weightiest undertakings in war or in the chase. It would be strange if the great lustrous

disc stamped with a cold, impassive, remorseless-looking human countenance, floating silently over the darkened earth, did not appeal powerfully to the spiritual side of untaught and imaginative races. And then, just think of the myriads upon myriads of scenes of violence and treachery—fraud, rapine, murder, and wholesale massacre—upon which that cold, spectral countenance has looked down, and still looks down; ay, and will continue to do as long as this miserable world shall be peopled with countless generations of the tailless and biped demon known as Man.

"At the full of the moon."

And now the black shadow passes from the cliff, revealing a shape—a shape which seems to have arisen from the earth itself, or peradventure to have sprung from the smooth wall of rock behind, so sudden is its appearance. Amid dead silence it glides into the midst of the expectant semicircle. Truly an appalling monster. The moonlight, now well-nigh as clear as day, plays upon a pair of glittering, wolf-like eyes and a lean, gaunt figure, about whose long limbs are dangling ox-tails and strings of beads. The grinning head-piece of a hyaena rests helmet-like upon this creature's skull, and from between the open jaws of the beast starts forth the horrible head of a live serpent, whose sinuous coils are wound about the wearer's body. The latter, smeared from head to foot with a glistening pigment, is hung about with birds' claws, reptile heads and festoons of entrails. A horrible and disgusting object. The right arm of the wizard is red to the elbow with blood, and in his hand he carries nothing but one short, broad-headed assegai.

"Hear the words of Sefele, the spirit of this place, speaking by the mouth of his descendant, Nomadudwana, the son of Mtyusi."

Silently the whole phalanx of dark warriors sank back into a crouching attitude, gazing upon the speaker, expectant and motionless.

"There are voices above and voices beneath. There are voices in the air and voices in the water. Lo, I see a mighty host; an army gathered for battle; an army which fills the earth and the air; many warriors with their chiefs and leaders; and their right hands are even as this," (holding up his gore-stained fingers), "and their shields are dinted and their assegais are broken. And the warriors are angry and they are sad, for they have fought and fought, always bravely, and now they are tired and may not rest. And I see another army—an army not of warriors but of women—and they, too, cannot rest; they must take weapons and go forth to battle, for there are no men left."

A deep murmur from the listeners, who, squatted on their haunches, with bodies bent eagerly forward, drink in every word the wizard speaks.

“Again, I look. This time I see another army—differing tribes, but all one host—thousands and thousands and tens of thousands of fighting men; the land is red with them, but they are all asleep. They have arms—they have the sharp weapons which their fathers had, but they have forgotten how to use them. They have more—they have the fire-weapons of the whites, but they know not how to use them. The white fools put their weapons into our hands willingly, joyfully, for money, but we do not know how to use them. We drink of the white men’s poisoned strong waters and our hearts melt away—we become children—we wallow like swine upon the ground. The fighting men of the Amaxosa have become dogs and slaves.”

A fierce ejaculation here went round the circle, while many a sinewy hand grasped the tough wood of assegai hafts. The grim prophet continued, his deep tones waxing more and more ferocious like the savage growl of a beast:

“We are the dogs and slaves of the white men, even as the cowardly Amafengu were our dogs. Not to the white men only, also to their women. Do not our warriors drop their weapons, and take service, and plough the land, and hoe corn, and milk the cows, and drive waggons for white women? Ha! We, a free, a brave nation, whose fathers conquered the land ages and ages before one accursed white-foot trod these mountains and valleys—our men to be dogs to the white women! Ha! Ask Ncanda, there, who, at the word of a white woman, was tied up and lashed with whips! Ask Mopela, the brother of Nxabahlana of the house of Sandili the Great Chief, who was beaten and kicked like a dog in the presence of a white woman—Hah!”

A frenzied howl burst from the audience at these words of the wily wizard, while the two savages referred to by name, gnashed their teeth with rage.

“Who are these people that rule us? Who are they? As a calabash of water is to the Nxumba River in flood, as five stones are to the pebbles on the sea-shore, so are the whites in this land to the fighting men of the Amaxosa, to the warriors of the Amanqgika, and of the Amagcaleka, and even of the peace-loving Abatembu. And we call ourselves men!”

Then, raising his voice: “Let the omens be sought.”

A stir among the throng. Two stalwart savages rose and stood before the orator. They were magnificent specimens of their race, prior to its deterioration in morale and physique through the destroying agencies of ardent spirits and contagious disease. Of commanding stature and herculean build, these men represented a type, once common enough, but now becoming more and more rare among the border tribes. The wizard muttered an incantation over each, and the two betook themselves to the bush. A

moment of dead silence and they reappeared, dragging with them two goats—one spotlessly white, the other, jet black.

The animals were thrown upon the ground in front of the wizard, and securely tied; even their mouths being bound up, lest the sound of their agonised bleatings upon the still night air, should reach unwelcome ears. Then, still chanting his hellish incantation, the cruel monster bent down, and, with his keen assegai, gashed and mutilated the wretched creatures in a manner too shocking for detailment, beginning with the white one. A hoarse rattle, smothered by the precautionary gag, burst from their tortured throats, and their convulsive struggles were frightful to behold. Yet they aroused no spark of compassion in these merciless breasts.

In silence the Kafirs contemplated the barbarous performance; then, unable to contain themselves any longer, they sprang to their feet and burst into a low war-song, rattling the shafts of their assegais as they beat time to the savage rhythm. It was a weird and gruesome scene, such a sight as a man might witness once and remember all his life long. Above, the great beetling cliff looming up against the midnight sky; around, the shadowy sleeping heights; in the midst that band of demon warriors, the green light of the magic fire touching their grim countenances with an unearthly hue as they circled round the hideous wizard and the quivering bodies of his tortured victims, chanting their terrific war-song. Every now and again a convulsive shudder would heave through the bodies of the miserable animals, whose glazing eyes rolled piteously as they writhed their necks and bared their jaws in their terrible agony.

For upwards of half an hour the dance went on, the chief men deeming it necessary from time to time to put in a restraining word, lest the suppressed excitement of their followers should break bounds; for sound travels far at night, and it would never do to attract attention. Suddenly several voices exclaimed:

“The omen! The omen!”

In a moment all gathered round the gory and mangled carcases. One of the goats had ceased its struggles. The wizard pricked it with his assegai, but without producing the smallest sign of sensibility. The poor creature was stone dead. It was the black one.

The savages stared at each other in awed silence, then their astonishment found words.

“Ha! The black goat dies! The black goat dies and the white goat lives! Ha!”

This patent fact established, they troubled themselves no more about the other wretched victim, which showed unmistakable signs of lingering for some time to come, but turned

attentively to the wizard in subdued and eager expectancy. Nomadudwana's tone was now no longer one of fiery exhortation. When he spoke it was with deliberation, even solemnity.

"The omen is sure. The black goat dies and the white goat lives. This night I have heard a voice—the voice of Sefele whom his brethren cast from yonder height and thought to slay. To slay! One who holds converse with the spirits! This night I have talked with Sefele in that cave which none can find but he who is loved by the shades of our ancestors. These are the words of Sefele: 'The fulness of time is not yet. Though it be long in coming, let not the fighting men of the Amaxosa fall asleep; let them watch the whites with sure and wakeful glance; let them take of their flocks and of their herds, when they can. Let them go and work for the whites and cast dust in their eyes—even as we have led away on a false search the fool who lives yonder,' (pointing to Armitage's homestead, lying silent and deserted on the other side of the river) 'and have made helpless with drink the wallowing Hottentot, his dog. But above all, let them acquire the fire-weapons of the whites and plenty of ammunition.' Thus speaks Sefele. Take his words with you. The fulness of time is not yet, but the omen is sure. Lo, the dawn is not far distant. Return as you came."

An awed murmur went round the band. The magic fire disappeared. They looked wonderingly at each other. Nomadudwana had vanished.

Breaking up into twos and threes the Kafirs rapidly dispersed, eager to be gone from the dreaded spot when no longer under the protecting presence of the powerful magician who communed with the spirit in the unknown cave. They were impatient, but not disheartened. They must continue to deceive the hated and masterful whites with soft words and lying promises. These superstitious souls, with their faith in the assurances of their wizards, saw their triumph ahead. What they did not see was their broken and decimated tribes hunted and starving, driven out of the land of their forefathers, utterly cowed and submissive. What they did not see was the flower and pick of their manhood strewing their native hills and kloofs with stiffened corpses in thousands, to the advantage of the aasvogel and the jackal.

There was something else that they did not see. They did not see a recumbent human figure which, from the very brow of the sacred cliff, had watched the uncanny and repulsive rites from beginning to end. They did not see this figure, snugly concealed and motionless, watch till the last of their outlying scouts finally left his post and moved away, and then descend from the airy vantage ground with the dry chuckle of one who has stolen a march on an uncommonly shrewd adversary, and going to where a horse was securely hidden, mount and ride off. Even their keen vision failed to descry this.

By sunrise these fierce warriors, who had borne such eager part in the wild war-dance and the hideous and cruel rites of the night through, would be once more so many quiet, civil herds and waggon-drivers, for, with few exceptions, they were all in farm service in the surrounding neighbourhood. But how came they here, how did they preserve so inviolate the secret of the nocturnal gathering? The whole thing is very simple. Two or three natives, inoffensive of aspect and deferential of manner, provided moreover with unimpeachable passes, had gone the round of the various employers of labour seeking for work here, come to visit a relative there, anxious for a day or two's job in another place, and so on. And wherever they had been they had delivered their "word" among all fellow-countrymen there employed, provided these were to be trusted, that is to say. That "word" was brief if slightly obscure to the uninitiated. Moreover, it occurred quite incidentally in the thick of conversation on ordinary topics. But those to whom it was addressed understood perfectly its import.

"At the full of the moon."

Chapter Nineteen.

"What has the World been Since?—Thee Alone!"

One of the most blissful delusions, and unaccountable withal, under which a man desperately in love invariably labours, is the profound unconsciousness of his state wherewith he credits those among whom he lives and moves. What renders the delusion all the more inexplicable is the certainty that its victim himself in his unsmitten days must have frequently spotted more than one of his friends labouring under the ravages of the intoxicating malady, or at any rate his feminine kinsfolk and acquaintance were not slow to make the discovery for him. Yet when his own turn comes he may, with absolute certainty, be counted upon to imagine that his own incoherencies of speech and action, in short, all the symptoms of acute delirium entirely escape the multifold optics of the Argus feminine; and that his Beeret remains all his own, so effectually has he guarded it. Which thing, by the way, no man ever succeeded in accomplishing yet.

Lilian was singing; a sweet pathetic ballad, rendered with infinite feeling. The song ended; a final chord or two; and the singer threw it aside and turned away from the piano.

"Thanks, Lilian. Why, my child, you sing like an angel," said her hostess, moved almost to tears by the full, rich voice which, keeping well within its compass, fills the room just so much as it will bear and no more, while every word is as distinctly enunciated as though the singer were reciting it. Even Mr Brathwaite had forgotten to fall into his post-coenal doze, and sat upright in his arm-chair, wide awake and listening.

The three above mentioned are alone in the room this evening—yet stay—there enters a fourth. He had been standing quietly in the doorway during the song, and refrained from entering, for fear of disturbing the singer. He had been obliged to go out after supper to give some orders to Xuvani about the morrow, and returning, was surprised and entranced by the sound of Lilian's voice in song. So he stood in the doorway, drinking in every note.

"Why, you vowed you never sang," he exclaimed, reproachfully, advancing to the piano. "And then you wait until a fellow is out of the way, and this is the result."

She turned to him with the most bewitching of smiles. "Well, I don't," she replied, in a deprecatory tone. "At least, I haven't for a long, long time, and now I'm only trying over something I picked up the other day. Just by ourselves, you know."

"Having carefully waited till I was out of the room."

“Perhaps I was just a little bit shy, from being so long out of practice,” answered she, with a glance that would have melted a stone.

But her auditor, though stony enough in all other respects, was wax in her hands, and her glance thrilled through him like an electric shock. She had penetrated the one weak joint in his armour most thoroughly. Did she know it?

“Shyness, like all other weaknesses, should be conquered,” he rejoined. “The best way of conquering it in this instance is to sing that over again. Just by ourselves, you know.”

“But Mrs Brathwaite won’t thank me. She must have had enough of it,” objected Lilian, with a laugh.

“Enough of it!” exclaimed the old lady. “My dear child, I would have asked you myself but I didn’t quite like to. Now do. Arthur hasn’t heard the first part.”

Thus adjured, she gave way; but this time the shyness to which she had pleaded guilty, made itself manifest by an occasional slight tremor in the sweet, clear voice. Which, however, rendered the pathetic ballad all the more entrancing to her new auditor.

There was silence for a minute when she had ended Claverton broke it.

“That’s the loveliest thing I ever heard.”

“What! Did you never hear it before?”

“Never. But I don’t care how soon I hear it again.”

“Now we must have something cheerful,” said Lilian.

“But it will counteract the other.”

She laughed.

“Just what it should do. What, Mr Claverton? You get the dismals over a song? Won’t do at all.” And without giving him time to reply, she rattled off a lively little ditty, doing full justice to the spirit and archness of the composition.

Ethel and Laura were away, spending two or three days with the Naylors, and to-night Hicks had taken himself there, too; thus these two and the old people had the house to

themselves. To one of the quartett that afternoon was to be marked with the traditional white stone. A deliciously long walk with Lilian, unhindered and unrestrained by the presence of any third person. She had talked freely about the old home, and her eyes had brightened, and her cheeks had glowed with the loveliest flush, while on that most congenial of topics. Yet a thorn beneath every rose. Never could she revert to the favourite subject without that indefinable moment of restraint coming in. Again this afternoon it had gone home to her companion, strengthening the resolve which he had already formed.

The door stood open. Attracted by the beauty of the night, Lilian went out on the verandah.

“Better have a shawl, my child; you’ll catch cold,” said Mrs Brathwaite.

“A shawl!” she echoed. “Dear Mrs Brathwaite, I should be roasted. It’s as warm almost as at midday.”

“Yes, it’s a regulation summer evening,” said Claverton, following her on to the stoep. “And a light one, too, considering that there’s no moon.”

“I do think you get such glorious starlight here,” continued Lilian. “An English starlight night is the feeblest of misty twinkles, in comparison. What’s that?” as a luminous spark floated by. “A firefly?”

“Yes. There are lots of them about. Look! there’s another.”

“What do they look like, close? Couldn’t we catch one?”

“Oh, yes; nothing easier. I’ll get Hicks’ butterfly net, it’s only in the passage. Now then,” he went on, returning with the implement, “which shall it be? There’s a bright one. We’ll go for him.” So saying he made a dexterous cast, ensnaring the shining insect. Their quest had led them some twenty yards from the house.

“They are not so brilliant as I thought,” remarked Lilian, as they inspected the captive. “It’s rather an insignificant-looking thing,” she continued, allowing the insect to crawl over her delicate palm. “Let’s take it to the light.”

This didn’t suit Claverton’s purpose at all. “It won’t shine there,” he said, “and you’ll be disenchanted with it, and—Ah! It’s gone.” For the creature, evidently thinking it had instructed them enough in a new branch of entomology, suddenly opened its wings and soared off among the orange trees.

“It’s a perfect shame to go indoors on such a night as this,” murmured Lilian, half to herself.

“No earthly reason exists why we should,” replied her companion. “At least not just yet. Let’s stroll round the garden.”

“Shall we? But what will Mrs Brathwaite say?” added Lilian, dubiously.

“Say? Oh, nothing. The dear old couple generally drop off in their arm-chairs of an evening, when Ethel isn’t here to make a racket; but to-night you have charmed them back from the land of Nod with those delicious songs. Come along.”

She yielded, and they wandered down the garden path in the starlight.

But Claverton was out of his reckoning, for once. The “dear old couple” in this instance happened to be wide awake, and were discussing him in a manner that was very much to the point.

“Walter,” began Mrs Brathwaite, when the voices outside were out of earshot, “I’m greatly afraid Arthur has lost his heart in that quarter.”

“Bah!” replied her husband, with a good-natured laugh; “not he. Arthur’s made of tougher stuff than that. And,” he added, “you women think of nothing but match-making.”

“But I tell you he has,” persisted she, ignoring the latter insinuation. “Now look here. For the last fortnight he has been a changed man. I can see it, if you can’t. Why, he hardly speaks to any one else when Lilian is there. Every moment that he is not at work he is in the house, or in the garden, or wherever she is. For some days he has been looking pale and worn, and no wonder, for he doesn’t eat enough to support life in a child of three years old. And he has become, for him, quite captious and irritable. Now,” she concluded, triumphantly, “do you mean to tell me all this is only my imagination?”

“Well, perhaps you are right,” answered the old settler, reflectively. “But somehow I’ve almost thought, of late, he was rather fond of Ethel.”

“That’s because you’re not a woman,” rejoined his wife. “Now I never thought so. And I’ve noticed what I’ve been telling you ever since the night of the dance, that is, ever since the day after Lilian’s arrival. You’ll see I’m right.”

“Not sure I don’t hope you are. It would be a good thing for both of them. She’s one of the sweetest girls I ever saw, as well as the prettiest. And to be thrown upon the world like that, gaining her livelihood by hammering a lot of dirty, uproarious brats into shape—it’s abominable; and if it is as you say I heartily congratulate Arthur.”

Mrs Brathwaite laughed rather dubiously. “Not so fast,” she said, “I’m by no means sure that Arthur will find it all plain sailing. Mark my words, that girl has a history, and she isn’t to be won by any chance comer. Ah, well; we shall see.”

Meanwhile the objects of their discussion are wandering on beneath the orange trees, even as they had done barely a fortnight ago for the first time.

“You are highly entertaining, I must say,” remarked Lilian, amusedly, when they had strolled some hundred yards further in absolute silence. “I suppose I ought to offer you the regulation penny.”

“You must make a much higher bid, then. I was thinking of what you have just been singing.”

“Really now? I should never have thought you were so easily impressed.”

“I don’t know. There is a world of pathos in that composition. Those few lines contain the story of two people who might have been happy. Why weren’t they? Because it pleased a beneficent Providence—beneficent, mark you—to decree otherwise, and so Death put in his oar. Now if all hadn’t been going well with them, it isn’t likely that Providence would have been so accommodating.”

There is a brusque harshness in his tones which causes his listener to glance up at him in surprise and dismay, and she can see that his features are haggard. She is even alarmed, for she remembers hearing vaguely that her companion’s life had been a stirring and chequered one. Has she now unwittingly rasped some hidden but unforgotten chord? It must be so, and she feels sorely troubled.

They are standing on the brink of the little rock-bound pool where they lingered and talked on the night of the dance. Almost mechanically they have struck out the same path and wandered down it, but this time no deadly foe dogs their footsteps. They are alone; alone in the dim hush of the African night. Overhead the dark vault is bespangled with its myriads of golden eyes, which are reflected in the still waters of the pool, and the Southern Cross flames from a starry zone. Now and then a large insect of the locust species sends forth a weird, twanging note from far down the kloof, but no sign of life is there among the spekboem sprays, which sleep around them as still as if cut out of steel.

He picks up a pebble and jerks it into the pool. It strikes the surface with a dull splashless thud, and sinks. A night-jar darts from beneath one of the fern-fringed rocks and skims across the water, uttering a whirring note of alarm.

“Hadn’t we better be going back?” hazards Lilian, at last. Anxious to withdraw from the dangerous topic, she takes refuge in a commonplace. “It was rather late when we came out.”

Claverton is standing half turned away from her—his face working curiously as he looks down into the water. For a minute he makes no answer; then he faces round upon her, and his voice, hoarse and thick, can scarcely make its way through his labouring throat.

“Lilian, Lilian—my darling—my sweet—my own sweetest love. For God’s sake tell me what I would die at this moment to know?”

He has taken both her hands in his and is gazing hungrily down into the lovely eyes. She gives a slight start of unfeigned surprise, and he can see the sweet face pale in the starlight. Trying to speak firm she gently repeats her former question: “Hadn’t we better be going back?”

Can he read his fate in her eyes? Do those gentle tones echo his sentence? It seems so.

“No,” he replies, with all the vehemence of a foregone cause—the passion of shattered hope. “No—not until you have heard everything.” His arms are around her now, and she cannot stir from the spot if she would, but she does not try. “Listen,” he goes on, speaking in a low, quick, eager voice. “Since the very first day I saw you I have loved you as no woman was ever yet loved. From the first minute, from the first glance I caught of you that day you flashed upon me like an angel of light. Stop. It is true, so help me God, every word of it,”—for she started as if in surprise. “From the very first moment. Couldn’t you see it? Couldn’t you even see it that first day?”

“No—I could not,” is her earnest answer. “I vow to you I could not. I had no idea of—of anything of the kind. I would have gone away from here at once—anywhere—sooner than have wrecked your peace! And now this is what I have done. Heaven knows I never intended it!”

The sweet eyes are brimming with tears as she stands with bent head before him, and Claverton is convulsed with a wild, helpless yearning. The first thought is to comfort her.

“Don’t I know that? Heavens! The intention is a mere superfluity. One has only to see you to love you. Can the sun help shining?”

She looks up at him. “Then you believe me? It would be dreadful to me—the thought that you could imagine I had trifled with you.”

“I could not think so. It would be an impossibility,” replies he. For the moment he almost forgets the death blow which she has dealt to his own hopes, in his great eagerness to set her at ease with herself, to reassure her. Forgets? No. Rather he rises above himself.

“Listen, darling. Every day since you came here I have only seemed to live when with you. I have never been a fraction of a moment away from you if I could possibly have been near you. Night after night through I have lain awake, restlessly longing for morning that I might look upon you again, and then when I have left you to go about the day’s work, how I have treasured up the last glance of those dear eyes, the last ring of that sweet voice, till the very air seemed all sunshine and music. Lilian, darling, I never can live again without you, and—by God, I never will.”

He pauses; his voice failing him. The expression of his face as he hangs upon her reply is terrible to behold. It might be compared to that worn by a convicted murderer when the return of the jury to give their verdict is announced. And this is the man who, at a comparatively early age, has looked upon many a harrowing scene of human suffering unmoved, who has thoroughly steeled himself against all the tenderer feelings of nature, ever presenting a cold philosophical front to the fortunes, good or ill, of himself or of his neighbours. Who would know him standing there, ghastly white, the whole of his being shaken to the very core? Yet but a few days have wrought this change.

She makes no answer at first, for she is silently weeping. Then with an effort she looks at him, and her face wears an expression of unutterable sadness.

“Hush! You don’t know what you are saying. You must never talk to me like this again. Try and forget that you have done so. Remember what a short time you have known me. How can you know anything of me in a fortnight?”

His answer is a harsh, jarring laugh. “Forget what I have been saying? Only a fortnight? Is everything to be subject to the unalterable rule of thumb? Only a fortnight! My love—my life; do you remember the first time we were here together? I could have told you even then, what I am telling you now. Do you remember telling me about yourself; how you were all alone in the world—you? Only say the word and your life shall be without a care—all brightness and sunshine, and such love. Listen, my own! I, too, am alone in the

world. I have never found any one to love—it has all been treasured up—kept for you. Now, take it. Lilian, Lilian, it cannot be that—you—will not?"

His voice sinks to a fierce, passionate whisper, and he holds her to him as if he would never let her go. Above, in the sky, a lustrous meteor gleams—and then fades. A flight of plover, rising from the ground, circles in the gloom, with soft and ghostly whistle, and all is still, save for the beating of two hearts. Around float the fragrant breaths of the rich, balmy night.

"I can give you—no—comfort," she replies, dropping out her words as if with an effort. "Oh, why did you ever tell me this? Do you think it is nothing to me to see you made wretched for my sake? I tell you it is heart-breaking—utterly heart-breaking. Yet it cannot be. You must never, never talk to me like that again. And you have given me all the best of yourself," she exclaims, the very depth of sadness in her tone, "and I—can give you—nothing!"

"Nothing?" he echoes, mechanically, looking down into the white, sad face, out of which every trace of its usual calm serenity has disappeared, leaving a weary, hopeless expression that is infinitely touching. "Ah, I can see that your life has not been without its sore troubles. It is not for me to pry into them."

"I can give you this amount of comfort, if it be any comfort," she says, throwing back her head with a quick movement and fixing her eyes on his. "I look back upon the hours which I have spent in your society as an unmixed pleasure, and I look forward to many more, selfish as I am in doing so. I formed my opinion of you the very first few moments we were together—and our first meeting was a queer one, was it not?" with a sad little smile at the recollection. "That opinion is unchanged, except, perhaps, for the better. I cannot bring myself to forego your society, though it is only fair to warn you that I can give you no hope; and you must never ask me to. Are the conditions too hard?"

"No, they are not."

Her words had a soothing effect upon her listener, and he began to see a gleam of light. He was not indifferent to her as it was, and, given the opportunity, he would make himself absolutely indispensable. Moreover, it was just possible that he had been premature in his declaration. Yes, more time and opportunity; that was what he wanted—and he would succeed. Determination, which had never yet failed him, should effect that—determination, combined with patience. He would not even ask her her reasons for refusing him now. No; he would trust her absolutely and wholly, and take not only her but her cares, whatever they might be. And at the prospect of a contest, a strife with circumstances, though the odds were dead against him, his spirits revived.

“Promise me one thing,” he said. “You will not avoid me in any way?”

She hesitated.

“No, not in any way,” she repeated at last.

“And all shall be as it has been?”

“Yes.” Then after a pause: “We must really go in.”

He released her, and they moved away, but her steps were unsteady. The strain had told upon her, and she felt weak and faint. Quickly he passed his arm round her. “No, not that,” she said, gently, but firmly. “I will take your arm, if I may.” And in silence they retraced the bush path and entered the little gate, then through the orange garden over the runnel of water where they had stood that night when accidentally watched by Ethel. A light was burning in the room as they entered, and in an arm-chair eat Mrs Brathwaite, fast asleep, her lord having retired half an hour ago.

“Why, Lilian!” she exclaimed, starting up. “You have been out a long time! I hope you haven’t caught cold, child!”

“Oh, no; it’s such a warm night. We have been astronomising,” replied she, with an attempt at a laugh which fell mournfully flat; but the old lady was too sleepy to detect its hollowness.

“Well, better get to bed. I suppose you’ll do the same, Arthur, now you haven’t got any one to sit up and smoke all night with.” For Hicks was away, as afore stated.

“No, I don’t feel restful. Good-night. Would that to-morrow were here now!” he added, in a low, tender voice as he held Lilian’s hand in a lingering clasp. A responsive pressure, and she was gone.

He withdrew to his quarters—to bed, but not to sleep—and hour followed hour as he lay with his gaze fixed upon the square patch of golden stars bounded by the framework of his open window. Well, the die had been thrown at last. He knew where he was now, at any rate. But it was too soon to despair, for had he not close upon two months wherein to make the most of his opportunities? Determination should win, as it always had in his case. Ah, but this was outside all previous experience. Well, they had still nearly two months together. Then he began to wonder whether he was actually undergoing this feeling, or if it were not a dream from which he would presently awaken.

He started up from a fitful and disturbed doze before dawn, and resolved to go for a ride. He would go down to the vij-kraal and count out Umgiswe's flock.

During the night the sky had become overcast, and now, as he rode along in the grey dawn, dark clouds were lowering to the very earth, and the mist swept in powdery flakes through the sprays of the bush. It was a thoroughly depressing morning, and the horseman's reflections were coloured thereby. And through the chill drizzle seemed to echo the far-off tones of a sweet, low voice: "I can give you no comfort. You have given me the best of yourself, and I can give you—nothing."

We allow that to sheep from disappointed love is something of a transition. Nevertheless, the incident which occurred at the shepherd's kraal that morning must be narrated, because it is not without its bearing on the future events of our story.

"Now, Umgiswe, turn out, and let's count," said Claverton, making a slash with his whip at a couple of lean, ill-looking curs, which sneaked sniffing round his horse's heels. "Eh—what's that you've got there?" as the Kafir, having saluted him, began fumbling about with something on the kraal fence.

"Two dead sheep," answered the old fellow, producing a couple of skins, with the air of a man who has triumphantly vindicated his character against all aspersions.

Claverton examined the skins narrowly. Having satisfied himself that their sometime wearers had died of disease, and had not been slain to appease the insatiable appetites of Umgiswe and a few boon companions, he proceeded to count out the flock. The score was correct.

"All right, Umgiswe; here's some smoke for you," he said, throwing the old herd a bit of tobacco. "But I say, though—whose dogs are those?"

The Kafir glanced uneasily at the curs aforesaid.

"A man who slept here last night left them. They are sure to go after him. He has not been long gone."

"No," replied Claverton, carelessly, "he has not been long gone, or rather they have not been long gone, for they are still here. Turn them out, Umgiswe." For his ear had detected the sound of several male voices in the hut as he passed its door.

“Whouw!” exclaimed the old man, turning half aside to conceal an embarrassed smile. “They are my brothers, ’Nkos. They just came to visit me.”

“Of course they are. If the half of Kafirland were to turn up here they would all be your brothers, just come to visit you. It won’t do. So turn them out, you old shuffler, and let’s have a look at them.”

Then the intruders, to the number of three, who had been attentive listeners to the above confabulation, turned out and saluted Claverton. All three were finely-made fellows, but the elder was a man of almost herculean build. His powerful frame, which was scantily clad, was smeared from head to foot with red ochre; above his left elbow he wore an armlet of solid ivory, and from his appearance he was evidently a man of rank. In his hand he held a couple of kerries made of heavy iron-wood; one of his companions was similarly armed, while the third carried a bundle of assegais.

Claverton looked them up and down, noting every detail in their persons and weapons. “Loafers all three, and up to no good,” was his mental estimation of them, “but devilish awkward customers to tackle. Never mind. Off they must go—quietly or the reverse—but go they must.” Then he asked them the usual questions—where they came from, where they were going, and so on—they being ready with an answer of which he knew exactly how much to believe.

“Came only last night, did you? That is strange, because the evening before and all day yesterday there were three Kafirs here, and one of them was a tall man with an armlet on, and they had a couple of yellow dogs with them. How queer that exactly the same thing, should happen two days in succession!” he said in a quiet, bantering tone. In point of fact he was drawing a bow at a venture, but could see by the shifty eyes of the man to whom he was speaking that the shaft had gone home.

This fellow grinned and shook his head with an exclamation of intense amusement.

“Inkos must be Umtagati,” (one who has dealings with magic or witchcraft) he said, “to see all that went on when he was not here.”

“Umtagati? Well, perhaps,” was the easy reply. Then, fixing his eyes on those of the tall chief, who had been regarding him with a haughty and indifferent stare, Claverton went on in the same easy tone. “What do you think, Nxabahlana?” He addressed, started perceptibly. How did the white man know his name? “What do you think of Umtagati? But listen. No one has any right loafing here without permission from the Baas up yonder. So now, off you go, all three—now and at once, or you’ll assuredly come to grief. And, be careful, for remember: The black goat dies and the white goat lives.”

“Whouw!” cried all four, unable to conceal their amazement. Then, without another word, one of the fellows diving into the hut, returned with the light impedimenta belonging to the three, and with their curs at their heels, the Kafirs strode off. Just before they entered the bush the chief turned and gazed fixedly at Claverton for a minute. Then they disappeared.

“All right, my friend. I shall know you again when next we meet.” Then to the old herd, who stood holding his stirrup: “Those men must not come back, Umgiswe. And I tell you what, if you go harbouring any more conspiring loafers you’ll get into trouble.” And he rode away.

Chapter Twenty.

One Golden Day.

The clouds were parting and revealing patches of blue through their rifts as Claverton reached home, and with the returning sunshine his spirits revived. It was going to be a lovely day, and he would have Lilian all to himself for two whole hours that morning, for he was to take her over to Thirlestane, Naylor's place, and return with the rest of the party in the afternoon.

It was just breakfast-time, and Lilian entered at the same time as himself. Her face looked worn and anxious, as if not much sleep had fallen to her lot, and though he would have cut off his right hand to spare her the lightest anxiety, yet he could not feel guiltless of a sense of consolation that she should have sorrowed with him and for him. The voice of Mr Brathwaite recalled him to himself with a start.

"Well, Arthur; where did you go this morning?"

"Down to Umgiswe's."

"Was his count all right?"

"Yes. Which is extraordinary, seeing that he had been entertaining visitors," and he narrated the presence there of the three strange Kafirs.

"Did you find out the big fellow's name?" asked Mr Brathwaite.

"Yes. It was Nxabahlana. Do you know him? He looked as if he held the right of succession to the paramount chieftainship of Kafirland."

"Nxabahlana? Oh, yes, I know him," replied the old man. "He's a kind of sub-chief, and a relation of Sandili's. One of the greatest blackguards that ever stepped. Good thing you turned them out; they were up to no good, that much is certain."

"A chief!" exclaimed Lilian, raising her eyes, "I should like to see a real Kafir chief."

"Would you?" said Claverton. "I wish I had known that; you should have seen him. I'd have brought him here."

The others laughed, thinking he was joking, but Lilian knew that he meant it, every word.

“Ah, but,” she said in a repentant tone, “you couldn’t have captured him, there were three of them; at least I mean—it would not have been worth the risk.”

Claverton laughed quietly.

“No such severe measures would have been necessary. If I had promised his chieftainship a glass of grog and an old hat, he would have come trundling up here with an alacrity that would surprise you.”

“Really? That quite takes away from the poetry of the idea. I thought these savage chiefs were very proud.”

“They are proud enough just as far as it suits them to be so—inasmuch as they affect to look upon us as dust beneath their feet; but they will condescend to accept anything we may think proper to give them, whether it be a ‘tickey’ (threepence) or a pair of old boots. In fact Jack Kafir, of whatever degree, has the bump of acquisitiveness very highly developed, I assure you. Hullo! who’s this?”

For the door opened and a Dutchman entered—the same who witnessed poor Allen’s immersion at the taking out of the bees’ nest. A good-humoured grin was on his stolid countenance, which looked suggestively warm, and perhaps not too clean, and his beady black eyes sparkled at the prospect of a good feed. His corduroy trousers were tucked into a pair of top boots, and a sjambok, or raw-hide whip, dangled from his wrist. Not until he had gone all round, extending a limp, moist paw to each, did it occur to him to remove his hat.

“Autre pays, autre moeurs,” murmured Claverton in response to a charming little grimace of amusement which Lilian flashed at him from across the table, in reference to the new arrival.

A seat was found for the Dutchman, and a well-garnished plate, and being provided with a knife and fork he began to make voracious play with the same. Then having removed the edge of a very exuberant appetite, he raised his head from the platter and waxed talkative.

“Oom Walter is well?”

“Ja. Pretty so so.”

“And Mrs Brathwaite?”

“Also.”

“Det is goed,” and then having given a like satisfactory account of his vrouw and kinders the Boer informed them that he was on his way to Thirlestane, with the object of purchasing some oxen from Naylor.

“Claverton’s going over there this morning,” said Mr Brathwaite, unthinkingly. “You can go over with him.”

“So,” said the Dutchman with a nod of approval. “We will ride together.”

This didn’t meet Claverton’s wishes at all.

“I’m afraid not,” he said. “Sticks is rather lame, and I shall have to send for my other horse. They’ll hardly find him till the afternoon—if then. It won’t be worth Botha’s while to wait.”

“No. I don’t think it will,” said good-natured Mrs Brathwaite, who had taken in the situation at a glance. Lilian, not understanding the Boer dialect, was an unconscious auditor of what was going on.

Breakfast over, the Dutchman sat for about half an hour outside, smoking his pipe and talking over the usual subjects with his host—sheep, ostriches, the state of the country, how much longer they could do without rain, and so on. Then, saddling up his small, rough-looking nag, he shook hands all round and departed, thoroughly content with himself and all the world.

“What a queer fellow!” said Lilian, gazing after the awkward, receding figure of their late guest, who, with his feet jammed to the heels in the stirrups, was shuffling leisurely along, pipe in mouth.

“Yes, isn’t he?” answered Claverton. “But he’s a fair specimen of the typical Boer. Washes three times a year, sleeps in his clothes, and wears his hat in the house.”

“Lilian, dear; hadn’t you better get ready to start?” suggested Mrs Brathwaite.

“I was just thinking the same,” said Claverton; “but,” he added, in a lower tone, “I couldn’t find it in my conscience to hasten even such a temporary separation, and yet I was racked with apprehension lest some other wayfarer should turn up and make a third.”

She gave him a bright smile as she flitted indoors; then he, having got into his riding-gear, went round to the stable and simply made Jan the Hottentot groom's life a burden to him over the caparisoning of Lilian's steed. This bit was too sharp—that too soft—those reins were too hard for the hands—and what the devil did he mean by leaving those two specks of rust on the stirrup-iron? Jan and his deputy—an impish-looking little bushman—couldn't make it out at all; Baas Clav'ton was usually so easy-going, and now here he was fidgeting worse than the "sir" in the long boots (Allen).

Then Lilian came out, looking lovely in her well-fitting blue habit. There was just a little air of timidity about her which was inexpressibly charming, as Claverton put her into the saddle. She was not a bold horsewoman, she confessed. She was ashamed to say that if anything she was just a wee bit afraid every time she mounted a horse. Nevertheless she sat beautifully, and the somewhat timid hand held the reins as gracefully if not quite as firmly as that of any hard-riding Amazon. To-day she was mounted on a handsome old bay horse of Mr Brathwaite's, who carried his head well, had a firm, easy walk, and was as safe as a church, while Claverton rode a dark chestnut just flecked with white, a fine, spirited animal which he had bought to supplement the faithful "Sticks," using the latter for the rougher kinds of work.

"Do you know, nothing but my unblushing mendacity kept that seedy Dutchman from inflicting himself upon our ride?" remarked Claverton, when they had started; and he told her of his little subterfuge.

"Shocking! You had no right to tell such a story," she answered, with a laugh.

"Hadn't I? Which would have been best—the lie or the Dutchman? 'Of the two evils,' you know, and I thought the lie the least. Perhaps you would have preferred the Dutchman?"

"No, I would not. But I think—well, I think—you did about the very best thing you could have done," she replied, breaking into a silvery laugh. "But don't take that as any encouragement to persevere in the art. It's a dangerous one, and I believe you are quite an adept in it already. In fact, I've heard you tell one or two shocking fibs myself."

"All's fair in love and war." Then noting the look which stole over her face he wished the quotation unsaid. "But I promise you I won't indulge in mendacity any more than I can help."

"You must not do it at all. Seriously, it isn't right."

"Except as a choice of evils. How would society get on without its mendacities?"

“Never mind about society,” retorted Lilian, brushing aside an inconvenient argument in right womanly fashion. “And now promise you’ll do what I’m going to ask you.”

“Oh, cheerfully.”

“I’m going to set you a penance.”

“Consider it performed. But what is it?”

“Well, the next time a choice of evils is offered you, you are to choose the one which does not involve romancing.”

“That must depend upon its nature.”

“Oh, you promised!”

“So I did, and so did Herod, and look what came of it.”

“Never mind about Herod,” was the laughing reply. “I have got you at a disadvantage, and I mean to keep you at it. Look, are not those Kafirs picturesque, in their red blankets, filing through the dark green of the bush?” she broke off, pointing out half-a-dozen ochre-painted beings who were crossing the valley some distance from them. They were walking in single file, and every now and then one would half stop and throw a remark over his shoulder in a deep bass tone. Their necklaces of jackals’ teeth showed white against their red bodies, which glistened in the sun, and as they marched along, head erect and with their kerries over their shoulders, they certainly did look picturesque.

“Yes, and do you notice how clear the air is? I can make out nearly every word those fellows are saying,” answered Claverton.

“Can you really? What are they talking about?”

“What are they talking about? Now look at them. The noble savage on his native heath, looking too, as if it actually did belong to him, striding with free and independent bearing, proud and scornful in mien. You think they are talking of war and tribal greatness, and the extermination of the hated white man, and such-like lofty and ambitious schemes? Nothing of the sort. One fellow is narrating how he got a thorn in his right heel, and how badly his brother extracted it for him, while three of the others

are all trying to say at once what a fool the brother was, and that they could have done it much better."

Lilian broke into a peal of laughter. "How absurd you are! You have quite taken the poetry out of them, and now they look like a very commonplace lot of beings. But is that really what they were saying?"

"It is, upon my word. To see a lot of Kafirs talking you would think they were letting off a stream of oratory, what with all their gesticulation and modulation of voice. In nine cases out of ten they are discussing the veriest trivialities."

"I'm not sure that I'm glad I know that. It spoils the romance of the thing. I shan't look at them with the same interest."

"You are given to idealisation, I see," he said. "It is a delightful pastime, and I must not do anything to shock it. But, look! That, at all events, is entirely free from the commonplace."

They had reached the brow of an eminence, and before them lay unfolded a panorama which brought a flush of delight to Lilian's face. Upland and valley lay sleeping in the golden sunshine, a rolling expanse of verdure, now open and grassy, now covered with thick bush, or dotted here and there with feathery mimosas. Wave upon wave of rise and swell, there seemed no end to the wide beautiful plains; and the eye wandered on, over and over it, drinking in a new delight in the far-seeing vision, then turning to refresh itself in the grand mountain chain which bounded its range in front. Stretching afar, in a hundred and fifty miles of stately crescent, rose those lofty mountains with their sunny slopes and beetling cliffs, and black forest-clad sides seen through the dim uncertainty of the summer haze; while, towering above the rest, the Great Winterberg raised his weather-beaten crest to the cloudless bine. The thatch and white walls of a farmhouse or two, visible here and there in the distance, redeemed the spectacle from the utter wildness of a newly-trodden land, but on the other hand added to the peaceful solemnity of the scene. Hard by, the air resounded with the low hum of bees busily gathering their stores from the blossoming sprays of a neighbouring clump of bush; spreuws whistled, and a dainty little sugar-bird—the humming-bird of Southern Africa—flitted across the path, his painted plumage glittering in the sun. Down in the valley two or three pairs of blue cranes roamed about picking in the grass, and every now and then their strange rasping note floated not unmelodiously through the calm.

Lilian, in her intense love of the beautiful, could not restrain a cry of delight as she gazed upon the splendid panorama before them. The exhilarating exercise and the warm balminess of the air had brought the loveliest flush into her clear olive cheeks, and as

she sat there lightly reining in her horse, while the sweet eyes sparkled and dilated and a witching smile carved the usually sad mouth, her companion thought he had never seen such a picture in his life.

“A lovely background with a lovelier central figure,” he murmured. “Look at it well,” he added. “Take it all in thoroughly, now; it will never look the same again. Nothing ever strikes us as it does the first time.”

She looked half round at him. “Am I delaying you?”

“Delaying me? Good heavens!” is all the reply he can make just then. Often in the time to come will he remember this day, this moment. Often will he stand in imagination as he does now with one arm over the pommel of his saddle, watching the radiant face of this girl in its almost divine beauty, set in entranced contemplation of the glorious landscape all gleaming with purple and gold in the flooding sunshine. And remembering it he will feel as though he had lost Heaven. A dull, gnawing pain tugs at his heart as a forecast of the future runs darkly through him, but with a great effort he thrusts it aside; he will live in the present, and sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

“What are those, down there?” cried Lilian. “Bucks of some sort?”

“Yes. Springbok. There are a few on this side of the place.”

Some two dozen of the graceful creatures were trotting leisurely along on the slope below them. They were near enough for the dark stripe upon their shining sides to be plainly discernible, as also the rings on their black curved horns, as they kept turning their heads to gaze inquiringly at their human observers.

“How pretty they are!” said Lilian. “We are seeing ever so many queer things to-day, and this beautiful country. Do you know, I am thoroughly enjoying this ride.”

“Are you? I wish it might last for ever.”

His face wears the same look of longing desperation which it wore in the starlight, while they stood by the pool. Quickly the gladness fades from hers as a light that has gone out. She thinks how selfish she is to throw her joyousness at him thus, while his heart is aching for love of her.

“Hush!” she says, in a low compassionate tone. “Remember our compact.”

Claverton dare not trust himself to look at her. His eyes are fixed on the hazy slopes of the far-off mountains, whose green and purple sides he scarcely so much as sees. For some minutes neither speaks. Then with a quick restless sigh he throws himself into the saddle.

“You are right,” he says, huskily. “It is I who am weak; weak as water. Only this once. I will not transgress again.”

They resumed their way. The springboks, startled by the sudden move forward, bounded off. On the brow of the rise, several of them began leaping high into the air, with all four feet off the ground together, and their bodies in the form of a semicircle. Being in relief against the sky, the effect was not a little bizarre.

“What ridiculous creatures!” said Lilian, watching them. “I never saw such contortions.”

“Yes, they are vindicating their name,” said her companion, tranquilly. He had recovered his composure, and was thankful for this diversion.

Cresting the next ridge they came suddenly upon a couple of advancing horsemen, heavy-faced, lumbering-looking fellows, their complexions tanned to the colour of brickdust, and it needed but a glance at their general untidiness, and seedy get-up, to pronounce upon their nationality.

They stopped and shook hands with Claverton, doffing their greasy hats to his companion, at sight of whom even their wooden countenances showed signs of animation. A few commonplace questions and answers were exchanged, then one of the Boers, glancing at Lilian, asked with the freedom of speech customary among that delightfully primitive people: “Is that your wife?”

He answered without moving a muscle, and enlightened them. They were only ignorant brutes, he reasoned, half savages almost; yet just then, the question had come upon him with a kind of shock. He was thankful that Lilian had not understood the conversation.

“I really must learn Dutch,” she said. “It isn’t nearly such an inviting tongue as the full melodious flow of the Kafir language; but far more useful, I should think. Everybody seems to speak it.”

“Yes, it’s the regular go-between jargon here. Very few even of the frontier people speak Kafir, and not one Kafir in five hundred can talk English, hence the necessity of a go-between. Look! There’s our destination.”

They had reached the brow of one of those long rolling undulations which formed a leading feature in the landscape, and on the rise opposite stood a large single-storeyed house, with an iron roof and deep verandah. A block of out-buildings adjoined, and several spacious enclosures sloped down into the hollow; but save for a few tall blue gums overshadowing the house, the surroundings were destitute of trees.

"Ah, you've found your way over to us at last," said Emily Naylor, who with Laura Brathwaite had come out on the stoep to meet Lilian. "So glad to see you. Was it very hot, riding? You must be tired."

"Oh, no," answered Lilian, "the air was delightful, and the view—I never saw anything so perfect;" and she turned to look again at the wide, sweeping landscape stretching away in front.

"Yes; it's very pretty," said her hostess. "It is not so pretty here as at Seringa Vale, because we have no trees, but the look-out is much wider. But come inside and sit down, or shall we sit out here? You must be tired after your ride."

"I'm not though, really. And you must not make me out an invalid," answered Lilian, with a smile. "I'm far from that."

"Then come and see the young ostriches."

Lilian readily assented, and the whole party moved thither accordingly.

"Well, Miss Laura, you're looking all the better for your change of air; in fact, blooming," remarked Claverton, who was walking beside her. "By the way, where's the twin?"

"Ethel? Oh, she's down at the ostrich enclosure, where we are going. Mr Allen is there, too, and Will Jeffreys."

"Alias Scowling Will. So he's here, is he?"

"Yes. But I can't return you the compliment you just paid me. You look as if you had been up all night for a week," answered Laura, with a spice of demure malice.

"Oh, don't make personal remarks; it's rude," murmured Claverton, languidly.

"Ha—ha," struck in Naylor. "Claverton's been getting on the spree, I expect, now that you two are not there to keep him in order. And now here we are," he went on, as they arrived at an improvised yard some twenty feet square, wherein a number of little oval-

shaped woolly things were running about. “They are strong little beggars, not a seedy one among the lot.”

They had not been long hatched, and as they scuttled about, stopping occasionally to peck at the chopped lucerne strewn on the ground, they were just the size and shape of the parent egg, plus legs and a neck. Naylor picked one of them up.

“You’d never think that this little chap in less than a year’s time would be able to kick a fellow into the middle of next week, would you?” he said, showing it to Lilian.

“No, indeed,” replied she, stroking the little creature’s glossy brown neck, and passing her fingers through the thick coating of hair-like feathers like the soft quills of the porcupine, which covered its back. “What dear little things they are. They ought always to keep small.”

“Oho!” laughed Naylor. “Bad look out for those who farm them, if they did. You wouldn’t get much for a plucking off this little beggar, for instance.”

“Of course I didn’t mean that,” she explained. “I meant that it was a pity such pretty little things should grow up big, and ugly, and vicious.”

“It’s a good thing sometimes that they are vicious,” said Naylor. “It keeps the niggers from going into the enclosures and stealing the eggs, and even plucking the birds. They are taking to that already.”

“Are they not too much afraid of them?”

“Not always. Look at those two black chaps in yonder camp. They are four-year-old birds, and the nigger isn’t born who’d go in and pluck them. Look, you can see them both now,” added Naylor, pointing out a couple of black moving balls, many hundred yards off, in the middle of their enclosures.

“It is all very interesting,” exclaimed Lilian, half to herself, gazing around. Far away on the sunlit plains a herd of cattle was lazily moving; down by the dam in the hollow, whose glassy waters shone like burnished silver in the midday heat, stood a few horses, recently turned out of the kraal, swishing the flies with their tails, or scratching each other’s backs with their teeth, while in the ostrich “camps,” whose long, low walls ran up the slope, the great bipeds stalked majestically about, pecking at the herbage on the ground, or, with head erect and neck distended, looked and listened suspiciously, equally ready for a feed of corn or for an intruder. All seemed to tell of peace, and sunshine, and prosperity.

“How you must enjoy your life in this beautiful country!” she went on.

Naylor was hugely gratified. Subsequently he took occasion to remark to his wife that Lilian Strange was the nicest and the most sensible girl he had ever seen. “Why doesn’t Claverton cut in for her?” added the blunt, jovial fellow, in his free-and-easy way. “Then they could get hold of one of these places round here. He’s a fool if he doesn’t.” To which his wife answered, with a provoking smile of superior knowledge, that she supposed most people knew their own business best.

Now, however, he looked pleased. “Well, yes; we’ve been brought up in it, you see, and shouldn’t be happy in any other. But I should have thought that you, coming out from England, would have found it rather slow. Perhaps you haven’t had time to, though, as yet.”

“You mean that the novelty hasn’t worn off yet? No more it has; but even when it did, that would make but little difference. There is a charm about this beautiful country, with its solitudes, its grand mountains, and rolling plains, and wild associations, which, so far from becoming tame, would grow upon one. And the climate, too, is perfect.”

Naylor laughed diffidently. “Yes; but there’s another side to that picture. How about bad seasons, and drought, and war, and locusts, and stock-lifting, and so on? It isn’t all fun here on the frontier.”

“Now, I won’t be disenchanted,” she retorted, with a bright smile. “You must not try and spoil the picture I have drawn.”

“Then I won’t. Hallo, Ethel! We’ve been looking for you,” he added, turning as he, for the first time, discovered she had joined them. “Here’s Miss Strange prepared to swear by the frontier—in fact, she has done so already.”

“Yes?” said Ethel, coming forward to greet Lilian; and Claverton could not help contrasting the two as they stood together: the one with her soft, dark, winning beauty, the lovely eyes never losing for a moment their serene composure; the other, bright, laughing, and golden, the full red lips ever ready to curl in mischief-loving jest or mocking retort, and hair like a rippling sunbeam. Yet nine men out of ten would probably have awarded the palm to Ethel. “Yes?” she said, and, in her heart of hearts, added, “and with her own reasons.” She did not feel very cordially towards Lilian just then.

“She says it’s perfect, all round,” went on Naylor—“a young Paradise.”

“I don’t know,” said Ethel. “I shouldn’t like to stay on the frontier all the year round. One would miss the balls and theatre in Cape Town.”

“Aha!” laughed Emily, “Ethel is still intent on slaughter. She made such havoc last session; ever so many poor fellows threw themselves off the cliffs on Table Mountain on her account; how many was it, Ethel—twenty-five?—that she had to be spirited away in the night for fear of the vengeance of their bereaved mammas.”

“Call it fifty while you’re about it,” she answered. “How awfully hot it has become!”

This served as a pretext for a move indoors, which was made accordingly.

“So you’re all determined to go back this evening,” said Naylor, as they sat in the verandah after dinner.

“I think we must,” answered Ethel; “aunt will think we are never coming back.”

Hicks, who at the other end of the verandah was “assisting” Laura to play with the children—these having finished their morning’s lessons, had invaded the party—pricked up his ears and looked rueful in advance. If they were persuaded to stay, he would have to go anyhow; but Ethel was firm, and he breathed freely again.

“But, Claverton, you and Miss Strange might stop—to-night, at any rate,” persisted Naylor.

It was Ethel’s turn to feel apprehensive. She had schooled herself into accepting the situation, and accepting it patiently. The strife had been a hard one, and she had suffered in it—suffered acutely, but she had conquered. Yet the struggle had not been won in a moment, and it had left its traces; but she seemed not to show them; she was a trifle graver, and more subdued in manner, that was all. A few days ago she had longed, with an intense longing, to get away—away from the sound of his voice, from the glance of his eyes; yet now that it is a question as to whether they shall return without him, her heart beats quick, and she seems to hang upon the verdict which they are all discussing so calmly.

“I don’t think we can to-day, Naylor,” answered Claverton, a glance at Lilian having satisfied him that she did not favour the scheme.

“But look here,” Naylor was beginning, when his wife cut him short.

“Why shouldn’t we inspan and go back with them, Ned? We can leave Seringa Vale again before breakfast if you like, and there’s something I want to see mother about.”

“All right, we’ll do that. Don’t you think Seringa Vale is rather a good name for a place, Miss Strange?”

“Yes—so pretty,” answered Lilian; “it’s a poem in itself.”

“How do you like Thirlestane?”

“I like it, too. Did you name it?”

“Yes,” replied Naylor, “it’s called after a small place my grandfather had in England. Its original name is a Dutch one—Uitkyk, a look-out; but Thirlestane’s better than Uitkyk, isn’t it?”

“Jack Armitage calls it ‘Oatcake’ even to this day,” put in Claverton.

Suddenly, a loud booming noise came from one of the enclosures. All looked in that direction. The great ostrich was plainly visible, his neck inflated to six times its size as he emitted his deep call, volleying it out in heavy booms, three at a time.

“Fancy an ostrich making such a row as that! You wouldn’t have thought it possible, would you, Miss Strange?” said Gough, the tutor. He had joined the party at dinner-time, when school was over.

“I don’t think I should,” answered Lilian. “The first time I heard it, I was so frightened. It was at Seringa Vale. I was lying awake at night, and this great booming sounded so awful in the dead of night. I hadn’t a notion what it was; the first thing I thought of was some wild beast.”

“A lion, I suppose,” said Naylor.

“I think the whole of the Zoological Gardens ran through my vivid imagination. How Mr Brathwaite laughed when I told him about it next morning! Yet I was terribly frightened.”

“No wonder,” said Claverton. “It’s a precious uncanny sort of row to strike up in the middle of the night, especially when you don’t know where it comes from, or what it’s all about.”

It was now voted time to be getting the horses in. This served as a signal for a general break-up, the masculine element of the party making towards the stable, or the enclosure, where some manoeuvring was needed, as we have seen, to obtain possession of the requisite steeds without exciting the wrath of the autocratic biped who reigned there.

Claverton having, as before, submitted Lilian's steed and its gear to a rigid examination, now whisking a speck of dust off the saddle, or letting down a link of the curb-chain and readjusting it, assisted her to mount.

"Wish that fool would go on," he muttered savagely, referring to Allen, whose ancient screw was mooning along with a kind of crop-the-grass gait. The rest of the party were on ahead. "He needn't wait for us," and flinging himself on his spirited chestnut he bade the groom let go the reins. The fine animal tossed his head and sidled and champed his bit as he felt himself free; free yet not free, for his rider was a consummate horseman and had him perfectly in hand.

Lilian laughed. "Poor fellow," she said. "Do you know, I sometimes feel so sorry for him. You all chaff him dreadfully and—Oh!"

The last exclamation is one of alarm, for at that moment a troop of ostriches—young ten-month-old birds—having deserted its herd in one of those stampedes to which these idiotic bipeds are so liable, whirls past them, with wings outstretched and snowy plumes sparkling in the sun, and Lilian's steed, which has not yet become quite accustomed to the gigantic fowls, shows signs of restiveness.

"Don't be frightened—darling. You're quite safe," says her escort, noting the scared look in her face, as the old horse tugs at his bridle and snorts and plunges a little. "He'll be perfectly quiet in half a minute."

He is so close beside her all the time, and speaks in such a reassuring tone that her alarm subsides, and the old steed drops into his normal steadiness as though half ashamed of himself.

"Are you not utterly disgusted with such a coward?" says she, with a faint apologetic laugh. "I ought to have enjoyed the affair as a good opportunity for showing off, oughtn't I?"

"One must show on before showing off. I wouldn't have you anything but timid on board a horse for the world, except for your own sake. It suits you to perfection."

He is in earnest. These oft-recurring little alarms of hers are so captivating in their pure unaffectedness, so womanly; and, withal, the sense of protection imparted to himself is delicious. And if she is at times somewhat shrinking, as at present, even that lends an additional attraction to her delicate refinement.

“Every one is not an Amazon, thank heaven,” he continued, “and you will soon be as much at home on horseback as in a chair. We will have a lot of practice. Besides, you know, lately you have not been very well, and that is calculated to unnerve you. We will do our best to set you up thoroughly—while—you are here.” He tried to speak firmly, but it was of no use, that tell-tale tremor shook his voice over the last four words, for they conjured up a picture of when she should be no longer “here,” and he dared not think of it. At present he would thrust the thought far from him.

They had now overtaken Allen, and were obliged to shape the conversation accordingly. “Shall we canter on a little?” suggested Claverton. “The rest are a good way ahead.”

Lilian acquiesced, and their steeds bounded along the grassy slopes at an easy elastic canter, but Allen’s sorry screw finding a difficulty in keeping pace with the long stride of the well-bred horses, that disconsolate youth soon dropped behind.

“Here is our panorama again,” said Claverton, reining in on the top of the hill, whence they had enjoyed the view that morning.

“It looks different already. This golden light sheds a rare peacefulness—an evening repose—upon it, which is perfectly enchanting. It is hard to determine, but of the two I think I preferred it this morning. There was an exhilaration in the very air that made one feel the pleasure of merely living.”

“I liked it best this morning, too,” he answered gravely. Then all the day was before him—so many hours with her. Now they had come—never to return.

Chapter Twenty One.

Hicks Waxes Intrepid.

"Phew-w!" whistled Hicks, staring in consternation at the scene before him. Then he added in a determined voice: "But I'm going straight over that bridge or down the river, one of the two."

"Umph! More fool you," growled his companion. "I'm damned if I am."

"But look here, Thorman. If we don't get across now while we've a chance, Heaven only knows when we shall. The river's 'down' as it has never been before, and all along the road we have heard nothing but how it's coming down harder. Every blessed one of the bridges will go, and we shall be stuck on this side, it may be for weeks."

Thorman made no reply, but sat on his horse scowling ferociously at the flood in front of them.

The spot was a drift on the Great Fish River crossed by an important main road which was one of the principal lines of transport up-country. Some years previously a fine bridge had been thrown across the bed of the river, which at that point was about fifty feet deep and twice the distance in width, thus rendering traffic independent of the rise or fall of the water or the state of the drift—at no time a first-rate one. But although the actual bed of the river was wide and deep, the stream itself was an insignificant trickle, dabbling along over stones, with here and there along sandy reach, after the manner of a North Country trout stream, but without its dash and sparkle. Except in rainy seasons; and then its red turbid waters, swelled by the contributions of numerous confluents and the drainings of the high watershed on either side, tore foaming between their high banks, carrying down drift-wood and trunks of trees in their swift pent-up course. But the bridge, a fine iron one, standing sixty feet from the bottom of the river to its parapet, rendered the transport-riders (carriers) absolutely independent of these floods, as has been said. Whether the stream was almost dry in its bed, or rolling down rocks and tree-stumps, mattered nothing to them now. Instead of the tedious delay of several days on the bank, and then the trouble and risk of crossing a bad, washed-out drift, their waggons rolled as gaily across the bridge as along the road, and they kept on their way as if there was no river there at all. Once or twice since the bridge had been built, the water had risen within a few feet of its roadway; but though an occasional prediction would be made that the river was capable of rising a great deal higher still, yet it had not done so. The bridge was of enormous strength, said they who were most concerned, and would stand against anything.

But now it seemed as if the predictions of disaster were going to be verified. For several days and nights it had rained incessantly; not a series of heavy deluging showers, but a steady, telling downpour. No break had occurred, not even a pause of ten minutes—rain, rain, rain, till people became as accustomed to the continuous fall upon their roofs of zinc or thatch as to the ticking of a clock—and the parched earth, now thoroughly soft and moistened, ran off the superfluous water in streams from every runnel and gully, which emptying themselves into the larger rivers, these in their turn came down in such force as to flood their banks, doing much and serious damage.

And the prospect before the two who sat there on their horses swathed from head to foot in long mackintoshes was, it must be allowed, sufficient justification for Thorman's retort. An expanse of tossing, swirling water lay in front, and in the middle of this stood the bridge, or rather all that could be seen of it, for its roadway lay at least a foot beneath the surface. The banks of the river were overflowed to some distance, and here it was comparatively smooth; but in the middle the mighty stream rushed on its way with a dulling and ever deafening roar, rolling its huge red waves; curling, hissing, splashing; now heaving up a great tree-stump which, tossing for a moment, and leaping half out like a live thing, disappeared again in the boiling depths; now floating down the carcase of an ox or half-a-dozen drowned sheep. Against the bridge lay jammed an accumulation of drift-wood and logs, which groaned and grated with half-human shriek as the fierce current hurled itself continually upon the obstructing mass, which as yet it was unable to break through.

For sky, a pall of dark rain-cloud—heavy, opaque, and without a break anywhere—resting, in a regular line, low down upon the sides of the high hills on either side of the valley. Not a breath of wind to toss about the showers—nor, indeed, could the term shower apply. A downpour—straight, penetrating, and incessant. On the opposite bank of the river many waggons lay outspanned, their number augmenting as more kept on arriving in twos and fours from up-country, and the cracking of long whips, and the peculiar "carrying" yells of their drivers, were borne through the roar of the flood in front. Though early in the afternoon it was dark and gloomy, and the great rolling river, its red, turbid, hissing surface covered with evidences of damage and destruction, the lowering sky, the oppressive and woe-begone aspect of the surroundings, made up a picture of indescribable weirdness and threatening grandeur. The elements were supreme; man was nowhere.

"Oh, hang it, Thorman," went on Hicks, impatiently. "You're not afraid of a little water? I must get home to-night, and it's now or never."

The two had left some days earlier to attend a sale a good distance from home; for Hicks, as we have said, was an energetic fellow, and always alive to the main chance. The rain had just begun at the time they started; but they hadn't bargained for this.

"Well, one damned fool makes two damned fools. Come along then," growled Thorman. It would never do for it to be said he was afraid—and by a "Britisher," too.

"That's the sort, old Baas. I knew you were humbugging," rejoined Hicks, heartily. He would have gone through more than the present undertaking, though that was no child's play, when he thought of the alternative—several days' weary waiting at the wretched little inn just left behind. Why, one evening of it would be too awful. But things gain or suffer by comparison, and now the comparison lay between this contingency and Seringa Vale, a cheerful room, a snug home circle, and—Laura. So quite airily he prepared to risk his life, having persuaded his companion to follow his wise example.

A group of men stood at the water's edge exchanging speculations on the probable turn of affairs, for a few waggons, bound up-country, lay outspanned on this side, though the large majority, coming down country, were on the opposite bank. They eyed the two travellers inquiringly.

"I say, Mister," said a tall fellow, with a beard the size of a peacock's tail, falling over his chest. "You're never going to try and get through, are you?"

"We are going to do just that," growled Thorman.

"We are not going to try, but we are going to get through," asserted Hicks confidently.

"Well, I hope you may," said the other, "but take my advice and don't attempt it."

"I'm going to attempt it, at any rate," answered Hicks. "Thanks all the same."

"Much better not," said another sturdy purveyor. "Joe's right. There's nearly a yard of water on the bridge, and the thing's been cracking and groaning under all that drift-wood. It'll go any minute, I tell you. I wouldn't go across for fifty pound. Besides, you've got to get to it first, and there's a lot of water on either side. Better give it up."

"Oh, I know the road all right, every inch of it," was the reply. "Come along, Thorman."

Fortunately for them they did know the road, for on either side of it lay deep fissures and gullies, now, of course, all under water. To flounder into one of these would be just better than getting into the river itself. Still it would be extremely dangerous.

“Well, good-bye,” called out the men on the bank as the two went plashing into the surging water. “So long! We shall meet in the next world.”

A jest which contained more than half the truth for all the likelihood of their ever meeting again in this, and so its utterers knew, perhaps better than the two on whose ears it fell; yet the rough, venturesome life led by these men rendered them reckless and indifferent in the face of danger. They could jest with Death, with his grim hand put out before them.

“Well, now we’re in for it you’d better let me go first,” said Thorman. “I know these rivers better than you do.”

Hicks acquiesced, and they plunged on. As they neared the bridge the current increased in strength, but not yet did they feel anything like its full force.

“Quick! Turn to your right,” shouted Thorman, wheeling his horse. His experienced eye detected one of those deep fissures above mentioned, into which his steed even then nearly slipped. A plunge and a splash, and he was on firm ground again, Hicks following.

And now, as they neared the bridge, the horses began to show signs of terror: snorting and tossing their heads, their eyes rolling wildly as they began to feel the effect of the swift, powerful current flowing round the great piers at the entrance to the bridge, and had the riders lost nerve their doom was sealed. And in truth the situation was somewhat awful, and well calculated to try the strongest nerves. Before them lay the submerged bridge, the water tearing over its roadway so as to hide it completely—to what depth they could hardly guess. Even Hicks began to repent of his headstrong rashness as he looked giddily at the red, heaving flood rearing up its great waves as it thundered against the bridge; but it was too late now, there was no turning back.

“So-ho, boy!—careful!—so-ho!” he cried, patting the neck of his frightened steed, which, terrified at the roar and rush of water through the ironwork, showed signs of backing; but the current upon the bridge shallowing after rather a deep plunge just before reaching it, in a measure reassured the animals.

“Don’t look at the river, Hicks; keep your eyes on your horse, and look only at where you’re going,” said Thorman, in a set, deep voice, speaking over his shoulder; but the warning was nearly lost in the deafening roar of the flood. Overhead, on either side, rose the parapet of the bridge, and, as they splashed along the submerged roadway, every

now and then an uprooted tree or a huge stump would be hurled with an appalling crash upon the accumulation of drift-wood which lay against the quivering mass of ironwork. In one place the head of a drowned ox protruded through an aperture as though the animal were looking into a road; having been dashed there by the current, and its body being unable to follow. A bizarre and ghastly sight was this great head, with its fixed, glassy eyes, and yet living aspect, glaring from out of the ruin. But such things as these our adventurers saw as in a dream. All their attention was turned to their horses and their own safety. They could feel the huge structure quiver and shake as they passed along it, and ever in their ears was the stunning, deafening roar of the mighty flood as it boomed beneath and around them.

And now the worst was over. They had gained the other end of the bridge, but before them lay an expanse of submerged land, where the current, if not so strong and deep as on the side they had started from, was at any rate wide enough still to constitute a source of peril in the exhausted state of their steeds. But the bottom was a smooth gentle slope, free from any of the occasional cracks and fissures which had troubled them at first.

“Don’t stop, Hicks! Keep his head up the stream. We’ll be through in a minute!” cried Thorman; and cramming his hat down, he settled himself firmer in the saddle, and struck into the open flood again.

But the horses knew that the worst was over, and kept up bravely, snorting and puffing like traction-engines as they struggled to maintain their footing in the swirling tide. As in a dream, the riders could see a crowd of men at the water’s edge; could hear their cheers of encouragement; then the resistance of the current slackened and ceased, and the exhausted animals walked despondently out, and stood, their dripping flanks panting and heaving, as Hicks and Thorman slid to the ground, little less done up than their steeds.

“I say—did you do that for a bet?” asked one of the crowd which had been standing ready to afford them what assistance they could, as well as to watch an event of some excitement, a perfect godsend to these men delayed there for many tedious days.

“No. Bet be damned,” growled Thorman. “I did it because that fool persuaded me to; and I wouldn’t do it again for a thousand pounds.”

“Oh, hang it, old man, don’t be shirty,” cried Hicks. “We are through now, you know, and the proof of the pudding’s in the eating. Besides, we’ve shown what our horses can do.”

“By the way, Mister, d’you care to part with that same animal?” said a tall, lank transport-rider, critically eyeing Hicks’ steed. “Because I want a horse that ain’t afraid o’ water. I have a lot of drift work to do at times, and that critter o’ yours ’ud just suit me. What’s the figure?”

“Well, no, I don’t,” answered Hicks. “It would be rather rough to get rid of him, just as he’s brought me through that, wouldn’t it?”

“Oh, all right,” rejoined the other, good-humouredly, “I’d kind of taken a fancy to him, that’s all. When you do, just drop a line to John Kemp, Salem, Lower Albany.”

The two turned and waved their hats in response to a cheer which arose from the other side.

“Well, we shan’t meet in the next world yet, my friends,” remarked Hicks, with a laugh, referring to the last God-speed hurled after them as they began their perilous crossing. Then, leading their horses, they turned towards the roadside inn, which lay a couple of hundred yards from the river bank, and whose landlord, by reason of the presence of a number of men in a state of enforced idleness, was driving a roaring trade. The inn, or “hotel” as it was usually called, was, this afternoon, in a state of exceeding liveliness, for it was full of transport-riders, making merry—one or two of them, indeed, decidedly “cut,” and in that condition affording huge entertainment to the rest. Ordinarily a sober class of men, they were now indulging through sheer ennui, being driven, as one of them expressed it, “to get on the spree in self-defence,” and to keep their spirits up. So the place rang with the boisterous mirth of many jovial souls, and the air was heavy with the fumes of grog and Boer tobacco which not all the open windows and the door sufficed to carry off. Hicks started, as a dog and an empty whisky-bottle shot past his legs at the same time in the doorway.

“Beg pardon, mate,” cried a giant in corduroy, from across the room, not moving from his place on a dingy sofa, where he sat wedged in among other boon companions. “Sims here bet me I couldn’t hit that Kafir cur on the side of the ear, the loser to stand drinks all round.”

“And, by jingo, you’ve lost,” rejoined Hicks, good-humouredly, “so we claim to cut in to the penalty.”

“Right you are,” cried the other, with a jolly laugh. “What’s it to be—‘French’—Whisky? All right. Here, Sims, whisky and soda for these gentlemen here; Hennessy for me,” and then followed much discussion and questioning among the rest as to what they would

take, one rather surly fellow coming near to having his head punched for curtly declining to benefit by the general "treat."

The hotel-keeper, a thin, wiry-looking man, with grey whiskers and a sharp face, now came forward.

"Where might you be from?" he began. "Want to off-saddle? You see I'm pretty busy just now," he went on, as if apologising for the delay.

"We might be from the bottom of the river, thanks to this fellow, and we don't want to off-saddle, because we have," growled Thorman. He was determined, characteristically, to make the worst of the situation, and resented having been made a fool of, as he phrased it, by Hicks.

"Why, it can't be that you've come across the river?" cried the landlord in amazement.

"The devil it can't! We have, though, unless we've gone down it and got into hell," fiercely replied the other, with a contemptuous glance around; but the sulky rejoinder was received with a loud laugh by the boisterous but good-natured crew as a capital joke.

"Come through the river?" exclaimed a rough-looking fellow sitting close by. "Here, Mister, you and your friend must have a drink with me. What's it to be?"

"No fear," called out the thrower of the bottle. "The gentlemen are going to have one with me, Robins; they can have one with you after. Here, Sims, look alive, trundle up those drinks."

"Keep your temper, Hallett," replied the imperturbable landlord. "A man can't wait on a dozen fellows at once, you see; and there are a precious deal more than a dozen of you here."

"And devilish glad you are of that same, you old humbug," retorted the other, cheerily.

"Tell you what it is," an oracle of "the road" was saying in a loud voice, for the benefit of the assemblage. "That bridge'll go, I say, before night; but, anyhow, it's bound to go before morning."

"Don't know about that, Bill," said another. "It's a good strong bit of iron, and my opinion is that it'll hold out."

“It won’t, though. It’ll never stand the crush of drift-wood that’s against it now. And, mind you, the river’s coming down harder nor ever it was—I know. It’s raining like blazes up the country, far more’n it is here, and what with the Tarka and the Little Fish and half-a-dozen other streams besides, emptying into this, the bridge is bound to go. Mark my words.”

“Well, p’raps you’re right, Bill. We haven’t had such a flood as this in my time, and I’ve known this road, man and boy, for over fifty years. Still I should have thought the bridge’d stand. It’s a good bit of iron. But what do you say, Mister?” he added, appealing to Thorman. “You’ve just come over it, I hear.”

“What do I say? Why, that the damned thing won’t hold out till night,” was the gruff reply. “It jumped about like a twenty-foot swing while we were on it. And the fool that made it ought to be strapped upon it now, say I.”

“I’ve known one flood bigger than this, but that was before your time,” observed a wiry-looking little man, with white hair and a weasel-like face, self-complacent in the consciousness of having the pull over the two last speakers, and, indeed, over most of those present. “That was the time poor Owens was drowned. The river rose to within a foot of where we are sitting now before it went down again.”

“Who was Owens, and how was he drowned?” inquired Hicks, spotting an episode.

“Who was Owens?” repeated the old man, placidly filling his pipe. “A fool; because he thought he was smarter than any of us, and thought he could cross the river when we couldn’t. He went in on horseback. The river was running just as it was to-day, only not quite so deep. He went down, as a matter of course, before he was half-way through.”

“Couldn’t any of you help him?” asked Hicks.

The old fellow glanced up with a look of silent contempt for any one capable of putting such a question. Then he calmly struck a match and lighted his pipe, and having done so he continued:

“The river was full of drift-wood, and we saw one big tree bearing down upon Owens full swing. We hollered out to warn him, but the water was kicking up such a row that he couldn’t hear, nor would it have helped him much if he had. Well, the tree came bang against him, entangling him and the horse in the branches. They rolled over and over; and tree, and horse, and Owens disappeared. We never saw him again, but the next I heard of him was that his body had been found a week afterwards, when the water had run off, sticking in the bed of the river, among the drift-wood down Peddie way.”

“Poor devil,” exclaimed several of his auditors.

“No one but a fool would have gone into the river at all,” concluded the old man, sententiously, as he tossed off the remainder of his grog.

“I say, Thorman, we must be going,” said Hicks.

“All right,” replied that worthy, knocking the ashes out of his pipe and rising to his feet.

“Oh, but you needn’t be off yet,” objected he addressed as Hallett. “Stay here with us and make a night of it; you can go on in the morning.”

But Hicks was firm. It was not for this he had risked his life.

“Awfully sorry, old man, but I must get back to-night.”

“Hang it! Well, then, have another drink—just an ‘off-setter,’” persisted the other. “No? Well, then, good-bye. If you’re round my way any time, mind you give us a look up. We’ll get up a buck hunt, and some fun of some sort. Ta, ta! Take care of yourself. But you’re well able to do that now, I should think.”

They settled for their horses’ forage, and going round to the stable, saddled-up, and were soon on their way; the steeds, after a good feed and a rub down, looking none the worse for their gallant efforts in crossing the perilous flood. And a carious sight was that which the neighbourhood of the drift presented as they rode forth. In every direction waggons were outspanned, standing in rows of six or seven, or in twos and threes, according to the number owned by or in charge of any one man, but everywhere waggons. A few were empty, but most of them were loaded high up with wool-bales, sent from up-country stores to the seaboard—or with hides, and horns, or other produce—for it was before the days of railroads, and the carrying trade was abundant and thriving. Their owners stood about in knots, watching the gathering flood; others passed to and from the inn. Some again sat stolidly by their fires smoking their pipes as they waited for the pot to boil, while a cloud of native servants—drivers and leaders—hung about the canteen or lolled by the fires, the deep bass of the manly Kafir mingling with the shrill chatter of Hottentots and Bastards (Note 1). A kind of twilight had come on prematurely, by reason of the lowering sky, and the red watch-fires glowed forth, and the crowd of waggons, considerably over a hundred, standing about, gave the place the appearance of a mining-camp, or a commissariat train halted while on the march. And every now and then, more waggons would come lumbering over the rise, the cracking of whips and the harsh yells of their drivers echoing through the heavy air.

“Hi! Here! Where the hell are you coming to? Can’t you keep the right side of the road, instead of the side of the bullocks, damn you?”

The voice proceeded from an unkempt and perspiring individual, in flannel shirt and corduroy trousers, who, wielding his long whip, walked beside a full span of sixteen oxen, the motive power of a mighty load of wool-bales. So insolent and aggressive was it in its tone, that even good-natured Hicks, to whom the query was addressed, and than whom a less quarrelsome fellow never lived, was moved to anger, and answered the incensed transport-rider pretty much in the same strain.

“Oh, so you think I ought to get out of your way, do you?” roared the other.

“I think you might be civil, confound it all!” fumed Hicks.

“Suppose I ought to say ‘sir,’ eh?” went on the other, in wrathful, sneering tones.

“Oh, go to the devil,” cried Hicks, fairly boiling over; “I’ve no time to stay jawing here all night with you,” he added, contemptuously, making as if he would ride on.

“Haven’t you? Just get down; I’ll soon show you who’s the best hand at jawing, and at hitting, too. Come down here and try, if you’re not a blanked coward!” yelled the fellow. He thought that the other was afraid of him; but he reckoned without his host.

“Oh, that’s your game, is it?” cried Hicks, springing to the ground, and throwing off his mackintosh. “Come on, I’m your Moses.” And he advanced towards the irate transport-rider, looking him fall in the eyes.

The fellow, who now saw that he had a tough customer to deal with, began to repent of his hastiness, and would fain have backed out of the scrape into which his insolent, overbearing temper had led him, but it was too late to decline the contest, for several of his contemporaries, attracted by the prospect of a row, had gathered round. So he rushed at his opponent, hitting out blindly, right and left. But Hicks, who knew something of “the art of self-defence,” and was of sturdy, powerful build besides, found no difficulty in parrying this unscientific attack. Then with a well-planted “one—two,” straight from the shoulder, he landed his adversary in a heap on the slippery, trodden-down grass by the roadside.

“He’s down—give him law,” cried one of the bystanders. “Who is it? What’s it all about?”

“Dick Martin,” answered another voice. “He cheeked t’other fellow, or t’other fellow cheeked him, it don’t matter which; so they’re having it out. Get up, Dick, and go in at him again.”

But Dick manifested no such inclination. He raised himself half up and sat glowering stupidly around, as if dazed. His nose was bleeding, and a huge lump over his eye betokened pretty plainly that he would wake on the morrow with that useful organ somewhat obscured.

“Never mind. Get up and have another try, man,” called out the last speaker.

“He can’t; he’s had enough. T’other’s been one too many for him,” said some one else. And he had.

Hicks, who was far too good-hearted a fellow to exult over a fallen foe, however great the provocation received, said nothing. He lingered a moment to see if his adversary would show any sign of renewing battle, and then began to mount his horse. Just then a loud shout went up from the water’s edge about four hundred yards below them. All turned.

“The bridge! It’s going!” cried some one.

The spot where they stood, being on an eminence, overlooked the river, and they could see the strong ironwork of the parapet bend to the ponderous mass of accumulated drift-wood heaped against it. It yielded—then snapped; and with a thunder-crash sounding loud above the continuous roar of the flood, the vast obstruction of débris bore it down. A huge wave reared its head many feet in the air, and fell with a mighty hiss, covering the rushing surface with seething foam. Then, the obstruction removed, the mighty river hurled itself forward, its horrible, many-tongued voices bellowing as if in savage joy at having overthrown and defeated the works of human ingenuity. All that could now be seen of the once fine bridge was a few strands of twisted ironwork clinging about what remained of the piers at each of its ends.

“Let’s give the old bridge three cheers,” cried one of the spectators. “She’s been a good friend to us, and now we shall be put about as we were before for the want of her.”

They did so; and a great shout went up from the outspan, echoing far along the sides of the darkening hills, where the lowering rain-clouds rested in an unbroken pall. The bridge had been a good friend to them, and now it was gone they would sorely feel the want of it for some time to come, until another should replace it, which might not be for years. So they cheered right heartily; but with a feeling of genuine regret.

Meanwhile, at Seringa Vale, everything was at a standstill. The stock was kept at home, and in the soaked kraals the sheep stood huddled together, stolidly chewing the cad, and looking very forlorn in the dripping rain. But their owner's watchful eye was everywhere, as, wrapped in a waterproof coat, he moved about, noting where it became necessary to cut a channel for the drainage of a fast accumulating body of water which threatened damage, and all hands would be turned out with spade and pick for this and such like duty. Even he was more than satisfied with the rainfall this time, and now and then cast an anxious look at the weather quarter.

"I don't think I ever saw the kloof so full as this before, and it's still rising," he said.

"No?" answered Claverton, who was meditatively jerking a pebble or two across the broad, surging rush of water in front of them. "All the rivers in the country must be tolerably well down. Why, the bridges will never stand."

"No, they won't. If it goes on like this till morning there won't be a bridge left in the country, that's my opinion. There'll be a heap of damage done besides. Well, we can't do anything more now, and it's getting dark," and they turned towards the house.

Very cosy and cheerful looked the interior of that domicile, as a few minutes later, Claverton found his way thither, and got into dry clothes. No one was about—wait—yes—there was some one in the inner room. It was Lilian. She had been reading, and was seated by the window with her book open in her hand, just as the twilight and then the darkness had surprised her.

"Trying to read in the dark? Worst thing possible for the eyes," he said. "What have you been doing with yourself all day?"

She turned to him.

"Very much what you see me doing now—reading and—dreaming."

"The best possible occupation for a day like this. I've been doing the latter—dreaming," he said.

"You? Why, you have been hard at work all day," said she. "I've been watching you walking about in the rain with a spade, and pitying you for being so uncomfortable, while we were all sitting indoors, dry and warm."

"Pitying me?"

“To any extent,” she answered, looking up at him with a bright smile.

He bent over her. “Yes, I was dreaming—of such a moment as this.”

She did not answer. Her eyes were fixed on the gloom without and the soft falling rain. Oh, the continuous drip, drip of that ceaseless rain throughout this livelong day, turning the daylight into dusk, and beating time in her heart to the echoes of the past! And throughout it all was a vague, indefinable longing for this man’s presence. The enforced imprisonment in the house had been doubly irksome without him, and at last she had been constrained to own it to herself. Once she had seen him coming towards the door, and all unconsciously had made ready such a bright smile of welcome; but he had turned back, and the smile had faded, and a chill, sickly feeling around her heart had taken its place. What right had she to feel thus, she thought? In a few weeks they would part as friends, acquaintances, nothing more, and then—well, at any rate he knew the worst. But now as he found her in the darkening twilight, her heart gave a bound, and her voice assumed a dangerous tenderness as she replied to him.

“The rain has been very cruel,” he went on. “I couldn’t catch so much as one stray glimpse throughout the whole afternoon. If you are blockaded indoors, you might look out of the window now and then.”

“Why, I’ve done nothing else. And you, did you get very wet?” And there is a little inflection as of anxiety in her voice as she raises her eyes to his.

“Don’t let’s talk about me, but about a far more interesting subject—yourself. Haven’t you been frightfully bored to-day?”

“Well, I have rather—at least, I mean, I oughtn’t to say that, but one gets rather low sometimes, you know, even without much cause, and I’ve been so to-day,” she answered, her tone relapsing into one of dejection, and he, standing there beside her, began to feel deliriously happy, though well knowing that it was for the moment. But the gloaming was about them, and they were alone together. What more could he—could they—want?

A light flashed from the other room; then a sound of voices. It was not exactly a blessing that Claverton gulped down, as some one was heard calling:

“Lilian. Are you there? It’s supper-time. Why, what has become of her?” added the voice, parenthetically.

Lilian started as if from a reverie. “Here I am,” and she rose hastily. Claverton was not the only one who watched her as she came out into the light, but the serene, beautiful face was as calm and unmoved as if she had been in their midst all the time.

Very cheerful and homelike looked the lighted room, and the table with its hissing tea-urn, and knives and forks and dish-covers sparkling on the snowy cloth. Very bright and exhilarating in contrast to the wet, chill gloom without, and to those two, who had been at work in the rain all day, especially so.

“The flood will do no end of damage,” Mr Brathwaite was saying, as he began to make play with the carving-knife. “There’ll be lots of stock swept away, I fear, and the homesteads along the river banks stand a good chance of following.”

“That’s cheerful, for their owners,” remarked Claverton. “I should think old Garthorpe’s place would be one of the first to go.”

“Serve him right, I was nearly saying. He doesn’t deserve to own a good farm like that—always preaching to the Kafirs instead of looking after it.”

“Is he a missionary?” asked Lilian.

“No. He ought to be, though. He’s quite humbug enough.”

“Tsh!” laughed Mrs Brathwaite. “Lilian will think you a regular heathen.”

“Can’t help it,” retorted the old man. “I know what I’m talking about, which is more than everybody does who professes to give an opinion on the subject. Any grocer’s boy, who in England would never get further than a shop-counter, makes a fine good trade of it by coming out here to ‘preach the Gospel’ to the heathen. It’s less trouble and pays infinitely better. What is the consequence? Kafirland is chock-full of bumptious, uneducated, hypocritical scamps, who live on the fat of the land, and are never happy unless meddling with what doesn’t concern them. All the disturbances which crop up from time to time, are hatched and fomented by these rascals. Call themselves teachers, indeed! What do they teach their lambs? To keep their hands off their neighbours’ property? Not a bit of it. And what missionary ever stuck to his post when war did break out, I should like to know? Not one. They clear out in time to save their own skins, never fear, and sneak off to befool the British public, while we are defending our lives and property. A set of meddlesome, mischief-brewing, slander-mongering frauds. They are the curse of the colony.”

On this congenial theme the old man continued to descant for some time. Then the tread of horses was heard outside, and the arrival of Hicks and Thorman created a diversion.

“So the bridge has gone,” said Mr Brathwaite, dropping the missionary question. “I thought it would. It should have been built ten feet higher from the first. This flood, though, is a flood, and no mistake. I only remember one like it.”

“Ha, ha?” laughed Thorman, who was quite in a genial mood. “You should have seen Hicks pitching into a transport-rider. He doubled him up by the roadside like a ninepin.”

“And how would he double up a ninepin, Mr Thorman?” queried Ethel, mischievously.

Meanwhile, Hicks looked sheepish. “I couldn’t help it,” he said. “The fellow challenged me.”

As predicted, the flood did an immense amount of damage. Every bridge was torn away by the force of the waters, as if it had been a bit of stick. Homesteads by the river-side flooded or swept away; gardens and corn lands swamped and utterly laid waste; every runnel or golly washed out as clean as a tube, the piles of drift-wood and rubbish, deposited here and there on their banks, alone showing the height to which the waters had risen. And when in a few days the rain ceased, and it was practicable to ascertain the fall extent of devastation—though even then in parts of the veldt it was impossible to ride with any safety or comfort, for a horse would sink knee-deep in the spongy soil—the land was noisome with the carcases of drowned animals, sheep and goats lying by tens and by twenties rotting in the sun in roadway and golly.

Note 1. Hottentots with an admixture of white blood are thus known in Colonial parlance.

Chapter Twenty Two.

The Bushman's Cave.

Christmas has come and gone, bringing with it, contrary to expectation, peace instead of a sword. The dreaded outbreak, by some inexplicable turn of events, has been averted, and instead of deluging the land in blood, and scattering rain and desolation broadcast, the tribes are, in their own expressive idiom, "sitting still," and the frontier is at peace.

No one can tell exactly how this welcome turn in the tide of affairs came about. Whether it was that the different sections of the Amaxosa race distrusted each other, suspicion being a leading trait in the savage character, and were unable to coalesce; or that they deemed the time not yet come when they could venture to strike a blow with any hope of success; or whether the counsels of the peace-loving party in the nation—the older men, who had everything to lose and nothing to gain by war, and who, moreover, had learnt by sad experience of former struggles, the futility of embarking in such undertakings—prevailed, no one can say for certain. Some contended that with the prospect of such a thriving good season before them, the Kafirs could not afford to throw it away, for the recent rains had made the land to blossom like a rose. Anyhow, the natives were tilling their mealie gardens, and the more well-to-do of them were laying out cash in the purchase of ploughs and other agricultural implements, which certainly did not point in the direction of hostilities. Christmas was past, and once well over Christmas without an outbreak, there was no fear of war this year, at any rate. So said the old frontiersmen, and they ought to know. Anyhow, at that moment, the tribes within and beyond the colonial border were more quiet and settled than they had been for some years past. Stock-stealing had decreased with a rapidity bordering on the miraculous, and daring outrages, which a month ago had been waxing alarmingly common, were now absolutely unknown.

So peace reigned, and with it its twin blessing, plenty. In the gardens the trees groaned beneath their weighted branches; yellow apricots, with a warm red flush through their golden skin as they turned lovingly towards the sun; velvety peaches, rosy-cheeked and fragrant, dragged down the branches, or lay scattered upon the earth in lavish profusion. Up among the purple figs, the spreuws were having a rare good time, but nobody grudged even those mischievous birds their share, for was there not abundance for all? And the long green pears hanging on the drooping boughs, which swept as in a natural harbour round the wooden seat at the foot of the tree, what a luscious refection they promised in two or three weeks' time, when they should have felt a little more sun, to those who would avail themselves of that cool, shady retreat!

In the fold, as in the lands, plenty reigned. The flocks and herds were fat and well-liking, for the grass was abundant and good; and, strengthened by the sweet and nutritious pasturage, the animals remained free alike from the ravages of disease or tick, and the better able to stand against the attacks of those insidious foes, that they were in excellent condition and likely so to remain; for, as if in compensation for the widespread havoc it had wrought, the great flood, besides washing away many impurities, both in noxious herb and insect, had thoroughly permeated the long parched-up soil, softening it to a depth of many feet. It had done more than this, for it had broken up the long continuation of settled drought; and periodical showers, soft and penetrating, had fallen from time to time since, so that the land had lost its brown, sun-baked aspect, and lay everywhere green and well watered, luxuriously reposing in the rich, generous glow of the Southern summer.

And now we shall transport the reader to a deep wooded valley, similar to many of those already described, though it would be hard to find one to equal it. It is a romantic and beautiful spot. At the upper end is a deep pool, some thirty yards across, and pear-shaped. Into this, when there is a rush of water in the stream, falls a really magnificent cascade; when there is not, well—there is the rock, perpendicular, black and shining, a film of water silvering down it to plunge into the pool beneath with a pleasant, cool tinkle. As you stand facing the cascade or its lofty wall of shining rock, on the left hand, starting sheer out of the depths of the pool, is a mighty cliff, rising up in rugged tiers or ledges—which afford root-hold to a profusion of mosses and trailing plants, with here and there an aloe—to a height of two hundred feet. Just below the exit of the pool these natural terraces all culminate in a jutting angle of the cliff, which protrudes, sharp and awful in its unbroken perpendicularity. On the right hand is also a cliff, but it stands back, leaving a slope of forest trees and bush between it and the water's edge. The exit from the basin discloses a lovely view—with the jutting cliff, above mentioned, as a foreground—of the valley, whose wooded slopes, undulating in spurs, either culminate in a precipice, or cleave the blue sky with a line of feathery tree-tops.

But to-day there is not a rush of water in the stream above, though there is enough to fall into the pool with a resounding plunge, and to carry off a clear, sparkling stream at the pointed end of the pear-shape. The cascade is not in force; if it were, the merry party gathered around its base would be constrained to put up with some less inviting resting-place, for it would fill all the hollow with a cloud of showery spray—thick, penetrating as rain. The place is in an outlying corner of Jim Brathwaite's farm, and, sure enough, there sits jovial Jim himself, in a shady corner beneath the rock, his legs dangling over the water, a pipe in his mouth, and in his hand a fishing-rod. Other pipes and other fishing-rods surround the water-hole, "the fool at the other end" of each staring stolidly and apathetically at the water or watching his float with a despairing eagerness begotten of hope deferred, according to temperament. But the fish are either replete and satisfied,

or cursed with the wiliness characteristic of their species, for not a float shows any sign of agitation. One rod, indeed, is submerged even to the second joint, while its manipulator, George Garrett—a stolid-looking youth of twenty-one—is occupied lying on his back upon a ledge of rock blowing rings of tobacco smoke skyward, and no one seems very keen on the sport. A line of blue smoke, curling beneath the cliff on the more open side of the pool, betokens "camp."

It may as well be stated that the gathering is nominally a fishing picnic. I say, nominally, for no one is idiotic enough to suppose for a moment that the fishing part of it will turn out aught but the veriest farce, for the day is hot and cloudless, and the still depths of the water are glassy and translucent.

"I say, but this is deuced exciting work," cried Jim, who had not had a bite the whole morning, a misfortune wherein he was not alone. "Let's knock off."

"That's right, Jim, always fall back on my advice," said Ethel, who was seated near him, likewise trying to fish. "I suggested that an hour ago."

"You? I like that. Why, it was you who said we didn't deserve our dinner unless we caught it."

"Did I? Well, I very soon recanted," laughed she, throwing down her rod with a yawn. "We are getting sleepy over this, and that's the preliminary stage to getting quarrelsome, you know. So let's go and see what the others are about."

"W-wait a bit," stuttered Allen, eagerly. "I've got a bite."

He had. Suddenly, after one or two violent bobs, his float disappeared—down, down—far into the depths.

"Hallo, Allen, you've got a whale on there, at least," cried Jim. "Hold on to him and be ready to cut the line before he lugs you in."

Allen's hands trembled with excitement, and he could hardly work his tackle for fear of losing the prize, as he felt the series of jerks and tugs as if something powerful was kicking at the end. At last he succeeded in bringing it to the surface. It was a huge eel.

But the next thing was to land his capture. For Allen, with infinite difficulty, had succeeded in making his way round the rock-bound sides of the pool to a narrow ledge, whereon he now stood. There was just standing-room, but only just, and the eel, as it leaped and squirmed on the narrow ledge, soon made it evident that there was not room

for itself and its captor too. Once it fell back into the water and Allen, losing his balance, nearly followed; but the tackle was good and he succeeded in landing it again. Finally he managed to get his heel upon it and end its writhings by a process of semi-decapitation, but, oh, Heavens! His jack-boots on which he had that morning bestowed an extra amount of care and blacking, were profusely defiled by contact with the slimy reptile as it twisted over them in its death-throes, leaving trails and trails of slime upon their polished surface.

"I say, Allen, you'll be wanting to catch another eel after that, I should think," cried Jim, while Ethel, whom Allen's silent expression of hopeless woe had convulsed, was nearly choking in her efforts to stifle her laughter.

It became necessary to rive a line through the eel and haul it across the water, as all its captor's efforts were needed to ensure himself a safe return along the slippery face of the cliff. But he was downcast and subdued, and the good-natured chaff that fell to his lot as the only successful angler, was bitter to him.

"Well, Jim," said his father, as the fishing contingent returned to the halting-place. "Caught anything?"

"No. At least Allen has. Caught enough for the lot of us put together. A regular young python. Look here," and he produced the eel.

"My! that is a big 'un," cried old Garrett, who was sitting in the shade with Mr Brathwaite, and talking over old times. "I say, you're a lucky feller, Allen. We ought to 'ave a drop o' grog over this."

Mr Brathwaite's eye twinkled as he heard this characteristic remark, and he turned to say something to Jim as a pretext for not hearing it. He shrewdly suspected that his old friend and companion-in-arms would have quite as much grog on board as he could carry before the day was out, and he didn't want him to get "cumbersome" too early. He had had more than one "tot" already.

A dozen yards off, on the other side of the glade, talking to Mrs Brathwaite, sat Lilian Strange; and the rich, sweet tones were well in keeping with the languorous beauty of the spot as she now and then raised her head from some crewel-work she had brought with her, to tell some little joke to the old lady. She was in cool white and looking lovelier than ever, for the fresh, healthy air had acted with tonic result, and she hardly knew herself, so thoroughly bracing had been its effect upon her. And she had been happy here, too—yes, happy; putting both past and future resolutely away from her—

and happiness and contentment is a better restorative than all the tonics or bracing climes in the world.

Claverton was away with the rest of the party, roaming about the kloof. She had asked him, as a special favour, to go with them, not feeling equal to a walk herself in the morning, as it was rather hot. And she must not monopolise him, she said, with a witching little smile. He must do his duty, and then, perhaps—no one knew what might happen in the afternoon. He had complied, as he took occasion to tell her, as he would have complied with any wish of hers however difficult, and irrespective of that veiled half-promise; to which latter, however, he intended holding her, and lived in anticipation on the thought. But it must be admitted that his presence among the exploring party did not, on the whole, constitute an adjunct of cheerfulness, though now and again, by an effort, he would make them laugh. And he persisted in piloting them to places involving a toilsome climb, ostensibly to descant on the view; but in his heart of hearts, hoping that the point of vantage would command the camp—where haply his eye might catch the gleam of a white dress against the foliage. Whereby it is manifest that, other points in his favour notwithstanding, Claverton was, after all, a consummate ass.

"Well, Miss Strange," cried Jim, "how do you like this sort of thing? Has mother been taking care of you, or have you been taking care of her? Why, you look as cool as if we were not in a sort of natural oven."

"I don't know about the oven," replied Lilian. "I know that this is a delightful place, and falling water always makes a current of air. But I do feel somewhat guilty, sitting lazily here while every one else is on the move."

"We've been taking it rather easy, too. Fishing, you know, is proverbially a lazy amusement."

"Is it? Anyhow, I have been pitying all of you poor creatures broiling in the sun, looking at the water."

"Ho, ho! Broiling in the sun?" laughed Jim. "Why, you should just have seen that fellow George, for instance, lying on his back in the shadiest corner of the place, blowing clouds, and his rod nearly at the bottom of the water?"

The youth named grinned shyly and looked sheepish.

"How about going to look after the others?" suggested Jim, ever energetic and anxious to be moving. "Do you feel inclined to venture, Miss Strange, or would you rather stay here?"

Now the fact was, Lilian had become a little tired of sitting still, and the proposal was rather a welcome one. She would fain have strolled away under the cool shade of the trees, but she had resisted her lover's longing entreaty to make one of the former party, on the ground of wishing to rest, and now he would come back and find her away with Jim and the others, and perhaps be hurt. No; he should not. If she could not give him all he asked—namely, herself—at any rate she would show an unselfish regard for his feelings in everything else. It was a poor consolation, but this she could do, no matter what it cost herself; and this was only one out of a hundred little instances of the kind, all of which Claverton had seen, and, seeing, could have worshipped her. And yet, would it not make their parting a hundredfold more bitter when it came?

So unhesitatingly she answered: "I think I'll stop here just at present."

"That's right, Lilian," said Mrs Brathwaite. "I'm sure you oughtn't to go scrambling about all day. It'll be much better for you to wait till this afternoon, dear, when it's a little cooler."

"Well, I shall go," cried Jim. "Come along, you fellows. Ethel, you'll come?"

"No, I won't."

"What? Well, I didn't think you'd be so lazy!"

"Thank you, Mr Brathwaite," said Lilian, with a quiet little laugh. "That's one at me."

"Oh, no; really not. It's different with you, you see, and—and—Hang it! I'd better clear out of this; it's getting too warm for me," cried Jim, in mock helplessness.

"Well, I think you had," laughed his mother. And he and young Garrett wandered off.

Soon the ramblers began to drop in, hot and tired, but in high spirits. Luncheon was ready laid out.

"Oh, Ethel, you ought to have come with us! It's lovely down there!" cried Gertie Wray, who, with Armitage, was the first to arrive.

"Yes? What have you been doing to yourself?"

Following the direction of her glance, Gertie put both hands to her hat. Her mischief-loving cavalier had amused himself by sticking the ends of several pieces of long grass

into it, and these were standing out a yard above her head, nodding like plumes. There was a laugh at her expense.

“Oh, you horrid tease!” she cried, crushing them up and throwing them at him.

“What? Why, ’pon my word it wasn’t me! I didn’t do it; it was Claverton.”

“Was it?” repeated she, indignantly. “It was you. Mr Claverton never plays practical jokes, and you—”

“Oh!—h’m!—ah! I say—awfully sorry! Didn’t know, really—have put my foot in it—must be more careful,” cried the mischievous dog, in tones of mock consternation.

“You’re a perfect horror!” cried Gertie, laughing, and blushing furiously. “I declare I’ll never speak to you again?”

“And was that Claverton, too?” tranquilly asked the owner of the patronymic in question. For Jessie Garrett, who had also been with Armitage and Gertie, now arrived on the scene—having lingered behind a little—similarly adorned.

“What a mischievous fellow he is!” cried Jim’s wife, who had just come up. “We ought to make him go without his dinner.”

“Or duck him—he deserves ducking,” put in Jessie Garrett. “Mr Claverton; can’t some of you duck him?”

“Too hot for any such violent exertion,” replied Claverton, nonchalantly, as he turned away, and sat down on the ground by the side of Lilian Strange, while old Garrett was heard to remark that “young fellers would ’ave their fun.”

“Do you know, I’m a shocking bad waiter,” he observed. “I invariably upset everything—cut over a wing of chicken into somebody’s lap, or pour a tumbler full of liquid down their back, or shoot some one opposite bang in the eye with a soda-water cork.”

“But to-day you won’t do any of these things,” laughed Lilian. “And you seem to have taken care of me pretty well.”

“Have I? As a rule, on these occasions, I skulk in the background, and pretend not to know that people have begun to feed. Then, when they are well under weigh, some motherly soul spots me, and makes a descent upon me, singing out: ‘Why, I declare, you haven’t got anything. Do come and have some of this and of that, and so on;’ and I find

myself looked after as if I was the prodigal calf—prodigal son. I mean—same thing. Thus the public back is saved from a baptism of soda-water, and I from making an ass of myself, and every one's happy."

"Don't be so utterly absurd," said Lilian, laughing as if she could never stop.

"Here, I say, what's the joke over there, Claverton?" cried Armitage. "Roll it down this end."

"I was only telling Miss Strange about you tumbling into the puddle yonder, Jack," answered he.

"Did he? When? How? Do tell us, Mr Claverton," cried Gertie Wray.

"Oh, hang it, that's not fair," growled he most concerned.

"Well, he and Hicks went fishing here one Sunday. They were told that only naughty little boys went fishing on Sunday; but anyhow they went, and so were bound to come to grief, and come to grief they did—at least one of them did. The other was spared that he might take warning by it. Friend Jack, finding it slow, I suppose, lay down on that first flat rock and went to sleep, and—presto!—he found himself floundering in deep water."

"You weren't there," retorted Jack.

"No; else you would not have been here to-day, for I should have deserved well of the State by leaving you in the deep. But the story goes that Hicks was so immensely tickled by the circumstance as to be unable for some time to render any help to poor Jack, who in consequence was nearly drowned, for the rock is perpendicular, and high out of the water, as you see. My impression is, that Hicks, likewise, wae in the land of Nod; but if so, no historian was present to record the fact."

There was a laugh all round at Armitage's expense, and amid the clatter of knives and forks, and the popping of corks, conversation and chaff waxed high.

"By the way, did any one go up to the cave?" asked Mr Brathwaite, suddenly.

"No, I think not," replied Hicks. While others inquired: "What cave?"

"Why, the cave up yonder. It's a regular Bushman's cave. A lot of them used to live there; but the Dutchmen, who owned the place just below, polished off the last of them. That

was during the ’46 war. Some of their bones are there still, I believe; but it’s a long time since I’ve been into it.”

“That sounds interesting, but rather ghastly,” said Lilian. “But why were they killed? Did they join the Kafirs in the war?”

“No. The Kafirs hated them almost more than the Boers did. But they’re mischievous little devils, you see. One scratch of their poisoned arrows, and it was all up with you.”

“Where is the place?” asked Claverton.

“Just a little way down the bend, there,” pointing to the jutting wall of cliff. “There’s a path leading up to it—a sort of cattle track—you ought to go and look at it. And there are a lot of regular Bushman drawings in the rock, which are rather curious things if you haven’t seen them before. Take Miss Strange up to see them, she might like to make sketches of them.”

For Lilian was an adept in the art of water-colour drawing, and had already portrayed much of the wild bush scenery in the neighbourhood, which had never before been reduced to paper.

“That would be so nice,” she said. “I’ve brought my drawing things with me, too.”

“Claverton, old feller,” cried old Garrett. “We ’aven’t ’ad a glass together all day; let’s have one now.”

“All right.”

“That’s it. Better late than never. ’Ere’s my respects,” cried the old chap, nodding; his rubicund countenance aglow with geniality—and grog. “I suppose, Miss Strange,” he went on, turning to Lilian, “you’d never ’ave thought we could get up such a pleasant little picnic in these out-of-the-way parts, would you?”

“Well, yes, I think I should, Mr Garrett,” she replied.

“Aha, yes. I dare say ’e’s bin putting you up to the ropes,” went on the old fellow, leering and winking at Claverton, and speaking in a tone which he thought was the perfection of genial banter; but which made its object wildly long to shy a bottle at his head. Ordinarily he looked upon old Garrett with a kind of amused contempt; but to be made the butt of his muzzy jests, that was quite another thing. So, completely ignoring him, he

drew Lilian's attention to an effect of light and shade high above them on the cliff opposite.

"Now we'll make for the cave," he said, as, feeding operations over, pipes began to appear.

"Yes. I'll get my drawing things," answered Lilian, rising.

"Are you going up to the cave?" said Miss Smithson, a pretty, fair-haired girl, who lived in the neighbourhood and whom they saw a good deal of. "That'll be delightful—I should so like to see it. Mr Gough, will you come, too; there are some beautiful ferns up there?"

Gough assented, while Claverton inwardly anathematised poor Lucy Smithson, little thinking how unjustly, for she was really going out of her way to render him a service.

The four started. No one else seemed inclined to embark in the undertaking, having had enough knocking about at present, they said; old Garrett adding: "We old fogies don't feel up to climbing, so we'll just sit and 'ave a nice comfortable chat and a smoke."

"And a big drink," added Claverton, cynically, to his companion. "What an infliction that old fool can become!"

"He is rather overpowering," assented Lilian. "Who can the old fellow have been?"

"A bricklayer, most likely, or a clodhopper of some sort. These fellows save a little coin, or make a lucky venture at the Diamond Fields, and buy a farm, and then, there they are. There's precious little class distinction here."

"I suppose so. But as the country gets more thickly settled, that'll all come."

"Yes. You see, in the old times when all these older men had to rough it together, and were dependent on each other for mutual help and defence, it was the smartest fellow who was made most of, irrespective of social grade. And these bricklayer chaps and journeymen were always in request, and could not only command high wages at any time, but didn't care what they did, so they made their pile quickly enough. In a few generations most of the class distinctions of the old country will prevail here, as education and the importation of educated people grows. As it is, the rising generation, if you notice, is better educated than its parents, and in many instances undisguisedly looks down on its grandparents."

“Yes, I’ve noticed that,” said Lilian. “And my predilection generally lies with the old people, who, if somewhat uncultured, are kindness itself.”

“And their very roughness makes them the fittest people to open up a new colony,” went on Claverton. “Now look at that scowling fellow Jeffreys—how weary I am of his eternal scowl, by the way. Well, his grandfather would hardly have been taken on as valet to Mr Brathwaite’s father in the old country, and yet here the Jeffreys mix with us as equals, and are among the most well-to-do people anywhere about. Isn’t this shade delightful?”

For they were walking beneath a growth of massive yellow-wood trees, whose great twisted limbs overhead shut out the sunlight, though here and there it struggled through and lay in a golden network on the ground. Masses of lichen festooned from trunk and bough, and monkey ropes and trailers of every description hung here straight and cord-like, there tangled together in the most hopeless confusion. A gloom lay beneath the shadowing trees, but it was the softened gloom of a cathedral aisle; and the column-like trunks, firm and massive, stood in rows along the coarse of the stream which bubbled along—now in little clear pools, now brawling over a stony shallow.

“Yes, perfectly sweet,” answered Lilian.

“Then, like all things to which that description applies, it isn’t to last, for here we turn upward.”

A ragged track, half path, half water-course, diverged from the stream, leading up the bush-covered hillside, steep as a flight of steps.

“Wait a minute,” called out Lucy Smithson, who was overtaking them. “I don’t think I’ll go up after all. It’s turned out so hot, and here we leave the shade. Do you mind, Mr Gough?” she added to her companion. “But don’t let me keep you from going, I can easily go back alone. It isn’t far.”

This was out of the question, and she knew it. The fact being that the whole move was a little ruse on her part with the object of befriending Claverton and Lilian, in a way covering their retreat, so as not to make it quite so conspicuous. Who knew, thought the good-natured girl, but that this very afternoon might decide the future of those two? So she had laid her little plan.

Gough, who had his own reasons for wanting to rejoin the others, professed that turning back was the very course he should have thought advisable, so with a conventional word or two of regret, they separated.

“Now one can breathe again,” exclaimed Claverton, in a tone of relief.

“I don’t know,” laughed his companion; “climbing a flight of very steep steps is likely to put one out of breath. And it’s awfully steep here.”

“It is rather,” he answered, taking her arm to help her up the rough bush path, which was, in truth, like a flight of stairs. “But you’ll go wild with delight when we get to the top, I expect. It’s just one of those views you revel in. And,” he added, tenderly, “this is the first time I have had you all to myself to-day.”

“I thought I should have ridden this morning,” she said.

“Were you sorry you didn’t?”

“They said it was too far for me to ride,” she went on as if not hearing his question. Then, looking suddenly at him: “Yes, I was sorry; but—”

Claverton’s heart gave a bound. Was this anything to augur from, after all? No. Lilian was not as most girls.

“But what?” he asked, eagerly. “Nothing,” and the expression of her face was grave and troubled.

Of late she had been a prey to sad misgivings; at times she felt as if she had been playing a deceitful and unworthy part. She had let this man go on thinking she was learning to care for him—for she was sure that he did think so—knowing the while that she could never be anything to him; and now the time of her stay was drawing very near its close, and she must explain to him that the fact of having given him so much of her society, and sought his confidence, and shown her unmistakable esteem for him, was only her side to the compact which they had ratified that evening under the stars, and that they must part as they had met—strangers, or what to him would seem but little less cold—friends only. Yet she had been very happy with him, happier even than she dared own to herself. And now she must explain all this, and what would he think of her? Would he hate her? Would his powerful, all-in-all love change to bitter contempt? Ah! there lay the sting. But, no! She felt that he was different somehow to other men. He would understand perhaps, and pity her, and even not withdraw his love. She could not bear the thought of losing that—and she was so lonely. Yes; she would explain; this very day, she had made up her mind as to that. But when she tried to begin she had stopped short, and when he would have had her continue, had answered “Nothing.”

Claverton did not urge her. He respected her sudden reticence, as he respected her every word, her lightest look. He, too, had his own thoughts to occupy him. With the shadow of her approaching departure lying upon his mind, deepening day by day as the time drew on, he was fast relapsing into the state of restless despondency to which he had been a prey before he tempted his fate so futilely. The wave of reckless happiness into which he had unquestioningly plunged, with nearly two months of Lilian's society before him, had rolled on, leaving him even worse than before. He would cast the dice again; but, instinctively, he felt that this time the throw would be fatal. Should he do it to-day? The opportunity was a rarely favourable one. But, no! He would not mar the recollection of this one golden day, one of the few last they would spend together.

So in silence they continued the ascent, every now and then pausing to rest and look back. At length the arching trees overhead gave way, and a wall of rock rose in front.

"We are nearly there now," said Claverton, leading the way along beneath the rock. "This is our way."

"Oh, look!"

There was a rustle among the bushes, as a buck, which had been lying in the sun at the base of the cliff, sprang up and plunged into the cover, where they could hear it bounding away down the hill.

"How pretty! I've never seen one so close before—at least, not alive," she went on. "I could see its eyes quite plainly; but how it startled me!" she added, with a laugh.

"All the unwonted eights that you do see are always when you are with me," said Claverton, with a pleased smile. "But here we are at last. One more staircase, though."

They stood before a yawning fissure falling back so as to make a natural staircase to the brow of the cliff. Nearly a hundred feet above, queer jagged pinnacles stood one above the other all up the sides of the gully, at whose entrance rose a great perpendicular tower of rock, with a huge boulder resting fantastically upon its summit. A tiny thread of water trickled down a well-worn channel, and from every cornice and cranny trailed a profusion of the most delicate maiden-hair ferns.

Lilian was enchanted. While pausing for a moment to rest, she dipped her hands into some clear water gathered in its little stony basin. In the act of withdrawing them, a ring slipped from one of her fingers and fell to the bottom of the water. It was a curious ring, consisting of two ropes of solid gold twisted together. Her companion fished it out, and, as he returned it to her, he noticed that she was deathly pale. But he made no remark,

only glanced in the opposite direction for a moment, in order to give her time to recover her self-possession. Yet he connected the circumstance with her former lapses of hesitation and restraint. In silence they resumed their way, and at length gained a wide ledge at the other end of which was the cave. It seemed of some depth, being wider and loftier at the month, narrowing thence into darkness.

“Wait, let me go in first and explore,” he went on, as a matter of precaution holding ready in his pocket the small revolver which had been his constant companion since Mopela’s attempt on his life. Then striking a match he was about to advance.

“What’s that?” exclaimed Lilian. But he had seen it as soon as she had, and placed himself in front of her. It was a human skull, standing on a ledge of rock about breast-high, and the eyeless sockets and white teeth looked ghastly enough, grinning at them dimly through the darkness. In an instant he had laid hold of it and jerked it away out of the cave down into the bush beneath.

“What was it?” she repeated.

“Only a stone. A rolling one, like yours truly. I don’t suppose it has stopped yet.”

He was glad she had not seen the hideous thing, and lighting another match he peered cautiously around, lest there should be a second skull. There was, but it was lying on the ground with the face turned away from them, and Lilian took it for a stone. There would have been to her something horribly ghastly in these grisly death’s-heads, lying there in that gloomy cavern, just faintly visible by the flickering light of the match he carried.

“That’s all right,” he said, as they returned to the light. “I didn’t much think we should find anything very terrific, but it’s as well to look. Sometimes a snake takes up his quarters in a place like this.”

“What’s this?” cried she, as something crackled beneath her feet.

“Oh, some of those old bones the Baas was telling us about. I don’t suppose there’s much left of them now, five-and-twenty years after.”

Lilian shuddered slightly.

“Let’s get into the air again,” she said. “This place is rather awesome.”

“Very well. But look, here are the Bushman drawings.”

The walls of the cavern were plentifully adorned with hieroglyphics—rude figures of men and animals—worked into the smoother parts of the rock with a kind of blue dye. Here and there the surface had been smoothed away to admit of the barbarous frescoes.

“They are very queer,” said Lilian, “but candidly I am just a little disappointed in them. I thought they were much more artistically done.”

“Yes, I always think people make more fuss about them than they are worth. They are sorry attempts after all.”

“I think I shall make a sketch of the kloof, bringing in that great jutting cliff. What a pity it just hides the waterfall!” continued she.

He undid her basket and got out her drawing materials. Then they discovered that the little portable water-tin was empty.

“I’ll get you some from down there in half a minute,” he said, starting to his feet.

“But—but—I don’t quite like being left alone here,” she said, hesitatingly, casting an apprehensive look backward at the gloomy cave.

Claverton stopped.

“Then we must go together,” he said. “As far as the end of the ledge, anyhow. Then I shall have you in sight while I scramble down the rocks.”

“What a helpless creature I am!” she exclaimed, with a sad little smile.

“I wouldn’t have you otherwise for all the world,” replied he, tenderly; and they started on their quest. Swinging himself over the ledge he filled the little vessel from the trickle of water in the gully, and was with her again in a minute.

“Now,” he went on, arranging a large flat stone as a seat for her, just in the shade of the cavern’s month. “Now, you must make the most of the time, and knock up an adequate representation of the scene, and I believe I shall have the cheek to ask you to copy it again for me,” and he threw himself down on the rock beside her.

“Don’t sit there in the sun,” said she. “And I shall tire you out, keeping you tied here by the hour. It would be much more amusing to you to be away with the others.”

Claverton indulged in a long, quiet laugh. “That idea strikes me as something too rich. Tire me out! When I have been longing the whole day to be with you, and with you only and alone. When I could sit here for ever and ever only to be by your side and to see you and to hear the music of your voice, darling. I never want a better heaven than this—than this one—here, at this moment,” he went on, with a burst of passionate abandonment as different from his ordinary self-control of speech as the beautiful scene before them was from a Lincolnshire fen.

Lilian made no reply, but bent her head rather lower over her drawing, and her fingers trembled ever so slightly. Clouds of spreuws flitted among the crags opposite, their shrill whistle echoing melodiously from rock to rock. Bright-eyed little conies sat up peering warily around for a moment, and then scampering into their holes among the stones and ledges; and a large bird of prey circled slowly overhead uttering a loud rasping cry, then soared away over the valley. Beneath, the forest lay sleeping in the lustrous sunlight, and now and again from its cool recess would be upborne the soft note of a hoopoe.

Lilian worked on, neither of them speaking much. Claverton, for his part, was content to lounge there, as he had said, for ever, so that only he might watch that graceful white figure—bending over the sketch-block—and the delicate patrician profile, the fringed eyelid opening wide as she kept looking up from the paper to take in the scene. The sound of his own voice had a tendency to break the charm, so he kept silence. And thus the time wore on, till at last the sketch was finished, and Lilian, laying down the block to dry, rose to her feet.

“There,” she said; “I think we must be going.”

Her companion’s countenance fell. “Not yet. Look. You haven’t filled in that tuft of aloes on the krantz, and there’s more shading wanted here.”

She laughed. “I can fill that in at home. And the shading’s quite right, really. Do you know how long we have been here?”

“I know how long we haven’t been here—half long enough.”

“Two hours and a quarter. We must really be going. They’ll be wondering what has become of us.”

“Really not. They won’t trouble their heads about us. A little longer. Heaven knows when I shall get you all to myself like this again,” he pleaded. “And—Why, Lilian—darling—what is it?” For she had suddenly grown very white.

“You are tired,” he went on. “The heat and the climb have been too much for you. What a ruffian I was to have made you come! But it’s shady and cool here, let’s wait a little longer; the rest will do you good.”

“No, I am not tired; but we will wait a little longer. I—I have something to say to you, and this is a good opportunity of saying it.”

“Yes. What is it?”

“Do you remember our compact?” she went on, with a sort of shiver, and speaking in a dead, mechanical voice. “Have you forgotten it—that night by the water? I had no right to bind you to such a one-sided agreement. It was not fair to you. I only thought of myself, and it was selfish of me—sinfully selfish—to ask you to consent to such a thing.”

“Selfish! You selfish? Well, what next?”

There was silence for a moment. Before—beneath them lay the beautiful valley, its abrupt slopes and iron-bound krantzes soft in the golden sunshine. A couple of crimson-winged louris flitted among the tree-tops beneath, and the hum of insects floated up with a faint and far-away sound. Behind—above them yawned the gloomy cave, those whited relics of primeval barbarism lying silent and ghastly on the shadowed floor, the sole witnesses of this conflict of love in all its heart-wrung hopelessness. What a mocking irony of circumstances is that which has caused such a scene in the drama of civilisation—civilisation in its highest and most refined phase, to be enacted here in this savage spot, where lie the dead bones of the most degraded of the human race.

“Yes, selfish. I valued your society, your friendship, so much, I could not bear to lose it. I was afraid you would leave me, then and there; and, oh! I have never known what real chivalrous sympathy was till I met you, and I have needed it so. Yet I might have known what would be the result of tasking you to the utmost of your strength—beyond it, rather. Well, our compact,” she went on, in an altered voice, as if nerving herself for an effort. “You have not kept to it. You must not talk to me as you have been doing lately—to-day even. You must not—”

She turned half away; she felt faint and sick at heart and dared not look at him. What would he say to her? Suddenly something struck her on the shoulder, just behind the neck. The concussion was of the nature of a blow, rather quick than violent. She turned upon her companion, lost in a kind of scared wonder.

He had sprang to his feet and was shaking something from his hand. It fell on the ground, and he stamped upon it and crushed it.

“What is that?” she asked, glancing from the ground to his face, which was growing very white.

“Only entomology,” he replied. “Look at it.”

A huge red scorpion lay on the ground, where he had trodden upon it. It died hard, however, and though half-crashed it lay writhing and darting out its formidable sting in its rage.

“In half a second it would have been on your neck; it was going there as fast as it could crawl when I picked it off,” he said.

“Has it stung you? Of course it has,” she cried, her rich voice vibrating with concern. “Why, Arthur,” she went on, all in a glow of admiration; “do you mean to say that you snatched that dreadful creature off me with your bare hand?”

It was the first time she had ever called him “Arthur,” and for a moment he almost forgot the furious pain of the sting.

“Just that. I’d lay hold of the devil himself under far less provocation, I assure you. It was the only way of getting it off quick enough. By Jingo, it hurts, though. Look away for a moment, I’m going to slash it.”

Opening his knife, which was keen and sharp as a razor, he drew its blade across the wound in a couple of deep gashes. The blood spurted freely, and he ground his teeth in the convulsive anguish caused by the venomous brute’s sting, which seemed to go through his whole frame. Then he applied his lips to the wound and sucked.

“Good thing it missed that large vein,” he said. For he had been just in time to seize the creature and crush it up in his fingers, during which process it had whipped up its tail and stung him twice just round the back of the hand. “Oh, I shall be all right, but we’d better get back. The Baas sometimes carries a bottle of Croft’s Tincture. That’ll put it right in no time,” continued he, with rather a ghastly smile. For the sting of a scorpion is terribly painful; indeed, unless a remedy is at hand the sufferer will undergo the most acute agony. The sting of the Apocalyptical locusts has been well compared.

“Yes, yes. Let us be going,” she said, hurriedly. “Is it dreadfully painful?”

“I hardly feel it when I look into your eyes, darling. And your very voice has a soothing effect.”

She had just been taking him to task for talking to her in this strain, regardless of their compact, but how could she upbraid him now—when he was in this terrible pain—and all for her? Suddenly he reeled giddily, and his face became even more livid; and the perspiration stood in beads upon his forehead. An awful fear gripped her heart. All the grim stories she had heard of deaths from stings and snakebites crowded up. If this were to prove fatal and he were to die at her feet, having laid down his life for her! At this moment she knew her own heart if she had never done so before. Further self-disguise was useless. This incident had swept away the veil.

"Ah, why did you do it?" cried she, in tones of thrilling anguish. "I would sooner it had stung me a hundred times! You can hardly walk! Lean on me. See! I am not such a weak support, after all."

She had passed her arm through his, and, for the moment, felt as strong and determined as even he could have been. All thoughts of prudence and conventionality were scattered to the winds in her awful apprehension. He was suffering horribly—it might be, even, that his life was in danger.

"Why, how childishly weak I am!" said he, with another forced smile. "The thing can't hurt so much, after all; hang it, it can't!"

But it did. There was no getting rid of that fact, try as he might to ignore it. Thus they made their way back.

"Look, now, I mustn't make a crutch of you any more. We shall be coming upon the others directly," said Claverton, as they drew near to the halting-place.

"I don't care if we do," she replied, fearlessly.

"But I care; and I'm not going to let you do what you might regret afterwards," rejoined he, sadly, remembering the burden of their conversation at the time of the occurrence.

"Ah, why did you do it?" she repeated. And by that time they were in sight and earshot of the rest of the party.

"Hallo, Arthur! What's up?" asked Mr Brathwaite, noticing his unwonted aspect.

"Nothing much; only a sting. Got any Croft's Tincture?"

“Is it a snake?” inquired the old man, with more alarm in his voice than he intended to betray.

“No; a scorpion.”

The while Mr Brathwaite had been uncorking a small bottle. “Lucky I didn’t change my coat at the last moment this morning. I was as nearly as possible doing so, and this would have been left behind if I had, sure as fate. Now, let’s have a look at it.”

An infusion of the healing fluid was applied, and soon the sufferer began to feel perceptibly relieved. The throbbing became less violent, and, although much swollen already, the hand grew no larger. Old Garrett stood by, watching the doctoring process, lecturing the while, his theme the deterioration from its ancestry of the rising generation.

“There,” he was saying, “I’ll be bound that none of you young fellers ’ave any of that stuff with you—and what would you ’ave done without it? We old stagers is always ready for any emergence,” (his auditors presumed he meant emergency)—“always ready. All there, sir; all there?”

“Have you got any of it yourself?” asked the patient, catting him short.

“’Ave I? Well, let’s see. No, I ’aven’t to-day, but I generally ’ave.”

“Oh!” said the patient, significantly.

“There, you’ll do now,” said Mr Brathwaite, tying up the hand with a handkerchief. “It’ll hurt a little for a time, but the swelling will soon go down. But how did it happen?”

“The scorpion was on my shoulder, and Mr Claverton snatched it off with his bare hand,” answered Lilian, quickly, in her clear tones.

“Awkwardly enough, too, as the result shows,” rejoined Claverton. “By the way, has Hicks slain anything? We heard him cannonading away down the kloof like the Siege of Paris.” He said this with the object of changing the topic, and the statement was not strictly historical in every particular.

“Ha, ha!” laughed Mr Brathwaite. “Hicks banging away, as usual. He never will move without his gun. One thing, though, if he isn’t dangerous to beast, he isn’t to man either. He’s always careful enough.”

“I’ve sent for the horses,” said Jim, who had just come up. “Hallo, Claverton! What’s the row with your hand?”

Then the story was raked up afresh, and all eyes were turned upon its hero, which he hated, and looked around seeking a means of escape, when, to his intense relief, a diversion occurred, in the shape of Hicks and Allen dragging between them a huge bushbuck ram, which the former had shot.

“Hicks to the fore. Hooray!” cried Armitage. “How much salt did you lodge on its tail, old man?”

“Go to Bath, Jack. You’re not the only fellow in the world who ever shot anything,” retorted Hicks, who was hot and testy. Then there was a general laugh, and at length the jollity was cut short by the inexorable hand of Time. The vehicles were in-spanned, for they must needs depart. Those who were to ride were busy saddling up, and at length farewells having been exchanged, all started on their respective ways, some riding, some driving. Armitage declared that the last thing he saw of old Garrett was that worthy balancing himself in his trap trying to draw a cork, while his hopeful held the reins; but no one knew whether to believe the statement or not. One thing, however, presumption was all in favour of its veracity, so they gave the old toper the benefit of the doubt—in the wrong direction.

Chapter Twenty Three.

"Sunshine Outside—Ice at the Core."

"After all, this is a glorious sort of life!" exclaimed Hicks, striking his hatchet into a thorn-stump and standing upright, in all the elation of his health and strength, to gaze at the sun—now rather more than an hour high—and then at the surrounding veldt, all dewy and sparkling.

"It is," assented his companion, making a final chop at a thorn-bush which he had cut down. "Here, Tambusa, lay hold of that 'tack' and bang it up against the others. There. The devil himself would yell if chucked against that hedge now."

For they were repairing sundry breaches in the fence of the wet-weather kraal.

Tambusa obeyed; but in the act of doing so stumbled, and, trying to save himself, sat right on the most thorny end of the branch he was manipulating.

"I never did see such a nigger for blundering," laughed Claverton, as Tambusa, picking himself up, endeavoured to extract the sharp mimosa spikes which had stuck in his naked carcase. "Hang it, man; you had the whole district for as far round as you can see to sit down in, and yet you pick out such a seat as that."

The Kafir grinned dolefully, not much relishing this keen jest; but he liked its propounder, and so he grinned.

"Yes. It's a glorious life," continued Hicks, bent on philosophising, apparently. "One never feels off one's chump. Suits a fellow down to the ground."

"It does," acquiesced the other. "By the way, I hear the Brathwaite girls are going away next week."

"Eh!—what? No. Who told you that?" cried Hicks, turning sharply.

"Oh! didn't you know? My informant was Ethel herself. I thought you knew."

Hicks looked "off his chump" enough now, to use his own expression, and his companion's satirical soul discovered something irresistibly comic in this sudden transition from elation to crestfallenness, which would have amused him vastly, but that the laugh was not entirely on his own side. So he only repeated: "I made sure you knew."

“No, I didn’t. But, I say, though, that’s a blue look out. I don’t know how we shall get on without them, it’ll be slow as slow can be,” and then, remembering that his companion might have good reasons for not agreeing with this latter statement, Hicks stopped short, and began blundering out something about “it making all the difference, you know, having a lot of people in the house—or only a few.”

“Let’s knock off,” suggested Claverton. “We’re about done here. Tambusa, lug along those ‘tacks,’ we’ll bang them up somewhere and go.”

It was a couple of days after the fishing picnic, and just each a morning. There had been plenty of work of one kind or another to occupy the whole of the time since then; but to-day they would only ride round the place, and give an eye to the stock, picking up, perchance, a stray shot or two on the way.

“Arthur,” said Mr Brathwaite, meeting the two young men on the stoep. “Driscoll’s just sent over to say he can take you down to see that place of his to-day. I advise you to ride over there and go with him. It’s a good place, and going for a mere song. I’d think twice, if I were you, before letting it slip.”

“You’re right; I’ll go over and see it. But could you come too, and give me the benefit of your experience?”

“I can’t to-day, I’m afraid. It’s a long way, and I don’t feel up to it. Still, you have a good eye to the capabilities of a place, I should say. Anyhow, go and look at it.”

On second thoughts, Claverton was rather glad. He would be more the master of his own movements if alone, and would be able to return as soon as possible, whereas, at the ordinary regulation speed, the undertaking would carry him through the whole day.

“Have you far to go?” asked Lilian, as after breakfast he sat buckling on his spurs in the passage.

“Yes; it’s a good way. I may not be back till nearly dark,” he answered, ruefully, taking down his riding-crop from the peg. “But to-day I’m going to imagine myself riding another fellow’s horse with my own spurs. I may as well be off, there’s that little chatterbox, Gertie, bearing down upon us. Good-bye.”

He mounted and rode off in a very discontented frame of mind. What did he care if any one made him a present of the whole continent of Africa, if he were not to win her? The days were so precious and so few now, and here he was throwing away a whole one for

the sake of a wretched "bargain." He wouldn't go—he would let the thing slide—he would turn back. And his face, as he rode, wore an aspect of troubled preoccupation.

Turning from the door, Lilian encountered Gertie Wray in the passage.

"Oh, there you are, Lilian," exclaimed that volatile young lady. "I was just coming to look for you. Do come and teach me that lovely song you promised to, last night. We shall have it all to ourselves. Ethel and Laura are fixed for the morning with Mrs Brathwaite, making dresses or something."

"Very well, dear," assented Lilian, always ready to oblige others. She was not feeling inclined just then to sit hammering out accompaniments for a not very apt learner to murder a song to; but self came second with her. So she did her best to instil the desired accompaniment into the other's understanding; but in about half an hour her pupil got tired of it.

"I think I shall sit indoors and read," said Gertie. "It's too hot to go out."

"Is it? I like the heat," said Lilian. "I think I shall go for one of what you call my 'somnambulisms.'"

"And a very good name for them," laughed the other. "To see you walking along, so still and stately, any one would think you were walking in your sleep, but that your eyes are open. Well, go for your 'somnambulism,' my peerless Lilian, only don't get too much in the sun or you'll get freckles," and the speaker nestled down comfortably in a chair in a cool corner to while away the morning over a novel.

"You silly child," replied Lilian, laughing as she bent down to kiss her. "You'll be asleep yourself, really and in good effect, in about half an hour at that rate. Good-bye."

She went out, and paused for a moment on the stoep with head gracefully poised and the beautiful figure erect as she stood gazing, with eyes opened wide, upon the glories of the sun-steeped landscape. Then she picked up a volume which lay on a chair under the verandah.

"I'll sit and read a little on that comfortable old seat under the large pear-tree when I'm tired," she thought, and, with the book in her hand, she passed on, down between the orange-trees, and out through the gate in the wooden fence, where the great scarlet-cactus blossoms twined in all their prismatic gorgeousness. Now and then she would stop and bend down to pick a wild flower or to examine some queer insect, and the warm glow of the summer morning seemed to favour her scheme of solitude and

meditation. It was hot, but she loved the warmth, there was nothing of enervation in it to her; on the contrary, her thoughts and intellect never had clearer or freer play than on a day like this.

Dreamily and in meditative mood, Lilian wandered on; along the wall of the mealie-land, where the tall stalks spread their broad, drooping leaves, and many a white tufted ear, just bursting through its vernal husk, gave promise of an abundant crop; past the dam, where she lingered a moment to mark the clear shadows in its burning waters now cleft into ripples as, one by one, the mud-turtles, who had been basking on the bank, shuffled their slimy, flat shapes in with an ungainly slide; then by the ostrich camp, whose fierce occupant lazily ambled towards the wall, and then stopped half-way as if changing his mind. Dreamily still she leaned, looking over the wall, her taper fingers gathering together little fragments of stone, which, hardly knowing what she did, she threw into the enclosure, as if enticing the bird to approach. Then turning to pursue her way, behold, a high quince hedge barred it.

“How tiresome!” she said to herself. “I shall have to go such a long way round.”

But she had not. A friendly gap opened a few yards further down, and, passing through it, she found herself in a wild, seldom visited part of the garden. Here tangled grass flourished in delightful confusion; and tall fig-trees, branching overhead, cast the sunlight in a network upon the shadowy ground, while among the topmost boughs a few spreuws lazily piped to each other as they revelled in the purple fruit. Then an open bit and sunshine, and the boughs of a large peach-tree swept nearly to the earth, as though to lay its load at her feet. She plucked off one of the peaches, and pressed its blushing, velvety skin against her own soft cheek.

“It seems almost a pity to eat such lovely fruit,” she murmured. “They look so smooth and delicate.”

Still turning over the peach in her hands, she swept aside the long drooping boughs of a great espalier. A rustic seat was fixed to the trunk, forming a shady nook—though sun-pierced here and there in a qualified degree—and on this she sat down. The surrounding branches falling around, shut in the spot as if it were a tent.

“It is delicious here, after that glare. I wonder who made this seat,” mused Lilian, throwing off her hat and preparing to discuss her peach and otherwise enjoy to the full the glories of the golden noontide. Mechanically she opened the book she had caught up as she came out; but without attempting to read. The call of birds echoed through the leafy arches; bees droned in subdued murmur; now and again a tree-cricket broke the quietude with a shrill screech; the air, though not close or sultry, was rich and warm and

languorous, and presently Lilian's thoughts began to get confused; her eyes closed; then the book slid from her lap. The influences of the prevailing calm had conquered—she slept.

And what a picture she made, reclining against the rough, twisted arm of the old rustic seat, one hand supporting the graceful head, and the delicate oval face, with its refined beauty of feature! The long lashes lay in a dark fringe upon each smooth cheek, which, lovingly kissed by the warm, generous air, was tinged with a faint but inexpressibly charming flush. The sweet, red lips were closed, but without a trace of hardness in their tender curves; and the whole attitude one of ease, abandonment, and yet of infinite grace in its every contour. A figure thoroughly in harmony with the place, clime, and hour. A lovely picture indeed.

So thought its only spectator, as, with a rapturous yearning pain at his heart, he noiselessly moved aside the trailing boughs and stepped within their shade. He would not disturb the spell, but stood gazing entranced upon the slumbering form in all its wealth of refinement of beauty.

A large pear fell to the ground with a dull thud. Lilian stirred uneasily, then half rose, letting fall the hand she had been leaning upon. It was seized in a firm grasp by two other hands, and in tones wherein earnest tenderness struggled with a gleeful laugh, a voice whispered:

"One doesn't wear gloves on the frontier, or what a chance of being set up in them for life!"

The long lashes unclosed, and she started ever so slightly. It was too much. The hot blood rushed through Claverton's veins as though it were molten liquid, and lifting her from the seat, he pressed her to him, raining down warm, passionate kisses upon her lips, forehead, eyes, and the soft dark hair which lay against his cheek, whispering wild, delirious words of love and entreaty. Then he felt ashamed of his fierce impulsiveness—his brutality as it seemed, in taking her at a disadvantage. Was she angry or humiliated, or both? She made no resistance as he held her there. Or had he about frightened her to death? Then he held her from him.

"You—here?" she cried, in astonishment; but there was no anger in her tone, although a lovely blush suffused her face, even to the very roots of her dark hair. "I thought you were going to be away all day. You told me you would hardly get back before night."

"I thought better of it. I couldn't remain away from you anything like so long; wherefore I turned back. That's the plain, unvarnished truth. Am I not improving in veracity?"

“Oh! I am hurting your hand!” she exclaimed, suddenly becoming aware that her fingers had been leaning hardly on the place where the scorpion had stung him. No fault of hers, by the way, for she could not have withdrawn them if she would.

“Say, rather, you are healing it. Your touch would have more effect in that line, with me, than that of a whole legion of Apostles,” he replied, still holding her.

“Hush! You must not talk like that,” said she, gently. Then, referring to the sting: “But I ought not to lecture you, when it was done for me. Ah, why do you take such care of me?” she cried, in conclusion, and her eyes were brimming.

“Why do—Oh, I do take care of you, then, do I?”

“Always. If I want anything, you are sure to have it ready. If ever I have a misgiving about anything, you are sure to be there to dispel it and reassure me. In fact, I can’t walk a yard but you are spreading metaphorical carpets before my feet. And yet—Oh, Arthur, why did we ever meet?”

She turned away from him, standing with hands clasped before her, and her eyes fixed on the ground.

“Why did we ever meet?” he repeated, again drawing her to him and bending down to whisper in her ear, a low, quick, passionate whisper. “Because you and I were made for each other. Because we were brought together here, both of us, from the other side of the world on purpose for each other. Darling, that was the first thought that flashed through me the very moment I saw you that first day. All of me before that, was a different self; I hardly recognise it, now. You remember that night by the water—it was the hardest blow I ever had, that that little hand dealt me. But I wouldn’t take it as final, I wouldn’t give it up, and now I’ve served my apprenticeship fairly well, haven’t I? What you’ve just said tells me that, even if nothing else did.”

There was a frightened, despairing look in her eyes; her lips moved as if she were trying to speak, but the words would not come, and she made as if she would draw away from him.

“Lilian—sweetest—life of my life! Don’t look so frightened, darling,” he cried, in a tone of thrilling tenderness. “Remember what you have just told me, and for God’s sake don’t look so frightened. Tell me now that you are going to give me the care of your whole life—your sweet, love-diffusing life. Tell me this: Haven’t I fairly established a claim to

it? Look at the sunshine around. That shall be an earnest of your life, if you give it to me. My darling—my more than Heaven—only say you will."

He paused, hanging breathlessly on the reply. Again she struggled to speak. The tension was fearful. Would she faint or die? Then he bent his ear yet lower to catch two words hoarsely whispered:

"I—cannot!"

And then again the black bolt of despair shot through Claverton's heart. This was the last throw of the dice, the last chance, and he felt it was. Hitherto he had been almost confident in his hopefulness, now the cup was dashed to the ground. Thus they stood for a space, neither speaking. To Lilian it seemed as if the hour of her death had come, and with her own hand she must drive home the weapon—down, down to her very heart. The stray sunbeams crept along the ground beneath the old pear-tree, insects hummed, and a bird twittered in the radiant light without, and all told of calm and peace, and the very air seemed like a glow from Heaven. With that mysterious instinct which stamps upon the mind the veriest trifles at the time of some momentous crisis, she marked the efforts of two large black ants who were carrying the dead body of a cricket up the trunk of the tree; and to the end of her days she would remember the persevering attempts of the laborious insects as they dragged their burden, regardless of check or stumble, over the rough bark of the old espalier. It seemed to her that hours had passed instead of moments. Then he spoke, but his voice had lost its confident, hopeful ring. "Don't say that. Say you can, and you will!" She tried to lift her head, to speak firmly, but the attempt was a failure.

"I cannot," she repeated. "Forget me—hate me, if you will," and she shuddered; but he clasped her closer to him. "I can be nothing to you. I am bound—tied—bound firmly. Nothing can release me—nothing!"

A look so stony and awful came into Claverton's face that, had she seen it, she would inevitably have fainted away then and there.

"Oh, Lilian! It can't be—that you are—that—you are—married?" he gasped, and his brow was livid as he hang upon her answer.

"No," she replied, "I am not—that," and again she shuddered.

For a moment the other did not speak, but his face would have made a study passing curious as he analysed the position. In the midst of the shock his coolness seemed to have come back to him in a sudden and dangerous degree.

“Listen, now, Lilian,” he said. “You are under a promise to some one—a rash, hasty promise. That much I might almost have seen for myself. I don’t care whether it was made in Heaven or in hell; but you are going to annul it, and to annul it in favour of me. For it was a rash promise, and if you keep it you will be doing evil that good may come of it. Your own creed would tell you that much, and would forbid it, too.”

“You don’t care for this man, whoever he is,” went on Claverton, having paused for her reply, but none came, “and he doesn’t care for you, or he would never have allowed you to throw yourself on the world’s tender mercies as he has done,” and his voice grew hard at the thought. “You don’t care for him, and you do—for—me,” he said, in a desperation which rose far above conventionalities of speech.

Again she made no reply, so he continued; but now his tones were very soft and pleading.

“Yes, you do for me, darling. I could see it. Haven’t I seen your sweet face light up at my approach? Haven’t I noticed the softening in that exquisite voice when you turned to me? You remember when I came back that time we went after the stolen oxen,” (referring to an episode which had involved a three days’ absence from Seringa Vale). “You were so glad to see me, then, sweetest. There was no mistaking the speech of those divine eyes of yours. There’s no conceit in my saying this, because love sometimes begets love, and have not I poured out the whole of mine at your feet? And I should be a fool not to see that you had been happy when with me. Oh, my darling, I cannot lose you. We cannot part. Only think of it! How can we? What will life be worth? Lilian, I won’t live without you. Only give me your future, your past shall never trouble you in your future’s sunshine. This wretched promise, it is nothing. It was made unthinkingly; you must retract it. You dare not wreck two lives for the sake of keeping a rash promise. You cannot, you dare not?”

He was terribly in earnest. There was something heartrending in the wild and, as it were, clinging tones of his entreaty, as he saw the prize slipping from his grasp just as he had thought to win it. He had played a bold stake, but it was his last, and the game must be boldly played if it was to be won.

To Lilian the moment was awful. She looked up at the dark, pleading face bent over her, drank in every tone of the strong, earnest voice. It was maddening, delirious. Ah! what happiness might be hers! She would yield. Then came the recollection of another face, another voice none the less pleading, a promise given, spoken low in a darkened chamber and at the side of a deathbed, but spoken in all pure faith and trust, a promise which was to hold good to the end of time, come weal, come woe. A promise—and such a

promise—was sacred. She might tear out her own heart in keeping it, but it must be kept. Oh, God! this was indeed awful. Would she be able to bear up much longer, or would she die? And in her ears kept ringing his voice—his loving, earnest, firm voice—firm now, though at times so terribly shaken. “You dare not wreck two lives for the sake of keeping a rash promise.” And the picture he had drawn for her! Oh, no; the price to be paid was to be counted in tears of blood, but a promise is sacred to the end of time.

“Only think of the future, Lilian,” he whispered, entreatingly. “The future, the bright future. Always sunny like this,” glancing at the surroundings. “An earnest of our lives. Yours and mine.”

With a low cry she tore herself from his hold and sank down upon the rustic seat.

“Ah, don’t tempt me!” she wailed, despairingly, with her face buried in her hands. “You don’t know what you are saying. Why do you tempt me like this? It is not fair, it is not manly of you.”

The first words of reproach he had ever heard pass her lips—and they were addressed to him!

“I want to save two lives from shipwreck,” he said. “Yours and mine.”

“Then listen,” she said, sitting up, and for the first time speaking firmly. “You must forget all this—you must forget me—hate me, if you will, for having brought you to this. I told you from the first that I could give you no hope whatever, and yet I was selfish enough to ask you to undertake a one-sided bargain. All through, I have been deceiving you, more and more. Think me utterly heartless—but forget me. And you—you have urged me to break a sacred promise for you,” she went on in a hard, dry, monotonous voice, as unlike her usual tones as it was possible to be. “Arthur Claverton, I have treated you shamefully. You will always; look back upon my memory with the scorn and contempt it deserves; but on one point you are wrong: I do not love you!”

“You do.”

The answer came quietly and confidently, as if he had been setting her right upon some trivial point under discussion.

She looked up at him with burning, tearless eyes; for she wae about to pluck her very heart out.

“What! you refuse to believe me? I must have sunk low in your estimation. I have told you the truth, and—and—you must leave me. Will you?” she went on, speaking fast in her fear lest she should break down in the act of sacrifice. “Will you go quite away until I leave this place? It will only be for a few days now, and it will be best for both of us. Will you do this for me?”

“No.”

“No? You will not? Then that is the extent of your love for me?” she said. “Ah! now I know you.”

Claverton reeled giddily, as if her words had struck him, as he stood facing her. He passed his hand across his eyes as though to clear away a mist. Was it indeed Lilian Strange who sat there before him, dealing out her pitiless, scornful words in that hard, steely voice—Lilian Strange, his ideal of all that was tender, and loving, and pitiful—or had some beautiful demon assumed her form to torment him? He felt half inclined to break away, and dash off to the house, where he would find the real Lilian in all her truth and sweetness. No; he was under a spell.

Taking a couple of turns of half-a-dozen steps, he again stood before her.

“Lilian, do you indeed mean what you say?” he asked, in a quiet, hopeless tone. “Are you really going to drive me from you? I will go—your lightest wish has ever been sacred to me. After this day you will never see me again; but that will be nothing to you. I see I was quite mistaken, darling,” he said, wishing to spare her the humiliation of thinking that he knew her love to be his, “quite mistaken. Forgive me—it was my fault, not yours—but it does not matter now, we shall never meet again. Am I to stay or—go?”

She did not lift her eyes to his—she did not move from her fixed, rigid position; but, hoarsely her lips framed a single small word:

“Go.”

With a quick shudder, as one who feels the stab of a knife, Claverton heard it. And he knew there was no disputing the decree.

“Lilian, for the love of my whole life which I have laid down before you—for the sake of the time that is past—give me one more kiss before we part for ever.”

He bent down to her, and she did not resist. He took her to his heart, but the burning eyes, dilated and tearless, did not seek his; he pressed one long, warm, passionate kiss

upon her pallid lips, such as he might have done if he had been looking upon her for the last time ere the lid of her coffin was shut down, but she made no response. Then he released her.

“There. No other woman’s lips shall meet mine, after this, till the grave closes over me—Lilian—my darling love—Heaven send you all happiness—Good-bye!”

Still she did not look up. She could not, she dared not. There was a rustle as the surrounding branches were parted, a sound as of retreating footsteps, and he was gone. Then, as the last of his footsteps died away, Lilian fell prone to the ground, and, with her face buried in her hands, sobbed as if her heart was reft in twain. She had driven him away—driven him from her with scornful words and with a lie—he, whose love was to her as something more than life. Now she had kept her promise. She had been true to that sacred bond, but at what a cost! She had torn out her own heart, and her act of self-immolation was complete. Never again in life would she see him whom she had now sent from her. Ah God! it was terrible.

So she lay with her face to the earth, watering it with her tears. Yet the sun continued to shine above; the sky was all cloudless in its azure glory; bright butterflies glanced from leaf to leaf; birds piped blithely and called to each other; all nature rejoiced in the golden forenoon; and there, prostrate on the grass, lay the beautiful form of that stricken woman pouring out her very heart in tears. For the light of her life had gone out, and her own was the hand that had quenched it.

Chapter Twenty Four.

Forth—a Wanderer.

After that last heart-breaking farewell, Claverton tried to walk quickly away, but in vain. Several times he paused to listen. Once he turned and retraced his steps a few yards, feeling sure he had heard his name called. But no. It was only the rustle of the leaves as a bird fluttered among them, or the murmur of a tiny whirlwind which now and again whisked round a few leaves and bits of stick in the stillness of the summer morning. On, on he strode, whither he knew not nor cared, his lips drawn tight over his set teeth, a tumult of desperate thoughts raging wildly in his breast, a glare almost of mania in his eyes, dragging his steps heavily as one who staggered beneath a load. This dream which he had been cherishing, this sweet hope which had made a new man of him, was dashed from his grasp, and so cruelly, so mercilessly. Ah, good God! how he had loved her—how he did love her! He had never loved any living thing before, and now the long-pent-up torrent had burst its barrier and overwhelmed him; and he tried to look into the black, bitter future till his brain reeled and all was confusion again—wild, surging, chaotic thoughts—as he strode on through the shadeless glare of the burning veldt. Shade or bud, what was it to him? But human endurance has its limits. Even his iron frame, weakened by the mental strain, began to fail after hours of tramping beneath that fierce sun, and he sank to the ground nearly exhausted at the foot of a small mimosa-tree. He was desperately hard hit, if ever man was.

"Why, Arthur! What on earth brings you here? I thought you were away at Driscoll's!" said a voice behind him.

In his preoccupation he had not heard the tramp of a horse's hoofs. Turning quickly, he saw Mr Brathwaite.

"Oh, I didn't go there after all—and I've been taking a little stroll," he answered, with a ghastly attempt at a laugh, and in a voice so harsh and strange that the old man, looking at him, began to think he had had a sunstroke, and was a little off his head.

"Anything the matter?" he asked, kindly. "You don't look at all the thing. Have you heard any bad news?"

Ah, that was a good idea! Claverton remembered that the post had come in that morning, bringing him two or three letters, which he had thrust unopened into his pocket. This would cover his retreat. He would be able to leave without any awkward explanations—called away suddenly. They would think he had heard of the death of

some relative; and grimly he thought to himself how the death of a hecatomb of relatives would be mere gossip compared with the "news" he really had heard.

"Yes," he replied, "that's what it is; and I am afraid I must leave here as soon as possible."

"H'm! But where's your horse?"

"My horse? Oh, I walked."

"H'm," said the old man again. "Now look here, Arthur, my boy, I've got through a pretty long spell of life, during which I've learnt the art of putting two and two together. Whatever you may have heard to upset you, didn't come through the post. Now I don't want to pry into your affairs, but I can see tolerably well now how things have gone. Is it so bad as you think?"

There was a world of delicate, kindly-hearted sympathy in the other's voice, and Claverton felt as if it did him good. Grasping the hand extended to him, he replied:

"It is. I will not try to convince you that you have got upon the wrong tack, even if it would not be useless to do so. I must go from here; you will understand, you will appreciate my reasons, and know why this place, which has been a dear home to me, the only real home I have ever known, has become unendurable now, at any rate for a time."

His voice failed him, and he broke down. Recovering himself with an effort, he went on:

"I know it seems abominably hard-hearted, ungrateful even, suddenly to leave the best and kindest friends I have, in this way, to say nothing of the possible inconvenience to you. Yet I am going to trespass even more upon your large-heartedness. I am going to ask you to help me to leave quietly, not to make it known that I have done so until after I am gone, and even then to let it be supposed that something I heard through the post has compelled my departure. Is this too much? I do not ask it so much for my own sake, as for—for another's."

Mr Brathwaite mused a moment.

"You're sure you're right about this, Arthur?" he said. "Well, I suppose you are; you're hardly the sort of fellow to do a thing by halves. Now listen: if things are as bad as you say, I think your plan is a good one. Go away for a change, and do some travel or up-country hunting. You're naturally a restless man, and a little excitement and change may do you a world of good now. As to any inconvenience to me, that's nothing. We are not

very busy just now, and though we shall all miss you terribly, Hicks and I will manage to rub along somehow. And I'll do what you want about getting off. When do you want to leave?"

"To-night, or to-morrow morning, rather. There's a good moon now, nearly at half."

"All right; but look here, my boy. Don't remain away from us a minute longer than you feel inclined; and whatever happens, or wherever you may be, remember that my door is always open to you, all you have to do is to walk in and make your home with us, as long as we are above ground if you feel inclined. Now we'd better be going. You are looking very ill; get on my horse, I'll walk a bit."

But this the other firmly refused to do. "I feel much better now," he said, "I'll walk alongside."

They were not very far from home, for Claverton's wandering had been of a somewhat tortuous nature, so that he had got over a great deal of ground without covering much of actual distance. So they started upon their way back, and for the time he felt calmed by the other's strong, manly sympathy; but it was the calm of exhaustion rather than that of relief.

Assuredly there were disturbing elements underlying the surface of the household at Seringa Vale, or, at any rate, of its younger members. Yet that evening, when they met, there was little or no sign of anything of the kind. Claverton looked rather worn and haggard, but not conspicuously so, and though quieter than usual, this was accounted for by one or two hints that Mr Brathwaite had let drop in accordance with the plan the two had agreed upon. Hicks, however, counterbalanced this by being uproariously lively on his own account. He had had a rare old time of it in the veldt that afternoon, having brought back a wild guinea-fowl, three partridges, and a red koorhaan slung to his saddle, the spoils of his bow and spear. "Not bad, you know," as he said. "To say nothing of that other guinea-fowl and another partridge, too, that I ought to have got."

"Why didn't you get them, then?" asked Mr Brathwaite.

"Oh, I dropped them all right, but the grass was so long and they got away somehow," at which reply the old man laughed meaningly, and remarked that Hicks was becoming such a crack shot that he felt himself bound to leave something for another time.

"By the way, where's Lilian?" went on Mr Brathwaite, forgetting.

“She isn’t very well to-night,” replied his wife. “Poor child, I told her it was too hot to sit out this morning, and she stayed out too long. It’s only a headache, she says, that will be all right to-morrow. I made her go to bed early and sent her some tea in her room.”

“Well, yes, it has been rather warm to-day,” rejoined Mr Brathwaite. “She ought to be more careful.”

”—And then I heard no end of a cackling on the opposite bank,” continued Hicks, who was narrating how he had circumvented his quarry, “and I crawled along from bush to bush, and came bang into the middle of a lot of guinea-fowl. The ground was black with them—by George it was—perfectly black. Well, the beggars wouldn’t rise; they kept legging it along till I thought I should never get a shot.”

“Well, but don’t you know what you should have done then?” said Mr Brathwaite.

“What?”

“Why, shot one on the ground. They’d have got up then.”

So the evening wore on, and Claverton thought it would never end. Was it a subtle instinct that this would be their last meeting, he wondered, that made Ethel persist in talking to him the whole evening, while Laura and Gertie Wray were singing duets together, with Hicks in attendance turning over, usually at the wrong place, by the way, for which he was rewarded by a half-angry, half-amused glance from Gertie’s big blue eyes? Somehow or other, things reminded him of that earlier time there—before this turning-point in his by no means uneventful life—but he remembered it only as a far-away recollection. Then at last good-night was said all round, and he found himself alone, though not yet, for Mr Brathwaite followed him to his room just to say a more formal good-bye.

“So you haven’t changed your mind about going, Arthur? Well, I didn’t much think you would, and perhaps it’s best, for a time. You’ve got your horse I see, and we can send on anything you may want after you. The women will be sorry when they find you’ve gone. I’ll only say what I did this afternoon—come back when, and as soon as you like, the sooner the better. Good-bye, now, my boy. Don’t take things too much to heart, all comes right in time, as you’ll see when you get to my age.”

Claverton wrung his hand in silence, then the door closed on the figure of the old man. Would he ever see that kindly face and genial presence again?

He went round to the stable to see that his horse was all ready for him in the morning. Yes, there stood the fine chestnut, and it snorted and then whinnied as it recognised its master by the dim light of the stable-lantern. He cut up a bundle of forage and threw it into the manger.

"Ah, Fleck!" he said, as he stood watching the horse eat it. "You and I have had many a good time of it together, and now we'll have many a bad time, but we'll never part, old horse. That glossy skin of yours, which her hand used to stroke half timidly and her eyes used to look upon and admire, shall never belong to any one but me, go we north, south, east, or west."

He patted the shining neck, and passed his hand down each of the smooth forelegs, and the horse, making one or two playful bites at his shoulder, whinnied again. Then he extinguished the lantern and went out of the stable.

"No use trying to go to sleep. I'll take a walk."

So saying he strolled away down into the kloof. The moon, nearly at half, was shining above, silvery and clear. Not a breath stirred the sleeping foliage, and, except that now and again something would rustle in the grass or bushes, the stillness was oppressive. He skirted the dam, whose dark glassy surface twinkled with the reflected stars, and passing through the gap in the quince hedge, stood under the old pear-tree, and the network of light beneath its moon-pierced shade was there still, but paler than that of the golden sun. A gleam of something lying on the ground caught his eye. He picked it up. It was a ring—two ropes of twisted gold welded together. Moved by the same instinct that chilled him the last time he held this trinket in his hand, he dropped it as if it had been some live thing. Then he changed his mind, and, picking it up again, slipped it into his pocket, intending to restore it to its owner, somehow. But the finding of it created a sudden revulsion of feeling—fierce resentment drove out the sad, heart-breaking thoughts with which he had come to that spot—and dark, murderous projects crowded upon his raging soul. Why could he not find out the original owner of that bauble, and remove him from his path? The end would more than justify the means. He had shot a man before to-night, merely to save his own life; and the stake to be won here was far more than his own life. He would keep the ring, it might be turned to account. Thus ruminating he passed through the wicket-gate, and on along the path towards the rocky pool. Here was where Lilian had started in alarm at the cry of the jackal that first evening; and then how happily they had conversed, wending their way down this path—but, be it remembered, with Death stalking the while unknown to them upon their footsteps.

At last he returned to the house, and re-entering his room threw himself upon his couch, sinking, from sheer exhaustion, into a troubled sleep. And the Southern Cross turned in the heavens, and the moon sank lower, and the world slumbered; but, at length, that worn-out brain was awake again.

Claverton rose, plunged his head into cold water, dressed himself for travelling, and within half an hour of awaking had saddled-up Fleck, and nothing remained but to start. Stay—something did remain. Where was his riding-crop? Then he remembered that he had left it in the dining-room. It had slipped down behind the sideboard, and something had diverted his attention at the time so that he had forgotten to pick it up. Noiselessly he turned the handle of the door and let himself into the dark passage; then into the dining-room, fearing lest the tread of his riding-boots or the creak of the floor should disturb the house; but no—all was still. He found the missing article just where he had left it; quietly he regained the passage again, in another instant he would be gone, when—What was that?

For the dining-room door, which he had just come through, was softly opened, and a figure stood at the end of the passage—a female figure—wrapped in a dressing-gown. Heavens! how his heart leaped! Had she yielded? Was this indeed her, come to cancel his departure? His thoughts were running so entirely upon her, or he would have seen that the figure before him was not tall enough for that of Lilian. But he turned towards it transfixed.

“Arthur,” whispered a voice, dispelling the illusion at once. “Arthur. You are going away—for good; I know you are.”

“Ethel! Good Heavens, child! What are you doing here?” he exclaimed in blank astonishment.

“You are going away,” she answered. “I guessed it last night. I could feel it, somehow. And you were going to leave us all without saying good-bye—to leave us without a word,” she went on in tones of suppressed excitement.

“Ethel, for goodness’ sake go back to your room at once,” said Claverton gently, yet firmly. “You don’t know what you are doing. Only think, if any one were to hear you and to come out now.”

To do him justice, he was anxious far more for her than for himself in the exceedingly awkward position in which her impulsiveness was in danger of placing them both.

“Oh, I don’t know what I am doing?” repeated the girl, bitterly, and stifling down a sob. “And you are very anxious to see the last of me; but remember this, Arthur. At any rate, I did not let you go without wishing you good-bye, however imprudent I may have been in doing so.”

“Ethel, believe me, I was thinking entirely for you. You never would think for yourself, you know,” he parenthesised, with a sad smile. “I can’t tell you how I appreciate your doing this; but I have too much regard for you to allow you to remain a moment longer. Now do go back to your room, if it is the last thing I ever ask you.”

For a moment the girl made no reply. A flood of moonlight streamed in at the open door, playing with her golden hair, which fell in waves upon her shoulders as she stood with her hands clasped before her.

“Good-bye, Arthur. And remember, I was the only one here who saw the very last of you,” she added in a tone of strange triumph, lifting her eyes suddenly to his. Was it that he had seen that look before in other eyes, and, recognising it, desired to save her from herself? Was it that in his mind was seared that last vow, uttered that morning and wrung from a breaking heart? Who may tell? He pressed both her little hands in his own, and, without again looking at her, passed through the doorway and was gone.

The red half-moon glowered in the sky, with its points turned angrily upwards, and a cloud-cap stole over the distant mountains one by one, spreading, creeping over the face of the land, and day broke. And in the cold grey dawn the wanderer rode on—on in the misty drizzle which swept through the dark spekboem sprays and made the big stones on the hillside, far and near, gleam like lumps of ice. Rain or shine, warmth or chill, it was nothing to him. Down the bush path, smooth or rugged; winding along a kloof; through a river; neither looking to the right nor to the left he held on his way, on, on—ever on.

Chapter Twenty Five.

"I Die, and Far Away. Hast Thou Known?"

A cheerful wood fire is crackling and sparkling in the grate, throwing out tremulous shadows upon the plain, massive furniture and polished floor, ever and anon lighting up the old room with a sudden glow.

The glow quivers upon a pale, beautiful face and on a coronal of dusky hair, whose owner sits gazing into the bright caverns formed by the burning wood, the picture of retrospective meditation. A book lies open upon her lap, proclaiming that the twilight has overtaken her and compelled her to give up reading in favour of a more idle but not always more pleasant resource—reflection; which pastime, in the present instance, seems to bring her more of sorrow than of joy, for there are tears brimming in the sweet eyes, and the curves of her mouth are even a little more wistfully sad than usual.

It is four months since we saw that horseman, with despair and gloom upon his countenance, riding away in the cold grey dawn, on, whither he knew not, neither cared; and Lilian Strange is still at Seringa Vale. A few days before her projected departure, news came from the McColls to the effect that they would not be returning to the colony for another six months, and offering, if she wished it, to release her from her engagement, otherwise they would be glad to have her back with them at the time of their return. Mrs Brathwaite, however, who had secretly formed a plan in her own mind for keeping Lilian altogether, soon persuaded her to prolong her stay, at any rate until the McColls returned. "You see, dear," she had said, "you are not nearly strong enough to go back to work again yet, even if you had anywhere to go. And just as we have got a little colour into your cheeks and set you up, here you go getting ill again. Besides, we shan't be able to do without your bright face, dearie, so if you can put up with such a quiet house as this is now, don't say anything more about leaving." And Lilian, lonely and friendless as she was, and shaken and upset by the recent events, had thrown her arms round the old lady's neck and indulged in a good cry, and declaring that she loved the dear old place almost beyond her old home, had done as she was told.

"You will be doing evil that good may come of it." Was this so, indeed? Had she better have broken that promise? Ah! better not dwell on that now. And then would arise the thought of him—wandering afar and alone, uncheered, heartsick and weary in spirit; it might be in daily peril of death. It was at night—by day she could in a life of usefulness in a measure lose herself—at night, in the dead, dark, lonesome hours, that such thoughts would come upon her, and with an awful feeling of forsakenness, she would lie through the long, silent watches hardly able to sob out the bitter, voiceless anguish that overwhelmed her soul. And as yet, Time, the merciful healer, had brought little or no

consolation. She would go about her daily avocations even cheerfully, always tender and thoughtful, smiling often, though as yet so sadly, for she would, as she had resolved to herself, live in the happiness of others. And the event which had kindled this resolve occurred very shortly after the death-blow to her own happiness.

One day Hicks and Laura, who had been taking a walk round the garden together, came in looking a little flurried, and the former at once and feverishly sought out his employer, whom he informed, with much stammering and bashfulness, that he had just proposed to and been accepted by Laura, and he trusted Mr Brathwaite would see no objection, etc, etc. The old man heard him out, and then mused for a moment in silence.

"H'm! You see, Hicks—you'll have to wait a bit, but I don't know that that'll do you any harm," he replied. "My brother George'll be round here in a few days—but you did quite right to tell me at once—then you can speak to him yourself. I dare say he won't object, and I'll do what I can for you. Ever since you've been with me you've given me nothing but satisfaction in every respect, and I don't forget it, my lad. You've learned your work well, and what's better, you've done it well; go on as you've begun, and you'll make your way. But, as I told you before, you'll have to wait a bit."

Hicks mumbled out a string of incoherent thanks, and wrung his employer's hand.

"Ah, it's a grand thing to be young and to have all one's life before one," said the old man, kindly. "Well, it's nearly time to go and count—or perhaps I'd better do it. Your head will hardly hold such commonplace things as sheep this evening," added he, with a good-natured laugh, as he turned away.

In great elation Hicks bolted off, and, not looking where he was going, collided against Lilian in the doorway, with such violence as nearly to upset her.

"Oh, Miss Strange. I beg your pardon! What a blundering ass I am! Have I hurt you?" he cried, in abject, remorseful consternation. "How confoundedly careless of me! Do forgive me?"

"I'm not in the least hurt, really," answered Lilian, leaning against the chair, which she had just seized in time to save herself from falling. "But I'll forgive you, only upon one condition," she added, with a smile. "That you tell me what you are looking so ridiculously happy about."

Hicks told her, there and then.

“I’m so glad,” Lilian said. “I congratulate you most truly. You will be very happy, and from what I have heard of you, you will deserve to be.”

Again Hicks mumbled something as he pressed the hand she extended to him, and passed on. Lilian gazed after him, and the tears rose to her eyes; but they were grateful, healing tears. “Thank God!” she murmured, “there is happiness left in the world for some people, and that is a sight good to look upon.” A warm glow crept round her heart—so stricken and desolate—and she felt that life might be worth living after all, to take part in the joys and sorrows of others. It was a turning-point, and the crisis was past; but, oh! the road was to be an uphill one upon whose thorny way the toiler would oft-times sink crushed and heartbroken. Then she had kissed and congratulated Laura, who, though outwardly very demure and reticent, yet felt thoroughly satisfied with her bargain.

Mr Brathwaite was as good as his word, and with such a powerful advocate Hicks’ suit was bound to prosper. George Brathwaite, an easy-going man in any matter wholly dissociated with politics, listened, and was convinced, as his brother put the case before him. Hicks was a quiet, steady, hard-working fellow, in fact, bound to make his way. He had a little stock of his own, and lately some money had been left him, not much, but enough to help him on a bit when he should set up for himself, and with a little help from them, would do well enough. He was good-tempered, and by no means a fool, and, in fact, Laura might have done worse. And Laura’s father thought the same, and the result was notified to the pair concerned. They must wait, of course, but the great thing was to have the consent of the authorities, and to know that it was a settled thing. But a thorn in the rose lay in the fact that in a couple of days or so George Brathwaite would take both his daughters away with him—that being the errand upon which he had come to Seringa Vale. However, they could write. A new experience to Hicks, by the way, who, with the exception of a stereotyped and brief letter home at rare intervals, seldom used the weapon mightier than the sword. But he would find plenty to say now, never fear.

“How I wish Claverton was back again,” Hicks had said to Laura, the day before she left. “Poor old Arthur. I suppose he’s started off on some mad expedition. The place won’t seem the same without him.”

“Won’t it? It would have been a good deal better for the place if it had always remained without him,” she retorted, rather bitterly.

He looked at her with surprise. “Why, Laura, what has he done? I thought you all liked him no end?”

“Yes, rather too much,” she rejoined, to herself—thinking of Ethel—but she only said: “Well, I don’t know why I said that. Never mind, Alfred, perhaps I’ll tell you what I mean, some day; perhaps I won’t; probably I won’t. Try and forget it now, at any rate. You will, won’t you?”

“On one condition,” replied Hicks, looking at her.

What that condition was need not be specified. Nor does it concern the thread of this narrative whether it was consented to or not.

Then the two girls had gone; and sorely did those left behind miss the bright young presences and the merry, jestful times which had prevailed, and the old farmhouse had settled down into the slumbrous quietude in which we first saw it that glowing August evening, the best part of a year back; and the events intervening had melted like a dream, for all the outward traces they had left. But a dream from which that pale, sad watcher, now gazing at the fire, would never awaken to life again.

Twice only had Claverton been heard of since he left. The first time he had written to Mrs Brathwaite explaining how nothing but the gravest reasons had induced him to leave thus suddenly—and more to the same effect; directing where his things were to be sent, and concluding with the sincerest expressions of appreciation and regard—and the old lady, who knew pretty well by that time how matters stood, had felt inclined to cry as she read it. The second letter, after an interval, was to Hicks, and bore the Durban postmark. The writer was going up-country, he said, far into the interior, to do a little shooting, and some knocking about. He wanted to be quite independent, so would go alone, with a nigger or two to carry the things and look after a spare horse. He didn’t want some cantankerous compatriot with him to worry his life out at every turn, not he. A few things had been left at Seringa Vale which Hicks might look after for him, and if he never came back could stick to—a horse, for instance, and some gimcrackery in the shape of riding-gear and one or two things. No doubt they’d clash again some of these days; if not, well, it would come all right in the end, he supposed, and life was not such a blissful thing, after all. It was not worth while answering this, concluded the writer, for he would be away on his travels almost before it had started.

And it is the crowd of memories and conjectures evoked by this letter which Lilian is pondering over this evening, alone in the firelight. A few days ago, Hicks had asked her if she would like to see it, as she was not in the room when he read out its contents. She had kept it ever since, and good-natured Hicks, noticing the light in her eyes, and the tremor of her hand as he gave it her, had “forgotten” to ask her for it again. She has read every word of it until she knows it by heart, and has conjured up many and many a picture of that lonely traveller, wandering on, mile after mile, far into that vast continent

of which this locality was merely the outskirts. And it is her doing! She can "read between the lines" that time has brought no more healing to him than to herself, and, thinking over it this evening, one of those terrible paroxysms of woe is nearly upon her, and she half rises to leave the room when a step is heard in the passage, then the door opens and some one enters, whistling a lively tune which stops suddenly as the whistler becomes aware of her presence.

"That you, Miss Strange? Good evening; are you trying to read in the dark? By Jove, how cold it's turned!" rattles on Hicks, rubbing his hands briskly, and kicking up the logs in the grate.

"Yes," answered Lilian, for the diversion has called her back to herself. "And how the days are drawing in!"

"Rather! And cold? This morning, down there in Aasvogel Kloof, the ground was white with frost, and at eight o'clock, long after the sun was up, it was nipping cold. I had to keep changing my bridle-hand about every minute and a half, keeping one in my pocket till it got warm, you know; not that it did get warm even then, still it thawed a bit."

"Fancy that. And yet there are people who would stare if you mentioned the word cold, in connection with Africa."

"Yes, I know. 'Afric's sunny fountains,' and all that kind of thing. The only 'fountains' we see here are after a jolly big rain, and then they're not sunny, but precious muddy. Those poetic fellows do talk awful bosh."

Lilian smiled. "Don't try to be satirical, it doesn't suit you at all," she said. "And now tell me what have you been doing all day?"

"Oh, I went down and counted at Umgiswe's. He's a regular old humbug, and is always losing sheep. I'm certain he kills them. Don't I wish I could catch him, that's all. I thought I had, the other day. Anyhow, the Baas ought to give him the sack."

"I shouldn't have thought it. I thought he had such a nice old face, and he always says, 'morning, missis,' to me, so prettily, whenever he comes up here."

"A bigger humbug than him couldn't help doing that," said Hicks, gallantly. "Well, then, I went on to Driscoll's, to see if I couldn't beat him down in what he asks for that place of his. He wants a great deal too much, the beggar does; far more than he offered it to Clav—" and then honest Hicks, suddenly remembering that this very place was the one Claverton had started to inspect on that day which, somehow, seemed connected with

his abrupt departure and Lilian's simultaneous depression, waxed very red in the face, and, bending over the fire, began stirring it and banging it about, as if he would pulverise the charred, smouldering faggots.

"And did you succeed?" asked Lilian, so quietly that he thought the reminiscence involved by the association of ideas had passed unnoticed by her.

"N-no," replied Hicks. "But I think I'll manage it in time. He's a tight fist, is old Driscoll."

"You will like settling in the old locality, I should think. You are not one of those who are always longing for change just for the sake of change."

"No. In fact, as it is, I hardly like leaving the old place."

"What—not even with Laura?" said Lilian, with a smile.

"Well, of course. But you know, when a fellow has been long on a place like this, and had such a rare good time of it, as I've had, he's bound to cut up a little rough when it comes to leaving it, no matter how."

"Naturally. But one must look forward—not back, unless it is for a pure, strengthening recollection. One might look longingly back from the rough, toilsome ascent of a steep hill into the sunlit, peaceful valley one had rested in behind; then to keep on and on till the ascent was conquered, and an easy road led smoothly down into another restful calm. That is how you must look at life, when things go the reverse of smoothly with you at first—as perhaps they will."

Poor Lilian! Not yet could she realise this herself, and she knew it. Yet she laid it down in theory to her companion, for he had told her that he liked that sort of talk—that it did him good, in fact—and its remembrance encouraged him when he was inclined to take a gloomy view of things. They had become great friends, those two, thrown together thus by force of circumstances; and Lilian had never tired of listening to her companion's hopes and fears, any more than he had ever tired of confiding them to her—it must be confessed, with something of wearisome reiteration, the more so that he had found so gentle and sympathetic a listener.

"But I forgot. I must not talk like that, or you will say I'm getting poetic; and 'those poetic fellows do talk awful bosh,'" concluded Lilian, looking up at him with a bright, arch smile.

“Oh, I say! As if I should think anything of the kind!” exclaimed Hicks. “It was I who was talking nonsense. I suppose the firelight makes a fellow get sentimental. The firelight in winter is pretty much what the moonlight is in summer, I suppose.”

But the sentimental side of this firelight talk was brought to an end by the entrance of Mr Brathwaite, followed almost immediately by that of his wife.

“Sharp evening!” he said, joining the two on the hearth. “We must expect winter now, at the end of May; and this year it’ll be a cold one. I see there’s a little snow on the mountains already—just a sprinkling.”

“When shall we have a good fall?” asked Lilian. “The mountains must look perfectly beautiful, all covered, and with such a sun as this upon them. It must be very cold up there.”

“Cold? I believe you. I was nearly frozen to death up there myself once. It was some years ago now. I was coming over the Katberg road with a waggon-load of mealies—I and Ben Jackson. He had three waggons. We were caught in a snowstorm, and had to outspan. Couldn’t see ten yards in front of us. Ten yards! Not one; for the wind whirled the powdery stuff into our eyes till we were nearly blinded. It was no joke, I can tell you. There are some lively krantzes about there; and it’s the easiest thing in the world to drop a few hundred feet before you know where you are.”

“And how did you manage?”

“Well, we outspanned, and tied the oxen to the yokes. We couldn’t make a fire, so we turned into our blankets and piled up everything in the way of covering; but that wasn’t enough, and I was quite frozen. Nothing to eat all the time, except a bit of frozen bread to gnaw at. One of my Kafirs was nearly dead, and thirteen out of sixteen oxen died from cold and starvation. Ben was more unlucky still, and lost two whole spans. Yes, that was a time!”

Then came the lamp and supper.

“You were asking when we should have a good fall?” went on Mr Brathwaite. “The first rains we get here will leave the mountains white as a sugarloaf down to their very foot.”

Thus, with many an anecdote and reminiscence, the evening wore on. Eventually the lights were extinguished in the slumbering house, one by one, till all was dark and silent. And shining upon upland and valley, and upon homestead and fold, cleaving the frosty sky with a broad path of pale incandescence, gleamed the Milky Way, with many a

brilliant constellation flashing around its track. Hour follows upon hour, but the calm influences of the peaceful night bring no relief to that broken-hearted woman lying there with her face buried in the pillows, sorrowing as one who is without hope. And every now and then a great anguished sob shook the prostrate form, for a very torrent of long-pent-up grief had come over her this evening, fresh and poignant as on that terrible day when the glories of the radiant summer world were as staring mockeries.

Lilian rose and threw open the door. The cool night air flowed in refreshing waves upon her burning brow, and, oh! how solemnly the golden stars twinkled in the far blue vault as though the eyes of their Creator Himself were visibly looking down upon her woe.

“Come back to me, darling!” she wailed, her brimming eyes fixed on the cold, star-spangled sky. “Only come back. Ah, love! I sent you away from me, drove you away with hard, cruel, bitter words, and now my heart is breaking—breaking. My life is done. I killed it when I sent you away.”

A ghostly beam streamed in through the open casement. Above hung the pointed moon, pale, glassy, and cold.

“My life, my love, come back!” she continued, sinking into a chair by the window, with her hands tightly locked, in the extremity of her anguish. “Come back, and we will never part again, never. I will abjure my word, which I have pledged by a dying bed. I will risk everything. We will never, never part again, no, not for an hour. Only come back. Oh! What am I saying? I shall never see you again. Perhaps even now you are—dead, and it is I who killed you. Ah, love, my heart is broken! If you are not in life, come and look at me in death—in pale, cold, still death—and take me with you. Only let me look upon you once more!”

The moonbeam crept further along the polished floor, and a puff of air entered. Ah! What was that? Was it a voice—a name—faint, dreamy, more felt than heard—a voice from the awesome, mysterious spirit world? Quickly Lilian raised her head.

“I thought you would come to me, darling,” she murmured, in low, firm tones, as though she had nerved herself for an effort. “I thought you would come to me, even though dead. But let me see you! I can hear your voice. I can hear you call me, once, twice. But, oh! let me see you. Ah—!”

She sat upright and rigid, gazing in front of her. For a form floated upon the shadowy moonlight, seeming to rest everywhere, yet nowhere. And the features of the recumbent figure she knew too well—pale, haggard, and drawn as they were.

“Ah, come to me, my love, my life!” she wailed, stretching out her arms in wild entreaty, but the apparition vanished. She rushed to the open window. Only the eyes of a myriad gleaming stars met hers, and a filmy dark cloud passed over the moon, veiling it for a moment.

“I have seen his spirit,” she exclaimed, passionately, her eyes fixed upon the dim horizon. “I have seen him, but he is gone. Ah, Christ! Thou hast a tender and a pitying heart. Let me see my love again—my sweet lost love!”

Look out into the still night, Lilian. Fix your eyes upon those distant mountain-tops, and then can your gaze travel many hundreds of miles beyond them, you may see—what it is better that you should not see.

Far away on the wild border of Northern Matabililand, night draws on. In one of a group of neat, circular kraals lying in a hollow between two great mountains, it is evident that something momentous has either happened or is going to happen this evening, for the chief men are standing together in a knot, talking in low tones and with an anxious look upon their grave, dignified faces. From the eastward, a mighty black cloud is rolling up along the rugged, iron-girded heights, and upon the fitful gusts is borne, ever and anon, a low, heavy boom. Down the mountain paths the cattle are wending, the shrill whoop of the children driving them, sounding loud and near, while the chatter of two or three withered crones, gossiping outside one of the domed huts, is strangely, distinct in the brooding atmosphere, hushed as it is before the gathering storm. The shades deepen, and the red fires twinkle out one by one in the gloaming; but still the men keep on their earnest discussion.

“He will die,” one of them is saying. “It will bring us ill-luck. The king, when he hears of it, will visit it upon us—he wants to stand well just now with the whites. And if this stranger dies here, he will say it is our fault. Haow!”

And, with true savage philosophy, the speaker and his auditors refresh themselves with a huge pinch of snuff.

“There is a white man living away beyond Intaba Nkulu,” says another. “He might be able to do something to save the stranger.”

“No, he is only a trader—not a medicine-man,” exclaim two or three more, simultaneously.

A flash; a peal of thunder, loud and long, and one or two large drops of rain. The Matabili start, look upward, and adjourn to carry on their discussion inside a hut; but

they are soon interrupted by the entrance of a young Natal native, who, with anxiety and fear on his countenance, cries:

“Mgcekweni—Sikoto—come quick and look. My chief is dying.”

With a hurried exclamation the two addressed rise, and, following the speaker, stoop and enter an adjoining hut. Lying on some native blankets on the floor, is the form of a man—an Englishman. A rolled-up mat serves him for a pillow, and he lies tossing about in the wild throes of fever. A saddle and bridle, a waterproof cloak, a gun, and one or two small things are scattered around; a bit of candle stuck in the neck of a bottle, throwing a ghastly flickering light upon the whole, and making the cockroaches which swarm in the thatch, glisten like scales.

“Water, water,” moans the sick man, throwing his arms wildly out of bed.

“Aow! Manzi!” murmur the two Matabili, not understanding, but with ready wit guessing the burden of his cry, and simultaneously making a move towards the earthen bowl containing the desired fluid.

But the young native was before them, and, motioning one of them to raise him, he held the bowl to his master’s lips.

“Ah-h-h,” exclaimed the dying man, falling back with a relieved sigh, and lying with closed eyes. Then he started again. “Where is it?” he cried, his fingers clutching spasmodically at something in his breast, which he drew out and held tightly clasped in his hand. “Lilian—Lilian—It died with me. Your writing—the only thing I have left of you—Lilian—!” He paused a moment, breathless.

Then he sprang up raving. “Sam! Sam! Where are you, you damned rascal? Sam; do you hear? Go and tell her—find Lilian,” and then as if the beloved name calmed and soothed him, he sank back with a quiet smile.

“What does he say?” asked the two Matabili of each other. “Liliáne—Liliáne. Aow! That must be the name of the white man’s God.” And they repeated the name over and over to themselves, so as to remember exactly what the stranger had said, when they should report the matter to their king.

He had come there, this stranger, but a few days previously, he and his native attendant. He had come alone, travelling through their land, as he said, on his way far, far into the interior beyond, and had stayed with them, living as they lived, talking with them a little, but usually grave, taciturn, and sad. He would wander about all day in the

mountains with his double gun, bringing back game at night, buck or birds, which he shared freely with them, and now he had become ill; no doubt caught the malaria while lying out all night down by the river, trying to get a shot at the lion, whose spoor had been seen by a boy who was wandering on its banks, and who had fled terrified at the sight of the great round pads in the sand. And Mgcekweni, the petty chief of the neighbourhood, was in sore perplexity about this stranger lying at the point of death within their gates; and over and above the fear that his royal master, with all the unreasoning caprice of a despot, would hold him and his responsible, he had a genuine liking for the white man—the grave, quiet traveller, whom he had at once set down as a big "Inkoa" among his own people.

Crash!

The thunder pealed without; a vivid blaze of lightning lit up the interior of the hut, leaving it more gloomy than before in its semi-darkness; the rain poured in torrents, lashing up the hard earth outside, and there, in the weird light, stood the tall, erect forms of the Matabili chief and his brother, conversing in subdued whispers, and with a world of concern clouding their dark, expressive faces. Kneeling beside his master, intently watching every change of his countenance, crouched the native boy, Sam. Again the thunder crashed and roared, and the scathing blaze darted through the pouring rainfall which hurled itself to the earth with a deafening rush; and amid the fierce warring of the elements let loose the wanderer lay dying. Yes, dying. Alone in a barbarous hut, racked with fever; tossing on a rude couch, almost on the bare earth; far from friendly or loving glance or touch; not even a countryman within hundreds of miles; alone in that gloomy apartment, the cockroaches chasing each other along the wattles of the thatch overhead, and tall, savage warriors watching his failing moments in wondering, half-superstitious concern. Thus he lay.

Suddenly he raised himself and sat upright.

"Lilian! Lilian!" he cried, in a voice so loud and clear that it startled his savage auditors. "Ah, I will see you," he went on, his eyes dilating and fixed on the opposite wall as if to pierce through it and all space.

"I will see you—and I can. I see you here, now, here beside me. Are you going with me? Keep those sweet eyes upon mine, as they are now, darling—ever—ever—ever."

His voice sank, and with a glad smile he fell back and lay perfectly still, and without the faintest movement.

"He is dead!" exclaimed the savages, holding their breath.

Precisely at that moment Lilian Strange was uttering her passionate, despairing invocation, as she gazed through her open casement far into the clear, starry night.

The day broke upon Seringa Vale, and the rain gusts howled along the wind-swept wastes—violent, biting, and chill. But by noon there was not a cloud in the heavens, and Lilian had her wish, for the mountains were thickly covered with snow to their very base. And as she gazed upon the distant peaks starting forth from the blue sky, spotless and dazzling in their whiteness, it seemed to her that they might be a meet embodiment of her own frozen despair—ever the same—icebound sight and day—through calm and through storm.

And the sun shone down upon the land in his undimmed glory, plenty and prosperity reigned everywhere; not a whisper of war or disturbance was in the air, indeed, all such had died away as completely as if it had never been. And the hearts of the dwellers on the frontier were glad within them—for the red tide, once threatening, had been stayed, and upon their borders rested, in all its fulness, the blessing of Peace.

Part II.

Once where Amatola mountains rise up purple to the snow,
Where the forests hide the fountains,
And green pastures sleep below—
Sweeter far than song of battle,
On the breezes of the morn,
Came the lowing of our cattle
And the rustling of our corn.
Where our flocks and herds were feeding
Now the white man's homestead stands;
And while yet his sword lies bleeding,
Lo, his plough is in new lands.

Lament of Tyala—Anon.