

The Fire Trumpet

VOL-II

**By
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***Free*editorial** 

THE FIRE TRUMPET

"A ROMANCE OF THE CAPE FRONTIER"

Chapter One.

"Is it Peace or War? Better War."

George Payne rode slowly away from the village of Komgha.

The air was warm and balmy, for the time of the southern winter was past, and on this September day not even the lightest of feathery clouds flecked the sky above the sunny plains of British Kaffraria. Now and again on the brow of one of the rolling eminences, which, smooth grassy, and round, alternated with mimosa-dotted vales, the rider might feel a puff of fresh air from the bine Indian Ocean thirty miles away, and which he was leaving further and further behind him with every tread of his steed. On his left front rose the round tops of the Kabousie hills, while beyond them a ridge of wooded heights slept in the golden haze of the early afternoon.

But he had little thought to spare for beauties of scenery, had this man, as he mechanically urged on his steed—a compact, well-stepping roadster—now at a long easy canter, now subsiding into a fast walk; for all his reflections were at that moment concentrated on the leading question of the day, a question which for weeks past had been in the mind of every dweller on that restless line of frontier, a question which to them was fraught with weighty apprehension—Peace or War?

And this topic, which was in everybody's month, had it any foundation to rest upon, or was it merely a recurrence of one of those periodical scares which, with more or less reason, had of late years seriously disturbed the border districts? Ministers and legislators might, from their places in the Assembly, deny all grounds for it; merchants and snug citizens of the western capital might deride it; the pseudo-philanthropic party, likewise at safe distance, might decry it as a libel upon and a plot against the native population, to despoil them of their lands, and what not. Yet Cape Town was many hundred miles from the unprotected border, and it is so very easy at a safe distance to ridicule the apprehensions of those to whom the fulfilment of their fears would mean ruin and death. For ignore it as some would, the fact remained that a cloud, at first no bigger than a man's hand, but already of sufficiently alarming proportions, was gathering beyond the Kei, to roll on and on till it should overwhelm all within reach—unless stopped in time, that is. And such check the country's rulers apparently deemed it their special mission not to facilitate.

This, then, was the topic whereon George Payne's thoughts were fixed as he rode over those grassy Kaffrarian plains in the direction of his home; and some additional rumours which he had heard that morning, had gone far towards seriously disquieting him.

He was a broad-shouldered, strongly-built man, about five feet ten in his shoes, though a slight stoop made him look shorter. He had a quiet, sensible face, and was sparing and deliberate of speech; this on first acquaintance might lead one to pronounce him "slow," were it not for an occasional satiric burst, accompanied by a twinkle in the keen grey eyes, which alone would suffice to show that he was very far from being a fool. And, though quiet and reserved on first acquaintance, he had a sunny geniality of manner which was very taking—in fact, was as good-natured a fellow as ever lived. He was thirty-six years of age, and of colonial birth; and though he had made a couple of visits to the mother country he seldom spoke of it. When he did, his audience, who had settled in its own mind that he had never been out of the colony, would be mightily taken aback by his shrewd insight into men and things.

Around lay the broad, rolling country; here and there in the distance might be seen the white walls of a homestead or two, glistening in the sun; or a clump of Kafir huts, smoky, squalid-looking, and tumble-down, lay about, whence a tribe of yelling mongrels rushed clamouring down to the path to mouth at the equestrian and snap at his horse's heels, while their owners stood, with kerries grasped in their dark, sinewy hands, scowling at the passer-by, and making no attempt to call off their detestable property. But the horseman cared little or nothing for this. If the four-footed pests came too near, he slashed them unmercifully with his long raw-hide whip, sending them howling back to their savage masters. At length he drew rein before a thatched, white-washed dwelling, a typical specimen of the rougher class of frontier farmhouse. A man came out—a tall man, clad in a grey flannel shirt and corduroy trousers; a slouch hat was stuck on one side of his head, a mighty red heard descended over his chest, and in his mouth was a short wooden pipe.

"Well, Marshall," cried Payne, dismounting. "How's the world been using you of late?"

"So so," replied the other, shaking hands. "Where are you from?"

"Komgha."

"Any news?"

“N-no. Nothing but ‘gas,’ in fact. One gets so sick of all the yarns that have been flying about that really one doesn’t know what to believe. I’ve got into the way of believing nothing.”

“Ah. Well, now, I think there’s something in them. And I’ll tell you what it is, Payne. If I were a married man like you I’d send my family away to King (King Williamstown. The chief town of British Kaffraria, commonly thus abbreviated) or somewhere, for depend upon it we shall have hot work here before long. They’re not safe out there at your place, I tell you.”

Payne laughed lightly. “Why, Marshall,” he said, “if you’re not becoming as great an old scare-monger as the rest! Oh, by the way, there was some news. It’s said that the new Governor’s coming up to the frontier.”

“Worse and worse—if it’s true. He wouldn’t be coming if there wasn’t good cause for it, I can tell you. What sort of a feller is he?”

“First-rate, from all accounts.”

“H’m. Did you hear anything else?”

“Two troops of police been ordered across the Kei.”

“Fat lot of good they’ll do,” growled Marshall. “A lot o’ greenhorns. Why, some of them can’t stick on their horses, and hardly know the butt from the muzzle of their carbines. The police are not what they used to be, since they’ve taken to getting out these raw chaps from England. Time was when the force was made up of good colonial men, who could ride and shoot, and follow spoor as easily as a waggon-road, and now—pooh!” And the speaker knocked the ashes out of his pipe with a contemptuous jerk.

“That’s all very well,” said Payne. “They may not be good for much at spoor, and there are a few greenhorns among them, as you say. But there are some fine fellows, too—fellows with any amount of fight in them—and, after all, that’s what we want now. You’ll see, they’ll do good service yet, if they get a fair chance.”

The other shook his head. “Dunno. But—have a drop of grog?”

“No, thanks; I must be moving on.”

“Won’t you, really? Do.”

“No, thanks. But I say, Marshall, when are you coming over our way? We haven’t seen you for about ten years. Come on Sunday.”

The other filled and lighted his pipe. “Well, the fact is, I’ve had a lot to do of late,” he replied at length, between sundry vigorous puffs. “And then, you see, I’m a rough sort of feller and haven’t got any company manners, and now you’ve got company. Perhaps, after all, I’m best here.”

“You surly old humbug,” said Payne, with a laugh, “I never heard such bosh. You come up on Sunday at latest, or we shall quarrel. Call yourself a neighbour, indeed! Now you’ll come, won’t you?”

“I’ll try.”

“All right, that’s settled. Ta-ta;” and mounting his horse Payne rode off.

Gradually the long smooth slopes became steeper, falling off into abrupt ravines, affording a glimpse of the Great Kei, which glided along, far down between its lofty banks—now winding round a smooth-headed knoll, now straightening as it washed the base of some huge wall of rock—a distant musical murmur being upborne upon the still air as it rushed over a stony shallow. From the far plains beyond, many a blue column of smoke rose into the sunshine, where dotted about lay the clustering kraals of the savage Gcalekas, whose hordes, even then, were gathering for the long-expected and somewhat dreaded inroad upon the peace of the colony. A bird sang in the thick thorn-protected brake adjoining the path, a white vulture or two soared lazily from one of the huge krantzes overhanging the river, insects hummed in the sunlight, and it seemed as if nothing but the savagery of man could avail to break the peaceful calm of that glorious scene, amid which Payne pursued his way wrapped in uneasy thought; for in spite of his sceptical tone when talking to Marshall he felt by no means the assurance that he would have had that worthy believe.

His horse suddenly pricked up its ears as the sound of deep voices immediately in front became audible, and in a moment three tall, savage-looking Kafirs, their athletic bodies smeared from head to foot with red ochre, advanced down the path at a run, swinging their kerries.

Now the said path was, just there, only wide enough for a single horseman, being shut in on either side by high thorn-bushes, and Payne naturally expected the pedestrians to make way for him. They, however, had no such intention, and his steed began to show signs of terror at the sudden appearance of the brawny, ochre-smeared barbarians, with their gleaming necklaces of jackal’s teeth rattling as they advanced.

“Out of the way, you vagabonds,” shouted Payne, angrily. “Out of the road; d’you hear?” and he raised his whip menacingly.

“Aow! Out of the way yourself, umlūngu!” (white man) insolently replied the foremost Kafir in his great deep tones, at the same time seizing the bridle and trying to jerk the horse’s head round. “We won’t get out of the way for you.”

Payne’s whip descended, the lash curling with an angry “swish” round the naked body of the speaker.

“Take that, you hound!” he cried. “And now let go.” And he clubbed his whip to strike with the heavy loaded end.

“Haoow! Hah!” roared the savage, dropping the bridle and stepping back a pace or two, while the lurid lightnings of wild-beast wrath shot from his eyes. Then he sprang at Payne like a tiger-cat, aiming a sledge-hammer blow at him with his heavy stick.

Fortunately for Payne he managed to throw up his arm in time to save his head, or he would have fallen to the ground, brained by the terrific force of the blow. Fortunately, too, for him, his adversaries carried no assegais, or he would there and then have been stabbed through and through and his body flung over the adjacent cliff into the Kei, for he need expect no mercy from such foes. The land was almost in a state of war, and brutal outrages of this kind were only too terribly common. He made a furious blow at his opponent with the butt of his whip, but ineffectively, for at the moment of striking he felt himself seized by a powerful hand and dragged from his horse, which backed into the bushes terrified and snorting. Then nearly stunned by the fall he lay upon the ground, and the sky and earth and foliage all went round in one giddy, sickening whirl, and still he could see the gigantic figure of the savage, who, with glaring eyes and white gleaming teeth, was advancing upon him with kerrie upraised to strike, and he lay there, powerless even to avoid the blow. In a second it would fall, when—woof! something descended through the air, a large dark object darted between him and the sky, and his enemy fell heavily to the earth. He heard the clash of kerries in strike and parry, a fierce imprecation, and the ring of a pistol-shot; then he knew no more till he awoke to consciousness with some one bending over him and fanning his brow.

“Don’t move,” said the stranger. “Take it easy a little longer, and then you’ll feel better.”

Payne looked wonderingly at the dark sun-browned face bent over him, with the calm, resolute, blue-grey eyes and clear-cut features, and it seemed to him that he had seen the owner of it before.

“Oh, I feel all right now,” he said, raising himself upon one elbow and then sitting up. “A little muddled, you know, that’s all.”

“I venture to say that our friend here, feels ‘a little muddled,’” remarked the other, pushing with his foot the form of a prostrate Kafir.

Payne stood up, rather giddily, and recognised his assailant in the inert, motionless mass.

“I say, though, but the brute isn’t dead?” he said, with just a tinge of concern, bending over the fallen savage.

“He isn’t dead. A stirrup-iron properly handled is a grand weapon; but Kafir skulls are notoriously thick. The chances are a hundred to one, though, that yours would have been split at this moment, had that individual carried out his amiable little programme just then.”

“Of course—I was forgetting. You saved my life. Why, what an ungracious dog you must think me!”

“And I could have dropped the other two so nicely in their tracks,” continued the stranger, as if he had not heard Payne’s remark. “They both came at me with their kerries; but directly they saw this,”—producing a revolver—“off they went. I wanted to fell another chap, so I didn’t trot out the barker at first, till they began to think they had it all their own way, and pressed me so hard that I was obliged to. Lord, how they streaked it off!”

“But you did let drive, didn’t you? At least, I thought I heard a shot.”

“Yes, I did. Couldn’t resist the temptation; but just at the moment it flashed across me how infernally near civilisation we were, and it’s a ticklish moment just now. The authorities would think nothing of running us in and making scapegoats of us, swearing we had brought on the war, you know, or something of that sort. So I just blazed over the fellow’s head, to give him a bit of a scare, otherwise I could have dropped the pair of them—oh, so sweetly! But how did it all happen?”

Payne told him.

“H’m,” said the other, reflectively. “We could run this fellow over to the gaol if that would be any satisfaction to you, and if you cared to go through the bother. But then,

unfortunately, you struck the first blow, as you couldn't have helped doing—and the result would have been the same in any case—and the chances are some pettifogging attorney, or meddling missionary, would take up the scoundrel's case and turn the tables on you. So that's out of the question."

"Shall we bring him to?" asked Payne.

"A few slashes of your whip would do it if you're anxious on his account; if not, let him lie."

"Poor devil, he seems to be in bad order," said Payne, inspecting his late foe, who lay with the crown of his head cut and bleeding, exactly as he had fallen beneath the blow of the stirrup-iron, and breathing heavily. "I'll take his kerries as a trophy, anyhow." Moved by a sudden impulse, he glanced narrowly at the stranger, a man of apparently about his own age, or not far from it; and it still seemed to him that the dark, handsome face, and determined eyes, no less than the rather mournful ring in the quiet voice, were familiar to him.

"Well, then, we'll be moving," continued Payne. "My place isn't far from here, and of course you are going with me. Don't say no, for I insist upon it."

There came an amused gleam into the other's eyes, and he stroked his long, brown moustache once or twice to conceal a smile. "There's no need to insist," he said, "because it so happens that that was my original intention. The first thing I meant to ask you, when you came round, was the way to George Payne's; but it would be rather superfluous to ask it of George Payne himself, wouldn't it?"

"What! Why, good heavens! Who the deuce are you? We've met before somewhere, I'll swear!" said Payne, looking at him in a puzzled manner.

The other broke into one of his long, quiet laughs, as if hugely enjoying the situation, as he steadily returned the puzzled, inquiring gaze. "Don't you remember that refreshing row close to De Klerk—that time you were coming from the gold fields? Hang it, it wasn't much more than two years ago!" Payne burst forth into a mighty expletive—a thing he very rarely did. "My dear fellow, this is a piece of luck! And I never recognised you! But you were bearded like the pard then, you know; and, another thing—my head must have been spinning round, for I felt an awful whack. Of course. So it is! Why, I ought to have recognised you by the neat-handed way in which you dropped that nigger, if by nothing else! That's the second time you saved my hide," and he seized the hand extended to him, in a mighty grip.

“Well, these niggers were tougher customers than those four swaggering Dutchmen, when all’s said and done. I haven’t been in a good honest row for a long while. It does one good.”

Mounting their horses they moved off, taking a farewell glance at the place where the fallen savage still lay at full length, though he began to show signs of returning consciousness. And the still sunshine glowed in all its former calmness, as though no fierce and deadly struggle had just occurred to mar its peace.

Chapter Two.

Ralph Truscott's Quest.

On the same day that these events are occurring on the far Kaffrarian border, two men are seated together in a dingy office just out of Chancery Lane. One is a solicitor, evidently the presiding genius of the place—a man with a high, bald forehead, iron-grey hair, and a keen, intellectual face; the other is a tall, dark, military-looking man, faultlessly attired, who sits impatiently tapping his boots with his cane while he listens to the lawyer in a half-incredulous and wholly discontented frame of mind, which betrays itself only too plainly in his eyes. A striking-looking man, in age about five-and-thirty; but there is an unmistakable air of dissipation, not to say excess, about the lines of the handsome face—the air of one who had lived too hard and too fast, and would be prematurely old. And a superciliousness about the mouth which the short black moustache did not conceal, and a cold, unscrupulous look in the eyes, would effectually prevent the face from ever being a pleasing one.

Ralph Truscott, late Captain in Her Majesty's —th Foot, was a firm believer in the adage, "All's fair in love and war"—in the former half of it literally, as more than one rather shady episode in his gallant career might serve to show, were it known, which it was not, even within his intimate circle; in the latter half as representing the multifold 'cute devices whereby he had staved off and otherwise evaded the just or unjust demands of a swarm of importunate creditors, Jew and Gentile. In a word, the man was a born spendthrift; and having run through one large fortune, and a second smaller one, in an incredibly short space of time, found himself compelled to sell, and had been living upon his wits and high play ever since. Not that he had degenerated into a mere card-room sharper—far from it—but he was noted as a man with an extraordinary run of luck; and though some held significantly aloof from him in connection with the card-table or the billiard-room, yet, on the whole, he had not lost caste. Of course it had occurred to him that he might retrieve his fallen fortunes by picking up an heiress. It ought not to be difficult, for he was just the sort of individual who, gifted with a striking exterior and unlimited assurance, might carry things pretty much as he pleased among the society women of his—or of any—set. But this course was open to two objections. One lay in his own inner consciousness, which made him fully aware that in three years, at the outside, he would inevitably have run through the lady's fortune, in which case he would find himself again destitute, and saddled with a wife to boot; the other, in the fact that though heiresses themselves might be soft of heart and compliant of head, their parents or guardians were not. Indeed, some of these, in the obduracy of their stony hearts, had been known to veto the transaction forthwith; while others, after a few private inquiries into the circumstances and antecedents of this enterprising individual, had briefly refused to entertain any of his proposals, and had carried off their charges out of harm's

way. So, Captain Ralph, repeatedly thwarted in his schemes of advancement, was compelled perforce to abandon them. He consoled himself, however, with the thought that after all it was better to be a free man, even if living was somewhat precarious, and gave up laying siege to the fair sex, with an eye to the main chance. But meanwhile his liabilities decreased not, and at the time the reader has the honour of making his acquaintance, he was, to use his own expression, “at his last kick” for want of the needful.

Such was the man who now sat in the inner office of Messrs Grantham and Grantham, solicitors, in close confabulation with the senior partner.

“Then you can give me no more positive information?” he was saying.

“I’m sorry to say we can’t,” replied the lawyer. “The young lady left England more than four years ago—went to the Cape, I believe, as governess or companion, or something or other in that line. Since then we have heard nothing of her.”

“Do you think she is out there still?”

“My dear sir, it is impossible for us to say. I repeat that it was more than four years ago, and that we have not heard one word of her since.”

“Well, I am surprised that you, of all people, should be so blankly ignorant of her whereabouts, considering that it might be necessary to communi—” He checked himself hurriedly, seeing that he had let out too much. “I mean—that her friends might be making inquiries after her.”

The faintest possible smile lurked round the corners of the lawyer’s mouth. He fancied that the other had let down his guard in that incautious speech into which vexation had betrayed him. And it was even so.

“You are very interested in this lady’s whereabouts,” he said.

“Naturally. We are relations—distant relations, that is.”

“Indeed! How, may I ask?”

“Well, you know—hang it all, I’m a deuced bad hand at pedigrees and all that sort of thing, but we are, in a way, cousins, on the mother’s side,” replied Truscott, testily, in a sort of tone which resented the doubt thrown upon his statement by the other’s inquisitiveness.

“I see,” said the lawyer, balancing a paper-cutter upon his forefinger. But though his features preserved their polite imperturbability, the fact was, he did not believe one word of this statement. “Let me see, though,” he went on, musingly; “I know who might be able to give you some information.”

“Who?” asked Truscott, eagerly looking up.

“Miss Dynevard, of Dynevard Chase. She, you are aware, is Miss Strange’s stepsister.”

The other’s countenance fell. He was more disappointed than he cared to say. Eveline Dynevard was the last person he could communicate with on the subject.

“Er—yes; of course,” he said, hurriedly. “I had forgotten. I will write to Miss Dynevard.”

“Can I make the inquiry for you?” asked the lawyer, politely.

“No—no, thanks. I needn’t trouble you further. Much obliged; good morning,” and taking up his hat Truscott made his way out into the street.

The lawyer went to the window and watched him turn the dingy corner. “John,” he said to his brother and junior partner, who at that moment entered. “You saw that chap who just went out from here. He’s got an inkling of the contents of old Dynevard’s will. I read him like a book as he sat there, clumsily trying to fish out the whereabouts of Miss Strange.”

“H’m! Has he?” grunted John Grantham, who was the greatest possible contrast to his more astute brother, in that he was short, red-faced, and irritable. “He didn’t succeed, I hope?”

“No. I couldn’t have told him if I had wanted to, for the simple reason that I don’t know. But he says he’s her cousin.”

“Hanky-panky,” replied the other, with a contemptuous snort. “I don’t believe a word of it. It’s easy to see what he’s after. And it would be a bad day for Lilian Strange, or indeed for any other pretty girl, when that rascal got making up to her. I know Master Ralph Truscott and his goings on, a good deal better than he thinks.”

“Well, it’s my opinion that the young lady’s married long ago. An attractive girl like that is sure to be able to pick and choose in a country where gentlewomen are scarce, I should imagine.”

“Bless my soul—yes,” assented the other, changing his coat, and brushing his hat, preparatory to a start for home. “And the sooner friend Truscott goes to the devil, the better for society at large; he’s going there as fast as he can, as it is.”

Meanwhile, the subject of this charitable remark was seated in a hansom with his face turned westward.

“That damned lawyer was lying,” he mused, “lying all the time. I could see it in his face, and it’s those chaps’ trade to lie. He could have told me if he had chosen. Never mind, I’ll be even with him yet. I’ll go to the Cape; by Jove, I will, and at once; the sooner the better, and this place is getting too hot for me just now. A few months of travel and sport, and it’ll cool down again, and then, if I find the fair Lilian—Find her? I must find her, and I will.” Then a suggestion, which Mr Grantham had thrown out, crossed his mind, and he turned hot and cold over the idea.

“I think it not improbable that we might have to seek for her under another name,” the lawyer had said. “Miss Strange, you are aware, was a young lady of considerable attractions. She may have married.”

“No, she will not,” repeated Truscott to himself, “I know her better than that. Unless—I don’t know. Time works queer changes. What a fool I was ever to let her out of my sight! And yet how could I tell that she would ever be worth keeping in it? It was the merest fluke that took me to Doctors’ Commons this morning, and a still greater one that moved me to look at old Dynevard’s will. I’ll go out and look for her, the game’s worth the candle, and, by George, if I win—and why shouldn’t I? She will almost throw herself into my arms, if only as a contrast to the Kafirs and Boers she is living amongst. Then I’ll turn over a new leaf. I could with Lilian, almost, I think. I never saw any woman to come up to her, unless it was—well, never mind. Yes, my luck is on the turn. Nearly six years ago, though. I wonder what she’s like now.”

He chuckled gleefully to himself as he leaned back in the cab and lighted a cigar. Then a thought struck him, and opening the trap in the roof he shouted a direction to the driver. The man turned his horse’s head and in a moment was speeding away Citywards. Somehow, the reader has already seen the dusty office-door before which Truscott leaped out of his cab, as also the sharp boy who opened it.

“Is your master in?”

The boy nodded and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. Quickly mounting the stairs Truscott found himself in the same dingy apartment wherein Claverton had sat, several years previously.

“Hullo, where’s Morkum?” he asked, disappointedly.

“He is out for de day, sair,” replied the occupant of the room, a hook-nosed son of Benjamin, rising from the table at which he was seated, and washing his hands with invisible soap, a process they greatly needed with the material article. “Can I not do anydings for you?”

“Yes, you can, Schultz,” said the other, in a conciliatory tone. “The fact is, I want to renew.”

The Jew looked keenly at him, and his little eyes twinkled maliciously.

“I can’t do it, sair. De monish, you see, must be paid. It is over-due—over-due.”

“What’s the amount now?”

“Fifteen hundred and twenty-five—six,” answered Schultz, having duly consulted a ponderous tome bound in leather.

“The devil! Now look here, Schultz. We’ll renew, say for three months, and you shall let me have the odd five hundred on your own terms.”

“No, sair. Mishter Morkum he said he cood not renew. I was haf de monish or—” and the speaker shrugged his shoulders in a way that was highly suggestive.

“But don’t you see, Schultz, I must renew, at any rate,” said the other, angrily. “Don’t be a damned fool now. I’m on a good thing, I tell you, and you shall be paid in full in a few months’ time. Don’t you see?”

But the Israelite apparently did not see. He was as obdurate towards this Gentile, as the Egyptian Gentile had erewhile been towards his own ancestors. He only shrugged his shoulders and repeated: “Mishter Morkum, he say I was haf de monish. Fifteen hundred and twenty-five—six.”

Then Truscott saw that it was useless, and, unfortunately for him, his temper got the better of him. He raved, and swore, and shook his fist under the other’s nose, threatening him with swift and sudden annihilation, and abusing him and his partner in

a torrent of the coarsest invective he could lay tongue to. But of his violence the little Jew was not one whit afraid, for his hand was in his coat-pocket and his fingers were grasping the butt of a revolver. His wicked little eyes sparkled like those of a rhinoceros, and the short grey bristles stood up upon his upper lip, as he turned upon Truscott in wrath.

“Hein! Vat do you shay? You shall not bully me, I can tell you dat much. You call yourself a shentelman, inteed? Yesh, you shall repent of this, ven you are in shail, dat’s vere you shall be. If you come a step nearer, I shall shoot you,” he went on, producing his weapon, for Truscott in another minute would have seized him by the throat and dashed him to the floor. But a bullet-wound would in no wise facilitate the success of his enterprise, if the result were no worse, and this he had the sense to see in a glimmering of reason which flashed in upon his rage. So he stopped, and, shaking his fist at the Jew, rushed from the room with a final curse—the parting epithet and scornful laugh flung after him by that worthy in no wise tending to allay his ire.

“Say, sonny,” remarked the cabman to the smart boy at the door. “The Kernel’s dustin’ your guv’nor’s jacket, ain’t he?” For the row going on upstairs was in a measure audible in the street.

“Reckon he’ll be the fust what’s done it—and the last,” replied the imp, pulling a handful of nuts from his breeches-pocket, and proceeding to crack them. Then Truscott emerged, and, flinging himself into the cab, started off westward.

“What a fool I was to get in a rage with the brute!” he thought, bitterly. “An utter fool! Now I’ve about done for myself, unless I can get away at once. I’m starting on a fool’s errand, though. Six years—or even five; it’s a long time. She may laugh in my face even if I find her; and then again—Hang it! I’ll just have another look at the will to make sure. No; it’s right enough, though. Still, I’m starting off on a regular fool’s errand. I’ve a good mind to give it up—a devilish good mind. But nothing venture, nothing win.”

The last ray of the sickly September sunlight was slanting garishly over the dust and whirl and roar of the great city, as he alighted at the steps of his club. Yes, a change would do him good, he thought, looking around; and when he came back, why, then—Somehow he felt certain of winning the game which he had set himself to play, and was quite elate. But the only thorn in his side—and a very sharp one it was—lay in the haunting fear lest the Jew should have him arrested before he could get away. And he could not get away for nearly a week. He would go down in the morning and see Morkum himself, and make it all right with that dirty little Schultz. Morkum was a reasonable fellow, and would be sure to renew, if not to accommodate him further, once

an inkling of the case was laid before him; and as for Schultz, why, a bottle of champagne and a slap on the back would salve his wounded feelings.

With this comforting resolve, Truscott dined sumptuously, and, in high good-humour, started off to a friendly rubber, at which he reckoned to make some nice little pickings. It was a fine evening—he would walk; so, lighting a cigar, he stepped out briskly, humming a popular tune, and thinking over his prospects if this move succeeded.

Before he had gone far, some one accosted him.

“Beg pardon, Capting. Sorry to trouble a gentleman—”

“What the devil do you want?” cried Truscott, angrily, an uncomfortable idea taking hold of him.

“I must arrest you, Capting, at the soot of Silas B. Morkum and Co,” replied the other, touching him on the shoulder. “Very sorry, sir, extremely sorry; but dooty is dooty—ain’t that right, Tom?”

“Tom,” a thin, quiet-looking individual, who might be anything, from a Russian spy to a Methodist class leader, nodded, and replied:

“That’s so, Bill.”

“But look here,” cried Truscott, “I’m going down to see Morkum the first thing in the morning. Can’t we make some arrangement for to-night? The fact is, I’ve got an important engagement now.”

The sheriff’s officer smiled pityingly.

“Extremely sorry, Capting, but the thing can’t be done. We’ll jest go quietly to my little crib now, and in the morning you can send and let your friends know. Here’s the writ; better look at it for yourself, Capting, and see that all’s fair, square, and above-board. Fifteen hundred and twenty-five—six. Cab, Tom.”

“Damn the writ!” cried Truscott, savagely.

And then, as they entered the rickety, jolting vehicle, he relapsed into silence. Fifteen hundred and twenty-five pounds! It might be fifteen million for all the chance there was of his being able to pay a third of it; for even he had at last come to the end of his tether. And no one would be likely to help him either; and this scheme, upon which he had been

building such hopes, must fall through, for every day was of importance now. And all its glowing chances looked fairer than ever now that he was compelled to abandon it; and his bright castles in the air seemed crumbling away in the very dust. So, with rage and despair in his heart, Ralph Truscott alighted at the door of the low sponging-house—his prison; whither he was consigned at the suit of Silas B. Morkum and Co, and whence he should not depart until he had satisfied the debt to the very last farthing; a requirement which at present he saw remarkably small prospect of fulfilling.

Chapter Three.

The Friend in Need.

George Payne and his newly-found friend—a veritable friend in need upon this occasion even as on a former one—kept on their way, winding along the picturesque heights overlooking the Kei, and exchanging many a reminiscence of their past acquaintance.

“To think of your turning up like this,” said the former. “Why, I thought you were still away up in the interior and never meant to come near these parts again.”

“Well, I don’t know. Fact is, after a few years of wandering, one has pretty well done this not too interesting continent, at least the southern part of it; and now I’m thinking of going somewhere else.”

“And you’ve come straight down country, now?”

“Yes; ridden all the way. It would be inconvenient in some ways were it not that one is indifferent to the exigencies of civilisation after such a spell of savagery as I’ve been having. One can’t carry much baggage, for instance.”

“Is that all you’ve got?” said Payne, glancing at the valise strapped across the other’s saddle.

“Yes; I had the rest sent to Komgha. It’s a good way from your place, but we might pick it up if it was wanted.”

“Better leave it there at present.”

“Why?”

“Well, it’s an even chance that we may all have to trek into laager there or somewhere, any day; and it’s safe there, at any rate.”

“Are things as fishy as that?”

“They are,” replied Payne. “A lot of the Dutchmen down towards the coast are already in laager; but they’re a white-livered lot, when all’s said and done, so that doesn’t mean much. Still, from one or two things I heard to-day, I should say that we shall have some tall rifle practice before long. I’m no alarmist; on the contrary, I’ve more than once been

advised to send the wife and kids away to the town, but I don't think there's any occasion for that just yet."

"No, perhaps not. And it's as well to keep straight as long as you can. Directly one begins to trek, another does—then another—and soon there's a regular panic."

"Rather. Now there was a scare on in the year of the big flood, and a lot of fellows round here began laagering, and one heard such a lot of war shop talked, that one almost wished there was some reason for it. Well, I remained through it all. I had only just come up here then, and didn't see the fun of leaving my place to run to wrack and ruin just as I had got it a little square and shipshape, so I stuck to it, and other fellows did the same; and we had the laugh of those who ran away in a funk."

"That was a bad scare, though."

"It was," said Payne. "The niggers were quite as cheeky then as they are now, and you've just had a specimen of what that is. By the way, don't mention that little scrimmage to the wife; she's very susceptible to scare, as it is, and once she heard of that, life would be a burden to her whenever I was away from home. Lately, she's done nothing but predict that I should come to grief."

"All right. I'll keep dark."

"Here we are at last," said Payne, as they entered a narrow gorge between two high hills, and emerging upon a sort of basin-like hollow, beheld a substantial-looking farmhouse. In front, a sweep of smooth sward sloping down to the dam, in whose still surface a cluster of willows lay mirrored, as they drooped their boughs to the water's edge; around this a few strips of enclosed and cultivated land, and a fruit-garden bordered by high quince hedges. On either side of the hollow, just far enough apart for the place not to be "shut in," rose green lofty heights, with here and there a clump of dark bush in their rifts and chasms; and two little streams of clear water met in the valley and dashed along past the homestead, sparkling as they joined their forces in a leaping, rushing rivulet—an invaluable boon in that land of drought. But it was not until one reached the house, which was situated on a slight eminence in the hollow, that the full charm of the situation became appreciable. Then, standing on the stoep, which ran round two sides of the building, on the one hand the Kei hills bounded the limit of vision; while on the other, focussed, as through a glass, between the double range of green heights narrowing as they stretched further and further away, a panorama of rolling bush country, with here and there a purple ridge rising in the sunny air, found its limit on the distant horizon. The house itself was a good specimen of the old-fashioned frontier abode, with its thatched roof and canvas ceilings. It had been added to by the present

owner, and was fairly roomy and comfortable. A passage intersected it, on either side of which, a door opened into a sitting-room and dining-room respectively, while another door from the latter communicated with the continuation of the stoep, which ran round that side of the building. Such was Payne's home—Fountain's Gap—so called from the two streams which met and flowed through the beautiful hollow, at either end of which one looked out upon the country beyond as through a gap.

"So this is your crib," remarked our new acquaintance, glancing critically around, as if to take in all the capabilities of the situation. "It strikes me as an uncommonly good one. Why, that stream alone ought to be a fortune to you."

"Yes; it's a good all-round place," assented Payne, perceptibly gratified. "You see, I've got a good deal of land under cultivation here round the dam. I'm going to break up any amount more, and go in strong for agriculture, as soon as this confounded scare, or war, whichever it's to be (and I don't care which), is over. It's of no use making a lot of improvements, only to be ravaged by these black devils—is it?"

"Not in the least."

They were now skirting the stream, which here flowed past the dam, communicating with it by a runnel cut with spades.

"Let's dismount here," said Payne, "unless you're tired, and would rather go in. You're not? Well then, look. Here's where I was thinking I might run up a mill one of these days; with this water power one might do anything. Higher up it's even better. Wait, we'll get rid of our horses and stroll along a bit," and a stentorian call brought a young Kafir running down from the out-buildings, as also three or four rough, fierce-looking dogs in open-mouthed clamour. The latter were soon pacified, and leaped around their master in boisterous glee, wagging their tails and whining joyously as he patted them, or bestowed a playful punch upon some shaggy hide, while a precautionary sniff having satisfied them as to the stranger's respectability, they forthwith took him into their confidence in a less mirthful and more dignified manner.

"Here, Booi," went on Payne. "Take the horses up to the stable, and off-saddle them. Is the missis in?"

"Don't know, Baas," answered the Kafir, grinning.

"Don't you? When did one of you fellows ever know anything? Now hook it," and as the boy led away their steeds, the two strolled on, Payne pointing out the capabilities of his

water advantages, and enlarging on his schemes of improvement; for this farm of his was his hobby, and in his heart of hearts he hoped some day to make it a model in the way of progress, as showing what might be done even there by a fellow with a little “go” in him.

They crossed the stream by a plank bridge, and now stood looking down it, scarcely, a hundred yards from the house, Payne still expatiating.

“Yes, with a place like this,” he said, “one ought to be able to do anything. It’s splendid pasturage, well situated, any amount of water, in fact, everything. And now comes this confounded war to upset the whole coach—Hullo!”

The exclamation is one of surprise and alarm as he turns round. His companion is standing rigid and motionless. Every particle of blood has fled from his face, leaving the sun-browned cheeks sallow and livid. His eyes are fixed and dilated, and one hand nervously grips the rail of the bridge against which he is leaning.

“Man alive—what’s up?” cried Payne, anxiously. “You look as if you had seen a ghost.”

“Nothing—nothing at all,” replied the other, with a faint smile. “I’m all right again now; don’t make a fuss, it’s nothing. I think it’s a remnant of that infernal up-country fever which I can’t thoroughly shake off. It left me as weak as a rat, and even yet I feel the effects now and then, as you see,” and again he made a ghastly attempt at a laugh.

“By Jove!” cried Payne, in alarm. “Did you get hit in that shindy just now?”

“No; don’t be afraid—I’m all right. It was only a slight seizure,” and his hand, as he removed it from the rail, still trembled a little, but the colour returned to his cheek.

What should have so violently moved this man, who looked as if nothing could disturb his placid equanimity for an instant? It could not be that he was in a weak state of health or of nerve, for had he not just engaged, single-handed, in an encounter with three daring ruffians, and come off victorious? And his weather-tanned features betokened health and strength as clearly as if he had not known a day’s illness for years. The heat was not overpowering; he had not been riding fast, or in any way exerting himself, nor was he subject to attacks of faintness. No, there was nothing. Unless it was that through the quiet air of that sunlit valley came the sound of a woman’s voice—a rich, full, sweet voice, distant but clear—singing a pathetic ballad.

“Are you sure?” went on Payne, looking at him concernedly. “Well, let’s go up to the house and have some brandy and water, you’ll want it, after that, and the sooner the better.”

“Payne,” said the other, with a sort of sternness, laying his hand on his arm. “I don’t want anything just now. If you make a fraction of fuss about me or my idiotic attack, I’ll ascend that horse of mine and say good-bye this very evening.”

“Eccentric as ever!” replied Payne, with a laugh. “My dear fellow, you shall do nothing of the sort, and I’ll promise not to bother you in any way. Come along, let’s go in.”

They walked towards the house, and as they approached it the song ended. Had that man been afflicted with heart disease he would assuredly have dropped down dead on the threshold, for a mist was before his eyes and his heart was beating as if it would burst.

“This way,” said Payne, ushering his guest into the empty sitting-room. “I’ll tell the wife you’re here,” and, closing the door, he left him alone.

Alone? Payne, while he stood holding the door open, could not see the piano at the far end of the room, and now as he closed it, the graceful figure of a lady, who had apparently been occupied in looking through a pile of music in the corner, rose to greet the new arrival. His back was to the light as she first saw him.

“Have you ridden far to-day?” she began, in a pleasant conversational voice. Then with a faint, gasping cry as if she had been stabbed, she reeled back and leaned against the piano, her face ashy white, and trembling in every limb.

“Arthur!”

“Lilian!”

He made three steps towards her, and stopped short. No, he dared not even touch her. She belonged to another, now. She was the wife of his host and friend, the man whose life he had just saved. Why had he, of all others, been sent there only just in time to rescue that life, and then have been brought on to this house to witness what the saving of that life involved? What power of evil had sent him to this fiery torment—this pang which was worse than hell—as he stood there looking upon the woman who possessed the love of his whole nature, and whose pure-souled, beautiful face had ever been before his mental gaze, night and day, during three years and a half of lonely wanderings? What had he done to deserve this torture? Like a lightning flash these reflections pierced

through his brain as he stood gazing, with a terrible agonised stare, upon the delicate beauty of face and form which had taken all the sunshine and gladness out of his existence, and now stood before him owned by another, and that other the man whose life he had just saved.

Something in his look froze her where she stood. Was she thinking much the same as himself? With hands clasped tightly before her, and eyes fixed upon his with a despairing fear, she whispered hoarsely:

“I thought I should never see you again. I thought—Oh, God—I thought—that you were—dead!”

The last ray of the sinking sun shot from over the western hills, entering the window and flooding with a golden and then a ruddy halo the pale, anguish-stricken face and the wealth of dusky hair. And there they stood, those two who had been parted three long weary years and twice that number of months. There they stood—suddenly thrown together, as it were, by the hand of Fate—facing each other, yet speechless. Three years and a half of parting, and now to meet again—thus.

“I knew it must be you,” he said at length, slowly. “When I heard those words I knew they could be sung by no one else—like that.”

For it was the same ballad which she had sung on that night at Seringa Vale, when he was betrayed into the first avowal of his love, nearly four years ago; and the first words which had thrilled upon his ear now, as he recovered from his sudden attack of faintness, was the conclusion of the sad and mournful refrain.

And then this man, whose death she had mourned long and in secret, suddenly stood before her.

When last we saw Claverton lying fever-racked in the Matabili hut, he was certainly as near to death's door as ever man was without actually passing that grim portal; and when the uncivilised bystanders, with bated breath, whispered their verdict, it was only the one which would have been returned by any onlooker. Falling back, he had lain to all appearance dead; but that very swoon had been the means of saving his life, at least, such was the unhesitating opinion of one or two to whom he afterwards told the circumstances, though of course not what had caused the swoon, and who, from their training and practice, were qualified to judge. His life must have been saved by a miracle, said they. What that miracle was he did not feel called upon to tell them. The sight—sudden and vivid in its distinctness—of a face the dying man had longed, with a terrible hopeless longing, to see; death had no terrors for him, his whole soul was

concentrated on this one agonising desire, and it had been fulfilled. The sight of that loved face, momentary as it was, had calmed him into a peaceful, death-like sleep, and the crisis was past. Had it been that in some mysterious manner, triumphing over nature, spirit had gone to meet spirit on that dark winter night? Who can tell? The end effected would have sufficed to justify such a departure from the law of nature, for it is certain that the apparition, whether due to the imagination of a fever-distorted brain, or to whatever cause, was the saving of Claverton's life.

Then, almost too soon after his recovery, he had wandered on. He had come through the Transvaal, and past the gold fields of the great Dutch Republic, and now he pushed on beyond the haunts of man striving after gain, farther and farther into the interior, where the gnu and quagga roamed the vast plains in countless herds; where the giraffe browsed in the green mimosa dales, and the elephant and rhinoceros crushed through the tangled jungle—at night terrific with the resounding roar of the forest king. On—ever on—alone, save for three or four native followers to look after his waggon and aid in the chase.

And he had borne a charmed life. He it was who had shot the huge lion in mid-air as it leaped right over him to seize one of the oxen tied fast for the night in the strong brushwood enclosure, the mighty frame falling nearly upon him as it bit and ramped in the agonies of death. He it was who had confronted the hostile Matabili chief and his six hundred men, when that truculent potentate had demanded the person of one of his followers in satisfaction for some trifling larceny committed by the hapless lad upon their mealie gardens, and dared the barbarian and his armed warriors so much as to lay a finger upon him or his; and the fierce savage, in admiring awe of his sublime indifference to death or danger, had suddenly become his fast friend, though a moment before, the chances were a hundred to one against his leaving the spot alive. He it was who had swum out into the river swarming with crocodiles, and rescued this very follower, none other than the same, the Natal boy, Sam—who had watched him through his illness at the Matabili kraal—who, carried off his feet by the force of the current, was being borne away down the river, and the other natives had given him up as lost. And many and many a hair-breadth escape had he, by field and flood, until the natives began to look upon him as a sort of god, and his own body servants felt safer in his service from danger or sickness than they would have done surrounded by British regiments in the former contingency, or protected by all the “charms” of their most renowned izanusis (wizards) in the latter. For he was absolutely indifferent to death, and consequently death was indifferent to him.

And ever before him, whether amid all the rapturous excitement of the chase, in the glowing noonday, or in the awesome solitude of the midnight camp far in the heart of the wilderness, hundreds of miles from the nearest haunt of civilised man, with the roar

of the lion and the howl of the hyaena echoing along the reedy bank of some turbid lagoon; while he watched the scintillating eyes of savage beasts glowing like live coals out of the surrounding gloom as they prowled around his encampment, haply waiting for the sinking watch-fire to fade altogether—amid all this, and ever before him, there was one beautiful face present to his mind's eye, as he had seen it, looking smilingly at him in the soft moonlight, or set and despairing as he had last gazed upon it that day in the golden noontide, beneath the old pear-tree. And as years went on they brought with them no solace, and now he had returned to civilisation, intending shortly to leave for ever the land which had made only to mar the successes of his life.

He had changed slightly—and changed for the better—for his years of wandering in the wilderness. He was in splendid condition, broader of chest and firmer-looking, though not one whit less active than in the old days; but the impatient, restless expression had departed from his eyes, leaving one of settled calm, the imperturbability of a man who feels that he has lived his life, and that his past is a far-away state—a vista, fair and lovely, perhaps, to look back upon, as the traveller looks back in memory upon some beautiful tract he has left behind—but still another and a different state of being. Such was Arthur Claverton, as brought there by a marvellous freak of the hand of Fate, he stood once more face to face with his first and only love.

Suddenly the voice of his host on the stoep recalled him to himself; recalled both of them, and, with a sigh, Lilian turned round as if to resume what she had been doing, in reality to collect herself, and Payne entered.

“Hallo,” he said. “You here, Miss Strange? Let me introduce my friend; or have you already been making acquaintance?”

Claverton started as if he had been shot, and the room seemed to go round with him. “Miss Strange!” She was not this man's wife, then, or anybody's. He hardly heard what was said after that; though outwardly cool and collected. Then the revulsion of feeling was succeeded by a relapse almost as overwhelming as the first. For was it likely, he argued, that she would listen to him now, any more than that morning three years and a half ago—when for the second time she refused his love? And his reason answered, No. Still it was a weight lifted, the discovery that she was not married to his host, as he had at first thought. He had never seen Payne's wife, nor had that genial-hearted soul ever touched upon the subject of his spouse in such way as to enable him to form any idea of her personal appearance. Nor had Payne mentioned the fact of there being a guest in his house. And then Lilian's own words—“I thought that I should never see you again—I thought that you were dead,” spoken as if in explanation of her own circumstances. No wonder he had jumped to that conclusion. Well, it did not matter either way, he told himself. He would importune her no more—he could follow the only course open to

him—he would go. She might tolerate his presence just this one evening, and on the morrow he could depart before any of the household were astir, even as he had done once before.

It may be wondered what Payne had been about all this time, after unconsciously leaving these two together. On going to the back of the house, the first sight that met his gaze was a troop of young cattle plunging over a fence and careering madly about one of his cultivated strips destined to become a model kitchen garden. To dash off then and there, and eject the intruders before damage, widespread and sore, was done, became at once the object of his life, and forgetting for the moment the very existence of his guest—or, indeed, of anybody—away he started; but the work of reparation was also one of time, and not until all possibility of a recurrence of the damage had been practically guarded against, did he so much as begin to think of returning to the house.

Fortunately the darkness of the room, as the shades of evening deepened, kept Payne from noticing Lilian's deathly paleness, and he chatted on in high good-humour, till the sound of voices and laughter in the passage proclaimed the advent of his wife and olive-branches—the latter, Lilian's charges; for she was still plying that delightfully remunerative and much appreciated craft—teaching the young idea.

“Well, Lilian,” cried Mrs Payne, a bright, cheery little woman of about her own age, or perhaps a year or two older. “You'd much better have come out with me instead of moping indoors, on this lovely afternoon, over that wretched music. Why, who's this?” Then a due introduction having been effected, she shook hands cordially with the new arrival. “Ah, Mr Claverton, I'm so glad to see you. I'm always at that dear, stupid old George for not bringing you here, after saving his life that time; but I'm so glad you've found us out at last.”

“That dear, stupid old George,” the while, was winking at Claverton over his spouse's shoulder, his satirical nature hugely tickled by the flutter which the news of the other's opportune aid a second time rendered would cast her into. He would tell her some day, but not just yet.

Claverton laughed. “Well, you see, Mrs Payne, he could hardly have done that, because I was bound in the opposite direction, but I've taken advantage of my opportunity as soon as I fell in with it, and here I am.”

“What! Do you mean to say you've been wandering about up the country ever since?”

“Of course he has,” struck in Payne. “But hadn't we better get all snug for the evening? It's about feeding-time! Here, Claverton, come this way, I dare say you'll like to put your

head into cold water. And, Annie, just tell those kids to shut up that infernal clatter," he added, as the uproar of juvenile romping, mingled with many a shrill laugh, came rather too distinctly from an inner room.

And how comes it that Lilian Strange, whom we last saw at Seringa Vale, should be quietly installed in this Kaffrarian border dwelling? It will be necessary to glance back.

Not long after we saw her, hopeless and heartbroken, more than three years back, an event happened which caused her to forget for a time her own grief in the sore affliction of others, of her dearest and truest friends. One day Mr Brathwaite started for his accustomed ride round the farm, but the afternoon slipped by and then evening came, and he did not return. His horse, however, did; for just as Mrs Brathwaite, in anxiety and alarm, was about to send forth in search of him, that quadruped put in an appearance, with the rein still on its neck, and limping up to the stable-door as if it had been injured. Then they started in search, leaving Mrs Brathwaite a prey to the most terrible forebodings, which were realised only too soon. The old settler was found lying in the veldt, unable to move. His horse, he said, had put its foot in a hole, stumbled and rolled over with him, falling upon him; no bones were broken, but he feared he had received some internal injury as he could not move without great pain. Carefully they carried him home, and he was put to bed. Tenderly did his wife and Lilian watch beside him the night through, while Hicks was riding at a hand-gallop to fetch a doctor from the district town. An errand, alas, which was only too futile; for as the clear dawn quivered glowing and chill over the homestead at Seringa Vale the sufferer's spirit passed slowly away, and the beams of the rising sun, darting in at the window, lighted upon the face of a corpse and two watchers weeping by a bedside.

Thus died Walter Brathwaite—the staunch, persevering settler, the pioneer of industry and advancement in a new and far-away land, and, above all, the genial, noble-hearted gentleman. One who had never turned his back on friend or foe, a man who had never been guilty of a mean action or reaped advantage from the misfortune of his fellows; open of hand, kindly of heart and firm of head, he died as he had lived, regretted, loved, and respected by all who knew him. And that country is fortunate which can show many of his like.

And in the dark and rayless days that followed, it was Lilian's task to whisper words of consolation and hope to the sorrowing widow, crushed to the very earth in her sudden and comfortless grief; and in no better hands could it have devolved. But within the year Mrs Brathwaite had followed her husband, and Lilian, who, up to then, had tended her with more than all the loving care of a daughter, watched over her to the last.

“God bless you, dearie,” had been the dying woman’s parting words to her. “You have given yourself up to the comfort and happiness of others; some day it will return to you a hundredfold. Only be patient.”

They buried her beside her husband; and in one disastrous day, sad indeed had been the change wrought in that peaceful, happy home. And then Lilian, craving for work and diversion, had gone back to her old line of life, which, involving a constant tax on her energies, would afford her both the one and the other. So here she was, after a lapse of years, installed at Fountain’s Gap, ostensibly as the preceptress of Mrs Payne’s children, in reality as companion to that good-hearted little woman herself, who had taken an immense fancy to her, and, moreover, hated being left alone, as must, otherwise, inevitably be frequently the case from the very nature of her husband’s pursuits.

“Did you hear anything fresh in Komgha to-day, George?” asked his wife, when they were seated at the table. The curtains were drawn and the room looked snug and homelike.

“Two more troops of Police ordered over the Kei.”

“Oh, dear. That looks bad. We are in a dreadful state of scare now, Mr Claverton,” she explained. “I can hardly sleep at night for thinking of it—and right in the middle of those wretches, too.”

“We are!” rejoined Payne, good-humouredly. “Say, rather, you are. The fact is, Claverton, my wife thinks of nothing but fire and sword, morning, noon, and night, till she’s worked herself up to such a pitch that every time a drunken nigger howls in the veldt she vows they are raising the war-cry.”

“Well, but you know there is reason for it,” retorted she. “And if it gets any worse, Lilian and I will go away with the children to Grahamstown or somewhere. I really am frightened.”

“That’s a long way,” said Payne, banteringly. “I also heard that the new Governor was coming up to the frontier.”

“Ah, we’re getting the news by degrees,” exclaimed his wife. “What else did you hear?”

“That a policeman rode in from the Transkei this morning.”

“What news did he bring?”

"I don't know."

"There now. You never find out anything. Some day we shall all be taken by surprise and murdered in our beds."

"Ha, ha, ha?" laughed Payne. "Well, at any rate, you're no worse than the people at Komgha. If an express rides in, they jump to the conclusion that Kreli is marching on their precious town at the head of twenty thousand men. For my part I don't believe there'll be a shindy at all. It's only another case of scare."

But he did believe it, only he thought a pious fraud justifiable to reassure the womenkind.

"When I'm big," remarked Harry Payne, aged seven, "I'll have a gun and shoot a great schelm Kafir."

"But, Harry, he may shoot you first," said Lilian, during the laugh that followed upon this interruption.

"No he won't," persisted the embryo warrior. "I'll shoot him."

It was the first time Lilian had spoken, and Claverton, who was sitting opposite her and almost as silent, heard with a thrill that low, sweet voice which had haunted his dreams and his waking thoughts during the long years of solitude. He had been furtively watching her, noting every turn of the beautifully poised head, striving to catch a glance from the sweet, serious eyes, which somehow were never suffered to meet his. And he likewise noted that Lilian Strange at twenty-seven was, if possible, even more lovely and winning to behold than on that day just four years ago, when he had first gazed upon the vision which had completely altered the course of his life. Not even the most spiteful of critics could say of her that she had "gone off." A trifle graver perhaps, but it was a gravity that suited well her soft, dark beauty; and the smile, when it did come, lit up the serene, exquisite face as the ripple of a sunbeam on a sleeping pool. And it was just such a smile as this which caused a tug of pain at Claverton's heart, when the urchin uttered his bellicose aspiration.

"By the time you're big enough for that, sonny, there may be occasion for it, not before," said Payne, as he wheeled back his chair. "Come and have a smoke on the stoep, Claverton. What! Did you say, 'No'?"

"That's what I said."

“Well! Here’s a transformation! Why, you haven’t given up the only sociable habit—Ah, I see. Ladies, you may score a triumph; you have tamed this savage. He is going to give up the soothing weed in favour of your more soothing society. But I am not, therefore for the present—so long,” and with a laugh the light-hearted fellow went out, cramming his pipe as he went.

“Now, Mr Claverton, we shall expect you to tell us some most thrilling adventures,” said his hostess. “You must have a great stock of them.”

“I assure you I have none,” he began.

“Oh, that won’t do. But tell me the ins and outs of that affair when you first met George.”

Claverton started. His wits were, in popular phraseology, wool-gathering; and at first he thought of to-day’s row. Then he remembered.

“That affair at De Klerk? It wasn’t much of a thing. Payne was holding his own gallantly against four big Dutchmen, and I came up in time to turn the scale. You said something about his life just now, but his life wasn’t in danger; the most they’d have done would have been to have given him rather a mauling.”

“What was it about?” asked Lilian.

“The right of outspan, usual bone of contention in Dutch neighbourhoods. And just then the Boers were rather sore about the Gold Fields, and made themselves very nasty to any one coming from or going to that sham El Dorado.”

“Sham! Yes, it is a sham; George did no good by going,” said Mrs Payne, rising. “Now, children, bed-time,” and with the reluctant juveniles she left the room; and again those two were alone together.

Claverton, who had hoped for such a moment, now that it had come, felt utterly tongue-tied. He felt that he had no right to rake up the past. She herself had buried it, and now that they were unexpectedly thrown together again, he felt that it would be unfair to her, not to say obtrusive, to revert to the forbidden subject. And yet what was he to say to her? Every topic they had in common was inextricably interwoven with that terribly painful past, which was as fresh and unhealed in his heart as on the morning when she had bidden him leave her.

“Do you know, I had not the remotest idea I should find you here to-day?” he began, rather lamely.

“Hadn’t you? I suppose not,” she answered, speaking quickly, and her fingers busy at some needlework, trembled ever so slightly.

“How long have you known the Paynes?”

“Nearly three years. Just before Mrs Brathwaite’s death.”

“What! Is Mrs Brathwaite dead?” he asked, in astonishment.

“Didn’t you know?” she replied. And then she gave him the history of the sad events which had followed so soon upon his leaving Seringa Vale, and he listened in amazement, for he had only just returned straight from the interior, and thus, as it were, into the world again.

“I am very grieved to hear this,” he said, when she had finished. “They were the truest, kindest friends that ever man had. I little thought I should never see them again. And I suppose Jim reigns in the old place, now?”

“Yes,” she answered sadly, and then there was silence for a few moments. The conversation was taking a decidedly dangerous turn, and Lilian began to feel embarrassed. Perhaps it was as well that Mrs Payne returned, having disposed of her offspring in their various couches, and almost immediately her lord entered from the stoep, bringing in a whiff of fresh night air not guiltless of tobacco smoke.

“Grand night!” he exclaimed, flinging down his hat in high good-humour. “We’ll have a ride over the place to-morrow, eh, Claverton?”

Claverton assented mechanically, thinking the while how he might be far enough away by that time. Then a little more conversation, and a move was made to retire. How narrowly he scanned Lilian’s face, while he held her fingers in ever so lingering a clasp as he bade her good-night! He could read nothing there. And then, mechanically again, he followed his host to the room prepared for him, and once more he was alone.

Then what a rush of recollections swept over his mind, as he sat at the open window looking out upon the still night! All the years of wandering, of peril, and of hardship, were bridged over as by a single night, and once more it seemed as if he had just heard his doom only a few hours since, in the garden at Seringa Vale. And now Fate had thrown him beneath the same roof with this woman, whom he had never expected nor dared hope to see again. He had once more looked into her eyes, and drank in the sound of her voice—once more had held her hand in his, and now the old wound, never even so

much as cicatrised over, was lacerated afresh, and gaped open and bleeding. Could he have been brought here for the mere sport of circumstances, or was it with a purpose—a deeper import? And with the superstition in small things which often, and in spite of himself, clings to a man who has travelled much and in solitude, he grasped the idea. Yet he dared not hope. Hope and he had parted company long since, he told himself. But he made up his mind that, at any rate, he would not leave his friend's hospitable roof the next day; and having arrived at that conclusion he fell asleep, and slept soundly.

Chapter Four.

“So the Face before her Lived, Dark-Splendid...”

And what of her to whom this long, weary period had been so many years and so many months of terrible self-reproach? To her, though Time had brought no solace, it had brought a certain amount of resignation; and she had been able to school herself to face the future as best she might. Then suddenly, without so much as a moment's warning, this man whom she had mourned as dead, whom she had wept and prayed for, night and morning, as one whom she would never again behold here on earth, stood before her. She had looked up, expecting to see a stranger—and there he stood! No wonder the blood forsook her ashy face and her heart stood still.

And now, in the dark, silent hours, she can scarcely realise it. It must be a dream—such a one as she had many and many a time awakened from to find her pillow wet with tears. Would she now awaken to find herself once more the dupe of one of those cruel hallucinations? No, this was real, she told herself; and looking back upon that meeting, awful in its suddenness, she wondered how she had so preserved her calmness. And he—he had shrunk from her—stopped short as soon as he recognised her. No wonder. She had sent him away with bitter words, with hard, cruel words, as a last recollection. How could he tell the agonies of remorse, of repentance, of vain, passionate yearning, which her life had since undergone? Time had gone by—perhaps he had eradicated from his heart the image of her who had made a plaything of it, as it must seem to him; perhaps some other image had taken its place. Better she could have continued to mourn him as dead than that. She forgot, in her anguish, how he had been wandering ever since they two parted—wandering afar in the wild interior, among its wilder inhabitants, alone with his own thoughts and her memory. She forgot all this as, the night through, she lay and tortured herself with these and kindred reflections.

And even if things were not so, and he had come back as he went, was there not the same barrier between them? Now that she was face to face with it once more, could she be false to her word any more now than then? Did not the old obstacle once more arise? No, it did not. From that fatal promise she had been absolved since then, absolved by the inexorable hand of Death—not always a merciless enemy—and at this moment she was free, absolutely free. But what availed her freedom now? Years ago it would have meant everything—life, love, and happiness—but now—

One by one the stars paled overhead, a faint glow suffused the eastern sky, and, with a chill tremor, the dawn swept clearer and clearer over the sleeping earth. Very soothing to Lilian's tired brow was the fresh, cool air as she leaned out of the window, restless and fevered, after a sleepless night. For a few moments thus she stood, watching the

shadows lightening upon the hills around, then, dressing hurriedly, she descended, intending to enjoy the early freshness before any one should be astir.

Noiselessly unlocking the front door, she passed out; and never had the pure morning air seemed more grateful or invigorating. She walked to the gate at the end of the stoep and turned the key—tried to turn it, rather, for it was firm. Then she tried again with all the strength of her two hands; but no; the wretched instrument moved not a hair's breadth, and she stood contemplating a deep-blue imprint on her own delicate palm—the sole result of her attempt.

“Allow me,” said a voice, and immediately the recalcitrant key yielded, with a creak and a snap, to the vigorous turn of a strong hand. “There,” said the new arrival, swinging open the gate. “Are you taking an early stroll?”

Upon what a startled ear had that voice fallen! Her first impulse was to disclaim all intention of early exercise, and to go back indoors; but she answered in the affirmative.

“I wonder if my company would bore you greatly?” went on Claverton. “Singularly enough, I turned out early with the same intent, and Fate seems to have thrown us together.”

Did he say this with a meaning? she wondered. Fate had indeed thrown them together.

“It would be very ungrateful of me to refuse it,” she answered, with a smile, “when you have just overcome such an obstacle in the way of my going out at all.”

They walked along in silence for a few moments, side by side—those two, who had been so long parted.

“Do you find this place as pretty as Seringa Vale?” he asked.

The question somewhat took her aback. Why did he wish to recur to the past? “No; I have never seen anything like that,” answered she. “Still this is very beautiful in its way. Mr Payne thinks it the most perfect spot on earth.”

“And—are you happy here, Lilian?”

“Yes; I have no right to be otherwise. In fact, I consider myself very fortunate.”

“Oh.”

They had reached the little wooden bridge whence he had first caught the notes of the old, familiar ballad the evening before. Crossing it, they turned down a path between two high pomegranate hedges. Beyond was a garden—cool, leafy, and inviting—where birds twittered and chirped in the morning air. A gleam beyond the Kei hills betokened the advent of the sun.

“It’s marvellously warm for daybreak at this time of year,” began Claverton after a pause. “I hope it doesn’t mean a storm in the afternoon, because that isn’t exactly an auspicious opening to a journey.”

“A journey!” echoed Lilian, blank dismay in her face and in her tone. “You are not going away—to-day?” And moved by an uncontrollable impulse she looked at him, and in that look was a world of entreaty, of despair, and of love; such a look as would be with him to his dying day.

“And is it not better so?” he said, gently. “Believe me, I did not come here to make it uncomfortable for you—darling.” Then, seeing the imploring look deepen in the white face, he went on in a strangely altered tone: “What? It cannot be! Oh, Lilian—tell me—am I to—?”

“Stay.” The word was spoken in a low, thrilling voice. “Stay! unless you want to break my heart. It is only what I should deserve,” and a great sob convulsed the beautiful frame, which was instantly locked fast in Claverton’s embrace; and heart beat against heart as he covered the shrinking face and the soft hair which lay against his shoulder with wild, delirious kisses.

Then the great, golden chariot of day mounted majestically above the eastern hills, and flamed from the azure vault, darting a bright beam upon those two happy ones as if in benediction, and flooding the valley with light and gladness; and the bleat and low of the flocks and herds sounded from the fold, and the voices of humankind echoed cheerily through the morning air—and the day was begun. And in that quiet garden the birds fluttered and piped, bees droned in the sunlight as they winged their way in search of the luscious store, and now and then the leaves would tremble in a faint breeze. Birds, insects, whispering trees, all seemed but to echo one voice, one glad, joyous refrain—“We will never part again, love, never, never.”

Lilian was the first to break the silence.

“Oh, Arthur, is this, too, a dream?” she murmured. “Shall I wake up in a moment and find you vanished, as I have so often done?”

“Have you, sweetest?” he replied in a tone of reverent tenderness, as if he could not speak too softly, or too gently, to her. “It is reality now—if ever anything was—sweet reality;” and at the picture which her words opened up before his mind he clasped her again to his heart as though he could never let her go.

“Let me have a look at you, darling,” she said, suddenly raising her head with a bright, lovely blush, and gazing into the firm, serious face bent over hers. “You have become so brown, and you are looking ever so much older, and—”

“And am quite a battered and hardened campaigner.”

“And are looking ever so much better—ever so much better than you used to. There, you don’t deserve that for interrupting me,” she added, with one of her most bewitching smiles.

“Let’s sit down here,” he suggested, as, with his arm still round her, he drew her towards a rustic seat which might be twin brother to the one under the pear-tree where that dread parting had taken place those years ago. “Now tell me all about yourself—about everything.”

She did so. She told him of her life since they parted, and previous to their first meeting; told him the story of that promise which had entailed such misery upon both of them. It was the old story—a former suitor—and the promise had been most solemnly given beside her mother’s deathbed. The man was worthless to the core, selfish, dissipated, and unprincipled, but he was fascinating both in manner and appearance; and Lilian, at any rate, fancied him genuine. Over her mother he had cast the spell of an extraordinary infatuation, and Mrs Dynevard had not a little to do with the bringing about of her daughter’s engagement. Certain it was that nothing else prevented that daughter from breaking it, for when—her stepfather dying shortly afterwards—Lilian could no longer make her home at Dynevard Chase, this fair-weather suitor kept aloof. He was obliged to leave England, he explained, in order to better his fortunes, which were in a very bad way. By this time, however, Lilian had gained some insight into his real character, and then the weight of that rash promise began to make itself felt. Once she appealed to him to release her from it, but met with a decided refusal, and, as though to rivet the bond still tighter, the man reminded her that her promise was not only given to him but also to her dead mother. So poor Lilian clung fast to her only hope, which was that he might not think it worth his while to claim its fulfilment. Meanwhile she sacrificed herself to sentiment—as men and women have so sacrificed themselves at the faggot pile, or helpless and defenceless before ravening beasts in the arena. Then, like a lightning flash, had come the consciousness of real love, but still she immolated herself to the sacredness of a rash promise.

Let us leave them there, those two, in the sunny garden, amid the unclouded glory of the new-born day. Their cup is full—full and brimming with such happiness as this world rarely affords. Let them revel in it while they may, for a dark cloud is rolling up, gathering as it rolls—a cloud whose edges are red with blood, and whose gruesome shadow is fraught with desolation, with ruin, and with Death.

“Payne,” quietly remarked Claverton, two hours later, as he and his host were standing at the gate of one of the sheep-kraals, the latter counting: “I wonder if I shall succeed in astonishing you directly—by what I’m going to tell you.”

“Twenty-three—five—seven—thirty-two—six,” counted Payne. “Don’t speak to a man on his stroke—or count. Nine—forty-one—forty-four—seven hundred and forty-four. Right, Booi. Now, off you go, and keep away from old Smith’s boundary. He’s a cantankerous beggar, and I don’t want to have a tiff with him. What were you saying, Claverton?” he continued, making a playful cut at a native urchin with his whip, which the boy dodged, and gambolled away swinging his sheepskin kaross and grinning from ear to ear.

“I was saying—would it surprise you greatly to learn that I am about to perpetrate matrimony?”

Payne whistled. “N-no—I don’t know—most fellows fall victims sooner or later. And after all the knocking about you’ve had it’ll do you good to settle down for a bit. By the way—if it’s not an impertinent question—who’s the lady?”

“Lilian Strange.”

“Eh?”

“Lilian Strange.”

“The devil!”

“No—nothing of the kind. That’s deuced uncomplimentary of you when I tell you a piece of news before I’ve imparted it to any one else. In fact, I call it downright shabby,” replied Claverton in a tone of mock remonstrance, while his eyes sparkled with suppressed merriment. For Payne was staring blankly at him as if he distrusted his sense of hearing.

“But—but—Hang it all, how do you know she’ll have you? Why, you never set eyes on her till yesterday.”

Claverton laughed. "I know it because I have it from the very best authority—her own lips. And I knew her—well, long before I had the advantage of first beholding the light of your supremely honest and genial old countenance," he said, quietly. "Come, don't stare at a fellow as if you thought him a candidate for a glass-case, but say something decent. Make us a speech, you know."

"Why, of course, I congratulate you, old chap, and all that sort of thing; but you've taken one a little aback. Hang it, it's as good as a play. Aha! that's what we get up so dismally early for, hey?"

And, indeed, honest Payne was so taken aback by the announcement that he walked beside the other speechless, with his hands in his pockets, and whistling.

Never before had the duties of the schoolroom seemed so irksome to Lilian as this morning. The warm, sunny air streamed in at the open windows, and just audible was the hum of male voices in conversation, and her heart thrilled as every now and then her ear caught a low, gleeful laugh, which she had learned to know so well. Once, indeed, she went to the window, in the hope of catching a glimpse of the talkers, or rather of one of them; but the result was lamentable, for she found herself dogmatically asserting to her pupils that Pekin, not Paris, was the capital of France—they staring the while as if they did not quite know what to make of her.

"Miss Strange," exclaimed the eldest girl, "do let's have the map of this country instead. France and Germany, and all those, are so stupid. We can see where all the Kafirs live, who are coming to fight us."

"They're not going to fight us," struck in Harry, somewhat indignantly. "Pa says they're not. They're funky."

Lilian smiled at this retort, and nipped in the bud an argument, which promised to wax warm, by producing a large map of the Eastern Province.

"Now look here, Harry," she said; "here's the River Kei, and here are we. Here are all the Kafirs and—"

"But where's Fountain's Gap?" inquired Rose, aged nine.

"It isn't marked. Look. We'll put a pencil spot for it. Here's King Williamstown."

"What, all that way off?" said Harry.

“Yes. It is a long way off.”

“But we should have to run there if the Kafirs came,” protested that doughty youth.

“Aha! Who’s funky now? Who wants to run away now—eh?” jeered his sister.

“Hush!” said Lilian, in that sweet, soothing way of hers, that stood her in far better stead than any amount of sternness. “You mustn’t quarrel now, you know.” Suddenly the urchin fixed his gaze upon her, and, with mischief gleaming from his blue eyes, exclaimed:

“I saw you this morning—you and that man.”

Lilian felt herself flushing all over. She tried to direct his attention to the lesson, but the imp, with that mixture of mulishness and malice which seems the invariable attribute of the infant prodigy oft-times petted, continued:

“I did. I saw you ki—”

“Harry!” cried Rose, making as if she would rush upon the delinquent. “I’ll go and tell mamma about you, at once. Send him out of the room, Miss Strange—do!”

Poor Lilian! Her delicate, sensitive nature was indeed undergoing acute laceration at the tongue of this urchin, on whom she had lavished nothing but tenderness and care. Whether from perversity, or with a savage enjoyment of the pain he was inflicting, the cub went on:

“I don’t care, Rose! I did see them. They were—”

What they were or were not doing remained unsolved, for the door opened, and Mrs Payne entered.

“I want you to give them a holiday to-day, Lilian,” she said. “Now then, children, run away out into the garden. You can put your books away after. Out you go—quick.”

They obeyed with double alacrity. For their mother, in spite of her warm-heartedness, had a very decided will of her own at times. And Rose, taking into consideration all the circumstances, deemed it advisable to say nothing about Master Harry’s ill-conditionedness.

“Lilian, dear!” exclaimed the good-hearted little woman, as soon as the children had gone out, “I’m so glad about this. Directly I heard of it I came straight here. I couldn’t let you remain drudging in here another moment, to-day. You must go out, and at once, or a certain person will be getting so impatient that he’ll be wanting to quarrel with George, which would be a pity, as they have always been such good friends.”

And then Lilian, somewhat unnerved by the recent juvenile disclosure, cried a little, and there was a good deal of kissing.

“By the way,” exclaimed Mrs Payne, ruefully, “of course, I shall lose you very soon, now; and I don’t know how I shall get on without you at all, dear.”

Chapter Five.

Sandili.

Never was war or outbreak more entirely without reason or provocation than the Kafir rising of 1877-8.

It is a well-known rule that savage races go under before the encroachments of white civilisation. The case of the native tribes in Southern Africa is a notable exception. Far from diminishing, every year sees their population actually increased. And the reason need not be sought for long. It lies in the security to life and property afforded these people by British rule, the quelling of intertribal wars, the breaking of the power of the chiefs, the abolition of sanguinary laws relating to witchcraft, the opening up of a vast field for native labour, and the resources of civilisation brought more and more within the reach of the tribes, who, for their part, are not slow to avail themselves of the same. True that, as well as ploughs, and waggons, and smithies, and schools, British rule has also conferred upon them grog. That would have come anyhow; but even as things are, in this respect the natives are no worse than our own countrymen.

This outbreak was devoid of a shadow of excuse. The different locations occupied by these tribes were fair and fertile tracts of country. They had no encroachments to complain of on the part of the colonists, for their territory was jealously secured to them—good pasturage, fertile lands, and well watered withal. For their surplus population there was abundance of work to be obtained in the colony, and whatever property they might accumulate it was beyond the power of any hostile tribe or tyrannical potentate to wrest from them. Yet they were not content. And the reason thereof does not require much seeking.

They were thorough savages. They had great martial traditions. For more than twenty years their warrior energies had found no outlet. Such a state of things could not be suffered to continue.

Not all, however, were of this mind. Broadly speaking, public opinion was divided into two factors. The first consisted of old and elderly men, who owned property and had something to lose, and, moreover, having actually fought, knew that war was not all beer and skittles. The second consisted of young men, who, owning nothing, had the same to lose; who had only heard of fighting, and consequently imagined that war was all beer and skittles. And the voice of the latter faction carried the day.

As was right and proper the first to take the initiative were the Gcalekas in the Transkei, the tribe ruled by Krela, Chief Paramount of all the Amaxosa divisions. These proceeded

to organise a series of raids against the Fingoes, whose emancipation from serfdom to themselves had long been a sore point. Matters became serious. The Fingoes were British subjects and must be protected accordingly.

The High Commissioner, then newly appointed, proceeded to the border. Settlers' meetings were held to discuss the important matter of defence, and deputations waited upon the Governor to a considerable extent. His Excellency was hopeful and reassuring in his replies, and, winning golden opinions by his courtesy and decisiveness, he passed on into the Transkei with the object of conferring with the Paramount Chief in person. That astute savage, however, plumed himself on being too old a bird to be caught upon so obviously limed a twig. While at large, he was safe. At large, therefore, he would remain. So he returned all manner of evasive replies, even the timeworn native excuse of illness. It became a case of Mohammed and the mountain, with the difference that in this case, whereas Kreli would not go to the High Commissioner, it was morally impossible that His Excellency should go to Kreli. He accordingly returned to the colony, and preparations were at once made for the inevitable campaign.

Even then it was hoped that hostilities would be confined to the Transkei—hoped, but not believed. The Gcalekas were a warlike tribe, who could put many thousands of fighting men into the field. It would be a troublesome matter to subdue them, for they had long been prepared, and were well supplied with food. But if the tribes within the colonial border—the Gaiikas, Hlambis, Emigrant Tembus, but especially the first named—should join them, then the war would become a formidable affair, and, in all probability, a matter of years. Whether this state of things came about or not will appear in the course of this narrative, which it closely concerns.

To-day, however, all seems peaceful enough as the sun beats down upon the rolling plains and silent kloofs of British Kaffraria, with unwonted force for a spring day. His rays also fall upon two equestrians, who are leisurely traversing the mimosa-dotted dales, as led by the capricious windings of a somewhat tortuous track. Two equestrians, who are riding very close beside each other, and whose attention seems somewhat unequally divided between the surrounding scenery and each other's eyes, to the advantage of which mattereth not. Indeed, so engrossed are they in each other's conversation, that the tread of hoofs behind entirely escapes them; but an expression comes over their faces, of anger on one, and of—well—not best pleased on the other; and they look over their shoulder as a rough voice exclaims: "Ahem!—er—how d'ye do?" The last time we saw those two persons, they were together in a garden, some time about the hour of sunrise; and they were absurdly happy. They look equally happy now, as side by side they ride leisurely along, this grand afternoon. To them, at this moment, all the surroundings are as the sights and sounds of Paradise; for they are together and alone. More than a week has passed since the sun rose upon that knitting together of two

severed hearts, that transformation of two sorrowing lives into, as it were, one of joy; more than a week of long, happy days, so perfect in their unbroken, blissful peace, that to the wanderer it seemed as if he had “cast” his old self and taken a fresh personality—that the old loveless existence and restless longing for excitement could never have belonged to him at all, but to some other being, so all-satisfying was this new atmosphere of peace. And on Lilian the outward change wrought was marvellous. As by magic the sad expression had given place to one of sunny contentment, and there was a sweet, tender curve in her lips, and the colour of perfect health returned to her cheek, as no longer grave she moved about the house and garden, trilling out little snatches of song, with a soft love-light in her eyes which rendered her more irresistibly charming than ever she had been in the old time. And now the two were returning from one of those long rides which they had been in the habit of taking together during those halcyon days of love deferred but now requited to the full, when that horribly grating voice burst upon them:

“Ahem! Er—how d’ye do?” And red-bearded Joe Marshall, overtaking them, doffed his slouch hat to Lilian, and shook hands with her escort, as he reined in his raw-boned nag by the side of the latter.

“Hallo, Marshall! Where have you dropped from?”

“Oh, I’ve just been making a round. I’m going home now. Won’t you come round by my place, and rest a bit? ’Tisn’t far. No? Ah, well, it’s hardly worth your while, perhaps, so near home.” For honest Joe could see pretty plainly that the two would prefer his room to his company, though they had conscientiously, at least, suffered no indication of such preference to escape them. “How are the Paynes?”

“Flourishing. Any news?”

“N-no. Kreli won’t meet the Governor. Says he’s sick. But that’s all an excuse, you know.”

“Yes; we heard that. Anything fresh?”

“N-no,” said Marshall again, with a dubious glance towards Lilian. “Nothing certain, at least. Some more fellows round me gone into laager, that’s all.”

“H’m. I’m inclined to think with Payne, that the scare’s all bosh,” said Claverton. “Look at the one four years ago. That all ended in smoke. Why shouldn’t this?”

Lilian, too, remembered that time; nor was she ever likely to forget it. A soft light came into her eyes, and she wished mightily that Marshall was not with them.

“Well, I dunno,” rejoined that worthy. “It may, and it mayn’t. We shall see, and very soon. Why, who’s this?”

They looked up. The track they had been following merged into a waggon-road, and about a hundred yards in front of them stood a low thatched building. It was a native trading-store. Not this, however, but the sight of a characteristic group, drew forth the remark. Seated on the ground, with his back against the wall, was a Kafir, an old man, with a full white beard, and a face which might have been at one time pleasing and intelligent. A blanket was thrown over his shoulders, and his lower limbs were encased in a pair of ancient trousers, from whose tattered extremities projected his bare, dusty feet, one of which was deformed. He was surrounded by a group of his compatriots; some in European attire, others in blankets only, and red with ochre; some sitting, some standing, some running in and out, but all jabbering.

“Why, I declare?” exclaimed Marshall, in surprise. “If it isn’t Sandili! What on earth can the old blackguard be doing here?”

“Sandili?” cried Lilian. “The chief? Oh, do let’s go and talk to him.”

“We will,” agreed Claverton. “Prepare for an interview with royalty.”

The Kafirs stopped jabbering for a minute to stare in astonishment at the party as it rode into their midst, then went on harder than ever. It was as Marshall had said. This old savage, with nothing remarkable-looking about him, unless it were that his countenance wore an air of semi-drunken stupidity—for he had been imbibing freely, according to his wont—was none other than Sandili, the chief of the powerful and warlike Gaika tribe, who, of all the Amaxosa race, had, in former wars, ever been the most formidable of the colonists’ foes.

“He says he’s glad to see us,” explained Claverton, as having conferred for a little with the old chief, he turned, in response to his companion’s inquiring glance. “In a minute he’ll be even more glad. Look,” and he emptied half the contents of his tobacco-pouch into the chief’s hands, who immediately instructed one of his followers to fill his pipe, and looked quite benevolently at the donor.

“Why, how delighted he is with it!” said Lilian, watching the interesting individual before her, with a curious glance.

“Yes, but unless I mistake, he’ll want farther delighting directly,” answered Claverton. “The principle of extending the proverbial inch to the ditto ell, is thoroughly well understood in Kafirland.”

And sure enough the old fellow began making signs and pointing to his mouth, after a few words in his own language.

“What does he say?” asked Lilian.

“Just what I told you. He’s thirsty, and wants sixpence to get a drink.”

“Old blackguard,” said Marshall. “He’s got quite as much grog on board already as is good for him.”

Lilian laughed. “Only think of a great chief like him, asking for sixpence like a crossing-sweeper,” she said.

The Kafirs standing around had stopped their conversation, and were gazing admiringly at Lilian, with many a half-smothered exclamation of astonishment. They had seen many white women on the farms, and when they had visited King Williamstown; but never had they seen any more bewitchingly lovely than this one, who sat there looking down on their chief.

Claverton produced a sixpence and handed it to one of the attendants, who disappeared into the store, which was also a canteen, shortly returning with a measure of the ordinary bad brandy sold to the natives. This Sandili drained without a pause, and looked up again at the group, remarking that it was good.

“Oh, what can be the matter?” exclaimed Lilian, in a frightened tone, as a hubbub of angry voices arose within the store; and before she could receive an answer, a brawny red Kafir suddenly shot out of the door, reeling forward with a quick yet uneven gait suggestive of artificial propulsion, and half-a-dozen others, with excited “whouws!” also emerged and stood around the door, as if expecting something.

They had not long to expect, for the evicted savage, having staggered a dozen yards, polled himself together and stood shaking his kerries at some one inside, as with flashing eyes he hurled a torrent of abuse at the unseen antagonist. But a bottle, which came whizzing through the open door, hit him on the shoulder, cutting his eloquence suddenly short, and, deeming discretion the better part of valour, he sneaked round the angle of the wall, muttering and growling, while the others stood looking on in dead silence.

“Don’t be frightened, Lilian,” said Claverton, reassuringly, noting that she was growing rather pale. “It’s only a fellow been kicked out by the storekeeper, probably for making himself a nuisance. It’s a thing that happens every day.”

“But he looks as if he’d kill him. I never saw a man look so ferocious,” she faltered.

“Oh no, he won’t,” answered Claverton, with a laugh. “In half an hour he’ll sneak round, and ask for a drink to make it square again. That’s what they do.”

“Really?” she said, still with a misgiving.

“Really. There won’t be a vestige of a row, so don’t be in the least afraid. Look. What do you think old Sandili is saying?”

“What?”

“That he never saw a white woman who was really pretty until this moment. And faith, I agree with him.”

Lilian laughed, and flushed softly; not so much at the old savage’s compliment as at her lover’s endorsement of it.

“Eh—what?” cried Claverton, who was listening to something Sandili was saying. “Fancy spoiling that pretty speech. The old brute?”

“What does he say?”

“He says that you haven’t given him anything, and must give him sixpence. I told him you would do nothing of the sort.”

“But I will. I should like to, just for the fun of the thing,” she laughed. “Only, tell him he mustn’t drink it; he must buy tobacco or something else with it. He looks awfully tipsy already.”

This Claverton duly translated, and the old savage nodded assent—of course as a mere matter of form—and Lilian gave him the sixpence with her own hand. Then he looked up at Marshall and made the same request; but that worthy, who had been watching the proceedings with disapproval, growled out, with something very like an oath, that “the old blackguard would get nothing out of him.”

“He’s going away now,” said Claverton. “We’ll watch him start. I imagine there’ll be some difficulty in getting him under weigh.”

And there was. For when his horse was brought round—a sorry quadruped, with ragged caparisonings in keeping with those of its owner—behold, the old chief was so much the worse for liquor that, when helped into the saddle, he would have tumbled off on the other side but for the timely support of one of his followers, who was ready to hand. Then two others mounted, one on each side of their exalted ruler, and thus supporting him, rode off, the whole trio swaying and lurching from side to side; for the supporters were only a degree less “screwed” than the supported. About thirty followers, mounted and on foot, brought up the rear, chattering, shouting, and laughing, as they went.

“There goes the Great Chief of the Gaikas,” remarked Claverton, ironically, as they stood gazing after the receding party; “the man upon whose nod it depends as to whether the colony will be swamped in war, or whether the outbreak will be just an abortive affair in the Transkei, to be settled by the Police. And—look at him!”

“Drunken brute!” growled Marshall. A tall man, with grizzled hair and beard, now strolled up to them. It was the storekeeper. “Evenin’,” he said, laconically, doffing his hat as he caught sight of Lilian. “I heard some one talking outside; but there were too many of those chaps within, and I couldn’t get away for a minute, or they’d have looted the place. Hello, Joe! Where’re you from?”

“Been the rounds. What was up with that nigger jes’ now?”

“Oh, I kicked him out. He kept plaguing me to give him some ’bacca—said he was Sandili’s brother. I told him to clear, or, if he was Sandili himself, I’d kick him out. And I did.”

“Aw, aw!” guffawed Joe. “But I say, Thompson, you don’t seem to lay yourself out much to amuse the chief!”

“Who? Sandili? Oh, no. He often comes here. I just give him a glass of grog and a bit of ’bacca, and let him sit down and make himself happy till he goes. I never bother about him. He cadges a lot of ‘tickeys,’ (threepenny-bits) “out of his fellows. They come here to get a drink, and then the old rascal makes them ‘stand’ him instead.”

Marshall guffawed again. “I say,” he said, “those chaps are making a jolly row. Why don’t you clear them out?”

“Where?” said the trader, turning. “Oh, they’ll go when they’re tired.”

“They” being a group of Kafirs, sitting round the man lately ejected, who was declaiming violently, and waxing more excited every moment, as he flung his arms about and brandished his sticks, and his language became more and more threatening. Claverton, who foresaw a row, was divided between a wish to get Lilian away and reluctance to desert a countryman under the circumstances; but the first consideration was paramount.

“Well, we must be going. Good day to you,” he said, shaking hands with the trader. “Good day, Marshall. Are you coming?”

“N-no; I think I’ll rest a bit longer.”

Just then the whole party, numbering perhaps a dozen, walked up to Thompson, the injured individual in advance. The latter, in an insulting and aggressive tone, demanded a sovereign in satisfaction for his wrongs.

Calmly eyeing the braggart and the muttering group behind him, the storekeeper lighted his pipe and repeated his order to quit.

“No, we won’t!” roared the savage. “We’ll roast you in your own winkel (shop) before long. Only wait a bit.” And then the others began all talking at once, louder and louder, and in a threatening and excited way, pressing closer and closer upon the two white men.

“Got a revolver, Joe? That’s right; so have I. Always carry it in these troublous times. Now then, Umsila; off you go—you and all the rest of them.”

The Kafirs, who saw that both the white men were armed, drew back, and, still muttering and threatening, they began to depart. Then, with loud jeering laughter and many threats, they started off at a trot along the plain, sending forth a long, resounding whoop upon the evening air. It was taken up by the kraals on the hillsides, and echoed farther and farther, fainter and fainter, till it died in the distance. The two men looked at each other.

“I say, Thompson, if I were you I should pack up my traps and clear out of this,” said Marshall.

Lilian was rather silent as they rode away from the place. The sight of that fierce-looking, loud-talking group of angry savages confronting the two white men had frightened her, and then the voices rose more violent in tone.

“Don’t be afraid, dear,” said her companion, tenderly, “Those two are perfectly well able to take care of themselves, and Jack Kafir barks a great deal more than he bites. They’re all right.”

“Yes, I know,” she replied, trying to smile. “I am so easily frightened.”

“For your own sake I wish you were not, otherwise I like it, and it seems rather to suit you. But now, only think what a lot you’ll have to tell them. Why, you’ve had an interview with no end of a big chief; and—well, it’s a pity that row should have come in just in time to spoil the recollection of the ride, but it was really nothing.”

Suddenly arose that wild, weird whoop; and turning their heads, they could see the Kafirs bounding along the hillside waving their karosses and gesticulating, and calling to each other as they ran.

“There, I told you so,” he went on. “They’ve had enough ‘jaw,’ and now they’re going home.”

But a gloom seemed to have fallen upon Lilian’s spirits. To her, in those fierce, dark forms bounding along the distant ridge, and in the weird, savage cry—like the gathering cry of a host—pealing forth and echoing in sudden answer from point to point till it died away against the purple slopes of the far mountains, there was something terrible, as though it pictured forth an earnest of the coming strife—and the smile faded from her lips.

“Oh, Arthur, can they do nothing to avert this dreadful war?”

“I’m afraid not, dearest. The only thing—if only it’s done—will be to nip it in the bud. Let them break out, and then give them a crashing defeat at the start.”

“And—you will have to go?”

He was silent for a moment. “Yes,” he said at length, “I don’t see how I can sit still when the whole country turns out to a man.”

“Of course not; you must go. I shall have to spare you for a time—darling. It will be only for a time, won’t it?” she said, beseechingly.

“It will. There isn’t a shadow of danger for me. I truly believe I bear a charmed life for some reason or other, a reason I think I’ve discovered,” he added, meaningly. “But I’ve

had so many narrow shaves—more than fall to the lot of most people—that I have become a bit of a fatalist.”

A sudden impulse seized her. “Arthur, I’m going to tell you something I never told you before.” And then she told him the events of that night at Seringa Vale, shortly before Mr Brathwaite’s death. “Now do you see why I said I thought you were dead? But you’ll laugh at the whole thing as a mere fancy.”

He showed no disposition to laugh; his face wore a grave, even a solemn look.

“When was this?” he asked.

She told him the exact day and hour.

“Lilian,” he said, very solemnly, “it was you and no other agency whatever that saved my life—saved it for yourself. Therefore, it is certain that it is not to be taken now, yet awhile.” And awestruck, she listened as he told her how he had lain fevered at the very point of death in the Matabili hut, and that the sight of her had sent him into that soothing sleep which was the turning-point.

And then, as they drew near home, and the soft light faded from the lofty Kei hills, between which the river flowed far down in the silent gloom between its frowning krantzes, the calming effects of the hour was upon these two. The present was very, very sweet. They had had a brief period of perfect happiness, after the years of dreary waiting, and now, if separation was to come, it would not be for long, and they would look forward hopefully to the time when, the disturbances over, peace should be restored.

That night Claverton and his host were sitting out on the stoep smoking their pipes, the rest of the party having long since retired. The conversation throughout the evening had turned upon the state of affairs, and now the same topic held.

“By-the-bye,” said Payne, “there was a strange nigger here this evening, a deuced fine-looking fellow, but an infernal scoundrel, I suspect. He asked if he might sleep at the huts, and I let him.”

“Why did you?”

“Well, you see, it would have done no good to turn him away. If he’s up to mischief he’d carry it out anyhow; and if he isn’t, well, there’s no harm done.”

“H’m. Marshall seems in a bit of a funk. He told me a couple of yarns to-day about fellows whose servants had warned them to clear. I should think that trick’s played out, though.”

“Dunno. You’ll still find people to believe in it. The niggers, of course, make it pay. Jack, in his capacity of old and faithful servant, warns his Baas. His Baas believes him. Henceforth Jack has a high old time of it, and, provided he is careful in the yarns he invents, may go on to the end of the chapter. For my part, I don’t believe in any nigger’s fidelity. You can’t trust one of them.”

“Except my chap, Sam,” said Claverton.

“Ah, that’s different. He’s away from his own country, you see; and then you and he have chummed it for ever so long in places where he has learnt to depend on you.”

It was a still, clear night, the sky seemed crowded with stars, and the air was warm and balmy for the time of year. Scarce a sound was audible, save that now and again the faintest possible echo of a savage song was borne from some kraal many miles across country. Otherwise there was a stillness that might be felt, and the voices of the two men, subdued as they were, sounded almost loud.

“Hallo! What the deuce is that?” said Payne, suddenly. For there arose a terrific clamour from the dogs at the back of the house. There was a preliminary “woof” as those vigilant guardians first scented intrusion; then the whole pack dashed off violently, and showing a very decided fixity of purpose, towards an angle of the high quince hedge which bounded the garden—baying savagely.

Both men rose to their feet.

“They’ve got something there, I’ll swear,” said Claverton in a low tone. “Wonder what.”

“Very likely a prowling nigger,” answered Payne. “We’ll just get out our shooting-irons and go and see.”

Chapter Six.

The Fire Trumpet.

With weapons cocked and ready, and keeping a sharp look-out ahead, our two friends stole quietly and warily along the shadow of the quince hedge. Meanwhile the canine clamour increased tenfold; such a yelling, and growling, and full-voiced baying as never before was heard.

“Why, they’ve treed something—look there!” whispered Claverton, as they arrived upon the scene of the disturbance. And sure enough in the branches of a small apricot-tree, which grew a little higher than the quince hedge, they could make out the dark figure of a man, clinging there as for dear life, while the dogs were leaping, and snapping, and rolling over upon one another and into the ditch in their frantic efforts to reach him. And, but for this timely refuge, he would have been torn in pieces by the great fierce brutes.

“Come down, whoever you are,” said Payne, speaking in the Kafir language, “or I’ll fire. If you attempt to run away the dogs will soon catch you. Come down.”

They could hear a muttered exclamation or two, and then the unknown replied:

“Keep in the dogs, ’Nkos. I came here to visit you, to tell you some news.”

“All right. Come down. Here, Neptune, Corker, Slow—keep still, you brutes. Voertsek, Huis! to!” (be off; home) cried Payne; and the excited hounds reluctantly drew off with many a savage growl.

Then something dropped from the tree, there was a rustle in the quince hedge, and a man stood before them in the darkness. Payne had just time to restrain the dogs, who would have flung themselves upon this sudden apparition there and then.

“Now, then, who are you and what do you want?” he asked.

“’Nkos, you remember me? But I can’t talk here, it’s cold and I’ve been frightened, and I am old and weak.”

“Why, it’s Mhlanga,” cried Payne, in astonishment. “But what the devil d’you want with me at this time of night?”

“Hadn’t we better take him to the house and give him a tot of grog?” said Claverton. “He looks rather shaky.”

“Of course. Come with us, Mhlanga,” and they returned to the house, where a liberal ration of undiluted spirit having sent a generous glow through the Kafir’s frame, that unexpected visitor squatted down on the stoep with his blanket huddled round him, and fired off an ejaculation or two.

He was an old man, with a white head and a lean, gaunt frame, and in spite of the potation shivered slightly from time to time as he sat there, for he had had a very narrow escape from the jaws of the dogs. Then he began, speaking in a low, rapid tone:

“When the grass-fire sweeps along the mountain side, who would stand in its way because he had built a hut there? When yonder river rushes down in a flood after the thunderstorms, who would stand in the drift and try to beat it back with his hands? Why are you still here?”

“Why not, Mhlanga? You must speak plainer.” The old Kafir made a gesture of impatience. “Are you waiting till this moon is dead?” he went on. “If so you will never see it die. Go. Go while there is time. What can two men do to stay the roaring flame through the long, dry grass? Nothing. Will they stand in the middle and be consumed? The grass is thoroughly dry and the torch is put in, the flame will spread and devour all in its way. Even now it is kindled. Are you tired of life?” concluded the old man in a more eager tone than he had hitherto employed.

“The gist of the parable is obvious,” remarked Payne to his companion, who nodded assent. “By the way, this old bird was with me several years and left suddenly some time ago, because he wanted a change. Now, you see, he’s doing the very confidence trick we were just talking about. Have some more grog, Mhlanga.”

The old man held out his tin mug with alacrity for Payne to replenish. Then he tossed off the contents, heaved a sigh or two and was about to speak, when suddenly he stopped short and appeared to be listening intently.

“Come,” he said, rising. “Come with me, Amakosi!”

“Oh, that’s another pair of shoes,” said Payne, suspiciously. “But, Mhlanga; why should you come here to tell me this—eh?”

“I was with you for several years, ’Nkosi, and when the snake bit me you put in the medicine stuff that healed it. I do not wish harm to befall you.”

“Oho! gratitude’s the order of the day, is it?” Then to the Kafir: “Steer ahead, Mhlanga.”

They followed the old man as he led the way to the brow of a slight eminence a few hundred yards from the homestead. Above, the stars twinkled in their silent watch, twinkled on ever the same. The midnight sky, moonless, and arching overhead like a heavy pall of blue-black velvet besprinkled with gold-dust, was oppressive in its darksome serenity, and there was something in the mystery and suddenness of the whole situation which even to the tried nerves of the two white men was intolerably awesome and thrilling. Far away in the distance, beyond the mouth of the defile or gap, a few fires glowed like sparks.

“Listen,” said the Kafir, pointing with his sticks in the direction of this. “When the amajoni (soldiers) are mustered kwa Rini (at King Williamstown), the trumpet is blown in the morning sunshine, and all the town hears it, for its voice is of brass. Ha! When the chiefs of the Amaxosa gather their fighting men the trumpet is sounded too, but it is sounded in the blackness of midnight; and all the country hears it, for its voice is of fire. Look,” he went on. “Even now the chiefs are talking to each other. The Fire Trumpet is calling the tribes to war.”

As he spoke a red tongue of flame leapt forth from the darkness against the distant horizon, where it flashed and burned for a few minutes. Then from another high point a second beacon-fire gleamed, followed by a third; and as the watchers gazed in half-incredulous wonder, not unmixed with awe, a strange, weird, resounding cry rose upon the midnight air, gathering volume as it rolled, as if kindled by those threatening beacons which glowed in the midnight firmament from the Kei to the far Amatola. Again and again pealed forth that dismal sound, and then all was still as the fiery signal shot up redly from half-a-dozen lofty elevations, and then sank as suddenly as it had blazed forth, until nearly invisible. And that unearthly and ominous cry might well strike a chill to the hearts of the listeners, for it was the war-cry of the formidable Gaika clans.

“Who was the man who asked leave to sleep in the huts, to-night?” asked the old Kafir, meaningly. “If he is here to-morrow, if your three herds are here to-morrow, if they answer when you call them, then I have been telling you lies. Listen, ’Nkosi,” he concluded, impressively. “You are a good man. You saved my life once, and I have come far to talk to you to-night. Take your wife and your children, and your sheep, and cattle, and go—go away into the town where they will be safe, and that to-morrow, for the call of the Fire Trumpet has rung in the heavens, and the land is dead.”

Payne was more impressed than he would care to own, and made up his mind to act upon the other’s words, if not to-morrow, yet at no distant date.

“Well, Mhlanga,” he began, “if it’s as you say, and—Why, by George, what’s become of the fellow?” he broke off, in astonishment.

For the Kafir had disappeared. He had vanished as he had come—silently, mysteriously. They called to him once or twice, but without result. His mission was accomplished and he was gone.

They turned towards the house. Suddenly, from the summit of one of the highest of the Kei hills, there blazed forth another fire, reddening the sky overhead, and they could make out distinctly the darting, leaping flames, shooting upward like demon tongues. And this startling answer from the opposite direction brought home to these two more vividly than ever a sense of their position, hemmed in between the plotting tribes now flashing their gruesome midnight messages of fire the one to the other, conveying in a moment to thousands of eager barbarians the dread signal, of which the destructive element was a terribly fitting exponent.

“I say,” suddenly exclaimed Payne; “let’s go and see if that nigger that came this afternoon is still in the huts.”

They went to the huts. A snore from inside told that these were still inhabited, and a sleepy growl or two as in obedience to their master’s summons the slumbering Kafirs aroused themselves. By the light of a match, which Payne held in his hand, several recumbent forms huddled in their blankets became visible.

“Here, Booi; where’s the chap who came here this afternoon?” asked Payne.

There was a momentary hesitation. “He’s gone, Baas.”

“Has he? Oh, all right, go to sleep again. Faugh?” he continued, as they stood once more in the open air. “The whiff in there reminds one of the ’tween-decks of a ship in a good rolling sea. The first part of old Mhlanga’s prediction holds good, but I must confess I don’t quite believe the second. Those fellows will be here in the morning.”

After this, neither felt much inclined to sleep, so they sat up chatting in a low tone far into the small hours. Then Payne’s answers began to get very confused, till at last his pipe dropped from his mouth, and came to the ground with a clatter.

“Look here, Payne, go and do the horizontal there on the sofa,” said his companion, with a laugh. “I’ll do sentry-go, and it’s no good both doing it.”

“Well, if you really aren’t sleepy—the fact is, I am, confoundedly,” and, rolling himself in a jackal-skin rug, Payne stretched himself on the couch, and in a minute was snoring peacefully.

His companion, well accustomed to long night-watches, sat at the window, motionless, but wide awake, looking out into the starlit gloom. Now and then he would doze off into that half-slumber known as “sleeping with one eye open,” wherein the wakeful faculties seem even more developed than during actual wakefulness, but nothing occurred of a disturbing nature. Once the dogs began to bark, but quieted down very soon, and the hours wore on till the clear still dawn lightened upon the hills and the sleeping valley.

Payne opened his eyes with a start, and met those of his companion. “Hullo! Haven’t you had a snooze?”

“No; that would be a queer way of mounting guard, wouldn’t it? I think I’ll have one now, though.”

“Well, I should recommend you to turn in altogether. I’ll call you presently. There’ll be no one up for the next three hours, you know,” continued Payne, with a meaning wink.

Two hours later Claverton was awake again, and found Payne just where he had left him, snoring in regular cadence. Though the sun was up there was no sign of life about the place.

“I wonder if that old Kafir was gammoning us,” remarked Payne, as the two made their way to the kraals. In that cheerful sunshine, the effects of the dour midnight warning had faded somewhat, as such effects will, and he was inclined to make light of it. “Here, Boo! Gcoku!” he shouted; “tumble out—look sharp!”

There was no answer.

Meaningly, the two looked at each other. Then they made their way to the huts, and kicked open the doors. The huts were empty. If your three herds are here to-morrow—if they answer when you call them—then I have been telling you lies, had been Mhlanga’s words. Therefore, no doubt now existed in his hearers’ minds that his strange, mysterious warning was true. The three Kafirs, with their families and belongings, had departed, obedient to the “word” of the stranger, the chief’s emissary; had gone to add three more warriors to the martial gathering of their tribe.

For a few moments Payne did not speak. He was rapidly revolving the situation in his mind. War would mean ruinous loss to him. He would have to send his family away to

the settlements for safety, and go into laager himself; which latter meant months of armed tending of his stock, in common with others in like predicament; and then, even if the animals escaped capture at the hands of the savage foe, there were the chances of catching lung sickness or other diseases from the inferior and ill-bred stock of less careful or less successful farmers, with whom they would necessarily mix during all the owners' joint occupation of the defensive camp.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, at length, as his eyes fell upon some spoor. "The schelms have gone, and they've not gone empty-handed."

On counting the cattle his worst suspicions were verified. Four of his finest cows were missing, and there was no difficulty whatever in making out by the tracks that they had been driven off by his treacherous and defecting retainers. Payne swore a great oath.

"We'll go after them!" he cried. "We'll give them pepper. Hallo! There's Marshall. He's getting quite neighbourly."

The countenance of that stalwart frontiersman evinced no surprise as, alighting from his nag, he learnt what had happened. He had come over to see how they were all getting on, and had also been making a little patrol on his own hook, he said.

"You're just in the nick of time, Joe," cried Payne. "You can come with us."

"And are you going to leave the ladies here all alone?" replied Marshall. "I wouldn't, if I were you."

"I had thought of that, too," said Claverton, quietly. "One of us must stay."

"Then I will," said Marshall. "If you fellers are determined to rush off, you'd better do so at once. Mind, I don't think you'll catch the beggars in any case; they've got a good start of you. And my old nag hasn't got go enough in her for a raid into Kreli's country just now."

"Very well, then, that settles it," said Payne. "It's awfully good of you, Joe. We'll get breakfast sharp, and then start. By the way, we'd better not tell the women where we're going."

Chapter Seven.

A Timely Flight.

Marshall's prediction was verified. Claverton and his host returned to Fountain's Gap at dusk; but without the lost stock. They had spoorred the animals down to a drift of the Kei River, and had even crossed; but in the then state of things they deemed it imprudent to a degree to venture farther into the enemy's country; and the thieves, having a good start of them, escaped with their booty.

Careful watch was kept that night in Payne's household; but beyond a couple of alarms—not unjustifiable after the events of the last twenty-four hours, though happily false—nothing transpired.

Under the influence of the cheering sunshine all were disposed to think more lightly of the situation; but Payne had formed his plans. It would not do to remain there any longer. He, in common with other settlers on that part of the Kaffrarian border, was very precariously situated. What with Kreli, just across the river, in a state of declared war; and the powerful Gaika clans, within colonial territory, liable to rise at any moment and make common cause with their brethren, George fully realised that he was in a cleft stick, hemmed in as he would thus be by hostile natives on every side. So he made up his mind to abandon Fountain's Gap, and remove his family to Komgha; then he would have his hands free to take the field if it were still necessary. The move was to be made that morning, and all the household were hastily preparing for it.

It was arranged that they should remain in the settlement for the present, till it could be seen how things would turn out. There they would be safe, as the place would be a kind of dépôt and the headquarters whence all operations for guarding the border would be carried on.

"And now, George, I suppose the Kafirs will have made a bonfire of the house before I see it again," remarked his wife, as a turn of the road hid the homestead from view.

"Dunno. Impossible to predict. They may, and they may not," sententiously replied George, whose chief object in life, at that moment, was the lighting of his pipe under the adverse circumstances of being at the same time obliged to control a pair of strong, fresh horses, none of the quietest at the best of times. He was driving a Cape cart, the ordinary family coach of the frontier settler, which, besides the said family, contained very little else, for he intended to return at once as soon as the womenkind were in safety, and load up a waggon with such of his lares and penates as it was most desirable to preserve; for the rest, well, he supposed it must take its chance. Lilian was riding—needless to specify

with what escort—and Marshall, who was leading a young horse, and whose attention was wholly taken up with that intractable animal—or at any rate, said it was—rode a little way behind.

“I wonder when I shall get you all to myself again, Arthur,” she said, softly.

“I was thinking very much the same,” he replied. “But keep the mercury up, dear. The row may not last long.”

“Yes. I must not be such a coward,” she said. “But somehow this morning, in spite of the sunshine and the glorious weather, there is something so awfully depressing over everything. The whole country seems deserted. That farmhouse we just passed spoke volumes, standing there all shut up; and there are no natives about even. It is dreadful.”

She was rather pale, after the long, anxious night, depressed as with the shadow of coming woe. Claverton looked tenderly at the sweet face in its sad, delicate beauty, and wished to Heaven the Kafirs would leave them all in peace. A fight was very good fun, but, for his part, he had had enough in the way of excitement to last him all his life, at least so he thought; and now he would ask nothing better than to spend the remainder of his days in calm, undisturbed quiet, with this, his long-lost love.

“Look,” he said; “there are some people coming across there—and they are Kafirs.”

Lilian started. “Where? Oh, there are only a few,” said she, in a relieved tone. For now, every member of the Amaxosa race assumed, in her imagination, the form of a fierce enemy threatening destruction to her and hers.

The natives, who had been crossing a bushy hollow some four hundred yards off, suddenly stopped, and began peering over the trees at the party, as if uncertain as to the reception they would meet with. Far away stretched the rolling sunny plains, and the lines of wooded hills, where here and there a thick column of smoke ascended through the clear air. One or two distant homesteads were visible—empty, and their pastures tenantless, for a general flight had taken place and the land seemed dead indeed; and there, a little way off, were the red forms of the Kafirs watching them from the bush, while the pleasant sun shone upon the bright points of their assegais.

“It reminds me rather of our ride over to Thirlestane that day,” said Claverton. “It’s just such another day for sunshine and scenery.”

“But not for peace,” she rejoined, softly. “Ah, if all was only as peaceful now.”

“But it will be, darling. Only a little while longer,” replied he, glad to have diverted her thoughts from this unexpected source of fear. And as they rode on further and further from it, the group of armed savages could still be seen watching them from the hill, but these were too few in number to be formidable, and, moreover, the settlement was near at hand. To which another hour of journeying brought them in due course.

And how changed was the aspect of the ordinarily quiet little village now! Waggon stood about everywhere, the three or four irregular streets were filled with a bustling crowd—men mounted and men afoot—men of every class and pursuit—farmer, mechanic, storekeeper, frontier policeman, with here and there a military uniform, and, amid the crowd, dark-skinned natives moved quietly about, or stood in knots at the corners, discussing the latest indaba. And the softer sex, too, held its own, in the shape of the wives and daughters of the settlers—these, for their part, of as varied a class as their lords—the ponderous frame of the blowzy Dutch vrouw, side by side with the regular features and straight profile of some tastefully-attired daughter of an old English line.

But although at first sight the place wore an air of bustle and confusion, it must not be supposed that chaos reigned. A regular system of defence had been organised in the event of attack, and certain points of vantage entrenched and fortified, and the safety of the place was provided for ably and well. The surrounding country, undulating and grassy, was dotted with horses and cattle grazing. These could be driven in at a moment’s warning; and the approaches to the place, being quite open and devoid of cover, were abundantly commanded by the artillery barracks of the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police, which stood upon a hill some eight hundred yards from the village. The church, a brick and plaster building of unparalleled ugliness, would make an efficient block-house in the last extremity—surrounded as it was with a high sod wall. For those to whom their fellows’ necessities were their own opportunities, the existing state of affairs promised a rich harvest, for the stores were doing a brisk trade, and the canteens and hotels were full morning, noon, and night. On the steps of one of the latter lounged a group of men as our friends arrived.

“Hullo, Payne! You don’t mean to say that’s yourself?” cried one. “Why, I thought you were going to stick to your place through it all.”

“Well, and who says I’m not?” retorted Payne. “Can’t a fellow drive into the village for the day without having trekked?”

“Oh, for the day!” repeated the first speaker, significantly. “Then, my good fellow, let me recommend you to remain. After that last affair we shall have old Kreli coming straight across to give as a look up, he’ll be so cock-a-hoop.”

“Wish he would,” growled another. “We’d give him particular toko.”

“What last affair?” said Payne, half anticipating the answer. “Has there been a fight?”

“I should jes’ think there had. A few of the Police and a lot of Fingoes were tackled by the Gcalekas; but you must have heard!”

“No, I haven’t; not a word.”

“Well, then,” went on the other, brightening up as a man will do when he is the first to impart to you a big bit of news; “the thing was this. A lot of Gcalekas—five thousand, they say—were going across to thrash the Fingoes, and the Police were ordered out to support the Fingoes. They met, and the gun opened fire—one of them seven-pounders they were practising here with t’other day. It appears that they made very good shootin’, and mowed down the Kafirs like smoke; and then somehow or other the gun broke down, and, by George, sir, before you could say ‘knife’ the Fingoes turned tail and ran—bolted clean. Well, of course it wasn’t to be expected a few Police—a mere handful as it were—How many were there, Jim?” broke off the narrator, turning to a companion.

“About one hundred and sixty.”

“Yes. Well, it wasn’t to be expected they could stand against five thousand of Kreli’s chaps; and they didn’t. The order was given to retire, and then it became a job to catch the horses, and, as the Kafirs charged them, they were obliged to run for it. Some who couldn’t catch their horses were killed—six—six privates and a sub-inspector; and now old Kreli’s cock of the walk—for the time being.”

“Where was the row?” asked Claverton.

“Well, it was at a place called Guadana—just on the boundary of the Idutywa Reserve.”

“When was it—yesterday?” inquired Payne.

“No—day before. I’m expecting a chap round here directly who’s straight from up there. Come in and liquor, and we’ll get him to tell us all about it.”

“The day before yesterday!” echoed Payne, opening his eyes wide—and he and Claverton looked meaningly at each other—for it was on the evening of that very day that the old Kafir had come to them with his stealthy warning, and the dread Fire Trumpet had

blazed forth on the Kei hills, signalling to the expectant tribes within the colonial boundary, the news of their brethren's victory. And it was on the following day that they two had so nearly carried the war into the enemy's country in pursuit of the stolen cattle, all unconscious, then, of the mad rashness of the undertaking—an undertaking, which, had it been carried out, would assuredly have cost them their lives.

Chapter Eight.

The Attack on the “Great Place.”

It is night. Night, that is to say, for all practical purposes, though strict chronological accuracy might compel us to define it as morning; for nearly three hours have elapsed since midnight. But, be that as it may, at present it is as dark as the nethermost shades, as one of that long, silent file of horsemen, wending its way through the gloom, remarks to a comrade.

A chill breeze stirs the raw atmosphere, and sweeps before it puffs of misty vapour which have been resting thickly alike upon hill-top and low-lying bottom. Overhead a few sickly stars shine forth through the flying scud, to be quickly veiled again, and replaced by another spangled patch. And, advancing at a foot-pace, comes line upon line of mounted men, moving through the darkness like the phantom horsemen of some eerie legend. Very little talking is there in the ranks. Muffled in their overcoats and with hats slouched over their faces the men ride on, stolid, and meditative, and little inclined for conversation in the damp, raw air which has a corresponding effect upon their spirits, even if orders had not been issued for quiet and caution; for it is a night march in the heart of the enemy's country.

It is difficult to distinguish face or feature of any description in the profundity of the gloom; but now and again the dull silence and the dead monotonous tramp of hoofs is relieved by the clank of arms and the jingle of a bit; or the smothered imprecation of some one whose horse has stumbled in the darkness, as he holds up the careless animal, who gives a snort of alarm. And the march continues on through the night, till at last the gloom shows signs of lightening, and we begin to make out the aspect of this bellicose-looking cavalcade advancing over the hills and dales of savage Gcalekaland. We see a number of roughly-clad, bearded men, mostly attired in serviceable corduroy and with a gaily-coloured handkerchief twined round their slouch hats, mounted on tough, wiry steeds. On their saddles are strapped blankets or mackintoshes and for arms each man carries a rifle of some sort—from the Government Snider, to the double-barrelled weapon in ordinary frontier use, rifled and smooth-barrel for varying distance or quarry. Not a few have revolvers also; and broad, heavy belts, holding at least two hundred rounds of cartridge, are buckled round them or slung over their shoulders. Many of which bullets will, I trow, find their mark in the dusky bodies of the savage enemy before the day is very far advanced. This is a corps of Irregular Horse, frontiersmen all of them. Another side of the column we see, in the gathering dawn, is composed of mounted volunteers—townsmen—whose gay uniforms, cavalry sabres, and glittering accoutrements, show out in contrast to the more sombre trappings of the corps first noticed. Yet of the two it is not difficult to predict which the enemy would rather meet in

battle. Another ingredient in this martial array is the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police, two or three troops of which useful force, looking ready and soldier-like in their helmets and sober uniforms, flank the march—these are armed with short carbine and revolver. And lo, moving along, drawn by several stout horses, black and rakish-looking in the uncertain light, are the field-pieces, with their attendant gunners—a smart and efficient selection of men.

The object of the expedition may be divulged by a scrap of the conversation of one of its members.

“So we shall smoke the old fox out of his own earth at last,” is saying a sturdy young fellow in the ranks of the Irregular Horse.

“Ha, ha! Shall we? You don’t suppose old Kreli is sitting at home waiting for us, do you?” is his comrade’s reply. “Why, he’s miles off, I expect.”

“Bet you he isn’t,” cut in a third. “Bet you one to five in half-crowns we nobble old Kreli to-day.”

“Ha, ha!” laughed the first speaker. “Jack’s so sure of his bet that he wants all the odds in his favour.”

“Well, well, yes,” rejoined the other, briskly. “We must have a bet on, you know, just as a matter of form. But you’ll have to hand over, Hicks, my boy. You laid me long odds when we started that we shouldn’t burn Kreli’s Great Place before Christmas, and—”

“And we haven’t,” interrupted Hicks. “There’s many a slip, you know, and we are not there yet; and the commander may take it into his head to—”

“Ssh-h! Silence there forward, please?”

The two disputants subsided. They were very near the scene of operations now, and almost immediately a halt was called. Beneath, in a hollow, lay the “Great Place,” a large collection of huts—well placed for convenience and comfort, but extremely badly for purposes of defence—on a bend of the Xora River, whose clear waters flowed gurgling past. Overshadowing the village on the one side was a great krantz, and around lay pleasant slopes of rolling pasture, relieved here and there by patches of mimosa thorns. All was wrapped in the most profound silence as the day broke. The inhabitants of the village slumbered unsuspectingly; and if the old chief was there it was extremely likely that the attacking column, drawing a cordon round the place, would have him fast shut within the trap. Meanwhile the said column rested upon its oars, and grumbled.

“What the devil are we waiting for?” fumed Hicks. “The niggers’ll all get away before we get so much as a long shot at them. And a fellow mayn’t even have a pipe while he’s waiting.”

“Keep cool, old man,” replied Armitage. “Or ask Captain Jim.”

“Captain Jim,” being none other than our old friend Jim Brathwaite, who, with characteristic energy, the moment war was fairly declared, had set to work to raise a select corps of his own—not a difficult proceeding, for men flocked from all parts to take service under a leader so popular and so well known for dash and daring—and in three days he had enrolled nearly a hundred picked men. This corps comprised all of our old Seringa Vale friends, and, being mainly of local origin, its members knew and trusted thoroughly each other and their leaders.

“Ah, now we shall hear something,” went on Hicks, as a Police orderly was seen to ride up and confer with their leader. “The advance, I expect.”

“Or the retreat,” suggested another, cynically. “Just as likely the one as the other, from all accounts.”

“Hallo. There’s the enemy, by Jupiter!” cried another young fellow.

All turned. A dark column was seen rapidly advancing up the hill in their rear, and more than one heart beat quicker as its owner watched the approach of this new factor in the state of affairs.

“Not it,” said Naylor, quietly. “It’s the Fingoes for whom we’ve been waiting all this time. Now we shall be able to go forward.”

An exclamation of wrath went along the line.

“Lazy brutes!”

“Waiting for them, indeed!” and so on.

“Now, men,” said Naylor, who was second in command, “here’s the programme. We are to attack on the right with the Kaffrarian fellows. At the sound of the bugle we advance, in skirmishing order, according to the number of Kafirs in the kraal, and the fight they show. If possible, we are to surround them. Now—mount!”

The last order had not to be given twice, and in a moment the whole troop was moving round behind the hills, to take up their allotted position—where they waited, each man, rifle in hand, burning with impatience to begin. Scarce a sound was audible in that quiet vale; now and then a small bird fluttered up from the grass with a piping twitter, once a great black ringhals rustled away, half inflating his hood in surprised wrath at the unwonted disturbance, but even of this abhorred foe the men took no notice. They were after heavier game to-day—the heaviest of all—human game. And the mist rolled back over the bills.

Suddenly a shot rings out on the morning air, then another and another. And now, on every face is an expression of the most eager expectancy, and every one grips his rifle. The hands of some of the younger men, who have never been in action before, begin to shake; but not with fear. There is something intensely exciting in this silent waiting, and they are only longing to begin. Then a volume of white-blue smoke spouts forth from a point above, a heavy boom, a hurtling rush through the air, and the shrapnel bursts with a screech and a detonation right over the nearest cluster of huts. At the same time the bugle-notes peal out from the hill-top loud and clear—the signal for the attack to begin.

And the kraal wears the appearance of a disturbed ants' nest. From everywhere and nowhere, apparently, dark forms are starting up, and the whole place is alive with fierce warriors, and shining gun-barrels, and bristling assegais; and puffs of smoke among the thatch huts, and many an ugly "whiz" in the ears of the attacking force, show that the Kafirs have opened a tolerably smart fire in return.

Crack—crack—crack! echo the rifles of the assailants, as the jets of flame, which in an advancing line play upon the doomed village, draw nearer and nearer—the sharpshooters taking advantage of every bit of cover during their approach. And over and above the rattle of small-arms booms out the thunderous roar of cannon, losing itself in a hundred echoes on the wall of the great cliff opposite, and again and again bursts the screeching shell over that swarm of human beings, and very soon the groans of the stricken and the maimed and the dying begin to mingle with the fierce war-shouts of the Gcaleka warriors. These, indeed, are beginning to fall thick and fast, but still their bullets and bits of potleg (Note 1) whistle about the ears of the attacking party.

"Now, men!" cries Jim Brathwaite. "One more volley and then at them. Ready!"

A rattling crash as every rifle is emptied, and then with a wild cheer the men, revolver in hand, are riding at a gallop upon the kraal; but first and foremost throughout is their undaunted leader. And the Kafirs, their ranks already sadly thinned out, unable to withstand the onslaught of this mad charge, turn and fly for dear life.

“Hurrah! At them, boys!” yells Jim, discharging his revolver at the foremost of two stalwart Gcalekas, who have sprung like lightning out of the very ground, as it were. The savage, however, dives to avoid the shot, which hits one of his fellow-countrymen fair in the back, and, gathering himself like a panther, leaps at his assailant, assegai in hand, aiming a furious stab at his side—but too late. The impetus of his pace carries Jim past, and the Kafir, missing his blow and his footing, falls forward on his face, to be trampled into a lifeless pulp beneath the hoofs of the horses, as the whole troop pours through the village, pistolling the fleeing or opposing enemy, and the ground is strewn with human forms, dead and dying.

And now the fight has become a stampede and a rout. Shut in on three sides by the horsemen bearing down upon them, the fleeing Kafirs run like bucks along the river bank, to make good their escape ere yon dark cloud of advancing Fingoes, sweeping steadily down to cut them off, shall get in front of them. Can they do this, they may yet hope to count up their scattered remnant in the welcome shelter of that dark forest line a few miles off. At any rate, they will cut their way through the Fingo dogs, and many a fierce warrior, grinding his teeth as he grips his assegai, starts off with renewed vigour, to pour out the heart’s blood of at any rate one of his despised foes before he dies.

Suddenly the flight stops, and with a rallying cry a body of the Kafirs make a stand. They are beyond the reach of the shells, and by this time the rout has scattered far over the plain; and the nearest Fingoes, who have been slowly overtaking their enemies, waver and hesitate, quailing before their former masters, who throw out at them threats and fierce taunts. The fugitives have nothing but empty guns, which being mostly muzzle-loaders, they have no time to reload. Assegais are thrown, and more than one whooping and hitherto exultant Fingo wallows in the dust, transfixed by the deadly javelin. In another minute these cowardly auxiliaries will turn and fly, as the Gcalekas, with clubbed guns and gripping their large stabbing assegais, furiously charge them, uttering their war-cry—when behold, a body of horsemen comes sweeping up, Jim Brathwaite’s troop leading, and the tide is turned. The Fingoes, inspired with fresh courage, stand, and sneak behind the whites, waiting for these to disperse the enemy, and then go quietly after them and assegai the wounded lying upon the ground.

“Hallo!” cried Armitage. “Hold on; Gough’s down.”

“Oh, it’s nothing, I’m not hurt,” is the plucky reply, as the young fellow leaps clear of his horse, which, stabbed to the heart by a wounded Kafir who lay on the ground, had fallen with a crash.

“Bight you are. Better fall in with the dismounted men,” and away rides the speaker.

Suddenly one of the Kafirs, watching his opportunity, springs like a cat on to the saddle of a trooper, and gripping him round the neck with one arm, stabs him to the heart with the other; then loosing his murderous embrace as he and his victim slide to the earth together, he runs like the wind, casting his glance from side to side in search of another possible victim, when he falls, pierced by a couple of revolver bullets. Another savage is suddenly descried by Hicks and Armitage, who are riding together, rushing at a man, who with his bridle over his arm stands coolly awaiting his approach. This man both of them have noticed during the pursuit. Working apparently alone, he has kept himself entirely free from flurry and excitement, reining in every now and then and taking a deliberate shot at long range, almost invariably bringing down one of the foe. And now they watch him, as a great sinewy Kafir rushes at him like a wild beast, now leaping high in the air, now dropping into the grass, then zig-zagging as if to get round the white man, who stands perfectly calm through it all, with a slightly sneering smile upon his face, but covering this dancing, leaping assailant with his gun-barrels.

Crack! The savage falls. Then, as suddenly, he picks himself up, and with a wild shout rushes at his cool antagonist.

“He’s got him, by God!” cries Hicks, as in a tension of excitement he marks the artful feint of the barbarian and, as he thinks, the turning of the tables. But the other never moves, nor does the expression of his countenance alter by a single hair’s breadth.

Crack! Another report, and the fierce warrior falls, this time stone-dead, leaping nearly against the barrel which at point-blank had sent a full charge of “loopers” straight through his heart.

“Whoop! Hooray!” yelled Hicks, wild with excitement. “Grand old shot, that! Thought you were a gone coon, by Jove!”

The other quickly slipped a couple of cartridges into the smoking breech of his gun, and looked up with a slight smile at this remark; and what he saw soon changed the smile into an outright laugh. For Hicks was staring at him, speechless and open-mouthed, while even Armitage looked somewhat dumbfounded.

“The devil!” ejaculated Hicks, and relapsed into staring again.

“That’s uncivil,” remarked the stranger, drily.

“Why, hang it, it is—Claverton, no one else! Arthur, old boy, where on earth have you dropped from? I vow this is the best thing that’s happened for years. We thought you must be dead and buried, hearing nothing about you,” and leaping to the ground, honest

Hicks wrung his former comrade's hand as if he would crush that remarkably useful member.

Something in the last phrase jarred upon Claverton. Lilian had said much the same thing when they had met.

"Well, here I am at any rate. Turned up again like the proverbial 'shise' coin," he replied. "How's yourself? Flourishing apparently. You look as if 'the holy estate' agreed with you. And Jack? I say, Jack; bet you two to one in anything you like you don't drop that chap scuttling away over there."

"Done for you!" cried Armitage, sighting his rifle and drawing a bead on one of the retreating enemy, distant some seven hundred yards.

"No. Hand over!" cried Claverton. "Missed him clean. Give you another shot, though."

But the other shot was likewise a failure; and the Gcaleka got off scot-free to rejoin, if he listed, the bosom of his family.

"Never mind, Jack. I won't dun you for the stakes, I only wanted to see if you had left off that villainous sporting habit of yours."

"But, Arthur—how the deuce did you come here?" went on Hicks. "You're not a Volunteer—those fellows are all jingling with chains and whistles."

"Yes, I am. Kaffrarian Rangers, full private. And then?"

"And then? Why, you must join us without any further indaba. We'll have a high old time of it. Do you mean to say you can cut all your old friends and go and fight among strangers? Bosh!"

Claverton whistled meditatively as he surveyed the field of battle and of flight. Here and there lay a dark object in a heap amid the grass, just as it had fallen—the slain body of a Gcaleka warrior—and scattered afar rode the pursuing horsemen.

"Well, I don't know," he said. "I should rather like to cut in with you fellows. I'll see if it can be managed."

"Of course you will," said Hicks, light-heartedly. "By Jove, if that isn't 'the retire.'"

For the clear notes of the bugle were ringing afar, and in obedience to the summons the straggling horsemen began to collect from all parts of the field, and to retrace their steps, marvelling not a little at this sudden and unlooked-for mandate. And from the chief's village, the "Great Place," went up a great cloud of smoke, as, having hunted out its fleeing inhabitants, the last of the attacking force had flung a torch into the thatch tenements, setting the whole in a blaze; and above the bursting flames great rolling pillars of smoke mounted to the sky.

Slowly the pursuers straggled back, their horses and themselves wet with perspiration and grimy with dust and powder; many hatless, having lost their "roofing," they said, in the hurry-scurry of the charge or of the pursuit; while a darker stain showed upon others, whether on their clothes or accoutrements—the stain of blood. The horses were panting after their long gallop, and the riders commenting freely on the events of the morning in a loud, excited tone. Many carried assegais, whole or broken, which they had taken as trophies, also bead-work, and other articles of native apparel or adornment. And in the rear marched the Fingo contingent, howling their war-song and looking intensely valiant now that the danger was over.

"Manzi! Ndipé manzi!" ("Water. Give me water.") besought a faint voice.

Our party stopped, looking searchingly around. Several bodies of the enemy lay about, all apparently lifeless.

"Let the skunk die," said a rough-looking fellow, who, with several others, had joined them when the rally was sounded. "Or give him his quietus in the shape of a leaden pill. A pretty dance they've led us all this time, and now to be calling on us to do hospital nurse for them. Damned if I do."

"Well, a pretty dance we've led them to-day, at any rate. Poor devil! It won't do any one any harm to give him a drink," rejoined Claverton, dismounting and scrutinising the only one who showed sign of life. A tall, finely-made young Kafir lay with eyes half unclosed, and breathing heavily, apparently in great pain. Claverton bent over him as he repeated his fevered entreaty.

"Well, you may do nurse, I shan't, so good day to you," jeered the first speaker, riding on, while Hicks and Armitage reined in a moment, looking from their newly-found chum to the wounded man as if wondering what was coming next. But Claverton, without heeding anybody, took a large flask from his pocket, and poured a little of its contents between the Kafir's teeth. Then filling the cup with water from the river, which ran hard by, he raised the wounded man's head, and let him drain off the desired fluid.

“More,” whispered the Kafir; and having filled the little vessel again, Claverton watched his protégé drink the contents greedily. Then, with a deep sigh of relief, the sufferer lay back with closed eyes.

“That’ll do, Arthur. Come on, now, and leave the beggar alone,” cried Hicks, impatiently. “Or are you going to set up an ‘ambulance’ all over the field?”

“Don’t know,” replied the other, imperturbably. “It’s not much trouble, and we’ve been shooting such a lot of the poor devils that one may as well give one of them the consolation of a drink in extremis.” And he stood contemplating his protégé, who he had ascertained was not dangerously though badly wounded by a ball in the side. Then it occurred to him that the face of the stricken savage was not altogether unfamiliar to him; but where he had seen it he could not remember.

And now the war-song of the Fingoes drew nearer, and hearing it, the wounded man once more unclosed his eyes, with a mingled expression of despair and resignation and contempt. There was not a chance for him, he thought. The “dogs” would come up, and the white man would stand by and tell them to kill him. Well, what did it matter? They were dogs, and he was a warrior of the Amaxosa—nothing could get rid of that fact. Then, just as he thought his hour had come, the white man remarked in his own tongue: “Lie perfectly still and shut your eyes. If the Fingoes see that you’re alive, even though I may save you now, they will surely come back and kill you before you can get away.” And the other obeyed.

Claverton slowly proceeded to fill and light his pipe, as if he had dismounted with that object and that alone, and the Fingoes, their assegais red and blood-stained, marched past, looking about as though in search of any of the dreaded foe still living. They saluted the white man with servile acclamation, and passed on.

“Now,” continued he, when the savage auxiliaries were well out of the way, “wait until the coast’s clear, and then hook it. Go and tell Kreli that if he’s wise he’ll shut up fighting and come and sing small, and acknowledge that he’s made an ass of himself. You see, we don’t want to kill you fellows unless we are obliged, and then we’ll do for the lot of you. Now be off as soon as you can.”

The young Kafir, who was by no means a bad-looking fellow, smiled as he softly murmured assent, and, with a grateful look in his eyes, he laid hold of his benefactor’s foot and drew it to his lips in token of gratitude.

“All right,” said the latter; “now look to yourself,” and mounting his horse he overtook the rest, who had been making merry over their friend’s eccentricity.

“Now you’ve done the wet-nurse trick, old chap, we’ll get back to camp and have a glass of grog,” said Armitage.

“That’s a good idea,” assented Claverton. He did not mind their chaff, and would not have even if it were more ill-natured. A passing impulse had moved him to befriend this wounded savage, and he had obeyed it. And it may be that an even yet more humanising influence was at work, and that on that fierce battle-field, reeking with blood and carnage, the image of Lilian stood, viewing him with a sweet, approving smile as he listened to the agonised prayer of the stricken barbarian, who might be the first, if ever opportunity offered, to repay his charity with an assegai thrust. But having done this thing he was glad, and a softer feeling centred round his heart as if he actually heard Lilian’s approving voice in his ear.

Much growling was indulged in as the burghers and volunteers, returning to camp, learned that the pursuit was to be discontinued. They had struck a decisive blow, and now were not to be allowed to follow it up. Public discontent found its expression freely and in forcible language.

“Infernal nonsense?” repeated one big fellow in reply to a comrade’s observation. “I believe you. Why, what we’ve done to-day is no good at all—not one blessed ha’porth. We’ve shot a few of these fellers and chevied a few more; but what o’ that? They’re thick as bees over yonder,” and the speaker jerked one hand in the direction of the flight, while with the other he viciously crammed his short, wooden pipe.

“Ay, that’s so,” assented a small, wiry-looking man. “If we had only gone straight on we could have cleared out the Manubi Bush right down to the coast, and driven the whole lot into the sea.”

“Where they were going to drive us,” chimed in another.

“And it’s there we should have nobbled old Kreli,” went on the former speaker. “He’s in there, mark my words—in there waiting for news—he, and Sicgau, and Botmane, and the whole bilin’ of ’em. Now we’ve burnt his old beehives here; but that’s no good, they’re built again in a day. No, sir; what we want is the old fox himself.”

“And don’t we wish we may get ’im? No; it’s nurses we want to look after us,” put in another.

There was a reluctant guffaw at this; but the gloom had deepened on their warlike souls.

“Well, we may as well go back, streak it straight home again, if we’re going to be commanded by a set of old women,” growled the first speaker. “We didn’t come out here to play with the niggers, did we?”

“Looks like it, anyhow, mate.”

Thus amid much growling, which, however, was not directed at our friend Jim, but at the power behind that gallant leader, the camps were pitched. A portion of the Police force started off back to their headquarters at Ibeka; but here, close to the scene of their late victory, the volunteers and burgher forces remained; and at nightfall the horses were driven in and “rung,” that is to say, tethered in circles; while additional sentries were posted, and every precaution taken, the recent success notwithstanding, for they were in the enemy’s country.

Jim Brathwaite was mightily glad, and no less surprised at the unexpected meeting, and warmly seconded Hicks’ suggestion that Claverton should join his corps.

“Twice I noticed a fellow to-day, Arthur,” he said, “who reminded me of your straight riding; and, by George, it must have been you yourself. Well, well; we are all bound to meet again some day, however we may scatter. But what do you think that fellow Hicks has done?”

“What?”

“Committed matrimony. And so has Jack.”

“Has he? Jack, I mean. I knew about the other. Who, and when, and where?”

“Oh, that’s a very old story, Jim,” said Armitage, trying to look quite at his ease. “Claverton heard it ages ago. Give us some baccy.”

They were sitting round the camp-fire. The afternoon had merged into night, and now the circle was discussing old times.

“Who?—Gertie Wray—you remember her—now Mrs Jack Armitage, promoted. When?—last year. Where?—in Grahamstown,” replied Jim.

And then, as others joined them, the conversation turned from things personal and retrospective, to things political and present; and the state of affairs was discussed in all its bearings.

“Well, we’ve a big enough force in the field to thrash out the Gcaleka country,” Jim was saying; “but then we shall have to be constantly playing hide-and-seek with the Kafirs until we catch old Kreli. If the Gaikas don’t break out, all that the people on the border will have to do will be to guard their line so that none of these chaps can cross. If the Gaikas rise, why, then our friends there will be between two fires.”

“And the Gaikas will rise,” put in Garnier—Jim’s second lieutenant—a quiet-looking, brown-bearded man of about five-and-forty. “You may take my word for that. It isn’t for nothing that they’ve been going through all the war-dancing and farrago. It isn’t for nothing they’ve been sending all their cattle away to the thickest parts of the Amatola forest. And it isn’t likely they’d sit still—they, the warrior race of all others—and let Kreli do all the fighting. And to hear ’em talk, too! Why, they’ve been coming round my place in shoals, and they don’t care what they say. Mind, they mean mischief.”

“But, then, how is it they haven’t broken out already?” ventured Hicks.

Garnier looked pityingly at him. “For several reasons. There’s a strong peace party among them, for one thing. For another, they heard, or rather saw—for there were lots of them present—what a hammering the Gcalekas got the other day when they attacked Ibeka; and they’re not ready. But if any of these chaps of Kreli’s get through and join them—then look out.”

“Well, we can put a tremendous force into the field,” went on Jim. “Why, in the Eastern Province alone we could raise enough to finish the war in a couple of months, if they’re only put to it and not kept fooling about doing nothing.”

“Yes; and if they’re properly looked after in the field,” said another. “No one can fight unless he’s fed; and with the commissariat always two days behind, no body of men will remain long contented.”

“And, while they are fooling about, all their property’s going to wrack and ruin, as ours is at this damned moment,” growled Thorman, who was one of the party.

“Never mind. All the more reason why we should make a thorough good thing of it while we are about it,” said another, of more cheerful disposition. “We’ll teach Jack Kafir a lesson this time, that he’ll remember.”

Thus talking, they sat round that red camp-fire, which threw a fitful glow upon bronzed faces and attire, fantastic-looking in the semi-darkness and in its wild picturesqueness, until at length the bugle sounded, "lights out," and gradually all subsided to silence. Now and again the yelp and snarl of a jackal came up from beneath, where lay the unburied corpses of the slain foe, and where a number of heaps of black smouldering ashes were all that remained of what in the morning had been the Kraal of the Paramount Chief of Kafirland.

Note 1. In war-time, when lead is scarce, Kafirs manufacture tolerably efficient slugs by cutting up the legs of their iron cooking-pots.

Chapter Nine.

A Lull in the Storm.

A dry, scorching wind is whirling the pungent red dust-clouds along the streets of King Williamstown, and early though it be, not much more than nine o'clock, life is at the moment exceeding unpleasant for dwellers in the Kaffrarian capital as the hot blast sweeps down the wide streets and over the great arid square, powdering the thirsty eucalyptus trees with a layer of sand, penetrating even the coolest and tightest of houses. A day on which an easy-chair and nankeen garments seem absolute necessities, and yet in the busy frontier town there is as much life and stir as usual. Waggons load and unload before the principal stores; their oxen standing or lying in the yokes, poor and attenuated, for the season is a bad one indeed, further up, the country is suffering from a veritable drought. Men move about singly or by twos and threes, some in the semi-military uniform affected by officers holding a command in some frontier corps, others lightly clad and in broad sombrero-like hat or pith helmet. Round the native shops and canteens bronzed Kafirs squat and jabber, or, jumping on their weedy, undersized nags, dash off at a gallop down the street. Here and there, a Police trooper, the snow-white cover of his peaked cap gleaming in the sun, rides briskly away from the telegraph office, and the scarlet uniforms of a detachment of regulars, as they march up from the river, returning from their morning bathe, make a glow of shining colour in the close, dusty street. It is an ill wind, however, that blows nobody good, as the drinking-bars could testify; for the number of persons who enter those useful institutions in the course of the morning—each and all with precisely the same remark, that it being externally so dry they stand all the more in need of a wet within—is so large that I will not attempt to reveal it.

Leaving the stir and the whirl of the brisk trading centre, we will pass to a comparatively quiet quarter. In the verandah of a small house, on the outskirts of the town, some one is standing, looking intently through a pair of field-glasses, which are levelled at a distant object, evidently a horseman rapidly approaching by the road leading from the Transkei. For a moment she stands eager and motionless, gazing with all her might at that dusty road in the distance; then a red flush of disappointment tinges the beautiful face as she drops the glass from her eyes, and the graceful, erect figure suddenly assumes an unconscious droop.

“The fifth time this morning,” she murmurs to herself, dejectedly. “I declare I won’t look again, it’s unlucky.”

“So it is, dear. ‘A watched kettle never boils,’ you know,” says a cheery female voice at her elbow. “That’s why I haven’t been watching for George. He’ll come, all in good time;

and so will the other one. But you really mustn't stay out in this heat, Lilian, you'll be ill, and then shan't I catch it!"

"Oh no, I won't," answered Lilian, with a laugh and a blush. "Besides, I like the heat."

"Do you? I wish I did, for I've got to go out in it. I'm not even going to ask you to come, because I know it will be impossible to get you off that verandah until—until—well, until," concluded Annie Payne with another cheerful laugh, as she started upon her unwilling errand, whatever it was.

Left to herself, Lilian looked wearily out on the wide expanse of sun-baked veldt, watching ever the white straggling road where it lost itself over the rise. Once a figure appeared on the sky-line, and her heart gave a great bound, but it was only a pedestrian, her eyes were sufficiently practised now to tell her that, without the necessity of looking through the glass. The heat and the scorching wind were nothing to her. It might have been the most exhilarating weather, and she would not have felt the difference, for to-day her lover would return—return to her, after more than two months of campaigning, two months of danger and hardship and separation; and now she watched the road, impatiently pacing the verandah, and longing for his arrival. Yet he came not. She had done nothing but scan the approaches to the town through the field-glass; but what to the naked eye had more than once looked like the well-known form, had speedily changed to that of some ungainly Dutchman, or sooty native, when the powerful lens was brought to bear upon it.

Yes, the campaign is over now—at least, for the present; and the volunteers and burgher forces are returning home, leaving to the Mounted Police and Regulars the task of patrolling the Gcaleka country—that being about all there is left to do. The summer is well advanced; in fact, it wants only a fortnight to Christmas, and the frontiersmen composing the colonial forces decline to remain any longer doing mere patrol work. They have borne their part gallantly in the actual fighting, and now that this is at an end they rightly deem themselves entitled to return. So there is great rejoicing in the little domicile in King Williamstown where George Payne has installed his household during his absence at the front, and now, on this bright, though overpoweringly hot day, Lilian stands in the verandah watching for the return of her lover.

What an anxious time to her have been those two months! How she has thought of him, and in spirit been with him all through the campaign! How eagerly she has sought out every scrap of news of the forces in the field, whether in the newspaper reports or the telegrams affiché-d outside the post office! And at night she has lain awake picturing all manner of dreadful contingencies till her pillow was wet with tears; but she can do nothing—nothing but weep and pray. And now the time of waiting is past, and she will

see him again to-day, and lay her head upon his breast and feel that life is too good to live.

But if he should not come till to-morrow or the next day! Something may have detained him. An accident perhaps, such things do happen. Her head begins to ache, and she goes into the house in search of some cooling restorative. She has the house to herself fortunately—for the children are out somewhere—and sinking into a low chair she holds her handkerchief, steeped in the grateful liquid, to her throbbing brows. At last, with a sickening sense of blankness—of hope deferred, at her heart, she falls asleep, worn out by the heat and the watching coming upon a night of wakefulness.

The molten hours creep on. The deep bass voices of a group of Kafir passers-by, momentarily break their stillness; the thrifty German housewife opens the door of the dwelling opposite—for it is a new quarter, and the houses are built almost in the veldt—and throws a pailful of stuff to her fowls, which run clucking up; but no tramp of hoofs disturbs the midday quiet.

Suddenly Lilian awakes. Is it an instinct, or is it the clink of a spur and a light, firm tread on the stoep outside, that makes her start up and hasten to the door? In the passage she collides against a man who is entering, and with a quick exclamation he catches her in his arms.

“Arthur—love—is it indeed you? I am not dreaming, am I?” she murmurs, clinging tightly to him, the rich voice vibrating with uncontrollable emotion. “It is you—at last—darling. And I have been waiting and watching so long—till I began to think all sorts of dreadful things must have happened,” and raising her head from his breast she looks at him, laughing and weeping at the same time in her ecstasy of joy.

“Yes; it’s myself all right,” he replies, kissing away the tears from her cheeks and eyes. “But I shall begin to think it’s some one else directly, because this is far and away too good for me—too good for me to believe in. Lilian, my life! Every day since we parted I have been looking forward to and waiting for this.”

“Ah God! I have got my darling back again safe—safe!” she murmurs almost inaudibly, but Claverton hears it, and he does not answer, he only tightens his clasp of the lithe, willowy figure which he holds in his embrace, and covers the soft dusky hair, lying against his cheek, with passionate kisses. A thousand years of ten times the peril and hardship he has gone through since they parted would be a small price to pay for such a moment as this, he thinks. They make a pleasant picture, those two, as they stand there. He—well-knit, grave, handsome, in the rough picturesqueness of his campaigning attire, his features bronzed by exposure to sun and climate, and with his normal air of quiet

resolution deepened and enhanced by a sense of many dangers recently passed through; looking at her with a tender, protecting reverence. She—soft, graceful, and clinging—the sweet lips curving into a succession of radiant smiles even while her eyes are yet wet with the tears which an uncontrollable feeling of love and thankfulness has evoked.

“So you thought I was never going to put in an appearance, darling?” he says, at length.

“Ah, how I waited and longed! But I can forget it now—now that I have got you. Wait! You look so much better for the dreadful time you have been through, dearest, so strong and well. And you are not going off again, are you? The war is over now.”

“I hope so,” is his rather weary reply. “I’m tired of ruffians and camp life—utterly sick of them. Not but what the said ruffians are rather good fellows; but peace is better than fighting, when all’s said and done. By the way, how is it we have the house all to ourselves? This is an unusual run of luck, my Lilian.”

“Mrs Payne is out somewhere, and the children too. And—”

“And—why didn’t you go with them, instead of moping in here alone all the morning?”

“Arthur!”

“Lilian! Don’t look so shocked, my darling. Do you think I don’t know perfectly, that you wouldn’t lose a chance of getting the first glimpse of a certain broken-down and war-worn ragamuffin?”

A shadow darkened the light. Both looked up quickly as a slim, well-made native, standing in the doorway, raised his hand above his head and sang out lustily, “Inkos!”

“Hallo, Sam!” cried Claverton, not best pleased with the interruption. “How are you getting on?”

The native showed a double row of dazzling “ivories” as he grinned in genuine delight at seeing his master back again.

“Did you kill many—very many of the Amaxosa, my chief?” he asked, in the Zulu tongue.

“H’m. Many of those who got in front of my gun-barrels up there, met with bad accidents,” replied his master, drily.

Sam chuckled and grinned. His exultation could hardly contain itself.

“Ha, Missie Liliane,” he said, in his broken English, “Sam he tell you so. Inkos, he kill lots, lots of Amaxosa nigga. He shoot, shoot them—so, so,” and he began snapping his fingers vehemently, and otherwise pantomiming the sharp-shooting of a body of skirmishers. “Sam, he tell you so, Missie Liliane. Amaxosa nigga no good! They no can hurt Inkos. Sam, he tell you so. Inkos, he shoot, shoot them instead. Amaxosa nigga no good. Haow!”

“Sam, you rascal, shut up that,” cried Claverton, good-humouredly. “Cut found to the stable and look after the horse; I’ve ridden the poor brute nearly to death. Give him a good rub down, and see that he’s cool before he drinks. D’you hear?”

“Teh bo ’Nkos,” answered Sam, and he disappeared; and they could hear him as he passed beneath the open window, humming to a sort of chant of his own: “Aow! Amaxosa nigga no good—no good.”

“Has that chap behaved himself while I’ve been away, darling?” asked Claverton.

“Behaved himself? Why, he’s the best of boys. Sometimes when I felt very, very downhearted about the war, that dear, good Sam would try all in his power to cheer me up, and persuade me that you would be sure not to come to harm, love. He used to declare that the Kafirs were sure to run away whenever you appeared, and he cut such extraordinary antics, always bringing in that ridiculous phrase of his, that he kept me in fits of laughter. Yes, he has been as good as possible.”

“That’s a feather in Sam’s cap, and a deuced good thing for him. Wasn’t it queer, my falling in with all the old lot up there? They were all just the same; even Jeffreys hasn’t quite laid by his scowl, and as for Jack Armitage, he’s a greater lunatic than ever. I hope our little friend keeps a tight rein on him at his hearth and home, for in the field there was no holding the fellow. He has started a frightful thing in bugles, which he toots upon vehemently on the smallest provocation, though, by Jove, I was glad enough to hear that braying old post-horn once, when Brathwaite’s men turned the tables in our favour in an awkwardish scrimmage.”

It was a remarkable coincidence that as he uttered these words a terrific fanfare should be sounded outside.

“That’s it! Jack’s post-horn for anything!” cried he, making for the window. “Talk of the—ah’m! Wonder what the fellow’s doing here. And, look, there’s George Payne and the rest of them.”

The whole lot of them it was, and a minute later they all entered, laughing and talking at a great rate.

“Why, Jack, what the deuce are you doing up here?” cried Claverton, in astonishment.

“We forgot it might be necessary to obtain Mr Claverton’s permission to tread the streets of King Williamstown,” demurely said a voice at his elbow, before the other could reply.

Claverton turned.

“Oh—ah—ah’m! So we did. I forgot. How d’you do, Mrs Armitage?” he said, looking quizzically down at the bright, saucy face of the speaker.

Gertie Armitage—née Wray—laughed and blushed as she shook hands with him. She looked much the same as when last we saw her, a trifle saucier, perhaps, but that was only natural, said her friends, seeing that she had to look after madcap Jack.

That worthy, meanwhile, was endeavouring to initiate Payne’s son and heir into the mysteries of the key bugle, but the youngster could evoke no sound from the same, and was ready to cry with chagrin.

“Look here, Harry, this is the dodge,” and, putting the instrument to his lips, he emitted a series of diabolical and heartrending blasts.

“Jack—Jack!” cried Claverton, stopping his ears, “for Heaven’s sake drop that fiendish row, or you’ll have all the Germans in the quarter scuttling under their beds, thinking that the Gaikas have risen, and some fellow has come to commandeer them to go to the front.”

“Fiendish row! There’s gratitude for you,” retorted Armitage. “He didn’t call it a fiendish row that day down near the Bashi, did he, Payne?”

“No, it was all right then,” rejoined Claverton. “Music in the wrong place, you know, degenerates into a diabolical row. Keep the old post-horn for the ghosts at Spoek Krantz, Jack. They’d appreciate it keenly.”

“Oh, the ingratitude of human nature!” exclaimed the bugler. “But I’ve left Spoek Krantz.”

“Have you? Ah, I thought the ghosts would be too much for you some day. Where are you now?”

“Nowhere. Got a roving commission. When the country’s quiet again I’m going to take over that place next door to Hicks. By the way, you should just see Hicks now, a model family man. Would hardly leave his missis and brace of kids even to go and have a shot at old Kreli. We almost had to lug him away by force.”

“When the country is quiet again I’m going to do this,” he had said, and in such wise do we mortals airily make our plans. Meanwhile all was hilarity and gladness and contentment in that circle, for was it not a reunion of those dear to each other, after the trials, and perils, and privations of a hard chapter of savage warfare?

Lilian was very happy in the days that followed; and to her lover, after the rough camp life, the toil and the battle, with all the hardening associations, the sunny quiet spent in the companionship of this refined, beautiful woman, was as the very peace of Heaven. Oft-times as he watched the sweet eyes kindle at his approach, and heard the firm, low voice shake ever so slightly, his heart would thrill and his cheek flush with a fierce elation over his absolute sense of possessing the rich, the priceless gift of her entire love; and then would succeed a momentary wave of despondency as he thought how this must be far too much happiness to fall to his lot, and with the thought something very like an unspoken prayer—wild, passionate, and unbridled in burden even as his own resolute nature—would shape itself within his heart, that rather than again experience such a blow as that which had sent him forth a desolate wanderer years ago—he might die—a hundred deaths, if need be, so that obliteration came to him at last. And had there been room for it, his tenderness towards Lilian would have redoubled with these reflections; but there was not—it was always the same.

“Be quick, darling,” he said to her one day, as she was leaving the room for a moment to fetch some necessary implement missing from her work-basket. “I hate to have you out of my sight for half a minute more than is inevitable.”

The two were alone together, and he pitched his book across the room impatiently as he spoke. She turned and came back to him.

“Why, I wonder you’re not quite tired of me,” she said, with her sunny smile, bending over him and toying with his hair.

“Tired of you! My Lilian. The only being on earth for me to love. The capacity has been kept so long in reserve that now there’s no holding it.”

She bent lower and laid her cheek against his brow. “Yes, Arthur. We are both alone in the world for each other—are we not?” she whispered; then, suddenly escaping from his

would-be detaining arm, she darted to the door, turning to flash upon him a bright, loving look before she went out; and he, rising, kicked over a chair and then another, and opened and threw down three or four books without gleaning an idea of their contents, and walked to the window, then back again, and whistled, and otherwise fidgeted outrageously until her return.

Lose not a minute of your happiness, ye two; gather to the full the sweets of the present, even while ye may, for ye know not what the future may have in store. Even yet the war-cloud hangs threatening on the horizon; it has lifted, but has not vanished. Amid the rage of the elements may suddenly fall peace. It is but a lull in the tempest.

To some of his former companions-in-arms, who lived in the town or neighbourhood, Claverton was an unfailing source of wonder.

“I should never have known the fellow,” one of them would say, as they discussed him among themselves. “Why, most of us in camp used to look upon Claverton as a man with no more heart than a stone. A fellow who would close the eyes of his twin brother and then sit down to a jolly good breakfast, and crack a joke about it,”—the speaker’s idea of the acme of callousness. “And now he’s making a perfect fool of himself about a girl—hardly leaves her for a moment, they say. I can’t understand it,” and the speaker knocked the ashes out of his pipe with a jerk and a shrug, implying half pity, half contempt.

“You could if you had seen her,” said another, quietly. “She’s awfully fetching.”

“So I’m told. But still—such a hard nail as Claverton. I can’t make it out.”

Thus spoke his companions-in-arms. It could not be expected, however, that these plain, honest, matter-of-fact frontiersmen should give him credit for possessing a two-sided nature. They merely spoke of him as they had seen him.

One day the two were walking along the upper end of the market-square. It was in the middle of the forenoon, and though warm, a fine day, and the traffic on the footway was tolerably brisk, while around an auctioneer’s table a goodly crowd was assembled, and the sale went on in spirited fashion. They were stopped by some mutual acquaintance, and Claverton, taking advantage of the incident, left Lilian talking to these, while he dived into the throng for a moment to speak to some one whom he had suddenly caught sight of. When he returned, he found Lilian standing alone, their friends having taken their leave and passed on.

“So sorry you’ve had to wait, darling—even a minute. Why, what is it?” For she was looking a trifle perturbed.

“Nothing. Really nothing. Let’s go on.”

“Is it the heat? We’ll go home. It is rather overwhelming, of course; I ought to have remembered,” he said, anxiously.

“No, it isn’t too hot in the least,” she answered. Then taking a quick, furtive look behind: “Arthur—wait—now look round—quick! There’s somebody following us.”

He turned rapidly and scanned the crowd. No one seemed to be making of them a special point of observation.

“I don’t see any one out of the common. See if you can point him out, dear.”

“No. He is gone; I could see him shrink out of sight directly I looked round the second time,” she said, excitedly, twirling the handle of her sun-shade. “I wouldn’t say anything at first, thinking it might be my fancy; but I could see him eyeing you as you went in among all those people just now. He was standing on the pavement—there.”

“Well, he’s disappeared now, at any rate,” said Claverton, again looking carefully around. “What was the animal like—white or black?”

“Neither. A sort of dirty brown colour, not at all like a native of these parts. He had woolly hair, though, and a hideous, wrinkled face with two pointed, shark-like teeth; and he was looking at you so fiercely,” and she shuddered. “And oh—Arthur—when I looked round again and saw those glaring eyes following on so close behind us, it quite frightened me.”

Claverton was puzzled. Nine Englishmen out of ten would have gently pooh-poohed the idea as mere fancy; but his life had been too full of strange and startling experiences for that.

“Have you no secret enemy? No one who would owe you a grudge?” she continued, in a tone of deep anxiety. “That man looked murder at you.”

“N-no; I can’t call to mind any. Most likely a case of mistaken identity. The fellow must have taken me for some one else, and bolted directly I looked round for fear of being brought to book. That was it, dear, depend upon it; so don’t think anything more about

the concern," he concluded, with the air of a man who has successfully solved a mystery. But he wished he had caught a glimpse of the mysterious individual all the same.

The incident had a depressing effect upon Lilian which she was quite unable to shake off. That some terrible danger was hovering over and threatening her lover she was certain; and the idea of being tracked and watched by a secret foe was to her fraught with horror. But it was for him she feared—for this man whom every day rendered more unspeakably dear to her, and for whom, retiring, even timid as her nature was, she could be brave as a lion, even to the giving of her own life to shield him from harm. Of his past she knew but little—as yet he had not told her much, and in all the fulness of her love and trust she took a pride in abstaining from asking him; but that it had been more eventful than the lives of most men of his age she had gathered, and what relentless enemies might he not have, now surely and stealthily pursuing him? Many a glance of admiration was cast on her—in her serene, dignified beauty, which the troubled thoughtfulness now clouding her face only seemed to enhance—as they passed along the busy streets; and people began to inquire of each other who those two were who were never seen apart, and who looked such a well-matched couple.

Meanwhile, the political outlook was becoming gloomier every day, for the warlike tribes of the Gaikas and Hlambis—whose locations comprised some of the wildest and most inaccessible parts of Kaffraria—were on the verge of revolt. The stage of sullen restlessness and daring outrage was about to culminate in open warfare, and no doubt now existed that these savages intended to rise and make common cause with their brethren the Gcalekas, who, though decimated and dispersed, were as far as ever from being subdued. And, when compared with the rising now threatening, the fighting in Gcalekaland was a mere fleabite, for the latter had been localised in the Transkei, whereas this would envelope the whole Eastern frontier in the flames of war. Day by day the low rumblings of the gathering storm increased, and from far and near the families of the settlers came crowding into King Williamstown. Every hotel and lodging-house was crammed, and not a room was obtainable for love or money. Many lived in their tent-waggons, failing more substantial shelter, and the pastureland in the immediate neighbourhood seemed in danger of exhaustion from the multitudes of live stock which grazed thereon. The telegraph was actively at work, hourly flashing its messages of alarm or reassurance according as the latest turn of events warranted; while many-tongued rumour hinted at a decisive move pending on the part of the enemy beyond the border simultaneously with the rising of the tribes within the same. It was understood that the burgher forces were liable to be called out at any moment, and among the townsmen fresh volunteers were enrolled, and drill and parades went on night and day in view of the probability that the regular troops in garrison would be ordered to take the field, and that the townspeople must be ready to protect themselves.

And as if the scourge of impending war—the merciless warfare of the savage—was not enough, the land lay parched up with drought. Transport-riders from up-country had gruesome tales to tell of roads lined with rotting carcasses or bleached skeletons of trek-oxen, which had succumbed unable to find nourishment in the burnt-up grass, or perishing on the margin of water-holes reduced to patches of dry, baked mud—pointing to their own attenuated spans in corroboration of their statements. The crops were failing, and, already in some districts, the appearance of locusts in sufficiently formidable swarms was reported; and the scant herbage, which the drought had spared, would be in danger of disappearing entirely before this new and redoubtable plague. Trade was at a standstill, and, amid the all-pervading apprehension and gloomy outlook, it was universally held that the sooner the rising took place the better. So Christmas approached; but it was not with joy or gladness that men's hearts looked forward to the kindly festival in that burning Southern midsummer, for the deserted farms and homesteads told their own tale, and the savage enemy sullenly sat still, biding his own time. The war-cloud hung brooding over the land darker and darker.

Chapter Ten.

The Fire Trumpet Again.

Payne had removed his household to Grahamstown, as being further from the seat of hostilities, and a very agreeable change to our party was the city of the old settlers, nestling in its basin-like hollow, and with its tree-shaded streets and leafy gardens, after the dust and glare and over-crowding of the Kaffrarian capital. Here, too, the talk was all of the war, but its dire evidences were less obtrusive, and, on the whole, the Paynes made themselves tolerably comfortable. To Lilian Strange, the time was fraught with a wondrous joy, and she often took herself to task for feeling so supremely happy while so much suffering and anxiety was pending over those around her. But she need not have, for the days of her rejoicing were already numbered.

She was out riding with her lover one afternoon, when a turn in the road brought them suddenly upon a man—only a native, apparently on the tramp—a half-caste Hottentot, and a dark-browed, ruffianly-looking specimen of the breed. Directly this fellow caught sight of them he stopped, and, stooping down, pretended to be tying his shoestring, at the same time keeping his face turned away from them as they passed. Lilian grew very pale.

“Arthur,” she whispered. “That’s the same man who was following us the other day in King Williamstown. I knew him at once; and he knew me. Didn’t you see how quickly he stopped and pretended not to take any notice of us?” And glancing at her lover, she saw that his face wore a slightly puzzled expression and a frown which, however, disappeared as she spoke.

“Only some loafer. One often runs against the same specimens of that class,” he said, carelessly.

“But see how quickly he has come here. Arthur—I can’t help looking upon the circumstance as an ill omen. I never saw such a murderous-looking ruffian; and I’m certain he knows you. You may laugh at my silly superstition, dear, but I can’t get rid of the feeling.”

He did laugh; but so pleasantly, so tenderly, as he tried to reassure her.

“But you must get rid of the feeling. Look now, my darling. We are not even on the road from King Williamstown, but on one leading almost in the opposite direction. If that nigger had been following me, and I don’t care a brass doit if he is, he would have come

straight and not all round the country. So let the affair slide. I want you to enjoy this afternoon; we may not have many more together, for some time, you know.”

He threw in this to counteract the effect of the unexpected encounter. Shaking off her depression, she looked up at him with a bright smile.

“You dreadful prophet of ill. I won’t have you predict such things. Let’s have another of those glorious canters. I’m not nearly such a coward as I was, am I?”

“No. You’re as fearless as a circus-rider,” answered he, with a laugh; and then they started off into a long, level, swinging canter. And the golden hours of the afternoon fled as they kept on their way, over breezy grassland and shady bush road; and not till after sundown did they draw rein at their door, just as the labours of the day were at an end in the pleasant old frontier city, whose inhabitants were strolling up the wide streets, or turning into the ever open bars in quest of their evening “peg,” or standing in knots at the corners discussing the news from the front.

“Oh, there you are,” said Payne, meeting them in the doorway, and handing Claverton a couple of letters. “Heard the news?”

“No.”

“Well, here’s the deuce to pay all round. A telegram came in to-day saying that a chap named Kiva, with five or six hundred Gcalekas, has crossed into the Gaika location, that the Gaikas have risen as one man, and the whole country is up in arms. The hotel and store at Draaibosch is burnt to the ground and a lot of farmhouses besides, mine among them, I expect. The road from ‘King’ to the Transkei is blocked, and Komgha in a state of siege. A pretty kettle of fish, isn’t it?”

“H’m. Rather. What’s going to be done?”

“They’re calling out men. Our old corps is in the thick of it now, I expect. Brathwaite’s will soon be there, too, I should think.”

“I should rather like to take service in that. But, look here,” went on Claverton, who had been opening his letters the while, extending one of them to Payne. It was an official one, offering him on the recommendation of Jim Brathwaite the command of a corps of Hottentot levies which was being raised; the other was from Jim himself strongly advising him to accept it.

It was hard—very hard, to leave Lilian again so soon, and for an indefinite time—but, after all, it had been more than half expected. He supposed he must go. All would most likely be called out for service at a later stage of hostilities, perhaps almost at once, and even if it were not so, how could he hold back? Besides, now, at any rate, here was a definite command which might lead to something much better.

“Take it, Arthur. You can’t refuse it,” Lilian said, bravely, when he showed her the letter. “You must go; but you need not to-morrow. We will have one more whole day together, my darling—will we not?”

“This is Saturday. They will want me to start to-morrow, but they may want. I can’t put it off later than Monday, I’m afraid, or they’ll pitch-fork some other fellow into the concern instead. So we will make the most of to-morrow. But cheer up, dearest. It won’t be for so long as last time.”

She only answered with a smile, a little forced. She kept her tears for when she was alone, then they flowed freely enough. Such are the results of war—glorious war! Men’s blood, mingled with women’s tears, fills the cup of the destructive demon.

That evening Claverton went round to the official to whom the letter referred him, and notified his acceptance of the post.

“Ah! Yes. The levies—I remember,” and he unearthed one or two papers from a pile. “You will go round by Fort Beaufort, and Victoria East, and pick up contingents that have been recruited there, and then report yourself at King Williamstown, where you will receive further instructions. Of course you will be ready to start at once—to-morrow at the latest.”

“No.”

The official looked up quickly, with a stare of astonishment.

“Pardon me,” he said, with some acerbity. “Did I understand you to say that you could not start upon this service to-morrow?”

“Not so fast, my dear sir; I didn’t say I couldn’t, I said I wouldn’t. A vastly different thing,” said the other, with a pleasant laugh.

“But, Mr—Mr Claverton, I would really advise you not to throw up this appointment. I assure you that I could name at least a dozen men who would jump at the chance.”

“In that case it might be as well to give them the opportunity of practising their leaping powers,” was the cool, smiling reply, and he made a movement as if to rise.

The official was sorely perplexed. To let Claverton go would entail no end of correspondence and bother before he could fix upon another man altogether fit for the post; and, what with all the disturbance and worry of the past few days, he had more than enough on his hands already, as the heap of letters and telegrams lying before him all demanding “immediate” attention, and the lateness of the hour for him to be in his office, abundantly testified.

“How soon will you be ready, then?” he said at last, wearily pushing back his chair.

“On Monday morning—an hour before daylight.”

“Very well, then, that’s settled. I suppose a day won’t make any great difference after all. And you might turn the time to account by picking up three or four likely-looking fellows here. If you want any further information you’ll find me here all to-morrow. No rest for us public servants, not even on Sunday, since these confounded wars; I feel quite ashamed to look a parson in the face now—ha, ha, ha! Good-night!” and chuckling in a dispirited manner over his feeble jest, the official shook hands with Claverton and returned to grind away at his vouchers, and requisitions, and reports until midnight. And our new commandant of levies sallied forth, a flash of satirical mirth lurking in his eyes over his interlocutor’s parting suggestion. So likely that, on the last day he would spend with Lilian, he was going to bother himself recruiting a lot of dirty niggers among the grog-shops of Bog-na-fin (the popular name for a low quarter of Grahamstown).

But his fame must have spread very rapidly, for early the next morning before he was half-dressed, his faithful henchman came to tell him that a man was asking for him in the back-yard. “What does he look like, Sam?”

“An ugly Hottentot, Inkos. Big and strong, though.”

“All right, tell him to wait. And, Sam!”

“Inkos?”

“I shall take you with me to the front. So you’ll be able to try your hand at shooting Amaxosa.”

Sam jumped with delight at this. He could hardly believe his ears. The last time, he had begged and prayed to be allowed to go; but then his master had gone in the capacity of a

private trooper, and couldn't be encumbered with a servant. Now it was different, and subsequently Sam might be heard imparting his good news over the wall to the Hottentot groom belonging to the neighbouring house, winding up with his cherished formula—"Amaxosa nigga no good."

In a few minutes Claverton went out to interview his intending recruit, as he supposed the visitor to be, and an almost imperceptible shade of annoyance came over his face as he saw before him the man whose sudden appearance yesterday had so sorely troubled Lilian during their ride. "Ghosts don't talk!" said he to himself, sardonically and with meaning, "or this might be one."

"Good mornin', Baas?" said the new arrival, with his eyes keenly fixed on the other's face.

"Morning," replied Claverton, shortly. "What d'you want with me?"

"I want to join your levies, Baas."

"Oh, do you? What's your name?"

"Vargas Smith, Baas," replied the fellow, who spoke English fluently, narrowly watching the effect of his words. But the said effect was simply nil.

"Queer name that. Where d'you come from?"

"I've bin up Zanzibar way—three, four, five years ago—up the river," answered the fellow, in a tone full of significance, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the supposed direction of that locality. Then sinking his voice to a whisper: "Don't you know me, Baas?"

"Never saw you before in my life," replied Claverton, looking him up and down with a cold stare of astonishment.

The coolness of this rejoinder fairly staggered Smith, who, for a minute, stood dumbfounded. Then he said, still in a would-be significant whisper:

"They used to call me 'Sharkey,' Baas, up yonder."

"Did they? A devilish good name, too. But what's 'up yonder,' and where do you hail from, when all's said and done? Are you from these parts?"

“No, sah, I’m Cuban gentleman.”

“Cuban gentleman, are you?” said Claverton, with a sneer. “Then let me tell you this, Mr Vargas Smith, alias Sharkey, that I don’t want gentlemen in my corps; so you won’t do for me. Now we understand each other.”

“Yes, sar. I was only jokin’. Of course I un’stand. But I want to serve under you, Baas Lidwell—ah—I mean, Baas Claverton—and you’ll let me join.”

Claverton thought for a moment. If the fellow intended mischief, it would be as well to keep him under his own eye. It might only be, after all, that Smith wae really desirous of joining his corps, for he, Claverton, had something of a reputation for coolness and daring, and this fellow, too, was in no wise wanting in pluck. And he had shown the man that he was determined not to recognise him, and that any attempt to trade upon a knowledge, real or imaginary, of former days, would be worse than useless. So he replied:

“Well, Smith, you’re a likely-looking fellow enough, and, on second thoughts, I’ll take you. But it’s only fair to warn you that, as to promotion or recommendation or anything of that kind, you’ll stand just the same chances as any one else: no more and no less, d’you hear? Now, you show up at the Public Offices at one o’clock, and I’ll let you know when you will be sworn in, and the rest of it.”

“Very well, Baas,” said the other, respectfully. “I’ll be there. Good morning.”

Just then Lilian, throwing open her window, caught sight of the retreating figure of Smith. Her heart sank. What had this evil-looking ruffian to do with her lover? Had not his appearance heralded misfortune already?—for, with true feminine logic, she could not help connecting him in some way with the turn affairs had taken. And Claverton, knowing the idea she had taken upon the subject of the man, purposely forbore to mention the circumstance, and she, fearing to trouble him, would not ask him.

All along the frontier the tide of war was rising. The spark had fallen in dry grass, and now the flame flashed forth with lightning rapidity as one after another the insurgent tribes rose in open revolt. And amid the wild glens and bushy wastes of their secluded fastnesses lurked armed hordes of fierce savages, hungering for prey and plunder; and the smoke of burning homesteads hung in a pall over the land, telling of the toil and industry of years laid in ruins. On many a hill-top hovered dark clouds of the enemy, ever watchful, and ready to swoop down upon the lonely traveller, or patrol scanty in numbers; and the war-cry, grim and defiant, mingling with the crackling of musketry, told that each red wave was rolling on its course. And night after night, beneath the

blackness of the heavens, the terrible Fire Trumpet rang out its lurid message of destruction, and pillage, and death.

Thus the year closed.

Chapter Eleven.

“Have you no Secret Enemy?”

“Good-bye!”

Who among us has not uttered the mournful word? Not merely in airy, hollow fashion, when passing out of a drawing-room door, but in dire sadness, as we look our last upon the face from which we are about to be divided by time or distance—and, it may be, upon which there is small chance of our ever looking again in life? The train rolls out of the station; the plank is hurriedly thrown back on to the thronged quay, and, as the great ship glides from her moorings handkerchiefs wave and voices no longer audible to each other still continue to articulate, it may be in accents of heartsick pain, or through a forced and broken smile, or even in tones of genuine cheerfulness, the saddest of all words—“Good-bye.”

The fatal Monday morning has come at last; and there, in the grey dawn, Lilian stands bidding farewell to her lover. A light is burning in the sitting-room, and without it is almost dark, for the morning is lowering and cloudy. Now and then a puff of warm wind, which seems to herald rain, sighs mournfully through the trees, whirling up the dust in little eddies along the empty street—and they two are alone, for none of the household are astir, which neither regrets. And thus they stand, looking into each other’s eyes and both hesitating to frame the word—“Good-bye.”

The conditions of parting are unequal, it is true. To the man, going forth on this dark, desolate morning, the time of separation will be abundantly occupied—downright hard, honest soldiering—no mere child’s play, and if during those long months there is hardship and privation, there is also the excitement of peril and the stir of strife, the rough sociality of camp, and the healthful glow and energy of life in the open. To the woman it means a period of weary and inactive waiting; of days unbrightened by the strong, tender presence she has learnt to love so dearly; of nights, wakeful and self-tormenting, when the overwrought brain will conjure up visions of deadly peril, of the flashing spears and wild war-cry of the savage foe, of the wasting form of fell disease following on wet and exposure, of the swift lightning and the raging of flooded rivers, and every contingency probable and improbable, attendant upon campaigning in a barbarous land.

“Wherever you are, and whatever you do, you will take care of yourself,” she is saying. “You will not run any unnecessary risks, even for other people. Your life belongs to me now, love.”

“It does,” he answers, softly and tenderly. “Keep up a good heart, my sweet. Don’t go imagining all sorts of horrors while I am away, for, remember, that after these years I was not sent back to you to be taken away again. Mine is a charmed life—never fear.”

“I believe so, indeed,” she answers, looking at him fondly—proudly, and smiling through her tears.

“Why, Arthur, I would not keep you if I could, now. It is such as you who should be to the fore at present, and how could they supply your place?”

He makes no reply for a moment, but presses his kisses faster upon the soft hair and sweet, up-turned face, and he is sad and heavy at heart; though he will affect as much cheerfulness as he can, with the object of making light of things. And there seems some excuse for her implied encomium, looking at him as he stands—ready and calm, entirely devoid of any affectation of the military in his dress or accoutrements; but yet, the very ideal of the frontier civilian soldier.

“Keep up a brave heart, my own,” he murmurs again. “The day will soon come when we shall look back to this, as one of the sad experiences of the past, even as we look back to that other time. This is a mere passing minute compared with that.”

“Ah, yes. Now I am delaying you, and you must go. God keep you, darling, and bring you back to me safe again. Good-bye.”

One more strong, loving embrace, and he is gone. He throws himself upon his horse, which Sam has with difficulty been holding, and its impatient hoof-strokes ring through the empty street as he turns for one last look at the graceful figure waving him a farewell from the gate, and for the moment he feels inclined to retrace his steps, go straight back and resign the post which, all unsought, has been thrust upon him, and allow the war to take care of itself as far as he is concerned.

And Lilian, returning to the deserted room, now so desolate and empty to her, as the dawn reduces the light of the candles to a pale garish flicker, feels the tears welling up afresh as she reproaches herself for not having kept him at any cost, for round her heart is a terrible foreboding of evil to come—how, when, and in what form the future will reveal. Yet the feeling is there.

We must follow the wayfarer. Throughout the whole day he rode mechanically forward, absorbed in his own thoughts. A heavy storm drove him for shelter to a wretched roadside inn; but ever impatient to be moving, he left before it was nearly over. The

roads wet and slippery with the rain rendered progress slow, so that by the time it grew dark he was still some miles from Hicks' farm, where he intended to pass the night.

"I'm afraid we've lost the way," he ruminated, as having gone some distance up a long, bush-covered valley, he began to feel rather out of his bearings. "Sam! Where the devil are we?"

"Don't know, Inkos. I never was here before. Look. There's a house!"

"So there is. We'll make for it," and, picking up their horses' heads, they approached the dwelling, which was a sorry-looking affair. Darker and darker it grew, and a drizzling shower began to fall. Suddenly a light gleamed from the ill-closed window, and at the same time a man's voice, raised high in expostulation, reached their ears—a voice not unfamiliar to Claverton, withal, and in its tones he caught his own name. Quickly he dismounted.

"Sam," he whispered. "Take the horses out of sight, there, in the bush—quietly, d'you hear? And if you hear a row, come and look after me without a moment's loss. You'll soon see which way to shoot."

"Yeh bo 'Nkos," replied the ready-witted native, whose eyes sparkled with excitement. Then silently, and with a rapid glide, Claverton made his way round to the back of the house. Through a chink under the window-joist he could see the interior of a room—a mouldy, disused room, with damp, discoloured walls, and rotting beams festooned with cobwebs; but the place wore a look of familiarity to him, even as a sight or a sound which now and then will strike our imaginations as in no wise to be accounted for save in the previous experience of a dream. For a moment he was puzzled; then it flashed upon him that he was looking into the room where he and Ethel Brathwaite had taken refuge on the night of the storm. Yes; there was the very place where she had slept and he had covered her with his cloak, and where she had sat when terrified by the wolf; and, straining his gaze further, he almost expected to see that quadruped's footsteps in the dust by the half-open door. A fire burnt in the middle of the room, and there by the side of it lay the very stone he had used for a seat. It all seemed so strange that he seriously began to think he must be dreaming.

But he was wide awake enough as the sound of voices was heard, and two men entered the room from outside, closing the door after them. And in one of them Claverton recognised his recruit of yesterday; the other he had never seen before. He was an Englishman—a tall, dark man, well made and erect of carriage, evidently a gentleman by birth, and yet with a certain sinister expression that would have led the watcher to

regard him with distrust even had he not heard his own name brought into the conversation.

“It’s all right, Sharkey,” this one was saying.

“Your ears must have played you tricks. There’s no sign of any one moving.”

“No, there ain’t. Well, now, Cap’n, about this devil Claverton?”

“Yes, I’ll be as good as my word. One hundred pounds, this day six months.”

“Make it two, Cap’n; make it two. He’s a devil to deal with—a very devil. You don’t know him as well as I do.”

“No; one. Not another stiver. And now, are you downright sure that Arthur Lidwell and Arthur Claverton are one and the same man? Could you swear to him?”

The mulatto laughed—a hideous, hyaena-like grin—showing the long, sharp, canine teeth which had gained him his repellent sobriquet.

“Swear to him?” he cried. “I’d swear to him in a million! I recognised him directly I set eyes on him in the crowd at ‘King.’ But the young lady spotted me sharp as a needle, and I had to hide. She does seem awful fond of him. Why, when I—”

“Drop that damned nonsense, Sharkey, and stick to the point?” exclaimed the Englishman, with a deep frown.

“Very sorry, Cap’n. Well, I was going to say, I knew him, and, what’s more, he knew me.”

“The devil he did!”

“Yes. He recognised me first when I met him on the road on Saturday, riding with the young lady; then afterwards I spoke to him, but he was that high and lofty! I told him my name, and watched him closely; then I called him by his name that he carried up there—just let it slip, like—and, would you believe it?—he never winced!”

“Didn’t he?”

“No, he didn’t. Says he: ‘Never saw you before in my life!’ as cool as you please. Ah, he’s a plucky devil is Lidwell; he always was!” said the mulatto, with a sigh of admiration.

“Why do you owe him a grudge?” asked the other, curiously.

“He knocked me down once, Cap’n—hit me here, bang on the nose.” And the speaker’s features assumed a look of deadly malice. “He shot me, too, and left me for dead. I could forgive him that, but not the whack on the nose.”

“So help me Heaven, I’ll repeat that operation with interest before you’re many weeks older, friend Sharkey,” muttered the watcher, between his set teeth.

“And then—one hundred pounds,” went on the fellow. “Hist! I’m certain I heard something.” And both men sat in an attitude of listening. For a moment there was dead silence; then the Englishman rose. “I’ll just take a look round, to make sure,” he said, producing a revolver and going out into the night, while Claverton, drawing his own weapon, crouched there, covering the angle of the tenement round which he expected his enemy to appear; for that this man was, for some cause or other, his deadly enemy was obvious. He would have the advantage of him, however, for his eyes were accustomed to the darkness, whereas the other had just come out of the light. For a moment he waited—anxious, expectant—but no one appeared; then he heard the two men’s voices inside again, and, peering through the crevice, saw the Englishman return, shutting the door behind him.

“All right; there’s no one moving. You do hear the most unaccountable noises, though, in this infernal bush at night.”

“Ha, ha, ha! So you do, Cap’n; and you’ll hear plenty more when you get up there to the front among the Kafirs,” said the other, with a mocking laugh. “When do you leave?”

“As soon as I get my command. Now, no tricks, Sharkey. In three months this fellow must have disappeared. No violence, mind; but he must be induced to leave the country;” and he emphasised the words with a significant look into the other’s face. “Mind, you mustn’t hurt him.”

“All right, Cap’n. I’ve joined his levies. What d’you think of that, hey? I’m not a bad shot, you know, and there’s no fear of my mistaking a Kafir for any one else, or any one else for a Kafir, eh? Ha, ha, ha!” and the villain winked his yellow eyes with a murderous leer.

The Englishman’s dark features grew red and then white. “By Jove, Sharkey, but you’re a knowing one,” he said. “I’m deuced glad I ran against you. One hundred pounds, fair and square.”

“Bight you are, Cap’n. One hundred pounds, and,” sinking his voice to a whisper, every word of which was audible to the listener, “in three months he’ll be out of your way, never fear.”

The gloom spread around, pitchy black, and the rain pattered upon the bush and upon the crouched form of the man who, with his eye to the chink in the wall, and gripping his revolver, witnessed these two calmly plotting his death, for there could be no mistaking the drift of their scarcely veiled hints. A wave of fierce wrath surged up in his heart as he gazed upon his would-be murderers. Why should he not quietly walk round and, flinging open the door, shoot the pair dead? It would be but the work of a moment. Then came the cold but none the less dangerous caution which always stood his friend—dangerous to the objects of his resentment in proportion as it preserved to him his own coolness. It would not do. How could he prove to the world at large that he had done it to save his own life? No. He would keep a close eye upon this ruffianly mulatto, and then the first time they were in action he could easily turn the tables on his sneaking assassin by shooting him quietly through the head—in mistake for one of the enemy—and he laughed sardonically at the thought of hoisting the villain with his own petard. He had no compunction, no nice scruples of honour in such a matter as this. It was *vae victis*. The other had put the weapon into his hand. And who was this Englishman who seemed bent on pursuing him in such a deadly manner? Who was this secret foe, so eager and anxious to plant the assassin’s steel in his back? And as the firelight flickered into the corners of the grim old room, lighting up the faces of these two midnight plotters, Claverton scanned every feature of the reckless lineaments of the arch-schemer again and again, but could detect nothing familiar in them. He had never seen the man before.

Suddenly the latter rose.

“Well, now I shall be off,” he said. “I leave it to you, Sharkey. Here’s something to go on with,” and there was a chink as of gold as he passed something into the mulatto’s hand, who clutched it greedily. “We understand each other. Now, the sooner you join your regiment the better,” he added, with a harsh laugh. “Good-bye. Are you going to stay here to-night?”

“Why, yes, Cap’n; it’s warm and dry.”

“Ha, ha! Supposing Claverton should want to off-saddle here. That would be a joke—eh?”

“He’s better employed, that devil,” replied the Cuban mulatto, and he chuckled to himself as the other passed out, frowning. And the listener heard the sound of footsteps,

and then the tread of a horse receding in the distance. The man was evidently riding away up the kloof.

Left to himself Sharkey got up, fastened the cranky door, and threw some more wood on the fire. Then he took out his pipe, filled and lighted it, and drawing his blanket around him, lay down, prepared to make himself thoroughly comfortable. He grunted once or twice as his pipe went out, and then with a muttered imprecation threw it down, and, pulling the blanket over his head, began to snore. A few moments more, and the watcher arose and softly stole away into the bush, for he was revolving a merciless and coldblooded plan.

“Sam!”

“Inkos?”

“Tie the horses up and come with me. You remember the scoundrel we enlisted yesterday?”

“Yeh bo 'Nkos.”

“Well, he is in that place, and you and I are going to take him. Directly I kick down the door, you will follow on my heels and collar him. Now come.”

They stole back to the house, and Claverton took the precaution of once more peeping in. The mulatto lay quite still, rolled in his blanket, evidently asleep. Then he returned to the front of the building.

“Now, Sam—ready!” he whispered.

A sudden rush, and a tremendous kick, and the door went down with an appalling crash, as, staggering with the shock and the impetus, Claverton half fell half rushed upon the sleeper, gripping him by the throat before he had time to move; while Sam, seizing both his hands, twisted them behind him, and rolled him over on to his stomach.

“That’s it, Sam; tie him up,” cried Claverton, in a steely voice, restraining with difficulty his longing to throttle the life out of the prostrate villain, who, for his part, did not yield without a struggle—and a violent one. Indeed, it required all their efforts to hold him, for the mulatto was of powerful and athletic build.

“So!” said Claverton, approvingly, as Sam dexterously made fast the prisoner’s feet with a reim he had brought for the purpose, having previously pinioned his hands. “Now, Mr

Vargas Smith, alias Sharkey, alias the Cuban gentleman—now, may I ask, what the devil are you doing here?”

The man regarded him with a scowl of hatred. “I was on the way to join the levy, Baas, and came in here for shelter from the rain,” he replied, sullenly.

“On the way to join the levy, were you? My good friend, this is not the way to King Williamstown. That, I believe, is where you were consigned to—but never mind that. Now, I want to know, who was the gentleman who has just left?”

The ruffian’s yellow hide grew a dirty, livid colour. “I don’t know his name, Baas,” he said, falteringly.

“It’s surprising how we live and learn,” said the other, coolly. “Before I count twenty you’ll not only have learnt his name, but you’ll have told it to me. Sam, put up that door. And Sam, go to the corner and keep watch; and let me know if you hear anybody coming. It isn’t in the least likely, but there’s nothing like caution. Now, friend Sharkey, what is his name? Out with it.”

“Don’t know, Baas,” repeated the other.

“That’s unfortunate for you. Now, you see this?” taking a glowing faggot from the fire and blowing upon it. “With this I am about to tickle the soles of your feet until you do know. Come! Out with it,” and he approached his victim.

“Mercy, mercy! I’ll tell you, Baas,” pleaded the mulatto.

“Well?”

“It’s Wallace—Cap’n Wallace, Baas.”

“Oh. No lies, mind,” said Claverton, with a determined look. “You know me. I stand no nonsense. Well, now, where did you first fall in with this Captain Wallace?”

“At Port Elizabeth.”

“Who is he?”

“That I don’t know, really, Baas,” pleaded the fellow, piteously. “He’s going to raise a levy and fight the Kafirs, and he wanted me to join it.”

“H’m. I believe the first statement, the last is a lie. No more lies, friend Sharkey, if you please, or we shall quarrel. And now, tell me, how do you purpose earning your hundred pounds?”

The mulatto’s face grew livid as death, and great beads of perspiration stood out upon his forehead. He knew that from this man, whose murder he had just been plotting, he need expect no mercy; and he read his doom in every line of the other’s features, as he stared at his captor with the haggard and hunted expression of a trapped wild creature. Again his shaking lips reiterated a prayer for mercy.

“You were going to be very merciful to the man whom you were about to put out of this Captain Wallace’s way in three months, were you not? Who was the man, by the way?”

“Yourself. He hates you, Baas, I don’t know why, I swear I don’t. I think it’s about some money you have that he ought to have—at least, so he says.”

“Quite so. And he set you to watch me?”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

Then there was dead silence. It was a strange sight that the ghostly firelight flickered and danced upon in that lonely hut. The bound and prostrate-ruffian, and the quiet, refined-looking man sitting opposite him—sitting in judgment on his would-be murderer. Outside, the rain pattered with a monotonous, dismal sound, and the distant cry of a jackal floated upon the heavy night air.

“Well, now, Sharkey,” said Claverton at length, “you are the greatest scoundrel that ever breathed, you know. I had almost made up my mind to amuse myself for the rest of the night by drawing figures on your carcass with this,” and again he held up the glowing faggot; “but I will be merciful, and won’t do that.”

A look of relief came into the prisoner’s eyes; but his tormentor went on:

“But, you see, you have confessed to having intended to murder me for the sake of a hundred pounds. Now, do you know what we do with murderers? We hang them; but I won’t hang you.” The look of relief increased, and the fellow began to murmur his thanks.

“Wait, wait, not so fast. I won’t hang you. I say, because, to begin with, I haven’t got a rope. But a couple of prods with this,”—touching the handle of a long, keen sheath-knife—“will answer the purpose a great deal better. For this is war-time, you know, Sharkey, and this hut is a devilish lonely place, so that when in about a month you are found here, a yarn will go the round of the papers as to how the body of a poor devil of a Hottentot—not even a Cuban gentleman, mind, they don’t understand that distinction here—was found slain by Kafirs, with no end of assegai holes in him. Or it might be safer for us to dig a hole in the next room, and quietly drop you in—alive, of course—and cover you up. It would, perhaps, be a little more trouble, but safer.”

The expression of the miserable man’s face, as he stared at his tormentor with a frozen, hopeless look of despair, was awful to behold, while he listened to the terrible doom which the other pronounced upon him. Not a gleam of relenting could he trace in that stern, impassive countenance.

“Mercy—mercy,” he moaned. “I will be your slave—your dog. I will kill the other man if you wish, only spare me,” and his dry, bloodless lips could hardly articulate his hopeless entreaty. “Only spare my life—it is yours—I deserve to die; but spare me,” and the miserable wretch grovelled on the earth.

Claverton contemplated him for a few moments with calm equanimity, unmoved by the extremity of his terror.

“Upon my word, Sharkey, I gave you credit for more gameness. Well, now, listen to me. It is as you say—you deserve to die, and your life is mine. Never mind about the other man, I won’t have him hurt for anything. Now for yourself. You have gone through all the bitterness of death in the last few minutes, as I intended you should. That is enough. I will spare your life—richly as you have deserved to lose it—but listen to me. You will go from here as a prisoner, and not be released from arrest till we have joined the others. I will make no conditions with you—first of all, because you are absolutely powerless to harm me, now, or at any future time—the very events of to-night prove that; secondly, because, if I did, you would not keep them. So I forgive you completely your plot to murder me, and you shall join the corps as if nothing had happened. One word of warning, though. I shall have my eye upon you always, and wherever you may be. And remember this, in case we go into action together—I’m not a bad shot, you know; and there’s no fear of my mistaking a Kafir for any one else, or any one else for a Kafir. Bear all this in mind, for if you are up to any more tricks, what you have just gone through is a mere joke compared with what’s in store for you. You know me.”

The prisoner looked at Claverton with a wild, superstitious awe. This man must be something more than mortal, and he shuddered as he reflected that he was indeed

powerless to harm him. Then, as he realised that his life was spared, the look of relief returned to his livid features. He knew the other only too well, and that every word had been spoken in no mere spirit of empty threat, but in sober earnest. And now he felt like a man who has been reprieved from under the very gallows-tree itself. He had spoken the truth in his revelation in all good faith—indeed, he dared not have done otherwise—and had told all he knew, marvelling that he had been asked so few questions.

Claverton, meanwhile, was sitting opposite, watching his prisoner with a curious and thoughtful expression. By what stroke of luck had he been made to lose his way and brought to this place in time to overhear the plot against his own life? Who on earth could the other man be—the arch mover in the scheme? He had never seen him before; had never even heard his name; and then what the mulatto had said, about it being a question of money. Stay, could it be that some will existed of which he, Claverton, knew nothing, and under which the other would benefit in the event of his death? It seemed strange, certainly; but then his experience had taught him that nothing was too strange to be true. And then recurred to his mind, with all the force of a prophecy, the words which Lilian had spoken when first she discovered the ruffian was following them in the square at King Williamstown: “Have you no secret enemy? No one who would owe you a grudge?” and he had answered lightly in the negative; whereas, he was actually being dogged by two secret assassins—one of them no mere common ruffian like the cut-throat lying there before him, but a man apparently his equal in birth and station. With whom, however, he promised himself a full and complete reckoning, all in good time.

Then the recollection of Lilian’s words naturally recalled the image of Lilian herself. What was she doing then? Thinking of him ever—at that hour most likely praying for him—and he? With difficulty had he just restrained himself from an act of wild, lawless vengeance—justified, perhaps, but still vengeance—one which in earlier days he would not have shrunk from; and now, as he thought of her, his whole mood softened and he felt glad that he had spared the villain opposite, even though by doing so he might have jeopardised his own life. Not that he gave this side of the question a thought, for his experiences had made him a fatalist, and he really believed himself under a special protection for some purpose or other—be that purpose what it might. Thus musing, he fell into a doze; while the faithful Sam, having stabled the horses in the adjoining apartment, had barred up the door as well as he could, and sat, huddled in his blanket, smoking his pipe and keeping watch over the prisoner and over his master’s safety.

With the first ray of dawn they were astir. The horses being saddled, the prisoner’s feet were untied to allow him to walk.

“Yon dam Hottentot nigga?” said Sam, administering a sly kick to the crestfallen Sharkey, when his master’s back was turned. “You cheek my chief, eh? Now, you try to run away, I shoot—shoot you—so. My chief, he good shot, shoot you dead—ha, ha!”

With which salutary warning they set out. Sam, in his heart of hearts, hoping that it would be disregarded, and that the mulatto would really make an attempt at escape. But that worthy was wise in his generation, and the Natal native had no opportunity of showing his skill with the new Snider rifle wherewith a paternal Government had supplied him on the occasion of his joining “Claverton’s Levies.”

A curious contrast did this grim cortège present to the last occasion of his leaving that place in the early dawn, thought Claverton. Instead of the bright, laughing girl who was his companion then, he cast his eye on the sullen prisoner and his guard, and then on his own warlike equipment; and mingled, indeed, were his reflections as he found himself traversing the old roads, with all the features of the familiar landscape stretching around. There was old Isaac Van Rooyen’s homestead, down in the hollow, on the right, looking just the same as of yore, except that that slow-going old Boer had built a new room on to it, probably for the accommodation of the family of one of his children, who had quartered themselves upon him. In front, in the distance, rose the frowning face of Spoek Krantz and the heights from among which it stood forth. The mountains, too, on the sky-line, wore their well-known aspect; and every feature of the surroundings, whether bush or open, seemed to bring back the past. Even Hicks’ farm, whither he was now wending, was the one he himself had started to treat for, and had turned back, that day when he had heard his fate and been sent forth into banishment from all that made life for him—four years ago.

“Hallo, hallo!” cried honest Hicks, looking up in astonishment from some carpentering he was doing behind the house, as the trio rode up. “Well, this is a piece of luck! How are you, Arthur, old boy? And who the deuce have you got there?”

“A chap who joined my corps and began his service by desertion; I chanced to pick him up on the way.”

Hicks looked mystified for a moment. “Oh—ah—yes, now I remember! Jim told me you had got the command of some of the greatest blackguards under heaven. That bird, by the way, looks as if he would be quite in his element among them. But I should think you’d manage to lick them into shape if any one would, eh?”

“Oh, yes. And they’re not bad fellows to fight, once you get them away from the canteens. I’ll manage them, never fear.”

“But come in. Laura will be surprised. Don’t bother about the horses, I’ll see to them; and your boy will be enough to look after the prisoner, I should think.”

“He will. The rascal has been licking his chops over him like a bull-terrier contemplating a cat in a tree. There’s nothing he’d like better than a chance of practising at the fellow running away.”

By this time they had entered the house, which was a trifle small perhaps, but comfortable, after the style of the ordinary frontier dwelling, and Claverton took in at a glance the air of neatness and domesticity that pervaded it, from the sewing-machine and work-basket on the table to the rocking-cradle standing in the corner, which latter was the sole work of Hicks’ skilful hands.

And Laura? She was but little changed in appearance, and that, if anything, for the better. More matronly-looking and a trifle more demure perhaps than formerly, and if her greeting to Claverton lacked ever so slightly in cordiality, it might have been that she still cherished a latent spark of resentment against him on Ethel’s account. But, after all, there was no altering the past. Whatever was to be—was—and there was no help for it. And being a good-hearted little woman she soon cast aside her first veil of reserve, and talked to him as in the old times, for she had always liked him, and besides, he had done her husband more than one good turn.

“And where is Ethel now, and how is she getting on?” asked Claverton, presently.

“She’s down at Cape Town still.”

“Does she ever come up to the frontier?”

“Oh, yes. Sometimes. She would have been coming just about now, only this new war broke out.”

“Who’s that? Ethel?” asked Hicks, returning. He had left the room for a moment to give some directions to one of his natives outside. “Oh, yes. She was engaged to some fellow down there and then choked him off all at once, no one quite knew why. Laura vows that—” Here the speaker became aware of a battery of warning glances being levelled at him from his wife’s dark eyes, and suddenly collapsed in a violent fit of coughing, on recovery from which he threw open the door, and looking frantically up at the heavens declared, with a vehemence wholly unsuited to the occasion, that the rain would inevitably clear away before twelve o’clock. Claverton, on whom not one fraction of this by-play was lost, although he pretended not to see it, could hardly restrain his mirth. Good old Hicks, he thought, was always a whale at blundering, and he had done for

himself again. Even in trying to extricate it, he had put his unlucky foot in yet deeper; for, to any one who did not know him, this violent prognostication as to the weather, taken in conjunction with what had gone before, would have had slightly an inhospitable smack; but Claverton enjoyed the situation only too well. By-and-by, when pursuing his journey, he would shout with laughter over the recollection; now, however, not a muscle of his countenance moved as he said, in the most matter-of-fact way:

“You might remember me to Ethel, when you write. We used to have rather fun together in the old times.”

Laura said something in assent, though she mentally resolved to do nothing of the kind. No good would come of waking up old recollections, she reasoned, by mentioning this man who, even if through no fault of his own, had, at any rate, she told herself, cast a cloud over her bright, wayward, beautiful sister’s life, and the sooner he was forgotten the better. For that sister’s sake she by no means shared her husband’s joy over his reappearance, and she sincerely hoped that those two might not meet again, and wished that he would be quick and marry Lilian Strange, or leave this part of the country, or both. Meanwhile here he was, still on the frontier, and Ethel might be coming up to visit her at any time.

Just then a chubby toddling—an exact infantile reproduction of his father—rushed into the room; and Laura, with a touch of pride that was very becoming, exhibited him to her guest, while the urchin opened his big blue eyes wide, and stood staring, with his finger in his mouth, at Claverton’s long boots and shining spurs.

“Go and say how d’you do to Mr Claverton, Jimmy,” said his mother, in the tone of half command, half entreaty, usual under the circumstances. “He’s a soldier, you know, going to fight the Kafirs, like Uncle Jim.”

“Uncle Jim” being Jim Brathwaite, who was the urchin’s godfather.

“I’ll be soja, when I big,” lisped the prodigy, toddling up to Claverton, and tentatively stroking with one finger the shin of his high boot. “I got gun—shoot de Kaffa—bang!”

“Halloa,” cried Hicks, re-entering. “Don’t let that kid bother you, Arthur. Kids are a confounded nuisance unless they happen to belong to a fellow, and very often even then.”

But Jimmy was not to be detached from his new acquaintance, to whom he had taken an immense fancy, and just then, fortunately for his peace of mind, a move was made in favour of breakfast.

They talked of the war and its progress. Hicks declared his intention of holding on a bit for the present, and joining Jim Brathwaite—who, with his troop, had already left for the front—later, if things got worse. Laura had been in a terrible fright the last time when he had gone, he said; but now, since she saw that none of them had been hurt, she didn't care—in fact, concluded Hicks, he rather believed she wanted to get rid of him, so he was determined to stay, just to spite her. Listening to the playful recrimination that followed, Claverton found himself thinking what a good thing it was to see two people happy like this, for there could be no doubt but that happy they were—thoroughly so—in their quiet and hitherto peaceful (for the tide of war had not yet rolled in so far as this) frontier home; though such may appear incredible to those who find their enjoyment of life in the whirl and feverishness of fashionable civilisation. And thinking it, he rejoiced greatly on his old chum's account.

And the said "old chum" was considerably crestfallen at the announcement that he must take the road again. "Why, hang it all," he grumbled; "you've hardly had time to look at us."

"My dear fellow—duty—inexorable duty calls. But I shall assuredly knock you up again, soon."

"Why, here's baby!" exclaimed Laura, as an approaching squall resounded through the passage. "You will just be able to have a peep at her before you go," and regardless of her lord's impatient protest that "Claverton didn't want to be bothered with a lot of kids," she took a limp bundle of clothes from the arms of its bearer and uncovered a wee red and—shall it be confessed?—rather wet physiognomy for her guest's inspection.

"H'm, I'm no judge of infants, Laura," said Claverton, good-humouredly, "but I should say this one ought to fetch first prize at the next show. But now I must be off—good-bye."

"Must you go? I'm so sorry," said Laura. "I should like to get Lilian up here to stay for a bit, only 'some one' would be sure to forbid it as unsafe," she added, archly.

"Well, good-bye, old fellow," said Hicks. "My horses are out in the veldt, and will take hours to get in, or I'd go part of the way with you. Mind you look us up again as soon as ever you can." He was going to add something about hoping "to see you both here before long"; but with his recent slip fresh in his mind, he refrained, fearing lest in some unaccountable manner he should put his foot in it again. "Good-bye—success to you. Mind you shoot lots of niggers and come back all jolly," and with a hearty hand-shake the two men parted.

Claverton rode on, reaching Fort Beaufort, where he tarried a day to recruit his men, or rather to collect them, for they had already been recruited by his lieutenant, a young Englishman named Lumley; and it was high time he appeared on the scene, for the rascals had taken the opportunity of getting on the spree, indulging in much inebriate jollification preparatory to starting for the seat of war. They would be all right, though, once away from the canteens and under proper discipline—and under proper discipline he intended they should be. So promptly mustering them he marched them off without any farther delay, not even waiting a day in Alice, the divisional town of Victoria East, where a fresh batch was picked up. At the latter place, however, a despatch awaited him, ordering him, instead of going to King Williamstown, to proceed straight through to join the main column on the borders of Sandili's location.

All along the road he met with fresh rumours and alarms. The rebellion was spreading; the whole of British Kaffraria and the Transkei was over-ran; nearly all the settlers' houses in the more exposed districts were burnt down; the Police express-riders carried their lives in their hands, as they darted across the hostile country, several of them having been cut off already. Added to which these districts were in a dire state of alarm, by reason of impending troubles nearer home, for the Gaika clans in the Waterkloof and Blinkwater fastnesses, under the chiefs Tini Macomo and Oba, were in a state of restlessness, and meanwhile signal fires burnt nightly on the higher peaks of the Amatola.

It was, indeed, a motley crew, was this "levy" of which the two Englishmen were in command, numbering between sixty and seventy men. Yellow-skinned Hottentots; dark Korannas; tall, light-coloured Bastards; every shade and kindred of the race which though inferior to them in many respects, yet looked upon themselves as the natural foes of the Kafirs, and with far more sympathies of rule, of civilisation, or rather semi-civilisation, and even of blood, with the white man, for few indeed but had some drops of white blood in them. Even two or three specimens of the ape-like Bushmen found part in the motley gathering—wiry, active little rascals, with skulls hard as iron and the agility of cats—and one and all by virtue of their white strain, and the weapons wherewith they had been supplied; and confidence in their leaders, felt themselves immeasurably superior in prowess to the naked tribesmen against whom they were burning to be led. Not a few of the older men—wrinkled, shrivelled-looking, sinewy creatures, but game to the backbone—had been rebels in the war of '50, when the old Cape Mounted Rifles, then composed of such fellows as these, had gone over in a body to the enemy, and, bearing in mind the salutary lesson they had been taught, both by their ill-chosen friends and their deserted employers, were now only too ready to retrieve the past, and to avenge themselves upon the treacherous savages who had then misled them. They were mostly plucky; fair shots and reliable at a pinch; but, as yet, in a

state of indifferent discipline; and it required all their leader's promptitude and firmness to lick them into anything like decent shape. His first address to them was short and to the point.

"Now, men," he said, in the ordinary Boer Dutch, which was their mother tongue. "We are going out to fight—to fight in real earnest, and not to play. I have seen fellows I would far less sooner command than I would you, for I know you can hold your own against any number of these rascally Gaikas. Many of you are good shots, I know, and we'll soon have plenty of opportunity of peppering Jack Kafir handsomely, I promise you. Remember, we are going to fight—and to fight we must always be in a state of readiness and of order, because we are in the enemy's country and never know when we may have him down upon us. Now, mark my words. Any man who gets drunk, or is found asleep at his post, shall have six dozen well laid on with a couple of new reims, as sure as my name's Claverton, and the second time he'll be shot. Mind, I'll stand no hanky-panky. When we get home again you can get on the spree as much as you like; in camp, steadiness is the order of the day. Your rations you'll get just as I get mine, neither better nor worse. I shall ask no man to go where I won't lead him, and now we'll just go and thrash Jack Kafir into a cocked hat—yourselves and Mr Lumley and I. So we understand each other. I am commanding men, not fools or children— isn't it so?"

"Ja, kaptyn—ja!" they cried, cheering him vociferously. "We shall show you we are all men—good men and true."

"That's right. Now I am going to let you elect your own sergeants and corporals, and, having elected them, by Jove, you'll have to obey them. I should recommend, for choice, Gert Spielman, Cobus Windvogel, Dirk Hesler," and he ran through a list of about a dozen of the most trustworthy veterans, knowing full well that those who were elected would be devoted to him, and those who were not, scarcely less so for his having recommended them. And thus having got his corps into working order, and, in fact, it became more manageable every day, Claverton and his lieutenant journeyed with light hearts towards the seat of war.

"These fellows will turn out a very creditable lot, or I'm much mistaken," remarked Lumley, as they were advancing through one of the defiles of the Amatola. "They are cool and reliable at a pinch, and not susceptible to panic like the Fingoes. I'd rather have fifty of them than five hundred Fingoes."

"I quite believe it," assented Claverton. "Some of them are tough customers, and once beyond the reach of grog they're all right."

“Yes. Look at that old Gert Spielman, for instance,” pointing to a shrivelled, little old Hottentot, with a skin like parchment. “He’s a dead shot. The infernal old scoundrel was a rebel last war, and only escaped hanging by the skin of his teeth. I suspect he’s drawn a bead with effect many a time on poor Tommy Atkins in those days. Well, now—if occasion offers—you’ll see he’ll turn out to be one of our best men.”

“No doubt. But I say; this is a queer place, and the sooner we get through it the better.”

They were threading a long, narrow defile. Overhead the forest-covered slopes rose to the sky, and down to the path stretched the jungly bush—dense, tangled, and apparently impenetrable. Great yellow-wood trees here and there reared their grey, massive limbs, from which the lichens dangled, above the lower scrub, and monkeys chattered, and birds flitted screaming from the road as the troop moved forward. Some fifteen or twenty of the men had horses of their own, and these, Claverton, like a prudent commander, had thrown forward as scouts, if not to clear the way at any rate to give warning of any assemblage of the foe threatening to oppose their progress—which they could easily do, being as quick of eye and as agile of limb as the Kafirs themselves. But no sign of obstruction was encountered, and soon, emerging from the gorge, they found themselves in more open country, bushy still, but not densely so—indeed, such that in the event of attack the advantage would not be wholly on the enemy’s side.

Chapter Twelve.

“The Land is Dead.”

For two days “Claverton’s Levy” has continued its march farther and further into the disturbed country, meeting, as yet, with no opposition. Now and again, far away on a hill-top, like a black speck, would be descried the form of a Kafir scout watching their movements, and on two or three of these occasions shots had been fired, though futilely, for at present the wily foe was showing a discretion eminently the better part of valour, and kept his distance. Deserted kraals and mealie-lands, here and there even the ruins of a once prosperous homestead, tell in significant, if voiceless testimony, that the “land is dead” indeed; and no sign of life is visible along the path, save for the occasional presence of the wild creatures of the waste, who, for their part, lose no time in getting out of the way of this quaint-looking crew. Once, indeed, a number of Kafir women came into the camp with a plausible tale of how they were fleeing from the rebels, and were on their way to join their husbands and fathers in the colony, who were loyal to the Government, and wouldn’t the white captain give them rations to carry them on their road? But Claverton, who saw through the trick, had ordered them out of camp at once, threatening to make prisoners of the lot if they were even within sight half an hour later. He knew they were spies—these confiding creatures—sent in by the enemy to see how great a fool the white chief was, and to report accordingly; but in the present instance they found him in no sense a fool at all.

Very careful and precise has Claverton been in the matter of guard; visiting the sentries himself, and that often. Indeed, there has been a tendency among the men to growl a little—always in secret, for they have already begun to look upon their leader with no inconsiderable awe—at the extra precautions he takes in posting rather more than the absolutely necessary number of guards. Very careful and precise is he in matters of discipline, although, within limits, the men are allowed and encouraged to make the time pass as cheerfully as possible; and many are the yells of laughter round the evening camp-fire over the antics of some yellow-skinned monkey; or another discourses the sweet music of a Dutch Hottentot song to the accompaniment of a concertina and a battered old fiddle, for they are fond of music in their way, are these light-hearted, scatter-brained half-breeds—their own music, that is—a weird, shrill, bag-pipish chorus, unparalleled in its discordant monotony. But at a given time all lights out, and woe to the delinquent who should think it safe to begin “trying it on” in this or any other respect. So the corps is in capital order for its rough work, and, thanks to the carefulness of its leaders, runs no more jeopardy than that provided by the ordinary chances of war—which, indeed, is fully sufficient.

And now the troop is halted in a hollow, by the side of a small stream—at this season nearly dry—dry, that is, in places where it should run, though there are several deep pools of standing water very inviting on a morning like this, for, though not yet high, the sun is making his rays disagreeably felt. Around, for a distance of about half a mile, the slopes are dotted with spekboem and aloes; the straight, prickly stems of the latter looking like an array of dark Kafirs stationed about in the shimmer of the rising heat. It is the third morning of their march, and to-day they expect to reach the main body; meanwhile, having been on the move since dawn, they are halted for breakfast.

As usual, the sentries have been carefully posted, for their leader has noticed among his men a certain tendency to carelessness, in proportion as their advance is made without sign of opposition, and, knowing their characteristics and their failings well, his watchfulness never relaxes. And now, as the sun shines pleasantly down, on this cloudless morning, the men sit and lounge about, taking their well-earned rest ere the word is given to set forward again. Some are cooking their breakfasts and those of their fellows; others lie about smoking their pipes and indulging in drowsy gossip; some lying on their backs, with their ragged hats between their faces and the sun, are fast asleep; while others are still splashing merrily in one or two of the water-holes, diving into the water or sitting on the brink basking in the sun. Claverton himself has just returned from his bath, and stands, in scanty attire, looking placidly round upon those under his command, in their various attitudes of ease and restfulness.

“Not much use tubbing if one has to walk a hundred yards after it,” he is saying. “One wants to go in again directly one gets here.”

“Yes,” answers his lieutenant, dreamily. “By the way, I was thinking what we should do if Jack Kafir were to make a sudden rush on us while we were splashing away down there. But I don’t believe we shall get a glimpse of the beggar until—”

Bang!

A shot is heard just over the brow of the rise about seven hundred yards off. It rings out on the still morning air with a sharp clearness that is startling, and immediately it is followed by a second. The effect is like magic: loungers sit bolt upright, sleepers wake, those in the water scurry out, and all eyes in camp are turned in the direction of this unlooked-for alarm.

“Kaptyn, Kaptyn—Kyk dar so!” (Captain, Captain—Look there!) cries one of the sergeants, a wiry little Hottentot of some sixty summers. But even before his warning is uttered Claverton’s quick eye has caught the cause of alarm, and more, has mastered the fact that nothing but the utmost coolness and determination will save every soul in that

camp from destruction. For the whole ridge is alive with Kafir warriors, swarming over the brow of the hill like a crowd of red ants; on they come, straight for the camp, evidently with the intention of carrying it by a rush. A man is fleeing before them as hard as ever he can run—apparently the sentry who has fired the shot—but he has a small start and they are gaining upon him. Suddenly he falls, then disappears, pierced by a score of assegais, and the crowd pours over him.

“Steady, men—steady!” cries Claverton, his clear voice ringing like a trumpet. “Every man to his place. No one to fire before the word is given.”

And now the state of discipline into which the corps had been brought, bore its fruit, as, quickly and without flurry, each man knew exactly where to find his rifle and ammunition, and found it—for the arms had been placed separately in a circle, not piled—and now, inspired by their leader’s coolness, every man stood armed and ready, only waiting the word of command. Once or twice Claverton detected signs of flurry and scrambling; but a word or two thrown in, and an invincible coolness—which could not have been greater had they been on parade, instead of waiting the furious onslaught of a savage horde, rushing down at a pace which three minutes at the outside would bring right upon them—instantly had the effect of restoring order.

“Steady, men,” cried Claverton again, as the whole force knelt behind the light breastwork of thorn-bushes, which a quarter of an hour’s work had sufficed to throw round the camp when they first halted. “Steady. Don’t put up any sights, and aim low. Now—Fire!”

Truly the attacking force presented a terrific and appalling spectacle. In a semi-circular formation on they came at a run—hundreds and hundreds of fierce savages, their naked bodies gleaming with red ochre, as they poured through the bush like demons, shrilling their wild war-whistles, and snapping their assegais across their knees to shorten them for the charge and the irresistible hand-to-hand encounter which it seemed nothing could stay.

Crash!

A roar of the detonation of many rifles. The smoke clears away, and a confused mass of fallen bodies and red struggling limbs, is descried. Another and another volley; the assailants roll over in heaps, their ranks literally ploughed through by the heavy and terribly destructive Snider bullets—almost explosive in their effects—poured in at such close quarters. The advancing mass halts a moment like a wave suddenly stopped by a breakwater, fairly impeded by the fallen bodies of its slain and the frantic convulsive throes of the stricken.

“That’s right, men!” shouts Claverton. “Give it them again! Hurrah!”

A wild cheer breaks from his followers as they pour in their fire—a shrill yell of maddening excitement, nearly drowned by the fierce, frenzied war-cry of the Gaika warriors. But these are beginning to waver. The tremendous loss they have suffered, the determined and wholly unexpected resistance they have met with, all tells, and promptly they drop down into cover, and commence a rapid and heavy fire upon the camp. Their shooting, however, is ludicrously bad, and the bullets and “pot-legs” whiz high overhead, imperilling no one. The Hottentots answer with a derisive cheer, and every time a Kafir shows his head a dozen shots are blazed into him, generally with effect.

Suddenly a tremendous fire is opened upon the camp from quite a new quarter. One man drops dead, and two or three others are badly hit, and then on the opposite side a great mass of Kafirs rises from the bush and sweeps down upon the frail breastwork, uttering a terrific shout. A chief is at their head—a slightly-built, handsome man, with bright, clear eyes and a heavy beard for a Kafir—waving his tiger-skin kaross as, sounding his rallying-cry, he charges straight forward. Claverton spots him at once, and, coolly drawing a bead upon him, fires and misses. The chief laughs—a bold, defiant laugh—showing a splendid set of white teeth, and poising an assegai, hurls it with good aim at his would-be destroyer, who manages to dodge it, or his hopes and fears would come to an untimely end then and there. And the rifles roar and crash into the red, bounding mass, and the smell of powder is heavy in its asphyxiating denseness; and the demon figures flit athwart the smoke and jets of belching flame, while the gun-barrels grow hot, and the brain begins to reel amid that awful, deafening din, and the foot slips in a dark stain of fresh warm life-blood welling forth upon the grass. Truly all this is unsurpassed by Pandemonium in its wildest conception.

The last volley has broken the neck of the charge, but the impetus has carried a number of the enemy within the breastwork, and among them the chief, who, grasping a short, broad-bladed assegai, is stabbing right and left. Claverton sees him, and, amid the frightful turmoil of the hand-to-hand conflict, cannot help admiring the cool intrepidity of the man. He tries to get at him, but finds enough on his hands with a huge Kafir who hurls himself upon him, making herculean efforts to brain him with a clubbed rifle. A neat revolver shot and the savage falls—the bullet cleaving his skull, entering straight through the right eye—and in falling nearly upsets Claverton by stumbling forward on him.

“The chief! Stop him or kill him!” cries the latter. “Twenty pounds to whoever kills the chief!”

He cannot get near him himself, however. He sees his quondam prisoner, Sharkey, lay hold of one of the enemy and by main force brain the Gaika warrior as he hurls him head downwards upon a stone. He sees Sam kill two Kafirs with his own hand by as many strokes with a powerful Zulu-made assegai, as he replies to their fierce challenge with the most ear-splitting of whistles. He can make out Lumley and the cool-headed little Hottentot, Gert Spielmann, with the utmost calmness keeping up, together with a section of their men, such a fire upon the Kafirs outside that these are already in full retreat; but get at the chief he cannot. And, indeed, that bold leader seems to bear a charmed life as he charges through the camp, till, seeing that the game is up, he bounds like a deer over the breastwork unharmed amid the shower of bullets that flies round him, and, shouting his war-cry, regains the friendly cover with such few of his followers as have had the good fortune to escape.

The fight is over and the day is saved, and the Kafirs may be seen slinking off in squads through the bush—some, indeed, dragging the wounded with them. Orders are given to cease firing, and then about twenty of the best shots are told off to pepper the retreating enemy at long range, while the rest are held ready in the event of a fresh and unexpected attack; for their leader is not the man to overlook the smallest possibility in the chances of war. But a rally is not among them in this instance, and, after a sufficient time has elapsed, the men are paraded. It is found that the loss has been five killed and twelve wounded. Silence is restored—all but restored, that is—for a voice might still be heard in the ranks in half-smothered dispute with a comrade, and then, with a vehemence which sounded loud upon the silence, it exclaimed: “Haow! Amaxosa nigga no good!” And at this sudden and evidently unintentional interruption a roar of laughter broke from one and all of those present, from their leader downwards, while our friend Sam, whose feedings had found vent, in his uncontrollable excitement, in his favourite ejaculation, stood there looking sheepish and guilty to a degree. Then Claverton addressed them.

“My men,” he said, “you have just shown the stuff you are made of. Half an hour ago we didn’t know there was a Kafir within ten miles of us, and now in that time, taken by surprise as you were, you have beaten off an enemy outnumbering you by six to one. You have behaved splendidly to-day—splendidly, I say—and I am proud to command you. You fought as well as any Englishmen could have done, in a tough action partly hand-to-hand, and you have won it by sheer pluck and hard fighting. We have lost five men, unfortunately—five good men and true. They fell doing their duty—fell with arms in their hands, like soldiers, and I shall make it my business strongly to recommend their families to the Government for a pension. Now, we must keep up our discipline in the camp stricter than ever after this, as you must see, if only for our common safety. So we’ll just give three cheers for the Queen, and then we’ll set to work and get into marching order. Now, then—”

Cheer upon cheer went up—three times three again and again; but it is to be feared that amid their acclamations the men thought far more of their present leaders than of their absent Sovereign. However, the effect was that intended—an inspiring one.

“One word more,” cried Claverton. “The Kafirs have fought us like men—in fair, open fight, and we’ve thrashed them, and thrashed them well. Now, there are many of them lying wounded round here in the bush. It is hardly necessary to remind you that soldiers—true soldiers—don’t hurt wounded men after a battle; so when we go round to count the dead directly, no harm is to be done to the wounded. Leave the poor devils in peace until their kinsmen come to carry them off, as they will do when we are gone. So mind—they are not to be hurt.”

“Ja, ja, Kaptyn. Det is recht!” cried many of them.

“You put that neatly,” remarked Lumley. “There’s nothing like giving people a good opinion of themselves.”

“Well, yes,” answered the other, with a slightly cynical laugh. “These fellows are like children—take in everything you tell them in praise of themselves. Now they’re as pleased as Punch, and ready to go anywhere.”

“I wonder what would have been the upshot if the Kafirs had come on more slowly. These chaps of ours are not half such good shots as they think themselves, for I noticed some of them firing awfully wide. They couldn’t help hitting the crowd, you see; and being under the influence of excitement, didn’t stop to think. Otherwise the effect of their poor shooting would have been disheartening to them and encouraging to the enemy. And the odds were frightfully against us, you know.”

Claverton looked grave. “There’s a great deal in what you say, Lumley. More than ever, then, must we keep the fellows thoroughly up to the mark.”

Accompanied by ten mounted men, Claverton made a wide circuit of the camp, by way of reconnaissance. From the ridges not a Kafir was to be seen, and it seemed incredible that on this spot, within the last half-hour, a furious conflict had raged. Beyond the camp a film of smoke still hung heavily upon the air, and there was a thick, sulphurous smell; otherwise, all was quiet and serene, as if the peace of the morning had never been disturbed. And then they came upon the bodies of the slain foe, lying thickly around the camp, most of them struck dead where they lay, and terribly mangled by the great tearing shock of the Snider bullets. Some had managed to crawl a few yards, and lay with their fingers dug deep into the hard earth, which they had clutched in their convulsive agony. Now and then a shuddering tremor would run through one of the

bodies, and lips would move, and glazed eyes half unclose. It was a terrible thing to contemplate that mass of humanity so lately pulsating with life and vigour, now a mere heap of inert corpses, mangled and hideous, lying there doubled up and contorted by the throes of death—a sight which, could the intriguing heads of the war faction in the tribe have seen, would surely have caused a dire sinking of heart and a regret, all too late, that the counsel of the older men should have been set at naught. They had had experience of these things; and such a sight as this hecatomb of their nation's manhood in its vigour and prime, must have been before their eyes when they uttered their warning, oft repeated but all unheeded.

Suddenly they came upon a horrible sight. In the midst of a pile of bodies, about thirty yards in front of them, a great gaunt savage rose slowly up to a sitting posture. The whole of his face, neck, and shoulders was one mass of blood, and he appeared to be intently listening. Not a muscle moved as, with his head turned sideways towards them, he awaited their approach. "Poor devil!" muttered Claverton, contemplating the grisly figure, while even the Hottentots were vehement in their expressions of commiseration. Then a rapid movement was seen to agitate the Kafir's limbs, and, springing half up, he discharged his gun quick as thought right into the astonished party barely ten yards distant, slightly wounding one of the horses, but doing no further damage.

"Stop!" cried Claverton in a tone of command, seeing that his men were about to fire on the unfortunate savage. "Stop! Not a shot to be fired; his gun's empty now." Then halting, he ordered the Kafir to lay down his arms; but the man never moved.

"Whaow!" he cried, ferociously. "Did I kill any one? But come and kill me, cowards, as you have sent me into night. Come and kill me. Do you hear, cowards? Or are you afraid of a man who cannot see?"

His last words were indeed true. A ball had passed through the upper part of his face, taking away both his eyes. The poor wretch was stone-blind. And in this condition, maddened by the frightful pain of his wound and a sense of his calamity, he had quietly awaited their approach, and then, guided by the sound, had struck a parting blow at his hated foes. Something very like a shudder ran through the spectators.

"No. We are not going to kill you," replied Claverton. "Listen. We shall soon be away from here, and then your friends will come back and find you. You may yet live a long time, and there may yet be some little pleasure in life even for a man who cannot see. So we shall not harm you. It's the fortune of war—you to-day, myself to-morrow."

The only answer was a moan of exhaustion as the sufferer sank back on the ground. Claverton sent one of his men for some water, of which the wounded man drank

copiously. Then he washed his face, and, placing the poor wretch in a more comfortable position, left him and passed on his round of the field of slaughter. Many a sickening sight met his gaze—a sight to curdle the heart's blood and make the brain grow sad, but none to equal that, and never in after years would he quite forget the spectacle of the stricken savage all covered with blood, rearing himself up in the agony of his sightlessness, guided by his hearing alone, to strike one last blow at his hated foes.

No time was there to do more than hurriedly bury their dead. They must get on, and the sooner the better. So the five slain Hottentots were buried in a common grave, one wizened little old fellow, by virtue of his office as “elder” of a native chapel in one of the settlements, making a rambling, incoherent prayer, and leading off, in a nasal twang, a cracked, doleful Dutch psalm. Scarcely was this impromptu dirge brought to a close when a group was descried advancing towards the camp, waving something white.

“Three Kafirs with a white flag, by Jove!” said Lumley, scanning the approaching group through his field-glass. “Ah! Lucky for him,” he went on, as on further investigation he made out the sentry, with his piece at “present,” walking distrustfully some twenty yards behind.

All present were disposed so as to be in readiness should this last move prove to be a mere ruse—it would not be the first instance in savage warfare of the abuse of the white flag—and the Kafirs were suffered to approach. All three were good-looking men of about middle age, shrewd of countenance, and lithe and well-made of figure. They halted just outside the camp, and saluted Claverton gravely as he went forth to meet them. He nodded in reply, looked them rapidly up and down and asked shortly:

“What do you want?”

“We have come to ask the white chief to let us carry away our wounded. Many of our brethren have fallen, and are lying about in the bushes. They will die if we do not attend to them.”

For a few moments Claverton made no reply, but stood meditatively flicking his boot with a small switch he held in his hand, the savage delegates, the while, eyeing him narrowly. He was turning over the situation in his mind. Why were they in such a hurry to look after their wounded—it was not in accordance with their usual practice? Could it be with the object of keeping his attention employed, of disarming watchfulness while a large force stole up to surprise them? Or were they merely enacting the part of spies? At length he replied—and his suspicion and deliberateness, so far from offending, caused him to rise in their estimation; for anything like hastiness either of speech or decision does not find favour in the eyes of these people:

“How is it you were not afraid to trust yourselves in our hands? It is not the time of peace.”

“Aow! The white captain is brave. He will not hurt three men alone in his camp,” replied the spokesman. “We are not afraid. See—we have the white flag.”

The insidious flattery conveyed in this speech was quite thrown away. For all the change that came over Claverton’s face he might not have heard it.

“Who was your leader?” he said. “The man with the leopard-skin cloak?”

“Matanzima.”

“The son of Sandili?”

“Yes.”

“He is a brave man and fought well. Now, why are you so anxious to look after your wounded at once, instead of waiting until we are gone?”

“The chief’s uncle is among them. The chief fears that his kinsman will die.”

“H’m. Who are you?”

“I am Usivulele the son of Sikunaya,” replied the spokesman of the three.

“H’m. Well, now, listen you three. These are my terms,” said Claverton, decisively. “If you, Usivulele, will remain with me as a hostage till the sun is there” (designating a point in the heavens which that luminary would reach by about four o’clock), “then your people may come and look after their wounded, but not until we are over that second hill. Should they come before, we shall fire on them again, and if they attack us before the hour named, you, Usivulele, shall die the moment a shot is fired. At that hour, if your people observe my conditions, you shall go free and unharmed. Those are my terms, they are not hard; you are at liberty to accept or to reject them.”

The Kafirs debated rapidly for a moment in an undertone. Then Usivulele stepped forward, looking Claverton full in the face.

“We accept them,” he said. “I am ready.”

“Very well. Now you two may return and carry my ‘word’ to Matanzima. When he comes he will find his friends just as they fell. We do not harm wounded men.”

The two ambassadors saluted again, and turning, strode away from the camp, escorted to the brow of the hill by a couple of sentries, while the hostage was placed under a strict guard. They gave him something to eat, and he was well treated though carefully watched. But not for a moment would he unbend from the grave, dignified reserve wherewith he had wrapped himself. Communicativeness was not in the bond, and to all their questions he returned laconic and evasive replies. It was evident that he was not to be “drawn.” Once during their march Lumley, having just given him a pipe of tobacco, asked where Sandili was.

“Chief,” replied the Kafir, in a tone of quiet rebuke. “If I were to ask you where your general and your amasoja (soldiers) were at this moment—what should you say?”

“I should say, ‘Damn your impudence,’” muttered Lumley, half angrily, as he turned away feeling very much snubbed; but Claverton, listening, thoroughly enjoyed the retort.

“Don’t be unfair, Lumley,” he said. “This fellow has his wits about him. He’s no ordinary nigger, I can see.”

“No, he isn’t, confound him,” growled the other, unmollified.

Meanwhile the hostage stalked along among his guards, and showed not the smallest concern as to his own fate. Evidently the conditions would be observed in good faith, and of that fact he was aware. In a trifle more than an hour, now, he would be set at liberty—when lo, cresting the brow of a hill, one of the saddest and most eloquent tokens of savage warfare burst upon the eyes of the party. Beneath, lay what had been a flourishing homestead, now a heap of débris and blackened ruins, from which, as they gazed, little lines of smoke still arose, showing that the work of destruction was but recent. The roof had fallen in but the walls still stood, with their gaping window-holes like the eyeless sockets of a skull, and fragments of charred rafters stood out overhead, the fleshless ribs of the frame of the once sheltering roof-tree. And in contrast to this sad work of desolation, a fine fruit-garden fronted the house, the trees weighed down beneath their luscious burdens—the fig and the pomegranate, blushing peaches and yellow pears, golden apricots, and quinces ripening in the high, straight hedges which shut in the orchard. Extensive lands under cultivation lay along in the bottom, and these had not been interfered with.

“This can’t have been done long,” observed Lumley, surveying the ruin. “Shouldn’t wonder if it was the same gang that attacked us.”

“Very likely. Stop. Here’s a part of it not so smashed up. Let’s have a look round,” said Claverton, dismounting.

One end of the building seemed to have partially escaped—a largish apartment, evidently a bedroom. A fall of rubbish across the narrow window had blocked it, and it was almost in darkness.

“Good heavens! look here,” cried Lumley, with a shudder, examining the ground. Their eyes had become accustomed to the gloom, and both made out a broad red stain, whose nature there was no mistaking. Upon that rude floor had been spilt the stream of life, and the greedy earth had absorbed it. “I don’t care for this sort of investigation,” continued he. “It’s one thing bowling fellows over in the open air, in fair, lively scrimmage; but, hang it all, nosing about in this infernal gloomy den is another. Let’s get outside,” and again he shuddered, as if dreading what they might find.

“Wait a bit,” said Claverton, “Look. Some one has come to grief here—there’s no doubt about it.”

Nor was there. Another great red patch and a few smaller ones were seen, and then, following a mark made by something heavy trailed along in the dust, they came to a doorway leading into the burnt part of the house, and here, among the dust, and bricks, and fallen débris, lying in the gloom cast by an overshadowing fragment of roof, which looked as if it was about to fall on them, they came upon the charred remains of three human beings—apparently two men and a woman, for portions of female attire still hung about one of them. Indeed, only presumably could their European nationality be pronounced upon, for the ghastly relics were little more than a few calcined bones.

“Good God!” exclaimed Lumley, turning sick and faint at the horrid sight. “They’ve been burnt alive.”

“No; I don’t think that,” said Claverton. “Poor wretches—they were killed first and then flung in here. The marks in the other room show that, if it’s any comfort. They were probably surprised in their beds and murdered; this very morning, too, I should say. What’s this?”

Something shining, which lay on the floor in a dark corner, had caught his eye. He picked it up. It was a small crucifix, about eight inches in length, such as is constructed to stand on a bracket. The cross was broken and splintered in two or three places, but the figure, being of metal, was intact. It was exquisitely wrought, and Claverton stood gazing sadly down upon the holy symbol, which he held in his hand amid this gloomy

scene of ashes, and tears, and blood; and it seemed to him that a wave of ineffable sorrow swept across the suffering, lifelike countenance as he gazed. Wrapping the relic in his handkerchief, he placed it carefully in his pocket. Lilian would certainly value it.

“By Jove, Lumley; but war isn’t all fun, after all!” he said, with something like a sigh.

“No, it isn’t. I’m glad now that we peppered those black devils this morning—cowardly, sneaking brutes. I wish we had done for a thousand of them.”

“Let’s see if we can find anything more among this rubbish,” went on Claverton, not heeding his lieutenant’s honest vehemence. But nothing was to be found. The savages had gutted the place, and how the holy relic had escaped them was incomprehensible, unless it were that, with superstitious awe, they feared to touch it. A few battered bits of iron, the remains of a bedstead, and some broken crockery lay strewn about; but everything combustible—chairs, tables, curtains, etcetera—had been given to the flames.

They went out into the air again. The sun shone placidly down from an unclouded sky upon this gloomy scene of desolation and death; around, a fair vision of hill and dale lay spread afar, and now and then the melodious call of the hoepoe would float upon the summer air as if no frightful tragedy had been enacted in that peaceful spot, where the torch and assegai of the savage had been glutted in his lust for blood.

“I suppose we must let this devil go, too,” said Lumley, with a fierce, vengeful glance at their hostage.

“Oh, yes,” said Claverton, decisively; “no question about that. Usivulele,” he went on, addressing the Kafir, “is this the work of your band? It’ll make no difference to you; I shall let you go all the same.”

The man gave a slight shrug of his shoulders.

“Chief,” he replied, “we are not the only party of warriors in the bush. The land is full of them. Some were here this morning, and are yonder to-night,” pointing to the horizon. “Why should it be our work?”

“A true native answer, but a fair one,” said Claverton. “No one’s bound to criminate himself. Hallo; here’s a book!”

For, agitated by the faint breeze, some leaves of paper might be seen stirring amid the grass a few yards off. He picked it up. It was not a book, but a few pages of one, in the German language—a hymn-book, from all appearances—and it must have been flung

there by the savages when they had completed their ruthless work. The finding of it, however, and some other fragments of books all in the same language, scattered around, threw additional light upon the incident. Evidently the unhappy victims were German immigrants, of whom there were many in Kaffraria, and who either disbelieving the alarming reports, or trusting to the friendliness of the natives, had been loth to leave their prosperous, and, as they thought, peaceful home; and had suffered the penalty of their imprudence.

A grave having been dug the remains were carefully deposited within it, and, knocking together a rude cross out of some of the wood-work of the ruined dwelling, Claverton planted it over the last resting-place of the unfortunate immigrants slaughtered beneath their own roof-tree. Then comparing his watch with the sun he addressed the hostage:

“Usivulele, you have kept your side of the compact and I will keep mine. The time has come and you are at liberty to return to your chief. Go. You are free.”

The Kafir’s impassive countenance relaxed into a slight smile, and, with a murmur of assent and a courteous salute to Claverton, he gathered his blanket about him and strode away into the veldt. Many a scowl followed the retreating figure as the bystanders grasped their rifles and stole a furtive glance at their leader’s face. They longed to send a volley after the retiring Kafir; but each man knew that to do so would mean instant death to himself.

Claverton watched his late prisoner till he was out of sight, and then returned to explore the ruins afresh, while his men regaled themselves on the ripe fruit which grew in the garden in such profusion; and very grateful was the luscious feast to their throats, dry with the smoke of powder and the shouting and excitement of the morning’s fray. Just as he was about to enter, the part of the roof which had escaped fell in with a crash, nearly smothering him in a cloud of dust and cinders.

“I say, Lumley. That was a narrow share of your getting promotion,” was all he said.

Further investigation was of course barred, and the time for halting having expired, the “fall-in” was sounded. As they wound their way out of the valley, they turned to look back. The fall of the roof had disturbed the still smouldering embers beneath, and now a volume of smoke was rolling up from the blackened ruins, darkening the azure sky, and casting a fell shadow upon the sunlit earth. And all Nature smiled around, in fair, mocking contrast to these hideous tokens of the vengeful hate of men.

Chapter Thirteen.

The Main Camp.

It was after sundown when “Claverton’s Levy” reached the camp of the main body of the forces detailed to operate in the Gaika Location.

The camp was pitched on an open flat, well situated for defensive purposes, and commanding a wide open sweep of half a mile on the most closed-in side. In the event of attack upon it the enemy would have to bring more than his wonted verve and determination to the fore, if he would render the chance of even partial success so much as possible; for here were gathered over eight hundred men, all handy with the rifle, and a few volleys, sweeping across that open approach, would tumble the advancing foe over so quickly that he would turn and flee before half the space was covered. A likely-looking force. Border farmers, up-country transport-riders, frontiersmen all—ready for the roughest work and the hardest of tussles, at the earliest opportunity—with many a long score of petty depredation and wholesale marauding, and insolence, and defiance, and menace, and desertion of service to pay off upon their erewhile turbulent neighbours, and now open enemies. Dutch burghers, from the Tarka and Cradock districts—past masters in the art of skirmishing, competent to pick off an object the size of an orange at three or four hundred yards, while exposing the smallest fraction of their own ungainly frames to the enemy’s fire. Volunteers—mostly townsmen—full of fight, if less reliable in their aim than their more practised brethren, all had their separate camps pitched in close proximity. Some of the corps were fortunate and had tents, others were unfortunate and had none. A few waggons were there, containing the supplies and baggage of each corps, or the ventures of private and speculative individuals, who retailed indifferent grog and other “luxuries” at their own prices. On one side of the camp, like a dark cloud, might be seen a swarm of native warriors; this was the bivouac of the Fingo levies, and like a disturbed ants’ nest, its area was alive with black forms moving to and fro and making themselves comfortable for the night, while the hum and murmur of their deep-toned voices rose upon the air.

Having fixed upon a camping ground for his men—to augment whose numbers an additional batch had arrived from King Williamstown—Claverton left his lieutenant in charge, and proceeded to report himself at head-quarters.

“I think you’ve done exceedingly well, Mr Claverton,” said the Commandant of Colonial Forces—a tall, quiet-looking, middle-aged man—as he listened to the narrative of the attack upon the Hottentot levy. He was a frontier farmer, and something of a politician, clever and prompt in the field, and of good administrative capacity, by virtue of which qualities he had been elected to, and subsequently confirmed in his present post. “In

fact, we hardly expected you so soon. I'm very glad to find that your fellows are made of such good fighting stuff; and, by the way, you may hardly like to leave them now. I mean," he went on, seeing the other's look of surprise, "when I say, you may not like to leave them, that I think we can find you something better. The fact is, Brathwaite wants to get you into his troop—Garnier, his third man, was invalided on the way up, fever, result of bad water or something; and he wants to pitchfork you into his place. I told him I didn't think you'd care to give up a regular command of your own to put yourself under another fellow, and, now, while I think of it, you have managed those Hottentot chaps so well, that I don't much like your leaving them just as you've got them ship-shape. Still, you'd probably rather be among your friends, and if you care about taking the post, I'll get you appointed at once."

"It's very kind of you," replied Claverton. "If I might, I should like to think it over. Would it do if I let you know in an hour's time?" It was even as the other had said; he was not quite prepared to throw up an absolute command of his own to serve in a subordinate capacity, even among his old comrades.

"Oh, yes. Let me know to-morrow morning, that will be time enough," was the good-natured answer. "Why, there is Brathwaite," and, gaining the door of the tent with a couple of strides, he called out: "Here, Brathwaite. Tumble in here for a minute, will you."

"What's up?" cried Jim, turning. "Why, Arthur! You here? When did you turn up?"

"He's had a scrimmage, and a good one," pat in the Commandant before he could answer. "But look here, Brathwaite. I've been telling Claverton about your idea, and he'll let us know in the morning. If you can talk him over meanwhile so much the better—for you," he added, with a smile.

"Oh! Well, look here, Arthur. Fetch up at my tent as soon as you've got your camp fixed, and we'll talk things over and make an evening of it. I can't stop now—got to see about that ammunition that's just come. So long!" and he wae gone.

From head-quarters Claverton betook himself to the commissariat department to arrange for the rationing of his men. He was well pleased with his reception, and might have been more so had he heard the remark of the chief authority to a volunteer officer who had dropped in just after he left.

"A smart fellow, that—a fine, smart fellow. Wish we had a few more like him! A cool hand, too. I could see it in his eye." And as the officer turned to gaze curiously after the receding form, he told him about the action which Claverton had reported; and the

listener, brimming over with such a piece of veritable “news”—gleaned, too, at first hand, on the very best authority—was not long in delivering himself of the same, first to one auditor, then another, till the story, gathering sundry additions and exaggerations as it went, soon spread throughout the camp.

The daylight waned, and hundreds of red fires shone out in the gloaming as the cooking of the evening meal went merrily forward. Here and there might be seen a rough, bearded fellow in shirt and trousers, seated on a log or an upturned biscuit tin, stirring the contents of a three-legged pot with a long wooden spoon, while his comrades lay or sat around, smoking their pipes and chaffing the elective cook—on duty by rotation—suggesting that, as long as he watched the old pot with that hungry and particularly wolfish stare, it would never boil; or that he needn’t think to keep them all waiting long enough to send them to sleep, and enable him to polish off half the rations—and so on. Here and there, too, through the open door of a tent, a man might be seen, by the light of a lantern, writing on a box turned bottom upwards; or others, needle in hand, busily stitching at some article of saddlery, or haply of more personal accoutrement; but for the most part they were taking it easy. And now and again a buzz of voices suddenly raised or a burst of laughter was heard, telling of discussion or argument, or jest, or successful chaff. Prompt at “spotting” a new arrival, not a few were the glances of inquiry turned upon Claverton as he made his way back to his quarters. “Who is he?”

“Where’s he from?” would be the half-whispered inquiries as each group, sinking its occupation for the moment, turned to gaze after the stranger. “Looks fit, anyhow!”

“One of Brathwaite’s chaps?”

“Not a ‘swell,’ is he?” was the varying comment as he passed.

True to his promise, Claverton, as soon as he had seen to the requirements of his men and posted his sentries, made his way to Jim Brathwaite’s tent. That jovial leader was busily occupied in setting out a variety of stores comestible upon a couple of upturned packing-cases; preserved-meat tins, biscuit, pepper and salt, cheese, knives and forks, and plates of debatable crockery warranted not to break, while upon the ground stood several bottles of Bass, and two or three of something stronger.

“Now, Klaas,” he was saying to his sable acolyte, “I don’t want you here any more, so collar that bucket and go and ‘skep’ out some water from the clean part of the river—up above; you understand. And look out that the sentries don’t shoot you, or your own countrymen either. Hallo, Arthur! here we are. Got a dinner-party on to-night.”

“Looks like it—”

“Rather! No one admitted if not in evening-dress,” cried Armitage, bursting into the tent, followed by Naylor and another man belonging to the troop.

“Where’s the post-horn, Jack?” was Claverton’s first inquiry.

“Left it at home,” replied Armitage, looking rather sheepish.

“Now bring yourselves to an anchor,” cried Jim. “You must sit where you can, and balance your plates somehow. They forgot to send a supply of tables. Here, Klaas, drag in that stew. We won’t wait for the other fellows.”

“Won’t ye? Indade and that’s illigant of ye! Company manners, I should call it!” And the speaker—a tall, broad-shouldered fellow, with a curly, reddish beard—entered the tent, a whimsical expression lurking in his blue Milesian eyes. His companion—a volunteer officer, by name Barlow—not looking where he was going, stumbled over the tent-rope and would have fallen had not the Irishman caught him in his athletic grasp.

“Hould up, me boy! Sure it’s too soon by six morthal hours for ye to be thrying to stand on one leg!”

The other laughed, and there was a fresh move in order to make way for the late arrivals, during which a newly-opened tin of salmon emptied its contents into Armitage’s hat, while simultaneously some one managed to upset and extinguish the lantern.

“Hold on! Don’t move!” cried Jim, striking a match. “There?” And lighting the lantern again, they surveyed the damage.

“See what comes of unpunctuality, McShane,” said Armitage, gravely, holding up his hat.

“Bedad, and ye oughtn’t to complain, for ye’ve got your own rations and all of ours, too,” retorted the Irishman.

“Never mind; shy it outside, Jack, or give it to Klaas. He’ll soon polish it off,” said Jim. “Here,” he went on, handing round the Bass bottles. “Just one apiece; make the most of it because it’s the last.”

“Last of the Mohicans,” inevitably and simultaneously quoted every one.

Corks popped and jollification reigned paramount; and sitting there in that rough tent, whose sole furniture consisted of a camp-stool or so, and a few old packing-cases turned upside down, Claverton began to find himself in a very comfortable frame of mind. The not very brilliant light of the tin lantern shone upon faces full of mirth and good fellowship, and many a hearty laugh rang out as they discussed the cheer before them—rough in all conscience, but plentiful and indeed luxurious compared with what awaited them. His mind was made up. He would accept the post offered to him.

The tinned meats disappeared, and so did the rather tough camp rations in their turn; and the Bass having long since vanished, the grog-bottles were beginning to show symptoms of decay.

“Tell you what it is, Claverton, old boy,” began Armitage, benignly contemplating him through a cloud of tobacco smoke. “You’d better cut in with us; just look how well we live here.”

“Jack, an’ it’s blarneyin’ ye are,” remarked the Irishman. “Ye needn’t think to find such a spread ivery night, me boy. It’s glad ye’ll be to get your eye-teeth into the hind quarters of the toughest old trek-ox in the span before you’re a week oulder—’dade and it’ll be Hobson’s choice for ye then. Tell ye what, Misther Claverton; that fellow Jack Armitage’s the damnedest old humbug in this camp. Now, what d’ye think he did, when we first came up here?”

“What?” Claverton was bottling up his mirth. He saw at a glance that this droll Irishman and Jack were sworn foes—rival wags, in fact—and was prepared for some fun.

“Why, he had a dirty, batthered ould tin trumpet, that his father used to toot on when he drove the Dublin coach, and it’s no wonder that same shandradan came to mortal smash twice a week wid such a dhriver. Well, this fellow Jack, the first time—and it won’t be the last, I’m thinking—he got his skin too full of Cape smoke, what’s he do but go outside his tent in the middle of the night and blow off a blast on his old post-horn. I give ye me word it was enough to wake the dead; anyhow, it woke the whole camp. Ye needn’t laff, Jack, ye unfalin’ divil, when it’s five innocent men ye blew to death with that trumpet—five—I give ye me word.”

“How was that?” asked Claverton.

“Well, in this way,” went on the other, delighted to find a new listener whom he could regale with Armitage’s delinquencies. “Ye see the fellow kicked up such a shilloo that every one tumbled out like mad, thinkin’ the camp was attacked, and the Fingo levies there, began lettin’ off their guns as hard as they could bang. They knocked over five of

their own men and winged a lot besides, and the bullets were flying about all over the place. As soon as they could be prevailed on to cease fire, and the cause of the scare was known, no end of fellows came cruising up this way, wanting to find the chap who'd sounded the alarm, but Jack, the villain, he stowed away the old trumpet and joined in the search louder than any of them, and it hasn't been seen or heard of since. Anyhow, he killed five innocent men wid his infernal old bray, and about thirteen of 'em—well, I was hard at work for hours next morning dhiggin' out the bullets their chums had plugged 'em wid, and nately they'd done it, too. One chap had his—”

“Oh, don't go lugging your old butcher's shop in here, Dennis,” interrupted Armitage. “Even at your own trade you're the clumsiest old sawbones that ever hoodwinked the examiners and slipped through.”

“Clumsy, am I? The devil!” cried McShane, who was accompanying the colonial forces in the capacity of surgeon. “Wait till I get me probes into ye, Master Jack Armitage—some of these days when ye get a couple of pot-legs through ye—and we'll see if it's clumsy I am.”

“Oh, hang it, Jim, only listen to the fellow. Do put an extinguisher on him. If we must have a butcher, at any rate he might leave the shop outside.”

There was a laugh.

“Wait a bit, Jack, me boy. It's meself who'll live to hear ye change your tone, as sure as me name's Dennis McShane!” cried the other.

“Well, this is lively sort of talk,” put in Barlow, who was of a melancholy disposition, except when “elevated,” and then he was uproarious to a degree. “Haven't you two fellows ever heard of the proverb, ‘Many a true word spoken in jest’?”

“If Jack gets hit now at any time, he ought to sue the doctor for big damages,” said Naylor, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

“Or make him put him right for nothing,” said Jim.

“An' that's what I'll do, faith,” said the Irishman, “an' it's mighty small he'll sing when the time comes.”

“You! I wouldn't have you digging for bullets in me, if I had to carry them for the rest of my natural life,” cried Armitage in withering scorn. “If it came to that I'd send across for

old Pollock. A blacksmith's better than a butcher under those circumstances, and being a Cornishman he might understand lead mining."

"An' if it was in your head he had to look for the lead, it's a bull's-eye lantern he'd want, for he'd find it mighty foggy in there, I'm thinkin'," retorted McShane.

"By Jove, Dennis," cried Armitage, suddenly, "It's deuced queer that I never noticed it before; but as you sit there you're the very image of poor Walker—Obadiah Walker."

"I am, am I? An' who the divil is Obadiah Walker?"

"The man who wouldn't help himself and wouldn't pass the bottle, though I must say that it's only in the last particular the likeness holds good."

"The bottle!" cried McShane, amid the roar that followed, for it was not often that even such an old hand as Jack managed to get a rise out of the astute Milesian. "Is it this one ye mane?" holding it up to the light. "Because, if so, she's come to an end—as the gossoon said when he slid down the cow's tail and she kicked him into the praist's strawberry bed."

There was other sign of the bottle having come to an end, and it needed not the misadventure of the too-enterprising youth just quoted, to support the announcement, for Barlow having passed out of the confidential stage, during which he had endeavoured to impart to Claverton, who was sitting next to him, his whole family history and circumstances, was beginning to wax extremely talkative, his utterance increasing in levity in proportion to its thickness. Armitage, who had his eye upon the unconscious sinner, was meditating what practical joke, that would bear the additional charm of originality, he could play off upon him as soon as it should be time to convey him to his own tent, when a tremendous row was heard outside—voices in remonstrance, and, loud above them, one screaming out torrents of imprecation upon everything and everybody. Quickly they all turned out, and there, not half-a-dozen yards off, stood a man of tall, powerful build, brandishing a revolver, while following on his footsteps, but keeping their respectful distance, were at least a dozen others. The fellow was mad drunk, and, as he stood there in the uncertain light, raving and dancing as he flourished his weapon, and bellowing out the most awful blasphemies, he looked quite formidable enough to afford a very sufficient excuse to the onlookers for their scrupulous and praiseworthy resolve to refrain from interfering in what was not their business. An infuriated drunkard brandishing a loaded six-shooter, is not an attractive person to interfere with.

Quickly McShane stepped up to the raving giant.

“See here, Flint,” he said, in his persuasive Irish way. “What’s all this about, now?”

The madman glared at him and started back a pace, gnashing his teeth and foaming at the mouth.

“I want my officer,” he yelled. “Where the hell’s my blanked officer? I want to blow his blanked brains out.”

“But see; your pistol isn’t loaded,” said McShane, in the quietest way.

The fellow stared, struck all of a heap by the idea, and, holding up the weapon to his eyes, began examining it in the dim flickering light. In a moment it was snatched from his hand by the intrepid Irishman who repelled his immediate onslaught with a blow in the chest, which sent him staggering back half-a-dozen paces, and before he had recovered his balance he was seized by the bystanders and firmly held.

“And why the divil didn’t some of ye do that before?” asked McShane, wrathfully. “Why, he might have blown up the whole camp while a dozen of ye were standin’ thur open-mouthed. Is it afraid of him ye were?”

The men looked sheepish, and muttered something about “were just going to” as they secured the arms of their fallen comrade, who lay on the ground still raving and cursing.

“Just going to, were ye!” cried the irascible doctor. “It’d serve ye right if he’d blown half your heads off. Now take him away. Don’t knock the poor divil about, Saunders,” he added, noticing a disposition to use the prisoner roughly.

They marched off the erring Flint, who had subsided suddenly, and became quite rational again; but it would not do to let him get abroad that night, so he was kept under arrest.

“Who’s that fellow?” said Jim. “If he belonged to my corps I’d bundle him out, sharp.”

“Yis; it’s bad enough havin’ such a chap in it as Jack Armitage. He’s a handful in himself, bedad.”

“Well, I’m going to turn in,” said Naylor. “Any one going my way?”

“Yis; hould on,” replied the doctor—and there was a general move made. Now and then a burst of laughter came from one of the tents, which, like this one, had been holding

festival; but for the rest the camp was in slumbrous quiet, only disturbed by the occasional challenge of sentry, or the footfall of such loiterers as these our friends.

“Jim,” said Claverton, the last thing as he bade him good-night, “I’ve made up my mind about that offer of yours.”

“You’ll take it?”

“Yes.”

In the morning, who should turn up but Hicks and some twenty others, whose restless spirits would not allow them to remain quiet at home; and later in the day two more troops of burghers from the Western districts. And the available forces being thus strengthened, it was resolved that a forward move should take place at once.

Claverton’s swarthy followers growled considerably at losing their chief, whom, in the short time he had been with them, they had already begun to look up to and respect. Lumley, especially, put his discontent into words.

“Always the way,” he grumbled. “Directly you get a fellow you pull well with—off he goes.”

“But, Lumley; you’ll be in command yourself now, don’t you see?”

Lumley evidently didn’t see, for this side of the question now burst upon him with a new light.

“Don’t know. They’re sure to keep me out of it,” he growled, but as if he thought the contingency not an unmixed evil. And the fact was, his late chief thought the same.

So Claverton, with the faithful Sam as body-servant, entered upon his new rank of Field-Captain in “Brathwaite’s Horse,” vice Philip Garnier resigned.

Chapter Fourteen.

“Summer has Stopped.”

“No, it’s of no use, old fellow. But look as much as you like, that’s everybody’s privilege. Deuced pretty girl, isn’t she?”

“Well, yes, now you mention it—that is, I think so.”

“Now I mention it! That’s good. Of course it was all piety, pure and simple, that trundled such a hardened reprobate as your redoubtable self into church on Sunday evening; an institution you, I make bold to say, have not patronised since the days of your downy youth. And, of course, it was by the merest accident that you happened to find a seat not far from the beautiful Miss Strange within that same tabernacle. Furthermore, it is purely accidental that she should be on one side of the street this morning, and you staring at her from the other. No, old boy. In the words of the poet, it won’t wash,” ironically concludes the first speaker.

A crowd has assembled in High Street to-day to witness the passage through Grahamstown of a body of men en route for the seat of war, and, for the time being, those who can do so, leave their shop, or store, or office, to come and look at this fresh batch of defenders, and give them a good, hearty cheer as they file away up the King Williamstown road. Those who have time and inclination to do so, make their way along the said road to the point where the band, which, discoursing inspiriting music, precedes the intending warriors, will cut adrift from them, and where some of the honest townsmen will, in the fulness of their hearts, air their rhetoric in speeches of an encouraging order as they weep over their martial brethren. And among those assembled at this point, to witness the ceremonial, is Payne and his household, and merged in the crowd about thirty yards away stand our two speakers.

“Bosh, Chadwick,” answers the butt of the good-humoured raillery. “Can’t a fellow look at a girl without your trying to evolve a ‘case’?”

The other laughs light-heartedly. He is a young fellow of five-and-twenty—slight, fair, and of middle height. His companion is ten years older, and exactly his opposite in personal appearance.

“A fellow can do anything he likes in that line—at least, a fellow like yourself can,” he replies. “But in this instance I fancy not. She’s booked, my good friend—booked as deep as the Dead Sea—and you haven’t a chance. You’re a day late for the fair.”

The elder man frowns slightly, which to conceal he half turns away.

“Who’s the fortunate individual?” he asks, carelessly, with a sneer.

“A man named Claverton. He’s away at the front now, and the fair Lilian is looking forward to the time when he shall come back ‘crowned with Triumph’s flushing honours.’ I deeply sympathise; but, barring the friendly thrust of an assegai, or the good offices of a peripatetic pot-leg discharged from the blunderbuss of the noble savage, you haven’t a chance. Not even then, for, from all accounts, I don’t think she’d let go the shadow of the departed Claverton in favour of the substance of even such a fascinating dog as Ralph Truscott. It is with grief that I say so.”

“It is with grief that I find myself constrained to listen to your maundering bosh. Now shut up for a moment, Chadwick, because I can’t talk amid the infernal din of this tin-kettle band.”

Shrill shrieks of laughter, much chatter, and some vituperation, drown their voices as the ragged portion of the crowd—slatternly Hottentot women and impish dust-coloured brats—fall back precipitately before the advancing cortège. Big drum puffs up the hill letting off a worthy sense of the importance of the event in well-timed whacks lustily laid on; and red in the face, hot and breathless, and with loving thoughts of that cool brandy and soda awaiting their return at the “Masonic Hotel” bar, the gallant musicians do their utmost to render with effect the cheery quick-step march destined to invigorate the pilgrimage of their brethren, going—as one of the orators subsequently puts it—to defend “their ’arths, ’omes, and haltars.” Then a halt is called, and, after some speech-making, the guard of honour—formed by a detachment of volunteer infantry—lining the road, presents arms, as the band strikes up the National Anthem, and the cavalcade of tough-looking, sunburnt men, two hundred and sixty strong, rifle on hip, and mounted on wiry, serviceable nags, files past, two deep, between the open ranks, and everybody feels exuberantly patriotic, and hoorays, and waves hats and handkerchiefs accordingly.

“Good compact lot of men, that,” is Payne’s verdict, as he watches the retreating burghers somewhat wistfully, for he is tired of hanging about the town, as he calls it, and would fain go to the front, only just at present he cannot. His wife detects the wistful expression, and rejoins mischievously:

“Yes. If anything, a trifle smarter than your old corps, George.”

“Not a bit of it,” says Payne, stoutly. “But—I forgot—you never saw it. They were all away, and in the field, before I got back from looking after you womenfolk. As it was, you did me out of half the fun.”

“Of course. Look, Lilian. There’s such a handsome man over there, who has done nothing but stare at you. He almost seems as if he knew you.”

Lilian is gazing after the retreating troop. It is little more than a fortnight since she bade farewell to her lover in the grey dawn, and now she is thinking that in three or four days that body of mounted men will be his camp-fellows; for the forces in the field have been concentrated for a combined movement. She has heard from him more than once—long, cheerful, tender letters, written during hours snatched from his hard-earned sleep, and despatched as opportunity served—rough scrawls, indeed, as was inevitable from the lack of appliances, and even of a knowledge of what time there would be to finish in—but to her so precious. And to-day, as she stands here gazing up the road, with a soft love-light in her eyes reflecting the burden of her own reverie, it is no wonder that the beautiful figure in the cool summer dress, with the dark, straight, patrician features, attracts many a look of admiration from several in the crowd. She starts, and softly twirling the handle of the open sunshade resting upon her shoulder—a pretty trick of hers when absent-minded—follows the direction of Annie Payne’s gaze. And a sudden flush suffuses her cheek, and fades, leaving it deathly white. Her glance is riveted to the spot, and it seems as if she must fall to the ground beneath the suddenness of the shock, for she gazes upon a face which she had never expected to look upon again in life. No, it could not be. He was dead, she had heard it for certain. It could not be. It must be a likeness—a marvellously startling one—but still a likeness. But on this point she is prevented from reassuring herself, for the owner of the face has turned, and is walking away through the crowd.

“Hallo!” says Payne, and it seems as if he was talking inside her brain. “There’s Truscott.”

“Who?” inquires his wife.

“Truscott. A man I met in the town yesterday. He was asking a lot about the war. Says he wants to raise a corps or something. That’s him—that tall fellow walking away.”

His wife manifests no further interest in the stranger, but with ready tact begins to talk about other things. Poor Lilian’s agitation has not escaped the kind-hearted little woman, who would rather die than do anything to increase it, as they return home. And Lilian, if she had a doubt before, Payne’s words have mercilessly dispelled it; and now she understands the foreboding of evil which came over her at the sight of the spy following them at King Williamstown for an unerring instinct leads her to connect that incident with the one of to-day. Her heart seems made of lead within her, and daring the walk home she hardly speaks, and even then at random. Even good-natured Payne

notices it, but puts it down to the remembrances called forth by the sight of a number of men going to the war; but the remembrances called forth are, in fact, of a very different nature. They go back to a time when she was light-hearted and happy, and without a care or anxiety in the world; then to a time of love and trust succeeded by blank, bitter disappointment; to a hard, uphill struggle for daily bread, alone, uncheered and unaided. Still her memory carries her on, over afresh start in a sunny new world, free, indeed, all but for one shackle which the captive herself had riveted. Then a period of brief, contraband happiness, and long years of a kind of living death; the fetter falls off and she is free, and then the cup of life is full—full to overflowing. These are some of the memories which the sight of that face in the crowd calls forth. Yet, why should she dread? What can harm her, secure as they are in each other's love—a love which has been tried, as by fire, and has come out brighter and more beautiful from the flame? Yet an unaccountable foreboding is upon her—a dread, chill presentiment of evil to come.

The day is overwhelmingly hot, and Payne playfully chides her for running the risk of sunstroke by standing all the morning on that dusty road, in which event he would, by the first law of nature, be compelled to spend the rest of his days speeding about the habitable and uninhabitable globe, with Claverton six hours behind him, fiercely on his trail with pistols and coffee. It is not fair of her to risk the life of a respectable father of a family, he says, even if she is tired of her own. As it is she is let down easy with a headache, whereat no one can wonder.

Poor Lilian smiles, rather faintly. Yes, she has a bit of a headache, she says; nothing much, she will go and lie down for a little while. Once in her room, however, she does not lie down, but sits and thinks. Then she opens a writing-case and begins a long letter to her lover. She does not know when it may reach him, perhaps not for more than a week, the movements of the Colonial Forces are so uncertain; but still the very fact of writing it is a source of comfort to her just now. She will tell him all about her foolish fears and forebodings, and as she does so it almost seems as if the calm, tender presence on which she has learnt to lean is at her side now, and for two hours she writes on, feeling comforted and happy. She lays aside her pen at last, thinks awhile, and then begins to read over the letter. She will not send it; on second thoughts—no; she will not worry him with mere foolish and superstitious fancies such as these—why should she? Has he not enough to think about up there, without having his mind troubled by such chimeras, perhaps just at the time when it should be most undisturbed to attend to the more serious game of war? As it is, she looks back to the way in which she yielded to her imaginary fears before, and will not trouble him with them now, when perhaps his life is in hourly danger. So with a sigh, she tears up and burns the letter which has taken her hours to write. Still, the composition of it has done her good, and her spirits have in great measure returned as she goes downstairs. The house seems deserted, so quiet is it. Payne is lying fast asleep in a hammock which he has slung in the little garden at the

back, and his wife is either in the same blissful state of oblivion, or has gone out; the children are at school, and, meanwhile, quiet reigns. Lilian reaches the passage just as a man stands in the front doorway, holding the knocker in his hand as if about to knock, and, seeing her, refrains, and advances into the hall. She stops short, seeming rooted to the ground. For the man to whom she made that fatal promise which has blighted some of the best years of her life, is standing before her.

“Why, Lilian,” he exclaims, taking the hand which she mechanically holds out. “You look as if you hardly knew me.”

“Do I? This is—rather sudden, you know. But, come in. I’ll tell Mrs Payne you’re here.”

“By no means,” says Truscott, quickly, placing himself between her and the door—they are in the drawing-room by now. “This is the most fortunate thing in the world. Couldn’t have been better if we had arranged it so. You don’t suppose I want a third party present the very first moment we are together again after all this time.”

This bracketing of them jars horribly on Lilian’s ear; but she only answers, somewhat irrelevantly:

“I thought you knew the Paynes. You do; don’t you?”

“Confound the Paynes. Here have I been searching the world for you these years and found you at last, and—hang it all, Lilian, you don’t seem in the least glad to see me.”

In fact, she is not. And the statement as to the comprehensiveness of his search she does not altogether believe. She cannot forget that when she was thrown upon the world, destitute almost, and alone, at a time when she most needed help, encouragement, protection, this man had held himself aloof from her, and now, when after years of desolation of spirit and of a struggle almost beyond her strength, the battle is won, and she has found happiness and rest and peace, he jauntily tells her that she doesn’t seem in the least glad to see him. Her heart hardens towards him; but she checks the impulse which arises to tell him in words of withering scorn that she is not. Yet she does not contradict him, for she remembers vividly with what relief she heard that news, and how thankfully she had accepted the restfulness it brought her—a restfulness undisturbed until that morning.

“H’m, well, you don’t seem very glad. And yet I’ve come a good way to find you, and had a narrow shave of my life, too—as narrow a shave as a man could well have and escape.”

“Yes? How was that?” she asks, hardly able to restrain her eagerness. He sees it and is gratified. The old interest is waking, he thinks; Lilian was always tender-hearted to a fault.

“Why, out in California. Fact is, I was awfully down on my luck and went wandering. Well, I got into one of these street rows and was hit—hit badly. For thirteen weeks I was lying in a hospital, the most awful lazar-house you could imagine, and at the end I crawled out more dead than alive. The best of the joke is that my affectionate relatives thought I was dead, and advertised me accordingly.”

Lilian makes no answer. It was this advertisement that, seen haphazard two years ago, had emancipated her from her fatal bond.

“But didn’t you hear of all this?” he asks.

“You know I have been out of the world for more than four years. When did it happen?”

“Only a year ago,” is his reply. And then she knows that he is lying to her—endeavouring to play upon her sympathies—for she has the number of the newspaper containing the advertisement safely locked up in an inner drawer of her writing-table, and its date is rather more than two years previous. “Those fools Grantham, the lawyers, could tell me nothing about you, though I pestered them with inquiries, till at last I began to suspect they were telling lies just for practice, to keep their hands in. But at last I’ve found you?” And there is a ring of real warmth, to Lilian’s ear, in his voice, which fills her with dismay. Can it be that he has not heard of her position now, that he comes upon her suddenly like this and takes possession of her in his tone, so to say? At all risks she must tell him.

Just then a cheery voice is heard in the passage, humming an old colonial song, and Payne walks into the room. He stops short on seeing the visitor, snatching his pipe from his mouth with one hand, while with the other he welcomes the unexpected guest.

“How d’you do?” says Truscott, in his silkiest manner. “I was hoping to have found Mrs Payne at home this afternoon. Meanwhile, I have been fortunate enough to renew a very old acquaintance with Miss Strange here.”

“So?” replies Payne, looking from one to the other. “Well, I’m glad you’ve found your way up. I saw you this morning, at a distance, when we were seeing those men off to the front. Good all-round lot, weren’t they?”

“Yes, yes; a very fair lot indeed. I suppose there’s a tidy number of men in the field by now?”

“Too many. If it depended on mere numbers, the war would be finished to-morrow; but it’s the management—we always break down in that. If we were allowed to go ahead in our own way, we should do the thing properly; but there’s such a tremendous lot of red-tape and despatch-writing that the forces are kept doing nothing for weeks, eating their heads off in camp. By the way, have you heard anything more about your application?”

“No, nothing. I suppose I shall in a day or two.”

They talked about the war for a little longer, and criticised the Government, the tactics, and the Commandant-General, and all connected with the campaign, and then Truscott got up to leave. He was sorry, he said, but he could not wait; perhaps another day he would be more fortunate. And so, with a cordial hand-shake from his host, on whom he had made a golden impression, he took himself off.

“I like that fellow!” said Payne, returning to the room. “No nonsense about him.”

“He can be very pleasant,” assented Lilian, ambiguously.

Doubtless the reader is wondering how Truscott got out of durance vile, whither he had just been consigned when last we saw him. The method of his liberation is immaterial to this narrative; suffice it that he did get out—obviously, since here he is, at large in Grahamstown. And now, as he walks away from Payne’s door, he is turning over in his mind the results of the speculation. So far, he is bound to admit, they are not promising. His influence with Lilian is evidently dead, and to revive it, he feels, will be no easy task; but that everything depends upon his ability to revive it he is only too fully aware. Moreover, there is an additional incentive to success which hitherto he had left entirely out of his calculations. He was prepared to find Lilian “gone off” in appearance; a number of years like that—how many he did not care to reckon—are apt to tell. But the hand of Time, so far from buffeting, had been laid caressingly on the soft but stately beauty, which had grown graver, indeed, but far more sweet and attractive than in the earlier days of girlhood; and when he met her eyes that morning in the crowd a thrill shot through him as he thought how luck might throw into his hands, at one coup, such loveliness combined with such a reversion. Might? It should! And now, as he walked down the street, he revolved and elaborated his plans. He had never seen this lover of hers, who, he more than feared, would be no ordinary rival; but then the fact of his absence was an immense advantage. He might be killed in action, as the light-hearted Chadwick had airily remarked; and there’s many a true word spoken in jest, as we all know. But putting aside this contingency into the category of exceptional luck, he—

Truscott—had other cards to play, and that warily, for he would not endanger success by any rash move. If the worst came to the worst, he could always use the double-edged weapon which chance had thrown into his hand in the shape of his scoundrelly friend, Sharkey; but win he must. Meanwhile, he would begin by sedulously ignoring Lilian's engagement. He would show her the most marked attentions—in fact, compromise her—till at length this absent lover of hers should hear of it, and hear of it, too, in such a way that a split would be inevitable. Not that he intended to do this all at once—oh, no. He would take time, and the while his rival might be removed to a better sphere by accident or—well, things could not always be helped.

So he lost no time in calling again at the Paynes'; and having, with the attractive manner that he could so well assume, won the heart of that honest frontiersman, set himself to lay siege to that of his hostess, and succeeded. Not altogether, for Annie Payne was a shrewd little woman, and though she found this new acquaintance pleasant and amusing, watched him narrowly. She remembered the look which had passed between him and Lilian, and held her true opinion of him in reserve. Meanwhile, she waited and watched.

In his intercourse with Lilian, too, he was all that was kind and thoughtful—scarcely ever referring to the past, and only then with a half regretful, half aggrieved air that was the perfection of acting. But somehow or other he was seldom away from her. If she went out, she was sure to meet Truscott; if she stayed at home, he was sure to call; or Payne would pick him up in the street—of course, by chance—and bring him home to lunch; and though she avoided him as much as she possibly could, without being rude, yet somehow it seemed to her that she was never seen in public without this man at her side, till at last the gossips used to say to each other, with a wink and a smile, that "it was a very convenient arrangement to have a lover away at the front, my dear, whose place could be so well supplied; and that really Miss Strange, for all her demureness, was no better than the rest," and so on. Which tattle, however, fortunately or unfortunately, never reached Lilian's ears; and the intimacy between Truscott and the house of Payne grew apace. Not that this state of things had come about all at once—Truscott was far too cautious for that; on the contrary, it had been one of the most gradual growth—so gradual, indeed, that the plotter had been inclined to blame himself for dilatoriness; but it was a fault in the right direction. So he bided his time, and was rewarded. Things were progressing as smoothly as he could wish.

To Lilian herself, his attentions are a terrible source of annoyance, and at times she feels as if the toils were closing in about her. She has never mentioned this new trouble in her letters to Claverton, thinking—and rightly—that it would bring him to her side at once; and she does not wish that, for his sake, if it can be avoided; but for her own, oh, how she longs for it! Why should this man, whom she had thought never to see again, return

to persecute her? Had he not escaped—by a hair's breadth merely—blighting her whole life, after embittering some of the best years of it? She feels that she is beginning to hate him; and it is while in this vein that she goes down to the drawing-room one afternoon to fetch a book, for she has taken to remaining in her room when the Paynes are out, as they are now. To her intense mortification, Truscott is there.

“Ah! At last!” is his greeting, in a tone which to her ear is provoking in its cool assurance. “I knew I should find you here, Lilian mine. The rest of the world has gone picnicking, hasn't it?”

She had intended to make some excuse, and to leave him at once; but that possessive alters her plan. Now, once and for all, he must be made to understand her position, and that this tacitly assertive air of ownership which he has chosen to set up over her must cease.

“I don't know why you should know anything of the sort,” she replies, very coldly.

“Don't be angry, Lilian. You never used to fly out about trifles. What I meant was, we've had so little opportunity for a quiet talk together of late, that when I heard you had not gone with the others I thought it would be a capital opportunity for one now.”

It happened that that day a picnic in a small way had been organised; but Lilian, somewhat to the Paynes' surprise, excused herself from going. She felt she could not take part in anything approaching to a festivity at such a time as this. It might be only a silly fad of hers, she said, and no one need know of it; still, she would rather stay quietly at home.

“But Lilian, child,” objected Mrs Payne. “It'll do you a world of good, and, after all, it's a very mild form of festivity—not like a ball, you know. And I'm sure Arthur wouldn't wish you to mope yourself to death just because he is away.”

“It isn't because he's away, but because he's away as he is,” she answered. “He may be risking his life every moment, while I am enjoying myself as if no one I cared for in the world was in danger. Only think, he might be lying shot down in the bush at the very moment we are all laughing and joking,” and her voice sank to an awed whisper. “No. I'd rather stay at home quietly to-day.” And the good-hearted little woman had kissed her, and vowed she was perfectly right; and then they had gone, and Lilian had her way and the house to herself, instead of accompanying them to rove about the deep rocky recesses of Fern Kloof and to eat a scrambling luncheon beneath its tangled shade, looking down, as in a splendid panorama, on the sunlit plains of Lower Albany.

The consciousness of this, in conjunction with Truscott's remark, causes her face to flush with something very like anger, and she answers, icily:

"In other words, you thought I had remained at home to receive visitors in Mrs Payne's absence. Thank you. I might have remembered—were it not that our acquaintance was a matter of such a long time ago—that that would be just the interpretation Ralph Truscott might be expected to put upon my actions."

"Why will you always harp upon that string, Lilian? You know it wasn't my fault. You would run away from every one and bury yourself in this beastly country among Dutchmen, and niggers, and all that sort of thing, where it has taken me years to find you; and now, when I have found you, you turn the cold shoulder on me. But, perhaps, you don't believe that I have done this?" he concludes, dashing his tone of sorrowful reproach with a touch of irony.

"No. I do not."

She looks him straight in the face, and there is a shade of contempt in the calm eyes. Why should the man tell her such a pitiful falsehood?

"Oh, you don't?" he says, staring at her from the arm-chair in which he is lounging, fairly startled by her straightforwardness.

"No. But why talk about that?" she answers. Her hands nervously grasp the back of a chair as she stands, speaking in a low, rapid voice. "It is past, and there is an end of it. What I have to say to you now is of the present, and it is best said frankly and without reserve. You have come here and assumed a kind of possession over me, which I must ask you to discontinue. Of course I have no actual right to request you to drop your intimacy with the Paynes, but I have a moral right as a defenceless woman appealing to a gentleman, and therefore presumably an honourable man, to ask you to discontinue those very marked attentions by which you have made me conspicuous of late. Whatever has been is past and done with, nothing can alter that, and under the circumstances there can be no question even of intimacy between us. I do not wish to say anything unkind, but it would be better for us not to meet again, much better, believe me."

All this time Truscott's countenance has been wearing an expression of blank and well-feigned amazement.

"Better not to meet again? No question of intimacy between us? Good Heavens! Why, Lilian, what do you suppose I've come from one end of the world to the other for, then?"

“I don’t pretend to guess. But it must be even as I say, and I am sure you will agree with me that it is best so.”

“Indeed, I am sure I shall do nothing of the sort,” he cries. “You are only playing with me, Lilian, only doing this just to try me. You are; say you are, my darling. It is not kind of you after I have come far to find you.”

For all reply she shakes her head, sadly but firmly, and Truscott can see that every particle of faith she ever had in him is dead and buried.

“But your promise!” he cries. “I have your promise, at all events. You cannot get out of that, nor do I intend to let you.”

“My promise!” she answers, and there is a scornful curve in the beautiful lips and a hard ring in the rich voice. “My promise! To a man who woos in prosperity and deserts in adversity; who sees an unprotected girl thrown upon the world, lonely and unfriended; and makes no sign. Who, when she departs to live among strangers in a far-off land, suffers her to go without so much as a word of farewell and encouragement; and that, too, the girl whom in palmier days he professed to love. No, Ralph Truscott, you have cancelled my promise by your own act, and, even if no other bar existed its conditions should never be yours.”

Truscott’s face is white with rage. He sees that his game is played out—that there is not a chance. He was prepared for some reproaches; in short, a good deal of unpleasantness, but not for such decision as this. His whole being quivers beneath a sense of overwhelming defeat, mortification, disappointment—nay, despair—and now, as he sees the prize slipping from his grasp, he is not sure whether he hates or loves her most.

“So the good, the pious, the saintly Lilian Strange can perjure herself in a way the most unregenerate would shrink from,” he sneers. “The privilege of godliness, I suppose. Oh, so a ‘bar’ does exist, does it? You should have told me that before.”

“It is impossible that you could not have known of it,” she replies, gently, but with quiet dignity. “That I am plighted—to another.”

His answer is a harsh, jeering laugh.

“Oh, I have heard some nonsensical story of the kind, but I knew it couldn’t be true. I thought you were only amusing yourself, in fact, knowing that anything serious was impossible, considering. So, of course, I didn’t believe it.”

“What do you mean?” says Lilian, outwardly calm, but with indignation and contempt in her voice, for there is something so maliciously significant in his tone that she is disturbed in spite of herself. “Don’t deal in hints and innuendoes. Speak out—if you dare.”

“If I dare? Well, then, I will speak out,” answers Truscott, stung to madness by her scornful look. He will bring her to her knees, he thinks. “This is what I mean,” dropping out his words deliberately. “I knew it couldn’t be true, because I knew it was impossible that Lilian Strange could be engaged to an ex-pirate, a murderer, and what, in her eyes, is probably much worse.”

“Do you know of whom you are speaking?”

“Of the man who calls himself Arthur Claverton.”

There is dead silence. The clock on the mantelpiece ticks loudly; the crack of a waggon-whip in the High Street, and the harsh, long-drawn shout of the driver, sound plainly though distant through the still afternoon, and in the little garden the bees hum drowsily.

“You must be mad?”

Every vestige of colour has fled from Lilian’s face, as she stands cold and statuesque, looking down upon her lover’s traducer. But she is perfectly calm, for she does not believe one word of this, though the bare suggestion has upset her. He shall speak more plainly, though.

“Of course you don’t believe me,” he says. “I wasn’t fool enough to expect you would—without proof. To begin, then. How much has this Claverton told you of his antecedents?”

“As much as I wish to know. But this is not proof.”

“Wait a bit. All in good time. He came to South Africa four years ago; quite so. Now has he by chance ever told you where he spent the two previous years—what he was doing?”

In spite of herself Lilian feels her heart sink somewhat. It happens that concerning that very portion of his career her lover has been conspicuously reticent. But she says carelessly:

“I dare say he has.”

“Indeed! You surprise me. Then it will be no news to you to learn that he was in Central Africa?”

“I believe he has been there. Go on.”

For Truscott pauses. He is watching her narrowly—playing with her in devilish malice. But he goes on in affected commiseration.

“Lilian, Lilian. I don’t think I’ll tell you any more. Forget what I have said. Perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps my informants are mistaken as to the man. Let it pass.”

“No. You have made charges against one who is absent; you must not leave this room until you have proved them. Otherwise the gallant Captain Truscott will stand branded as a liar and a coward.”

He stares at her in amazement, quite nonplussed. He never could have given Lilian Strange credit for so much firmness, he thinks. Yet there she stands over him, calm, even judicial, as she awaits his answer.

“You would not dare to say these things if he were here,” she adds.

“If he is wise he will not give me the chance,” is the prompt reply. “To be brief, then, our friend, at that period of his history, in company with seven other spirits more wicked than himself, let us say, dealt in ebony. Slaves, you understand.”

“Go on.”

“He made a good thing of it, I’m told—a very good thing. But then, unfortunately, by British law, and, indeed, by international law, slavery is piracy; and piracy is—a hanging matter.”

“I see,” she answers in a dry, stony voice. “We have disposed of the piracy, now let us get on to the murder; after that to the other thing.”

Truscott’s astonishment knows no bounds. “Upon my word, Lilian, you have a judicial mind. Why, you ought to be a Q.C.,” he says, admiringly.

She smiles slightly—a hard, defiant smile.

“Well, then,” he continues, “you recollect the affair with the Sea Foam? In case you don’t, I’ll just go over the facts again. The Sea Foam, then, was a gunboat stationed in Zanzibar waters, where there was a good deal of dhow-running just at that time—in fact, several captures were made. But it so happened that on one occasion four dhows got clean off, beating back the boats’ crews with a loss of three men killed and several wounded. It was a secret expedition, betrayed to the captain of the man-of-war by a spy, and, but for one man, the whole concern would have been captured red-handed. That man was Arthur Lidwell—the commander of the slavers—now known as Arthur Claverton. The authorities, at that time, did not know who the leader was whose coolness and daring caused their retreat, with loss; but they suspected him to be a renegade European, and a price was set on his head; but, with his usual luck, our friend escaped. Three men were killed, I say; and recollect our friend is a good shot, and, moreover, not likely to stand by with his hands in his pockets while fighting is going on,” concludes Truscott, significantly.

Lilian remembers the circumstance perfectly. She had listened shudderingly while her stepfather read out the details from the newspaper, one evening years ago in the cosy, lighted drawing-room at Dynevard Chase, expressing a hope, as became “a fine, old English gentleman,” that the scoundrels would all be caught and hanged, and especially their rascally leader. And now this same leader—but it is incredible—her brain is dazed. Her eyes are fixed on Truscott’s face, but she does not speak.

“For the other thing,” he goes on, narrowly watching her, “the next time you see Claverton ask him what became of Anita de Castro. Ask him, at the same time, what made him suddenly give up so paying a thing as the slave trade.”

Lilian becomes a shade whiter, and Truscott, noting it, feels a fiendish delight in having at length disturbed her equanimity.

“Who is Anita de Castro?” she asks, still in a firm voice.

“The daughter of the chief of the gang. Spanish or Portuguese; but, they tell me, a lovely girl. Our friend Claverton, to do him justice, is a man of taste, and, these Spaniards are terribly revengeful when you take an undue advantage of them.”

Lilian stands in the same attitude as before. Her fingers clutch more nervously the back of the chair; but that is the only sign she shows of having even heard. She would fain not believe this; but then, how confidently this man speaks! He cannot have invented such a story, the way in which he tells it is enough to show that. And, in spite of herself, recollections crop up of more than one hint which Claverton has let fall to the effect that there is a chapter in his life’s history which he would fain forget; mere nothings at the

time, and which on one or two occasions she even gently rallied him about, but now with what fell significance do they stand out! She knows his bold and daring disposition, his coolness and powers of administration or command; his cynical vein, which might under adverse circumstances render him unscrupulous and even cruel; and all this seems to lend likelihood to the other's statements. But, ah! how she loves him! Even if every word of what she has just heard is true, she feels that, in spite of it all, she loves him if possible ten times more dearly than she did before. She remembers his neglected and uncared-for childhood and youth which might palliate, if not excuse, far worse crimes than these; and her whole soul goes out in a pitying, tender yearning to make his life so different, so happy with her love, and in time to lead him gradually and gently to what she reckoned a more lasting source of joy. She hardly sees Truscott; she is looking out through the open window beyond him with a soft, pensive expression that is wondrously lovely, and he who watches her gnaws his lip in fury, and the very fiend of mad burning jealousy shakes his soul. This prize was within his grasp once, but he threw it away.

"Well?" he says, impatiently.

She brings down her eyes to his, calm and serene as before. "Quite a romance. But, as yet, we are no farther than when we started. You have given me no proof."

"Romance, eh? Well, like many romances, it may have a tragic ending. I have two witnesses. You remember the man you saw following you in the crowd at King Williamstown?"

Again Lilian grows ashy white. It was something more than instinct, then. And, like a flash, she remembers the troubled look which had come over her lover's face when they met the man on the road during their ride, and how the two had been conversing under her window that last Sunday morning. Doubtless the fellow had been trying to trade on his knowledge. Merciful heavens! That ruffian—and Arthur in his power!

"Yes, I see you do. Now for the other. You don't suppose Anita de Castro would spare him?"

Lilian gives an imperceptible shudder. "All this may, or may not be," she replies. "But in the former event, it all happened years ago, and the bare word of these people would go for nothing here. The idea is absurd."

"Ha, ha, ha! Really I shall have to retract what I said just now about your having a judicial mind," sneers Truscott. "The bare word of these people would go for just this much here. It would make out a strong *prima facie* case for the committal of this

precious scoundrel—bail refused, of course—pending the making of inquiries and the procuring of more witnesses at Zanzibar, when he would be put upon his trial for piracy—piracy in its worst phase, mind—and murder. What do you think of that, Lilian Strange? In either case a conviction is certain, and in either case with the same result—the rope. So that is the fate in store for our gallows-bird before six months are over—a dance on nothing—and I shall get a pass to go into the gaol-yard and witness the fun.”

He has risen and is standing before her, his features working with a livid rage that is absolutely devilish. Suddenly the full, awful force of the situation sweeps across Lilian’s mind, and with a low cry, like that of a stricken animal, and a shrinking motion, she drops her face into her hands.

“Ah, good God! Spare him!” she moans. “Why will you harm him? He never injured you!”

Heaven help her! She has let down her guard, and the enemy is prompt to rush in over it. From that moment she is completely at his mercy.

“Never injured me? What is she dreaming of? Good heavens! hasn’t he robbed me of you—of you? Isn’t that enough?” is the harsh, pitiless reply. “Ha, ha! Six months about will do it. It’ll be winter then—June or July. The mornings are cold then. Perhaps, as a last kind act, I’ll give the poor wretch a ‘nip’ out of my flask, before he’s swung off, just to keep his spirits up, you know.”

“Demon,” whispers Lilian, hoarsely, gazing at him in set, stony despair.

“I am just what you and he have made me. It is your own doing. You know I was never one of your godly lot. If a man does me an ill turn I repay it with interest, that is, if I am in a position to do so, which, in this case, fortunately I am. Five o’clock”—glancing at his watch—“I shall just have time to beat up my informant and take him round to the Public Offices before the magistrate goes away, or the Clerk of the Peace will do as well; and by making his deposition this evening we can get a warrant out and save the whole night by it. So you will soon see our friend again, Lilian, sooner than you expected, eh? Now good-bye for the present. I am sorry you have driven me to this, but—” and he moves towards the door. Before he can reach it, she throws herself in front of him. He cannot leave the room without actual violence.

“Stop! Have you no mercy? No pity—for me—for me whom you once professed to love?” and the clear accents of her voice are wrung with despair—with a sense of her utter helplessness.

“None for him. None. Less than none. I hate the man who has robbed me of you. He shall die, and I will go and witness his last struggles.”

“No. Spare him, Ralph, spare him! In killing him you will be killing me. Ah, God! Why was I ever sent into this world? I am the destruction of all whom I would gladly die for!” and she presses her hands tightly upon her temples, and a tremor of hopeless agony shakes the tall, beautiful figure.

Even the heart of that fiend in human shape smites him as he witnesses her awful grief, listens to her wild, despairing accents. But she is playing into his hands now—perfectly. At one time he almost thought the game a lost one, and was about to throw it up, when lo! one false move, and it is entirely his own.

“All whom you would gladly die for,” he repeats, echoing her words. “Would you, then, die for this fellow?”

“God knows I would—a hundred times over,” she wails.

“Well then, listen. I will not require you to do that. What I require you to do is to live for him.”

She looks up quickly—her face transformed in wonderment, which is on the point of breaking out into joy. He is relenting.

“I mean, to live for him by living without him. That is the only way in which you can save his life.”

Her head droops again, and a shudder runs through her frame at this alternative, and Truscott, watching her, gloats over her anguish, remembering how she defied him at first.

“The conditions are not so hard as they might be,” he continues. “I only stipulate that you shall never see him again, never hold another word of communication with him, either orally, on paper, or through a third person, henceforth from this moment. On those conditions I spare his life—otherwise—well, you know the alternative.”

“May I not even write him one line of farewell?” she asks, with a look in her dry, tearless eyes that would melt a stone. Her tormentor sees it, and turns his glance away, fearing for his resolution. One word of communication might undo the whole plot. At all costs he must separate them now and for ever. So again he invokes the demon of jealousy to his aid, and goads and lashes himself to his fiend-like work.

“No. I will spare his life, but nothing else. Those are my conditions. Accept them or not. In three minutes it will be too late,” and he stands holding his watch in his hand.

Lilian is beside herself. An awful numbing sense of fatalism creeps over her. Is it to be? Ah, well, she will give her life for his, for this will kill her.

“Well? In another moment it may be too late.”

“I give in,” she says, in the same dreamy, hopeless tone.

“And you promise to hold no further communication whatever with Arthur Claverton from this day forward?”

“I promise!”

The agony of that moment, as with her own lips she dooms herself and him!

“If I were inclined to be hard, Lilian, I might remind you that you are not wholly superior to the weakness of breaking your promises; but let that pass. You will find my conditions are not so hard. I only ask that one thing.” By-and-by he intended to ask one other thing—and to obtain it, too. For the present she had been tried as much as she was capable of bearing. She would get used to the idea in time, and then, with the same hold on her as he had now, he would snatch the prize for which he had risked so much and plotted so wickedly.

“Now I must go. Don’t look like that, Lilian,” he says in a kinder tone. “You have gained one great object at any rate, and in this world we must be thankful for small mercies. So keep up your spirits.”

She makes no answer to this, at best, cruel mockery. She is leaning against the wall, with her hands still clasped over her face. Not a tear falls, her grief is too great for that. He glances uneasily at her again, for he is anxious to get away. He has already been here more than two hours; and it would never do, under the circumstances, for him to be here still when the Paynes return. Besides, she might faint, and that would still further complicate the situation.

“Good-bye,” he repeats. “Remember, now—everything depends on you.” And she is left alone.

How long she stands thus she cannot tell. At length the sound of familiar voices, with many a happy laugh, approaching down the street, warns her of the return of the party, and gaining her room with staggering, uneven steps, she locks herself in, and, throwing herself on the bed, yields herself unrestrained to her terrible, hopeless agony. "Oh God!" she prays, "let me die! let me die!" And beneath, the house is filled with merry voices, laughing and talking all at once; and there in the golden eventide, while the soft flush gathers in its purpling suffusion over the western mountains where fades the sun, the riven heart quivers and throbs in its voiceless despair.

Chapter Fifteen.

“There is One amongst us Missing.”

Meanwhile at the seat of war, events were developing. Several weeks had now gone by, during which the rebellion had spread. With the insane fatuity which was luring these people to their destruction, it seemed that to every disaffected tribe hitherto peaceful, the news of a crushing blow sustained by its brethren was the signal for itself to take up arms. There was a lack of cohesion in the enemy's councils and undertakings that was simply incomprehensible. And now Emigrant Tembuland had broken out into revolt, threatening Queenstown; and the Hlambi section of the Gaikas, under the chiefs Ndimba and Seyolo, were making common cause with Sandili in British Kaffraria, while within the colony, the clans under Tini Macomo, from their rugged fastnesses in the Blinkwater forest—famous battle-ground in days gone by—defied the colonial authorities. Yet as each rose in succession, tribe after tribe, it seemed as though in their very half-heartedness, they were fighting against their will.

For several weeks, then, have the colonial forces been occupied in clearing out the Gaika location from end to end by a series of well-arranged patrols—sometimes meeting the wily foe in pitched battle—or as near approaching it as Jack Kafir deems wise to venture—more often exchanging shots in desultory skirmish, with the result of dispersing the savages after a few of their number had been laid low. Much cattle has been taken, too—thousands of head—which though an effective deterrent to the enemy aforesaid, is by no means an unmixed blessing to the captors; at least, so say more than one of their leaders. For large numbers of captured cattle in the camp can be nothing less than a nuisance of the first magnitude; leading to confusion and worry, the telling off of a considerable body of men as guards or as escort who might be better employed in the field; and conducive to much friction and irritability among the various native levies, each only too anxious to suspect and accuse the other of quiet purloining from the herds under their charge.

It was only yesterday that Jim Brathwaite, with feelings of intense relief, watched the last of a large herd, as it made its way over the hill under a strong escort, en route for Komgha; and now, with an air of semi-disgust, he is pondering over a despatch which has just arrived, bidding him push forward at once, for that a body of rebels, in considerable force, are known to be on their way through at a point some fifteen miles lower down, to join Sandili in the Perie forest. Not that this is the fact which calls an expression of disgust to the brown face of the dashing and fearless commander; on the contrary. But the sting of the document—like that of the scorpion—is in its tail, and is to the effect that an immense number of cattle are with them, which, can they but be taken,

by thus cutting off their resources, a heavy blow will be struck at the concealed foe, even if he is not so seriously crippled as to be compelled to surrender.

“Oh, blazes,” growled Jim. “Even the glorious fan of a good old rough-and-tumble—if the beggars stand, that is—is dashed by the certainty of the camp being turned into a cattle-market for the next week or so. Naylor—Claverton, get the men into the saddle at once. No need to take rations. We shall be back to-night or to-morrow at the latest, and, if not, we shall find plenty of beefsteaks down there. Sharp’s the word, or we shall have those lumbering Dutchmen away before us.”

The door of the tent is darkened, and one of “those lumbering Dutchmen” enters—a tall, strong, but awkward-looking man, who, in that way, seems to deserve the slightly contemptuous epithet. It is the Commandant of one of the troops of Dutch Burghers, and he is anxious to confer with Jim anent the despatch he has just received, and of which, by the way, being ignorant of English, he cannot make out one word.

“What have you got to do?” echoes Jim, somewhat impatiently—for he foresees delay. “Why, you’ve got to hang it all, Arthur—you’re good at lingo. Translate the orders to him as sharp as you can.”

Gladly the Boer relinquishes the sheet of blue foolscap which he has been turning over and over in his great hands with a pitifully puzzled expression to Claverton, who translates it for the benefit of him and his four “field-captains,” who stand round eagerly listening.

“This is what it says,” goes on Claverton, having translated the first part, which is in all particulars similar to Jim’s. “Your troop must keep on about four miles ahead of us, so as to cut them off from the pass over yonder. The Fingo levies will also work with it.”

“Ja, kaptyn.”

“We shall keep on this side and drive them into you,” and then followed a few rapid details.

“Ja, kaptyn, ja, ja!”

“Well, then, we will work round to you. And now we must be off. You understand, Mynheer Van Heerden!”

“Ja, kaptyn.”

“That’s all right,” and away goes Claverton, jumps on his horse, which is held ready by the faithful Sam, while the Boer leaders make their way back to get their men under arms; still a little hazy, perhaps, as to the plan of operations; but trusting with characteristic phlegm, that *det sal als recht kom*.

The camp is placed on an open bit of ground forming the summit of a small eminence, and commanding a good wide sweep all round. It is shut in, however, as to view, save on one side, and it is from this side that they are able to lay their plans. Far away—at least two hours’ ride—is a bold spur, where rises conspicuous a cliff of considerable altitude; its brow, crowned by a row of stiff euphorbia trees, whose straight stems and plumed heads stand out from the soft profusion of the surrounding forest. At the foot of this cliff is the defile by which the enemy is expected to pass; and, to reach it, at least three hours of rough scramble along the bushy valleys branching out in every direction, will be necessary.

In an incredibly short space of time all is ready, and the veldt is alive with horsemen, hastening to make their way to the scene of operations. Opposite—across the ravine—the Dutch troop, about three hundred men, is hurrying forward; while beyond them some eight hundred Fingoes, marching in four columns, advance no less rapidly, chanting their war-song in a deep bass, and the sun gleams upon the gun-barrels and assegai blades; and, now and again, the tinkle of a bit and the neigh of a horse is heard as the expedition moves on.

It is the middle of the forenoon, and not a cloud is in the heavens to break the endless blue, and the heat is to be felt. As yet there is no sign of life. The other column has long been out of sight, and now carefully Jim’s troop moves forward, expecting every moment to get touch of the enemy, while nearer and nearer rises the lofty *krantz* which is to be the rallying-point. No one speaks; all are on the *qui vive*; but nothing disturbs the stillness of the deep valley into which they have been constrained to dip down in order to conceal the march as much as possible.

Suddenly, from the bush in front, breaks forth a puff of smoke, followed by another and another, till a regular line of fire bars their progress. The horses start and swerve, terrified by the detonation, as the bullets come whizzing about their riders’ ears with a horribly near and suggestive “sing.” One volley in return—for as yet they can see no one—and the order is given to seek cover, for, crack! crack! crack! on every side now the jets of flame are belching forth from the thick green bush, and it is evident that the enemy is in strong force. But he has caught a Tartar. Cool and self-possessed to a man, Brathwaite’s Horse are but waiting their opportunity, and ere long they begin to catch glimpses of the Kafirs, dodging in and out among the trees. Then the game becomes two-sided, as the experienced frontiersmen, with many a deft snap-shot, begin to “drop”

their concealed enemy—so quickly, indeed, that in a quarter of an hour the latter begins to draw off. Still the fire is unusually warm on their front, and the sagacious Jim strongly suspects a deliberate intention to hold him in check there while the main body gets safely off with its spoil, as intimated.

“Claverton,” he says, coming quickly to his lieutenant’s side. “Take about thirty men, and advance upon those fellows in front, while we keep them occupied here. Try and get round them and take them in the flank; knock over as many as ever you can, and drive the rest on.”

Claverton hastens to obey, and, with his contingent, makes his way swiftly and stealthily by a circuit so as, if possible, to take the enemy in the rear. Meanwhile the fusillade goes on, and the smoke hangs in a cloud above the valley as the concealed forces, each under cover, pepper away, but with a caution that, on the part of the Kafirs, is somewhat unwonted.

And now the “special service” band has reached the ridge some five hundred yards above and beyond the main body, and its leader begins to think about doubling upon the wily foe. A smothered chuckle at his elbow makes him turn. Below, not six yards off, lying on his stomach on a rock, is a huge red Kafir. His piece is cocked, and he is worming himself into a good position for a safe and sure shot; and the chuckle proceeds from Hicks, who stands with his revolver aimed well between the greasy shoulders of the recumbent barbarian. But the quick ears of the savage detect the sound. In a twinkling he wriggles round, but, before he has time to spring up, his “Youw!” of consternation is cut short in his throat as Hicks’ revolver cracks, and the ball passing fair through the Kafir’s ribs, the huge carcase rolls from its perch, falling with a crash into the bush below.

“Sold again?” exclaims Hicks, smothering a shout of laughter. “Not this journey, my boy. I never saw anything more comic than that bird’s face when he looked round.”

Three more Kafirs spring up at their very feet, but before they can lift an assegai even, or at any rate use one, they are shot dead, almost point-blank. And now several dark heads may be detected peering in the direction of this new danger, but this is just what our friends have been expecting, and, crack! crack! crack! go their trusty breech-loaders as they advance down through the scrub, driving the enemy before them.

But the said enemy is in full retreat. He has had enough, and yonder over the ridge, dark bodies are running, by twos and threes, while the fire of the victorious whites still tells as it is kept constantly playing upon the discomfited savages. Then Jim gives the order to mount and push forward. No time is to be lost after this delay, or the plan will fall

through. His troop has suffered by two men wounded and the loss of three horses, the dismounted riders making their way as best they can by holding on to the stirrup of a comrade. Nothing, indeed, could have been worse than the enemy's marksmanship.

They make their way out of the hollow without any further opposition and are upon the heights overlooking the pass. Have they been misinformed, or are they too soon? Jim hardly thinks they are too late. It may be that the Kafirs in charge of the cattle, hearing the firing, have driven these off in another direction. Suddenly an exclamation breaks from his lips.

"Oh-h-h! Good Lord! Where on earth are those damned Dutchmen?"

For he has been descending all this time, and is standing looking up the pass. There is the great cliff, towering many hundreds of feet above, and there about two miles off the whole defile is filled with a dense mass of cattle, a cloud of dust arising before them as their drivers urge them along with many a shout which is borne to the ears of the disappointed pursuers. Even the very spoors at their feet were tantalisingly fresh.

"Perhaps they've gone round up above," suggested Naylor.

"Maybe. In the meantime we'll go down and lie in wait so as to hem the niggers in when they turn. Van Heerden's sure to have got his men round too far."

An outpost was left on the rising ground, and the rest descended. They were about to take up a position on either side of the road and wait; when, without any warning, a tremendous volley is poured into them; and all the bush is alive with dark shapes—hundreds and hundreds of them—darting from cover to cover, yelling and brandishing their assegais as they advance nearer and nearer, while a constant fire is kept up by those in front.

So sudden and unlooked-for is this attack, that Jim's men are for the moment completely taken by surprise. It is, moreover, unparalleled in its fierceness and determination, for the Kafirs press boldly forward, waving their weapons. Some of them even may be seen snapping off their assegais in preparation for a charge.

"Steady, Allen, old boy. That's a new kind of a tuning-fork," remarks Claverton, as a bit of pot-leg whistles between his ear and that of him addressed, with a vicious whirr. "No use ducking when it's past, you know. Hallo!"

His attention is drawn by two men struggling, a white man and a Kafir. The savage, pinned against the very base of the cliff described, is vainly striving to free his right wrist

from his antagonist's grasp, so as to use the assegai which, held flat against the rock, is useless to him; the white man, finding it all he can do to hold on to the other's throat; and thus the two are struggling, each unable to use his weapon. Then, in response to a half-choked shout from the Kafir, several of his countrymen are seen rushing through the bush to his assistance, when lo, a quick movement, something gleams; the white man throws his adversary off, and with a couple of bounds is at Claverton's side panting, as, crouching behind a bush to dodge several shots aimed at him, he wipes the blade of his sheath-knife on the ground.

"Ripped—the beggar—up."

"Deuce you did! Well done, Gough. A smart bit of work that," rejoins his chief.

And now the great cliff thunders back in tremendous echoes the volley-firing. Two of Brathwaite's men have fallen, shot dead, another has been overwhelmed in a sudden rush of the fierce foe, who becomes more and more daring, and assegaid in a moment. Several are slightly wounded; and Jim, seeing that no time is to be lost if they are to avoid being surrounded, gives the word to fall back on higher ground, to a point where his practised eye detects better facilities for defence, and for holding out until assistance comes. Suddenly somebody exclaims:

"Any one seen Jack Armitage?" A chill of blank consternation goes through all who hear it.

"Eh, what? Where's Jack? Where's Jack?" echo several voices.

"He was close to me when first we began to retire," says Claverton. "He may be there yet. Come along, boys, we'll pick him up, wherever he is. Who'll volunteer? We can't leave poor Jack to be chopped up by these devils?" Even as he speaks there floats through his brain the echo of those soft, entreating words whispered in the hour of parting: "You will not run any unnecessary risks, even for other people. Your life belongs to me now, love!" And side by side with the tender thought, runs the consciousness that he cannot leave a comrade to a certain and cruel death.

"I will." "I will." "The devil's in it but we'll find Jack."

"Come on, straight at 'em," were some of the cries in answer to his appeal, and among the confusion and smoke—for the firing was pretty brisk—Claverton and a dozen others, gliding rapidly from bush to bush, revolver in hand, made their way to where the missing man was last seen. And in doing so they went further and further into the most

deadly peril, and separated themselves more and more from their retreating comrades; but still they went.

A couple of hundred yards further, and it seemed as if they had even got behind the enemy's lines. Two or three Kafirs had sprung up before them, but these had been immediately shot down, and, amid the confusion and firing on all sides, they succeeded in breaking through almost unobserved.

"Here's where I saw him last," said Claverton. "Jack! Jack!" he called in a low, penetrating tone. "Where are you, man?"

No answer.

A double report, and a couple of bullets came singing over their heads.

"Half-a-dozen of you fellows keep an eye on our rear," said Claverton. "We shall have them down upon us directly. But we won't give up yet."

"Hallo?" cried a faint voice some twenty yards off.

"There he is, by all that's blue!" exclaimed several. "Hooray?"

There he was sure enough. Lying under a huge, overhanging yellow-wood tree—several of which grew along the course of the small stream flowing through the valley—half hidden away in the long grass, whither he had crawled in the hope of escaping notice, lay poor Jack Armitage, his right foot shattered by a ball, while another had penetrated his side. His only hope was to be allowed to die in peace, though more than once as he lay there, alone with the anguish of his wounds, forgotten and left behind in that wild forest, he had thought of calling out to the savages to come and put an end to him. But hope would again reassert itself, and his own natural buoyancy of spirits, combined with the thought of his young wife, whom he would yet live to return to, made him resolve to cling on at all costs, as he put it. Poor Jack!

The rescuers were none too soon, for just then a Kafir, attracted by his faint shout, glided from behind the trunk of a tree, assegai uplifted; but a couple of revolver bullets, well aimed, stretched him beside his intended victim.

"Jack, old man, are you badly hit?" asked Claverton, with a thrill of concern in his voice, bending over him and grasping his hand.

“Infernally,” was the reply in a weak voice; and the poor fellow’s face was bathed in moisture from the agonies he was undergoing.

“Well, cheer up, old chap; we’ll get you out of this, and you’ll live to have the laugh of John Kafir yet.”

“Ping, ping!” A bullet embedded itself in the trunk of the tree, while a second whistled perilously close to the speaker’s ear.

“The devil! There’s some one among those fellows who can shoot. Lie close, every one. There’s fairly good cover here, and we’ll pepper them a few.”

“Hallo, Allen; you there?” said the wounded man. “Shake hands, old chap. You’re a good sort to come down here and look after a fellow.”

Allen looked a little sheepish. He might be a duffer in some respects, but he was not deficient in pluck, and had been one of the first to volunteer in the search.

The place where they stood, or rather crouched, was a ring of bush. Above, rose the great yellow-wood tree, with long, tangled monkey ropes trailing from its boughs. Around, however, all was tolerably open, although the trunks of the large forest trees which overshadowed the spot, shutting out the sunlight, might afford some cover to the foe. And this openness of the surroundings might yet prove the salvation of the devoted group, who stood there hemmed in by relentless and eager foes.

“We’ll hold our own, never fear!” cried Claverton. “We were in a worse fix that day down by the Bashi—you remember, Jack?—when a blast of your old post-horn sent the niggers flying in every direction.”

The wounded man smiled faintly at the reminiscence.

“Give us a revolver, some one,” he said. “I can still draw a bead lying here.”

“No, you can’t. Just lie quiet, old chap, and leave the fun to us this time. The Dutchmen are sure to come up soon, and then we’ll turn the tables, as we did that other time.”

It was their only chance. Not for ever could that brave handful hope to hold their own against such desperate odds. They could hear the firing of their comrades on the hillside far away; but these had enough to do to act on the defensive; no relief was to be looked for from them. And now the savages began to call to each other, and scores of dark shapes could be seen flitting amid the semi-gloom of the forest—now running a few

yards, now sinking down, as it were, into the very earth, as the well-directed fire of the defenders began to tell, but each time springing up again, and more of them crowding on behind, and advancing nearer—nearer—nearer.

“Now, then, you six, blaze a volley into that low bush there, at the foot of the tree. At least three niggers are lying there,” said Claverton.

They obeyed, and upon the detonation came a loud yell and groans from more than one throat, notifying that the move had been effective. Two bodies rolled out into the open, and two more, badly hit, staggered behind the huge trunk.

“That’s it, boys! Hurrah! We’ll give them pepper! They won’t come to close quarters, not they!” And catching their leader’s spirit, the men, all young fellows brimful of pluck, cheered wildly and gazed eagerly round in search of more targets.

There was silence for a moment, and then a crowd of Kafirs could be seen gliding like spectres among the trees.

“Here they come, by Jingo!” muttered several of the group, but the savages hardly seemed to see them. They passed on, running, as for dear life, many of them turning their heads to look back. And the reason of this soon became evident, as a strong, harsh voice was heard exclaiming: “Nouw kerels, skiet maar! Skiet em doed, die verdomde schepsels,” (“Now, boys, shoot away! Shoot them dead, the damned rascals.”) and immediately a tremendous volley was poured into the retreating foe.

Never was any sound more welcome to mortal ear than the harsh, familiar dialect to the ears of the beleaguered group to whom it brought deliverance, and a ringing cheer went up from their midst as they recognised the voice of the old Dutch commandant, who with his men had thus arrived timely to the rescue. Spread out in a long line through the bush the Boers advanced, cautiously but rapidly, shooting down the flying foe in every direction. And another wild cheer went up in reply, as Jim Brathwaite, at the head of his mounted men, charged up the path in the hope of cutting off the enemy’s retreat, or at any rate of thinning his numbers while crossing the open ground some two miles beyond.

“Hallo, Claverton!” he cried as he rode past. “Better fall back, as you’re dismounted. The ground’s quite clear behind.” And the battle, which had now become a rout, swept on, farther and farther up the pass.

Indeed our friends had as much as they could, manage in transporting their wounded comrade with all the comfort—rough at best—that they could muster under the

circumstances; but it had to be done, and the poor fellow went through agonies. His pluck and cheerfulness never failed him. "I say, Claverton," he remarked, with an attempt at a smile, "that old humbug McShane will have the laugh of me now. How the old beggar will crow!" But the speaker knew full well that not a soul among the forces now in the field would be more concerned and grieved on his account than the fiery but soft-hearted Irish doctor.

The camp was reached at last; but long before it was reached, the whole force had overtaken them, returning from the pursuit. The bodies of those who had fallen were found, horribly mutilated, and were hastily buried where they fell. But the undertaking had been a failure. The Boer commando had been unable to arrive at the rendezvous in time, owing to the same reason which had delayed Brathwaite's Horse. It had been engaged by a large body of the enemy evidently thrown out for the purpose, and as soon as it had beaten these off it hastened to the relief of our friends, as we have seen. And the upshot of the whole affair was that nearly two thousand rebels, with an immense number of cattle, had succeeded in breaking through, and had gone to join their countrymen in the fastnesses of the Amatola Mountains.

All through that night the wounded man lay, watched in turns by his old comrades, those among whom he had spent his life. A stupor had succeeded the agony which he had first undergone, and now he lay comparatively free from pain and breathing heavily. It happened that there was no surgeon in the camp, McShane being with the larger column some twenty-five miles off; and though three men were galloping across country to fetch him, it had long since become evident to all, even the sufferer himself, that the whole Faculty of Medicine could not save his life. He was doomed from the very first; that ball in the side had decided his fate. So they watched beside him there, and many times in the course of the night would his companions-in-arms steal to the door of the tent to whisper for news, for poor Jack was a favourite with the whole corps. So still and beautiful was the night that it required some extent of imagination to realise the stirring drama which had been enacted the day before, and an hour after midnight the camp was wrapped in slumber and darkness, save for that one faint light burning in the dying man's tent, a meet symbol of the life that was flickering within, fainter, and fainter, and fainter. Away on the slopes of the far Amatola the red signal fires of the savages twinkled and glowed, and above rose the eternal peaks in dark outline.

It was towards dawn. Jim Brathwaite and Claverton alone were in the tent when Armitage seemed suddenly to awake from his death-like stupor.

"Who's there?" he whispered. "That you, Jim?"

In a moment Jim was at his side.

“Well, look here, old chap, I’m off the hooks this time, and no mistake. It wouldn’t much matter—only—” and he paused.

“It wouldn’t much matter,” he continued, as if with an effort; “but—Jim—hang it, it’s Gertie I’m thinking of. Poor little girl, she’ll be left all alone—,” again he seemed to hesitate, and by the light of the dim lantern, it could be seen that the dying man’s eyes were very moist. “You’ll look after her a little, now and then, won’t you, Jim, for the sake of old times? There’ll be enough to keep her comfortably—when everything’s realised—that’s one consolation. And tell the little girl not to fret. It can’t be helped.”

Solemnly Jim promised to carry out his wishes. He was a man of few words, but they were from his heart.

“Claverton—it was downright good of you to bring a fellow up here to die among his old friends,” went on Armitage, suddenly catching sight of the other. “Better fun than pegging out with only the sooty-faced niggers prodding away at you,” he added, with an attempt at his old light-heartedness. “After all, what does it matter? I say, though, you fellows, don’t go bothering to drag me off to ‘King.’ Just slip me in somewhere here. I’d rather, you see. Best sort of grave for a fellow campaigning—and it’s all God’s earth.”

His voice grew somewhat fainter as he ceased. There was silence for a few minutes, and he lay with closed eyes. The watchers stole a look at each other, and just then three more figures slipped softly into the tent. They were Hicks, and Allen, and Naylor. The dying man’s lips began to move, but Claverton, bending over him, could not catch his words, though he thought he could just detect the name of his wife.

“Where’s Hicks?” he suddenly exclaimed, opening his eyes. “And Naylor, and all of them? I should just like to say good-bye to them. Oh, hang it all—it’s too soon to give way. One more shot and the beggars’ll run. Ah-h-h! That chap’s down.” His mind was wandering, and he fancied himself in the conflict again, “N-no. Where am I? It’s awfully dark. Open those shutters, somebody. A fellow can’t see.”

Again the watchers look at each other. This was the beginning of the end. Hicks had knelt down beside his dying comrade, and, grasping his hand, something very like a sob is heard to proceed from his broad chest. The candle in the lantern burns low, flickers, and goes out. They put back the flaps of the tent door, and just then the first red flush of dawn glows in the east. Then they bend down to look at their comrade; but it is all over. The spirit has fled, only the clay remains—cold and tenantless.

Thus died, in his full manhood, the joyous, mischief-loving, sunny-tempered Jack Armitage—light-hearted to the very last; fearless, for he had never done anything to be ashamed of, or contrary to his simple, straightforward code. Never a dishonest or malicious action could he blame himself with, and now he was at peace with all mankind. And if any one is tempted to ask: “Was the man a Pagan? Was he utterly Godless?” I reply, not necessarily. He died as he had lived, among his old comrades, careless and unthinking, perhaps, and with his thoughts apparently all for those he left behind; but genuinely regretted by all, and without an enemy in the world. And, O pious reader, when your time comes and the grim monarch lays his icy grasp upon you, will they be able to say of you even thus much?

Chapter Sixteen.

Face to Face.

They buried poor Jack Armitage in the afternoon, and all turned out to render the last honours to their departed comrade. Brathwaite's Horse, with arms reversed, formed the principal guard of honour, the improvised bier being borne by the dead man's most intimate friends. All the Dutch burghers followed in the cortège, and, hovering around in dark groups, the men of the Fingo Levies gazed curiously but respectfully upon the white man's burial. No surpliced priest stood to hallow this newly-made grave in the wilderness, or speak the commendatory words; but all the solemnity which real feeling could impart was supplied in the demeanour of these rough bands of armed horsemen, pacing along so silent, and orderly, and mournful.

The grave had been dug beneath a couple of euphorbia trees, upon a green knoll commanding a lovely view of hill and dale, and sweeping grassland and distant mountain, all blending into one soft picture in the golden lustre of the afternoon sun. The steady tramp of hoof-strokes ceased as the horsemen ranged themselves in a semicircle around the grave, and there was dead silence. All uncovered as Jim Brathwaite, who, as senior commander and the dead man's intimate friend, had been unanimously voted to the duty, began to read—in the subdued and serious voice of one wholly unaccustomed to the performance of such offices—the Anglican burial service. At its close a firing party stepped forward, and a threefold volley sounded forth upon the hushed air, rolling its echoes afar, till the Amaxosa warriors, listening from their tangled fastnesses to its distant thunder, told each other, with grim satisfaction, that the English must be burying one of their principal captains.

So poor Jack Armitage was laid to rest there in his lonely grave amid the sunny wilds of Kaffraria, and a gloom hung over the camp because of the cheerful spirit taken from its midst.

That evening they were joined by the other column, forming part of which was Claverton's old corps. It happened that Lumley, who had been given the provisional command on the transfer of his chief, was in hot water. An excellent subordinate, he was quite unfit for a wholly responsible position, and, as was disgustingly said by those on whom his mistakes had nearly entailed serious disaster, he had made an utter mess of it. Consequently he had been superseded, and was daily expecting the arrival of the man appointed to take his place. "Quite a new hand," as he said, in an injured tone; "a fellow only just out from England." All this he told Claverton, seated that evening in the latter's tent, where he had come to pour out his grievances. He would clear out, he vowed, and let the beastly war go to the deuce. Naylor was also present.

“Don’t do anything rash, Lumley. Wait and see who the new fellow is,” was Claverton’s advice. “You and I had very good fun together, and so may you and he. It isn’t all walnuts and Madeira being in command, I can tell you. Anyhow, I found it quite within my conscience to throw over mine in favour of subordinacy—and am not sorry. No, believe me, responsibility’s a mistake except for the gifted few; and you and I can have a much better time of it playing second fiddle.”

With such arguments he soothed the other’s wounded spirit, and at length persuaded him that so far from feeling ill-used he ought to rejoice.

“Pon my soul, I believe you’re right,” was poor Lumley’s parting remark, made in a tone of intense relief, partly owing to his former chief’s friendliness and encouragement, partly—it may be—the result of a couple of glasses of grog warming the cockles of his heart. “But I wish it was you they were going to put back again, Claverton. It would be all right then. Good-night—good-night,” and he went out.

“Poor Lumley,” remarked Claverton, after he had left. “I’m sorry for him; but he’s no more fit to be at the head of a body of men than I am to command the Channel Fleet.”

“H’m, isn’t he?” said Naylor. “At any rate you have sent him away in quite a contented frame of mind. I was watching the process leading up to it, somewhat narrowly.”

Claverton laughed. “Oh, I can always talk over a fool, that is, an ordinary one, when it’s worth while taking the trouble, which in this case it is, for Lumley’s a good fellow in most ways. But I can’t talk over the fool blatant, for he is too overwhelmed with a sense of his own infallibility to give the slightest attention to any one else’s suggestions. By the way, I must go across and see Jim Brathwaite. Will you come, or would you rather stay here? Our ‘business’ won’t take a minute.”

“I may as well walk across,” and they went out. On arrival at Jim’s tent, however, that redoubted warrior was not there.

“Probably making a night of it with some of the fellows who have just come,” was Claverton’s remark. “Ah, here’s what I want,” pouncing upon a bit of blue paper which lay ostentatiously upon an old packing-case, and was directed to himself. “Now we’ll go back.”

The night was moonless and rather dark, for a curtain of cloud had drifted across the sky; here and there one or two stars twinkled through its rifts, and the outline of the sombre ridge beyond was scarcely visible. All was quiet in the camp, the voices of the

men made a kind of monotonous hum, and now and then a laugh arose from some centre of jollity for the time being.

A light burned in Claverton's tent as they were about to enter, and, pausing for a moment, the figures of the two men were thrown out into full relief.

Crack!

A bright jet shoots out of the gloom just beneath the shadowy outline of the ridge overlooking the camp, and the sharp report rolls away in dull echo upon the night. Then another flash, and, amid the roar that follows, Claverton and his companion both experience a strange, jarring sensation, for a bullet has passed, with a shrill whiz, between them, narrowly missing the head of either.

"Good shot that, whoever it is," remarked Naylor, coolly, while his companion, who had quickly extinguished the light, was by his side again. "There'll be tall cannonading for the next half-hour, and tolerably wild shooting, too."

And there was. The effect of the double shot upon that camp—which fancied itself so secure—was marvellous. In a moment every man had seized his piece, and was standing eagerly peering into the gloom in the direction of the shot—and not merely that, for many discharged their weapons haphazard—and presently, as Naylor had said, the cannonading waxed alarming. The frontier corps, beyond a few shots fired on the impulse of the moment, had remained cool; they knew the futility of blazing at random into the darkness, and had too much respect for themselves and their reputation to be made the subject of a practical joke played by one or two skulking Kafirs. But the camps of the Fingo and Hottentot levies were like a disturbed ants' nest; and heeding the voices of their officers no more than the wind, those startled and panic-stricken auxiliaries poured a terrific fire into the darkness, and the air was aflame with the flash of their wild, reckless volleys as they blazed away—round after round—as fast as ever they could reload. It was in vain that their officers strove to restrain them—their voices were lost in the constant bellow of musketry. Now and then they would knock down a refractory nigger or two within reach, but it had no effect upon the others, and confusion reigned supreme.

"Well, Lumley, here's a lively kettle of fish."

He addressed, turned, perspiring and despairing in his frantic attempts to restore order.

"Good God! Claverton, is that you? Now just look at these damned fools. Drop that, will you?" he roared, bestowing a violent kick on one of his men who was blazing away

without even bringing his piece to his shoulder. The fellow gave a yell of pain and made off.

At length the confusion began to abate. Seeing no further sign of an attack upon the camp, and their ammunition having decreased alarmingly, the native auxiliaries ceased firing by degrees, each man, as he did so, sneaking off looking very much ashamed of himself.

“Damned fools, in sooth,” assented Claverton, when the uproar had calmed down. “But, Lumley, I wish you’d just turn up that fellow Smith—Vargas Smith. There’s something I want to see him about at once.”

“Certainly. Here, pass the word there for Corporal Smith,” he called out.

“Oh, he’s promoted, then?”

“Well, yes. A sharp fellow, you know; helps me no end.”

But Corporal Smith was not forthcoming. He was nowhere to be found, in fact. He was not on guard, for he had been in the camp not long before the alarm, they said, but now there was no trace of him.

“How long before?”

Well, it might have been half an hour since he was seen, certainly not much more.

“Not less?”

No, not less. On that point they were all ready to swear.

“Even as I suspected,” thought Claverton to himself. And he waited some time longer talking to Lumley, and ironically bantering some of his former men for their contribution to the recent chaos.

“A set of smart fellows you are, eh, old Cobus?” he said, addressing one of the sergeants. “Blazing away all night at the stars and bushes.”

“Nay what, kaptyn,” rejoined the old Hottentot, shamefacedly. “You see a lot of us shooting like that must hit somebody. We shall find many of the schelms lying there in the morning.”

“Many of the schelms? Devil a bit. One or two of your own sentries, perhaps.”

“No—Kafirs, kaptyn.”

“Bah. There won’t be a leaf or a twig left on the bushes within a circle of two miles, perhaps, but if you find a single Kafir lying within it, I’ll engage to eat him.”

There was a roar of laughter, half deprecatory, half of intense amusement, from the group of listeners who had drawn near, at this sarcastic hit. But just then a diversion occurred in the shape of the reappearance of the missing Corporal Smith.

“Hallo, Smith; where the devil have you been?” cried Lumley.

“Been on guard, sir,” was the reply, in a tone which seemed to add, “and now shut up.”

“You weren’t told off.”

“I went because they said Gert Flinders was ill, and I took his place,” he said, with a touch of defiance.

Claverton, meanwhile, eyed him narrowly. Two impressions were present to his mind—one, the extremely loose state of discipline into which Lumley had let the corps drift; the other, which more nearly concerned himself, the evident anxiety of the Cuban mulatto to avoid further questioning. He noticed also, with one keen, swift glance, that that worthy wore a pair of new veldtschoens.

“By the way, on second thoughts it doesn’t matter to-night,” he said, carelessly. “To-morrow will do just as well, Smith. It’s late now, and it’s best to get things ship-shape after the row. Good-night, Lumley,” he added. “Come round and feed to-morrow night if we are still here,” and he went away.

By the time Claverton reached his tent all was quiet again. His companion had turned in, and was sleeping as unconcernedly as if beneath the roof of an English dwelling instead of having narrowly escaped being shot through the head by a nocturnal foe in the wilds of Kafirland. He hastened to turn in likewise, but not to sleep. Instinct led him to connect this last attempt upon his life with some evil hovering over himself and Lilian. For that he was the intended mark of the assassin’s bullet he had known the moment it was fired.

While it was yet dark Claverton left the camp quietly, and the first glimmer of dawn saw him narrowly searching for the spot whence the shot had been fired. It took him nearly

an hour, but he found it at last. And he found something more: he found three distinct footmarks—the print of a pair of new veldtschoens—in the damp soil, for a heavy dew had fallen in the night; and furthermore, sticking among the thorns, the tiny fragment of a flannel shirt of peculiar pattern. And a vindictive light came into the blue-grey eyes as he walked straight back to camp, murmuring to himself complacently:

“Just so—just as I suspected! Mr Corporal Vargas Smith—alias Sharkey—you have chosen to throw away your life again, and now, if you are above ground in six weeks at the outside from to-day, may I be beneath it!”

For a moment the resolve seized him to have the ruffian arrested. There was abundant evidence to convict him before a drum-head court-martial, but then the heads of the field forces would inevitably shrink from administering the extreme penalty; and besides, the question of motive must arise, which would be an inconvenient thing to be ventilated in public just then. No; the safest and best plan would be to pay the assassin in his own coin; and, strong-headed and unscrupulous in such a case as this, Claverton doubted not his ability to discharge the debt with interest.

He reached his tent in time to find a trooper dismounting there. The man looked hot, dusty, and tired, having ridden express from Cathcart with letters and despatches for the camp. Saluting, he handed a telegram to Claverton and withdrew. The latter held the ominous missive for a moment, regarding it with a blank stare, then, with a jerk, tore it open, and, at the first glimpse of its purport, his face became ashy. This is what he saw:

From Payne, Grahamstown.

To Claverton, Brathwaite's Horse, Colonial Forces in Gaika Location, via Cathcart.

Come at once, and at all risks. No cause for alarm, but come.

He looked at the date. The message had been handed in two days before, and had been lying at Cathcart for lack of an opportunity of transport. The words swam before his eyes, and his blood ran cold with a chill fear. This brooding presentiment, then, had not come upon him for nothing. Handing his companion the telegram, he strode to the door and called for Sam.

“Nkos?” and the native came running up with alacrity.

“Saddle-up Fleck and the young horse, Sam, and be ready to start in half an hour at the outside.”

“Yeh bo, 'Nkos,” replied Sam, too well accustomed to his master’s ways to be astonished at anything; and he retired to carry out his orders.

Quickly Claverton went over to arrange with Jim Brathwaite for his absence, and long before the appointed time he was ready to start. He fidgeted about, looking at his watch every moment; and lo, just three minutes short of the half-hour his retainer appeared with the two horses.

“My dear fellow, don’t give a thought to me,” said Naylor, warmly, in response to his explanations of this sudden departure. “I shall make myself comfortable while you are away, never fear. Now, don’t delay any longer. Your duty shall be looked after all right,” he added, and with a close hand grip he bade his friend farewell.

Claverton, with his trusty follower, sped on across the hostile ground, every yard of which might conceal a foe; but of this he took less than no heed. All his thoughts were ahead of him by the hundred and odd miles or so which he had to traverse. His plan was to change horses half-way, leaving Sam to follow at leisure, once they were well out of the localities where they might fall in with roving bands of the enemy; and to push on, even if he killed his steed in the undertaking. Away in the blue heavens clouds of vultures, the ubiquitous scavengers of Southern Africa, were visible, poised above the scene of the late conflict; and these grew fainter and fainter, till they were lost to view in the far distance, and the sun began to decline in the west as the travellers kept steadily on over hill and dale, carefully eschewing short cuts and keeping to the beaten track. Once they were descried by a group of Kafir scouts, who, from their position on a hill-top, opened fire at long range, and of course ineffectually.

“Sam,” exclaimed Claverton, as they were saddling up to continue their road, after a short halt, “there’s a devil of a storm coming up. Look there.”

The native glanced upwards. “There is, Inkos,” he replied; “but we may just ride through it and escape.”

Great inky clouds were gathering with alarming rapidity, and hastening to unite themselves to the dense black pall which drew on, silent, spectral, and gigantic, over the mountain-tops, and a dull, muffled roar boomed nearer and nearer between the fitful puffs of hot wind which fanned the travellers’ faces. And now the scene was a weird one indeed. They were just entering a long defile—for they had reached the mountains—and along the rugged crags of the lonely heights towering above on either side, the red flashes were playing. Higher and higher piled the solid cloud-masses, and a few large drops of rain began to patter upon the stones. The gloom deepened, and all Nature was hushed as if in preparation for the coming battle of the elements.

Hark! Was that the ring of a horse's hoof far down the pass? No. Not a human creature is abroad in this awesome place to-night, with the black, brooding storm overhead, and the clans of the savage enemy besetting every step of the road with peril. A huge bird of prey soars away from one of the desolate crags, uttering a hoarse, long-drawn cry like the wailing of a lost soul. It is pitch dark. Then a flash lights up the road, and Claverton, profiting by it, peers anxiously ahead.

"Come along, Sam. There's a smooth bit here, anyhow, and we can get over a good stride of ground," and, spurring up his horse, away he goes at a long, even canter, with the Natal boy close behind him striving to keep up; and the sparks fly from beneath the horses' hoofs as they dash on through the night. A roll of thunder—long, heavy, and appalling—peals through the pass, a vivid flash of plum-coloured flame, and Claverton suddenly reins in his steed—who, with a snort of terror, rears and shies—just in time to avoid charging headlong into another horseman advancing at an equally rapid pace from the contrary direction, and who also reins in with a jerk. A powerfully-built, dark-featured man who stifles a half-spoken ejaculation; but beyond that neither speak.

What is the spell thrown over these two as they sit their horses gazing at each other in the lightning's horrible, scathing gleam in that gloomy pass? Is it an instinct? It is more. In that one vivid flash occupying not a second of time, Claverton has recognised in this sudden apparition the man whom he had seen and heard in the deserted hut, deliberately instigating his assassination. He recognises something more. As, with a muttered "good-night," the other passes on into the gloom, the lightning flashes again, revealing upon his bridle-hand a curious ring. It is an exact facsimile of the lost ring which glittered in the moonbeams beneath the old pear-tree on that last night at Seringa Vale.

Chapter Seventeen.

“Give us Long Rest... Dare Death or Dreamful Ease.”

We left Lilian crushed beneath the weight of this fresh blow dealt her by the man who had been the curse of her life.

To a night of anguish—anguish so poignant that she sometimes feared for her very reason—succeeded days of dull and hopeless apathy. Her whole being, body and soul alike, seemed to be numb and dead. She could not talk, she dared not think, nor could she pray. Even that last resource was denied her; for there came upon her a miserable feeling of fatality, that her God had forsaken her, leaving her to be the sport of some cruel demon. And, amid her apathy, her thoughts would, in spite of herself, float dreamily back in a mechanical kind of way to all that had gone before. She had been sad-hearted then in the temporary separation from her lover; but now! that time was ecstasy itself in comparison with this. Somehow, it never occurred to her to doubt one word of Truscott's statement. He had been so positive, so resolute, that it must be true. And then she remembered the hundred and one little incidents—hints that her lover had let fall—uneasiness manifested on an occasion—the veiled compunction with which he had touched upon his former life—all stood out now in startling conspicuousness. Even that day had opened so propitiously, and lo, within one single hour, life was ended for her.

Sorely anxious were the Paynes over this fell change which had come upon her on that sunny afternoon. They could elicit nothing from her. She was not well, she admitted, but would be all right in a day or two, no doubt. And this, with such a ghost of a smile upon her white face, that Payne, suddenly struck with an idea, snatched up his hat and rushed down into the town to inquire if any fresh news had been received from the seat of war. Had she, unknown to them, heard that harm had befallen her lover? If so, that would amply account for the depression. So he went diligently to work to hunt up news; but no telegrams of a dispiriting nature had been received, quite the contrary—the enemy had had another thrashing, and there was no mention of loss on the colonial side. All this was a relief to Payne. But sorely puzzled; indeed, completely baffled; he returned to his wife and reported accordingly.

“I tell you what, George,” she began, and her face wore a troubled and concerned expression. “I've heard something—something that makes me think this Captain Truscott's at the bottom of it.”

“Eh?”

“Well, he was here yesterday afternoon for more than two hours, and Lilian hasn’t been herself since. She didn’t tell me, but I heard it while you were out.”

Payne stared at her blankly, but made no reply.

“You know I never did like that man,” continued she. “I told you so at first. And I’m perfectly certain that he and Lilian are something more than merely old acquaintances.” And then she told him of the latter’s dismayed look on first recognising Truscott in the crowd, and one or two other things that had not escaped her observation. “He has been persecuting her in some way, I’m sure, and I won’t have her persecuted,” concluded the warm-hearted little woman.

Payne was whistling meditatively. He had a high opinion of his wife’s intelligence in all matters relating to the idiosyncrasies of her sex, so he would just let her go on.

“Well, what’s to be done?” he said. “We can’t ask the fellow what the devil he’s been up to, and Lilian won’t tell us.”

“Can’t we? I think we can, and ought.”

Payne shook his head, and looked gloomy. The affair was beginning to assume a serious phase. It was a delicate business, and the honest frontiersman felt thoroughly perplexed. He did not want to make a fool of himself, or of any one else, through officiousness or meddling.

“I know a trick worth two of that, Annie,” he said at last.

“What is it?”

“Wire to Claverton. Eh?”

She paused. “Well, perhaps that would be the best plan.”

“Good. I’ll cut down and do it now.” And, sliding from the table whereon he had been seated swinging his legs, he reached down a jar of tobacco from a shelf, and hastily cramming his pipe, started off. “What shall I tell him, though?” he asked, suddenly stopping in the doorway. “Won’t do to pitch it too strong, eh?”

“N-no. Wait a bit,” and then she concocted the message which we have seen Claverton receive; and Payne being on his way to despatch it, she turned away with a look of relief over the prospect of decreasing responsibility.

Lilian, meanwhile, had become a mere shadow of her old self, and the one spark of comfort left to her was that her persecutor had kept himself out of her sight. For he had left the city, bound for the seat of war, and, for reasons of his own, he had refrained from bidding farewell to the Paynes in person, but had sent a note explaining that he was ordered off at a minute's warning. He had got a command at last, he said; only some levies, at present, but still that was something to go on with, and he must leave for the front immediately. Which missive was read by its recipients with feelings of decided relief.

The fact was, the gallant Truscott began to suspect that it might be advisable for him to take himself out of the way for a time, and he had no desire to meet his rival in person. Let the two settle it as best they might, was his cynical reflection; settle it they must, and to his, Truscott's, satisfaction—on that point he felt perfectly safe. He had played a bold game and had won, and, now that he had won, it would never do to spoil it by any chance blundering. So with a few lines of renewed warning, merciless, pithy, and to the point, posted to Lilian—the wily scoundrel departed for the seat of war, and unless a well-aimed bullet should pierce the black, scheming heart, and of that there was but small chance, there would be no more happiness for her on earth. There were times when she would almost make up her mind to throw off the hateful thrall, to defy him to do his worst, whatever that worst might be; but then would rise up the frightful facts, as he had laid them before her in all their nakedness, and she would fall asleep, only to be haunted by a series of terrible dreams; visions of a crowded court hushed to a deathly silence in expectation of the dread sentence; of a small group in a grim gaol-yard, in the chill morning—one face among them lit up with fiendish exaltation—a noose, a gallows, and a black, hideous beam.

“My love—my sweet lost love!” she would moan, waking from one of these frightful fantasies in a flood of streaming tears. “Was it for this you were restored to me again? Ah, why did we ever meet?” And the black, silent hours melted away into dawn, but brought with them no comfort. More than once had her affectionate hostess tried to get at the secret of her grief—but Lilian was firm. Meanwhile, the Paynes began to grow seriously alarmed. A very little more of this, and the results would be disastrous. Nothing had been heard of the telegram, and they became more and more anxious every day.

“Miss Strange, do let's go for a walk when I come back; it'll be such a lovely evening.” The speaker was Rose Payne, who was hurriedly gathering up her books, and cramming them into a bag, preparatory to starting for afternoon school.

“So we will, dear. Only you must come back in good time.”

“Won’t I?” gleefully cried the little girl, flinging her arms round Lilian’s neck. She was rapturously fond of her former preceptress, all the more so, perhaps, now that she was subjected to the sterner discipline of school; and a long, quiet evening walk with Lilian, all to herself, was a treat indeed. “Won’t I just come straight back! It’ll be nice and cool then, and we can go ever so far over the hill, above Fern Kloof. So long, till four.”

“Good-bye, Rosie dear,” replied Lilian, kissing the child affectionately, and, with a sigh, watching her bound light-heartedly away. Then she turned from the doorway, and, with a drooping gesture of abandonment, threw herself into a low chair. The Paynes were out somewhere, and, as on that former afternoon, she had the house entirely to herself. The soft air came in through the open windows, warm but not oppressive, from the tree-fringed shade. A great striped butterfly floated in, and, scarcely aware of its mistake, fluttered around a large vase of flowers upon the table. And still she sat, heedless of everything, with her hands pressed to her face, thinking, thinking—ever thinking.

“Only four days ago,” she said to herself, “four short days—and now! Ah, God, it is too cruel!” and the tears welled forth and slowly began to force their way through the closed fingers.

The hum of the voices of a couple of passers-by sound drowsily upon the calm; then, the ring of hoofs coming up the street at a rapid canter. It stops, as if some one had reined in before the door—but she heeds it not. Some one dismounting at the next house, she thinks. Then a quick, firm tread in the passage, and a man is standing inside the room. With a low, startled cry, Lilian looks up and falls back in her chair in a deathly faint. It is Claverton.

In a moment he is beside her, and has her in his arms. “Oh, Lilian, my darling! What is this? They did right to send for me—Good God, Lilian! Why, what have you been doing with yourself to get like this?” he adds, in a tone of undisguised alarm, startled by her white and dejected looks.

But no reply can she make. Fairly taken by storm, she is clinging tightly to him, her face buried in his breast. Only a convulsive sob shakes her frame from head to foot.

“What have you been doing with yourself, child?” he continues, vehemently. “Why, you are as white and pale as the mere ghost of your former self. Lilian!” but still she cannot answer. “Lilian; look at me, I say. I have ridden straight here, day and night as hard as I could ride, to come to you and never to leave you again.”

He paused; but the expected words of joy and of love came not. Suddenly she drew herself away from him, and the look on her face was as the look of death. Already she had failed to keep her side of the compact—that compact written in tears, and sealed with the throes of a breaking heart—and she had doomed him. No, but she would not.

“Arthur, you must leave me. Now, at once, before it is too late,” she exclaimed, in a quick, alarmed tone.

“Lilian. Are you mad?”

Not a shade of anger or reproach is there in his voice. Amazement and indulgent tenderness alone are to be traced.

And she? Frantic with apprehension, she knew not what to say. To warn him of danger would be but to drive him right into its jaws. What should she do? Ah! That was it. The old promise.

“Lilian, what has come between us, now? Only tell me, darling, and it will all be cleared away.”

It was terrible. Her brain reeled as, with wild, dilated eyes, she stood gazing at him. His presence was so unexpected—it had burst upon her like a thunderbolt. He had, as he said, travelled night and day to reach her side—and now she must bid him leave her for ever though it broke her heart, as it certainly would. They two must never look upon each other again in life. Then her brain grew cold and steady. She must not flinch, she must save him from this ruthless enemy at all and whatever cost to herself. To herself! Ah, but—and to him? The answer to this question flashed across her determination—the consciousness of how valueless would be the life she was about to save. Yet—O God! the recollection of those terrible, menacing words! She sank her head into her clasped hands and shuddered. Again, so softly, so tenderly, he repeated his question:

“Lilian; what has come between us? Tell me, darling!”

She threw back her head with a quick movement, as if quivering beneath the torture.

“My former promise, Arthur. You remember,” and averting her face, again she shuddered from head to foot. “He is not—dead—as I thought.”

“And then—?”

“I cannot break it. I thought him dead—but now—I cannot break it. God help me!—help us both!”

A devil took possession of Claverton’s heart, and the fixed, vengeful look in his face was awful to behold as he murmured to himself: “God help him. If he is not dead he soon will be—or I.” Then aloud: “Lilian, you vowed once that nothing ever should part us. You remember, darling.”

The voice was even more gentle than before. Had it been otherwise she could almost better have borne it—and yet not. A fraction of a second and she had yielded, had thrown herself into his arms; but again the savage threats of Truscott and the diabolical malice of his tones and looks rose up before her, and she felt strong again. In a paroxysm of that love, which was at once her strength and her weakness, she cried:

“I cannot—I cannot, Arthur. I am too weak, and that you must see. I cannot break that promise. You must go—go and curse my name and memory—if it be worth cursing, to the end of your days. And I—O God! let me die!”

The forced, unnatural hardness which she had thrown into her voice, struck upon his ear, filling him with amazement and dismay. It was all like a bad dream. He could hardly realise that she was actually trying to cast him off. From any other living soul guilty of such vacillating treachery, he would have turned away in scarcely surprised scorn. To this woman, rather than speak one word of anger, reproach, or blame—and what is harder—rather than think it, he would have died a thousand deaths. How he loved her! Her very weakness was sacred to him. It was thrown upon his tenderness, now; it was for him to handle it tenderly, not to crush it—and her. And a curious thrill of ghastly comfort shot through him in the thought that even at this fearful moment, when his heart was sick with bitter despair, he was really proving the strength of his love by something more than words. Three times now had she repulsed him, each under circumstances more cruel than the previous one—but the loyal love of the man never flinched—never swerved by a single hair’s breadth. And he must be very gentle and indulgent with her now.

“Lilian, my sweet, you hardly know what you are saying,” he answered, imprinting a shower of passionate kisses on the trembling, ashy lips. “I’m not going to take what you tell me, in earnest at all.”

“Spare me—spare me,” she moaned, shuddering in his embrace. “I meant it—all, and—”

“Hi—Halloa! Here’s some fellow’s horse got into the garden!” cried a man’s voice outside. “Yek—yek! Hi! Jafta. Turn the infernal brute out. He’s broken down the fence in

two places—confound it—which means a claim for five pounds from old Cooke next door. Out, you brute!” and a sound was heard of a stone, launched by an incensed hand, striking violently against the paling, while the offending quadruped, tearing his way through and carrying with him two yards of fence, bolted off, snorting and kicking, down the road.

“What’ll the owner do, George?” said another voice approaching the front door. “Goodness knows where that horse’ll bolt to, now.”

“Blazes, I hope—and his owner after him,” replied Payne, surveying resentfully the receding form of the trespasser. “Why the deuce can’t fellows tie their horses up when they leave ’em in the streets? O Lord!”

This last ejaculation was caused by the sight of Claverton, who had come quickly to the door to meet them and to give Lilian time to recover herself, and at whom the speaker stood staring open-mouthed and somewhat dismayed.

“Was that your horse, old chap?” he asked, dubiously, shaking hands with the new arrival and experiencing a sensation of huge relief because of his presence.

“It was; but it may be the possession of some one else by now. Bother the horse, though. I say, Payne, I want to talk to you.”

“One minute, old chap. Here, Jafta—Jafta,” he called out to his boy. “Go and catch that horse again. Look sharp—run like the devil. If you bring him back within a quarter of an hour I’ll give you a shilling.”

Away went Jafta, and Payne, glad of the momentary delay, returned to Claverton sorely perplexed. He had sent for him, indeed, but didn’t know what the deuce to say to him now that he had come. It was more within a woman’s province, he thought; and there and then his spouse came to the rescue, taking the affair into her own hands.

“Come inside, Mr Claverton,” she said. “I’m so glad you’re here.” And then, when they were alone, she told him everything that had happened, from the day they had first seen Truscott until the moment of their going out that afternoon just before his arrival.

He listened quietly. A deadly resolve was shaping itself within his heart.

“What sort of a man is this Truscott—I mean what sort of a looking man?” he asked.

She described him, and the listener immediately recognised the portrait. The whole scheme was clear to him now. There was no question of money at the bottom of this man's hostility towards him. Either the mulatto was lying when he had told him this, or, more probably, the other had given such a reason in order to conceal the real one. No. It was to rob him of Lilian that his would-be assassin was plotting. He was wise, indeed, to hire the bravo's steel in the shape of Sharkey—for he might have been sure that only death would part him from Lilian. Ralph Truscott, look to yourself now. It is no woman, weak in the very helplessness of her love, with whom you have to deal this time. You have, indeed, cause to meditate.

"He's gone to the front, has he?" continued Claverton. "Whereabouts? Do you know?"

Annie Payne looked at him with a troubled air. She knew well her interlocutor's determination and daring, and she saw breakers ahead.

"But it will be all right now that you are back again," she ventured. She greatly feared otherwise; still, one must hope for the best.

The dark look deepened over his features. He hardly seemed to hear her, but stood gazing through the open window.

"I must go," he exclaimed, suddenly. "Where is Lilian?" and with three strides he gained the other room. It was empty. "Ah, better so, perhaps," he muttered to himself. "Mrs Payne, tell her, with my love, that a very few days will see me back here again, and everything will come right then. Now I must not lose another moment. Good-bye, for a few days."

"What are you going to do?" was the reply, spoken in a tone of alarm. "Wait. Don't be in such a hurry. You can't rush off at once. You must off-saddle if only for an hour. Anyhow, wait until George comes back. Ah, there he is."

For at that moment George appeared, leading the runaway by the bridle. The joint exertions of himself and his stable-boy had availed to catch the trespasser just in time to prevent his doing further damage.

Claverton was firm in his refusal. He had his own reasons for wishing to leave that house. Not even the smallest risk would he run of being tempted to forego the purpose he had in hand, for a single instant.

“Here’s your critter, old chap,” cried Payne, panting from the effects of his ran. “Jerusalem! What a cheffy we had after the beggar—Eh? What? Going away! Not to be thought of.”

“But I am!” replied the other in a tone of settled resolve, as he prepared to fling the bridle over the animal’s neck. “Shall be back again in four or five days. Hold on. Just walk a little way down the street with me.”

They walked on. Payne’s brow growing more and more serious as he listened. He had a great regard for this man, who had stepped in to his rescue twice at a very critical moment.

“My dear Claverton, be careful what you are about,” he said, gravely. “It’s a devilish awkward business, and at any other time than during the war it would be impossible.”

“Oh, I’ve served my apprenticeship in a good school for caution, never fear. But, you’ll see me again in a few days or—you’ll never see me at all.”

Payne made no reply. Suddenly he looked up at a house they were passing. It was a small house standing back from the street.

“By the way. We were awfully sorry to hear about that poor fellow Armitage,” he said. “His wife is staying there.”

“Staying there? In that house? Why, I thought she was in ‘King.’”

“No. She came down here about a week ago—she only heard about the poor fellow the day before yesterday.”

“Is she very much cut up?”

“Dreadfully, I’m told. She is staying with another friend of yours—Mrs Hicks.”

“Then she’s in good hands. Look here, Payne. I’ll go in for a moment and ask after her—poor little thing. And if I’m not out in five minutes, just take my horse round to Wood’s and make them off-saddle him and give him a feed. It’s all on my way and it’ll save time. I’ll join you there, if you don’t mind waiting.”

Quickly walking up the little gravel path bordered with orange-trees, and shaded with trellised vines, Claverton knocked gently at the door. A subdued footstep in the silent passage, and it was opened—by Laura. She stared at him in amazement.

“Why, when did you come? I thought you were away at the front. Do come in.” A superfluous request, seeing that she had already shut the door behind him. “Poor Gertie will like to see you.”

“How does she bear it?”

“She is dreadfully down-hearted. At first I was quite alarmed for her, but I think the worst is over now. She was very fond of poor Jack.”

“So were we all. Even such a leather-hearted curmudgeon as your humble servant.”

“It is no fault of yours that the poor fellow is not alive at this moment,” rejoined Laura, with warmth. “We heard all about it.” All this time she had been furtively watching him, and noting, with some astonishment, his listless and dejected air. It was owing to no regret for his deceased comrade, she was certain of that. What could be going wrong with him?

“My dear Laura, I give you my word for it there was nothing to hear,” he replied; and seeing that the subject was distasteful to him, she left him, to go and prepare poor Gertie for his visit.

Claverton wished he could have forgotten his own trouble as he stood in the presence of the young widow—this mere girl—sorrowing for the loss of him with whom she had begun to tread life’s path. Very happy and bright had that path been to her—to them both—during those short two years. Very happy and peaceful would it have continued to be; but now he was gone—snatched away from her suddenly by the merciless bullet of the savage foe—shot down in the dark forest. He lay, cold in his grave, far away in the wilds of Kafirland; and his gleeful laugh, and sunny glance, would gladden her heart and her eyes no more. No wonder a rush of tears came to her eyes, as she remembered under what circumstances she had last seen her visitor. And now she was desolate and alone.

Claverton held her hand in his strong, friendly grasp, and, when the first paroxysm of her reopened grief was spent, gently he narrated the circumstances of poor Armitage’s last moments; how his last thoughts and care had been for her; how her name had been almost the last words upon his lips. Then he dwelt upon the dead man’s popularity, and the blank his loss would leave in the ranks of his comrades, not one of whom but would have risked life to save him had they known before it was too late. And there was that in the gentle, sympathetic voice, which soothed and comforted the girl-widow, sorrowing there as one who had no hope.

“My bright-hearted Jack! I shall never see you again. Would that I had been more loving to you while you were here,” she murmured, and, bowing her head into her hands, again she wept.

“That I am sure you could not have been,” answered Claverton, gently, placing his hand upon her shoulder, and looking down on her with infinite pity. “Child, believe me, there are losses more bitter even than those inflicted upon as by death. Now, I must go. Good-bye—I am returning to camp now; but I shall come and see you again soon, and you must try and keep up your spirits.”

She seized his hand. “You risked your life to save his. No—it’s of no use denying it—you did. God bless you for it, and those who were with you. Tell them from me, when you go back, that I thank them. Good-bye. God bless you—and Lilian.”

This was too much. The chord of his own grief thus suddenly touched, vibrated loudly. With a silent pressure of the hand, he left her.

“Any message for Hicks?” he asked, as Laura met him in the passage.

“What! Why, you are never going back to the front already?” answered she, gazing at him in astonishment.

“I am—straight. In an hour’s time I shall be at least eight or nine miles on the road.”

She saw that he meant it, and her woman’s wit saw at once that something was wrong.

“I am very sorry,” she said. “Do wait ten minutes while I write a line to Alfred. He will like to get it direct, and the post is such a chance.”

A superstitious foreboding took hold of Claverton’s mind as he watched her bending over her writing-case at the other side of the room. This miserable war had made one widow immediately within their own circle, Heaven grant that it might not make two. It seemed that nothing but ill-luck had befallen that once happy circle since he had joined it—as if his presence had something baleful about it, and was destined to work harm to all with whom he came in contact. Ah, well, he had one more mission to fulfil, and then what became of him did not much matter. So Laura having finished her letter he bade her farewell, promising to deliver it as soon as he reached the camp.

“I tell you what it is, Claverton. You’ll have to ride that animal rather carefully, or he’ll never carry you all the way,” remarked Payne, eyeing the horse critically as his rider, having hastily buckled the last strap, swung himself into the saddle.

“No, I’ve ridden his tail nearly off as it is. But I shall meet Sam on the road, and shall change. Good-bye, or rather, so long. You’ll see me again in about a week—barring accidents.”

Payne’s heart sank within him. There was a reckless, determined ring in the other’s tone that meant volumes; and he shook his head sadly as he watched him ride away down the street. Then he walked slowly home, lost in thought.

Chapter Eighteen.

Trapped.

“When did he begin to go lame, Sam?”

“About two hours the other side of this, Inkos. I had to lead him all the way here.”

Claverton bends down again to examine the horse’s leg, and the light of the stable-lantern reveals an expression of the most intense and hopeless disgust upon his face. The stable is that belonging to the inn half-way along the King Williamstown road, the hour is shortly after midnight, and he has only just arrived. He has ridden untiringly, not sparing his mount, which indeed can hardly go a pace further; and now his other horse, which he has been counting on as a relay, is dead lame. It will be remembered that he had left Sam on the road, with orders to rest his horse and follow him at leisure. Shortly after Sam had seen his master’s back disappear over the rising ground, the animal began to go lame. Carefully the Natal boy examined his feet. There was no shoe loose, no stone in the frog—no. Poor Fleck had strained a sinew, and, by dint of much toil and considerable pain, the horse managed to reach the inn with his fetlock swelled to a ball.

“Sam, I must get on; and at once. Is there no one here who could sell me a horse?” The native thought a moment. “There are two men who came down from the camp to-day, Inkos, but their horses are used up. There’s a Dutchman going up there, he has an extra horse. That’s it; this one over here,” and, taking the lantern, Sam led the way to the other end of the stable. Claverton ran his eye over the animal designated. It was a large, young horse, well put together and in tolerable condition, but it rolled the whites of its eyes and laid its ears back in suggestive fashion.

“Looks skittish,” mused Claverton, as with a wild snort the animal backed and began “rucking” at its tether, then bounding suddenly forward, came with a fracas against the rickety crib, and stood snorting and trembling and rolling its eyes. “Half-broken evidently. What’s the fellow’s name, Sam?”

“Oppermann. Cornelius Oppermann, Inkos.”

“H’m. Getting light,” he mused, opening the door and looking skywards. “Sam, I’m going to buy that brute anyhow, and go straight on at once. Now you must wait till the young horse is rested, and take him back to Payne’s. Fleck can stay here. And, Sam,” he went on in a graver tone, “you are to wait there till I come back. Do everything they tell you; and if they send you to me, come at once and as quickly as you can. You see?”

Sam looked crestfallen. He had reckoned upon accompanying his master back to the war. But with the unswerving loyalty of his race towards those whom they hold in veneration he made no demur, and promised faithfully to carry out his master's wishes to the best of his ability.

Ten minutes later Claverton was standing on the stoep of the inn, bargaining with an unkempt, sandy-bearded Dutchman, who, hastily arrayed in his shirt and trousers, stood rubbing his eyes with the air of a man just aroused from a sound sleep; as, indeed, was the case.

"You can take him for forty-five pounds," the latter was saying, having finished a cavernous yawn.

"Ha—ha—ha! Forty-five? Now look here, Oppermann," answered Claverton in a chaffing, good-natured tone. "You're not awake yet, man, or you'd remember the brute wasn't worth a dollar more than twenty. He isn't half-broken, to begin with."

"Twenty. Nay, what? You shall have him for forty."

"I rather want him, but I'm in no hurry," was the reply. "Here's thirty, down on the nail. Look."

He pulled out some notes, and the Dutchman's eyes glittered.

"Thirty-five?" he began.

"No. Thirty. Take it or—leave it."

"Well, well. Give me the money," and he held out his hand. But Claverton was not quite so "green" as all that.

"Here, Sam," he called out. "Look. The Baas has sold me the horse we were looking at for thirty pounds," and he handed over the money to the expectant Boer, thus making Sam a witness to the transaction. "Now go and saddle him up," he continued.

"Are you starting so soon?" said Oppermann, with surprise. "I'm going up to the camp—we might ride together. Wait a little quarter of an hour."

"Can't wait a moment longer. Look sharp."

The other disappeared with alacrity. He had been looking forward with some apprehension to his lonely journey across the hostile ground, and the escort and companionship of this cool, clear-headed Englishman would be a perfect godsend to him. So he soon hurried through his scant preparations, and by the time Claverton had settled with the host, and had saddled up, the Boer was nearly ready.

Two rough-looking fellows were talking to the landlord in front of the door as Claverton was about to start. They were the two referred to by Sam as having just come from the war.

“I say, Mister,” called out one of them. “You’re not going all the way alone, are you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, now—if I might be so bold as to advise—you be a bit careful. A lot more of them Kafirs have broken out, and there are gangs of ’em out all over this side of the Buffalo range, and that’s where you’ll have to cut through to reach the main camp—unless you go all the way round by ‘King,’ which’ll take you a day longer.”

“Well, I shan’t do that, anyhow. Thanks for the hint, all the same. Here, Sam.”

“Inkos?”

“Don’t forget what I told you, and—here—give this to Miss Lilian.”

“This” was a note, and the speaker’s tone trembled ever so slightly over the name.

“Yeh bo, Inkos,” replied Sam, earnestly. Then a sudden impulse seized him, and, bending down, he kissed his master’s foot as it rested in the stirrup. A vague superstitious thrill shot through Claverton’s heart. These natives were sometimes gifted with marvellous presage. Did this touching act of homage on the part of his humble follower portend that they would never see each other again. Claverton put out his hand.

“Good-bye, Sam. Mind what I told you.”

The native took it shyly. Then he turned away, his eyes sparkling as he held up his head proudly. His master had shaken hands with him—a black man. Death itself would be nothing to what he would willingly undergo for that master. Meanwhile the white spectators smiled indulgently among themselves. They did not sneer; a little of Claverton’s reputation had been noised abroad, and they respected him too much. But

some of these Englishmen were such queer fellows. Shaking hands with a nigger, for instance—etcetera, etcetera!

The temporary diversion afforded by these preparations and precautions over, Claverton's thoughts again ran in the old channel. He gazed on the mountain range in front of him, peak after peak rising up to the eternal blue, and remembered how they two had looked on them together from that very spot when all seemed so secure and propitious not much more than a couple of months before; and it was like the mocking smile of a demon, this same landscape smiling on him now in the bright fresh morning. Something or other made his mind recur to poor Herbert Spalding plunging overboard in the dead of night deliberately intending to take his own life, and the thought stung him like a spur. He would take not his own life, but that of the man who had taken what was far dearer to him than his own life. Every stride of his horse was bringing him nearer and nearer to his sure vengeance.

The sound of hoofs behind interrupted his meditations, and the Boer, whom true to his word he had not waited for a minute beyond the stipulated time, overtook him, riding at a gallop. He frowned. In no mood for conversation, he would be obliged to listen to and answer the commonplaces of this lout, and there was no getting rid of him. But the Dutchman was of the taciturn order. In half an hour his topics of conversation were used up, and he was content to jog along in silence by the side of his companion, who certainly gave him no encouragement to break it. Thus the day wore on, and by the middle of the afternoon they were in among the mountains. Hitherto there had been little sign of disturbance. They had passed a few farmsteads and a native kraal or two—the latter still inhabited by so-called "loyals," in other words, natives who did not fight against the Government themselves, but assisted with supplies and information those who did. But even these habitations had ceased now, and they wound their way through the great gloomy gorges covered with dense bush, where the sentinel baboons eat and looked down upon them from many an overhanging cliff, which echoed their loud resounding bark.

Suddenly their steeds pricked up their ears, with an inquiring snort. Promptly Claverton's revolver was in his hand, while his companion held his rifle—an excellent Martini-Henry—ready on his hip. Something was heard approaching.

"Kafirs!" exclaimed the Dutchman, excitedly.

"Tsh! No; it's a horseman."

It was—and a strange figure he cut as at that moment he appeared round a bend in the track. A middle-sized, plebeian-looking man, mounted on a sorry nag. His hair, and the

wispy scraps of beard stuck about his parchment-coloured visage, were of a neutral tint; and a snub nose, and projecting lower jaw, in no wise prepossessed one towards the individual. He was arrayed in a rusty suit of black, and a dirty white tie was stuck half in half out of the throat of his clerical waistcoat, and he sat his horse “like a tailor;” but the most grotesque article of this out-of-keeping costume was his hat—a reduced “chimney-pot,” with a huge puggaree wound turban-wise about the crown, the ends falling down over the wearer’s back.

“Bah!” exclaimed Claverton. “Why, it’s a parson. What the deuce can he be doing here?”

The stranger’s countenance lighted up with satisfaction at sight of the pair.

“This is a relief,” he said. “I thought I should never get out of this dreadful bush alive.”

“Where were you going to?” asked Claverton. “I was going to take a short cut through to Cathcart. They told me the way was safe, and now I find it isn’t. The whole bush is full of Kafirs. I could hear them calling to each other in every direction.”

“Quite sure it wasn’t baboons?”

“Oh, yes; I saw them—hundreds of them. Luckily they didn’t see me. It was in trying to avoid them that I lost myself.”

“Where did you say they were?” went on Claverton. He had formed no very high opinion of his new acquaintance, who informed him that his name was Swaysland, and that he was a missionary.

“Over in that next kloof. But you are not going on, surely? The way is not safe, indeed it is not.”

“We are, though—straight. But I—”

The words were cut short, for the young horse, all unbroken as it was, gave a violent shy, which, taking its rider unawares, nearly unseated him, so unexpected was it. And, simultaneously, several red forms rose up amid the bushes three hundred yards in their rear and poured in a rattling volley, but, as usual, firing well over the heads of their destined victims.

“By Jove! there they are,” cried Claverton. “Come along; there’s no turning back now. We must ride like the devil,” and he spurred along the path followed closely by the other two. At least two hundred Kafirs sprang up and started in pursuit, discharging their

pieces as they leaped from cover with a fierce shout, and the bullets whistled around the fugitives with a sharp, shrill hiss.

“Come on, Mr Swaysland. Spur up that nag of yours; we shall get a good start here,” cried Claverton, as they reached a comparatively open plateau of about a mile in extent. But it was uphill ground and rough withal, and the pursuers were only too evidently gaining on them.

Pphit! Pphit! A bullet ploughs up the ground almost between the very hoofs of Claverton’s horse, while another splinters itself against a stone just in front.

“The devil! It’s getting lively,” he ejaculated as, without slackening speed, he looked round for a target for his revolver. The missionary was deathly white, and cut a grotesque figure, spurring up his seedy animal, almost holding on round its neck, while the flaps of his long-tailed coat and the ends of his puggaree streamed out behind him. For the life of him Claverton could not repress a laugh.

Suddenly the Dutchman lurches in his saddle and falls headlong to the ground—shot dead by one of the pursuers, whose bullet has entered between the shoulders—probably to the great surprise of the marksman. His horse, terrified, starts off, dragging him in the stirrup for a few paces, then his foot disentangles itself and he lies an inanimate heap. With a wild-beast howl the savages bound forward, and Claverton, glancing over his shoulder, can see a score of assegais flash and gleam blood-red in the sunshine, as the fierce warriors crowd round the ill-fated Boer, literally cutting him to pieces.

Like wolves delayed in the pursuit of a sledge by a forestalment of the prey which must eventually be theirs, the Kafirs halt for a moment, each eager to bury his spear-head in the body of the fallen man; but it is only for a moment. With a wild yell of triumph they press on—thirsting for more blood. A sudden groan from his companion causes Claverton to turn his head. Is he hit, too? The missionary’s face is livid with terror, and following the glance of the staring, dilated eyeballs—dilated with a fear that has almost mania in it—all hope dies within him. A dense swarm of Kafirs is issuing from the bush immediately in front, and the two white men are thus securely caught, as in a trap. For on the only side left open falls a huge precipice, down which nothing breathing can go—and live.

“God help us?” exclaimed the missionary. “We are lost,” and he fell to the ground in a dead faint.

Claverton reins in his horse, and confronts the savages, with a calm brow and revolver in hand. Death has overtaken him at last. He has stared the grim Monarch in the face full

oft, but now his time has come. He feels that his lucky star has set; his meeting with Lilian yesterday—only yesterday—was the beginning of the end. What can a man do when his star has set? All this runs through his mind like a lightning-flash.

It is a marvellous picture, that last scene in the awful drama on this lonely mountain top. The sweet golden sunshine falls upon a crowd of bounding shapes, sweeping forward in a fast diminishing semicircle, and the still air is rent with fiendish howls. Eyeballs roll with a merciless gleam, white teeth are bared in grinning triumph, and the pointed blades of the assegais bristle like a forest among the leaping, naked red bodies. And turning to confront this hideous array—calmly awaiting the approach of his destroyers, this one man—cool, fearless, and noble-looking—sits his horse, whose terrified restiveness he can scarcely curb with one hand, while in the other he holds his revolver in a firm, steady grasp. Before him, the spears of the savage host; behind, the awful brow of the cliff. A ghastly choice.

The Kafirs have ceased firing and are advancing eagerly to secure their prey. They will take him alive.

“Ha, ha, ha!” A mocking laugh goes up from their midst. “You are in a trap, white man. Better yield!” cry some; while others, eager for such a rare spectacle as a man taking a flying leap into four hundred feet of space, wave their weapons and shout madly in the hope of terrifying the horse and driving it over.

“Does even a wolf yield without biting?” is the cold, scornful answer. Not a dozen paces lie between him and the brink of the precipice, towards which he is backing his horse, step by step.

Fifty yards—forty—thirty. They approach more leisurely now, sure of their capture.

He raises his revolver and fires. One of the foremost falls headlong upon the ground, clutching it with his hands, as his body quivers in the throes of death. But the young horse, maddened by the sudden flash and report and the onward rush of the advancing crowd, plunges and rears, uttering a frenzied squeal. Three steps more. No power short of a miracle can save him now. The frantic hoof-strokes rip up the sward in long furrows—and then a plunge—a slide and a struggle—they are gone! Horse and man have disappeared. A moment of dead silence—a crash and a dull thud is heard far beneath. And then a wild shout—in which awe, and admiration, and baffled rage are all mingled—arises from the savages, one and all of whom press forward to peer over the giddy height.

Nothing can they see, however. A few leaves and broken twigs, scattered by the fall of a heavy body through the tangled bushes sprouting here and there from a crevice or ledge in the face of the cliff, float upon the air; beneath, the great sweep of dense bush lies silent and unbroken; a few vultures glide lazily off from the rugged cliffs opposite, looking in the distance like great white feathers as they soar over the broad valley; but nothing is to be seen lying below, neither horse nor man. At length their keen eyes detected a spot where the bush was slightly displaced.

“Ha—there he is! Good. His bones will be like the stamped mealies in the mortar, after that jump. Aow!”

A low laugh greeted this speech, and the Kafirs were about to turn away in quest of fresh excitement, when one of their number—a tall, evil-looking barbarian—who had been lying flat on his stomach narrowly scanning the bush beneath, exclaimed:

“Wait. Are you going to leave him on the chance of his being dead? He may not be dead, I tell you. He may not be even hurt.”

A mighty shout of laughter greeted this utterance.

“Ha, ha! Not dead—not even hurt! Whaaow! What madness! Is the white man a bird, that he can fly down there? Did any one see his wings?” Such were the derisive comments on the proposal of the first speaker, who waited with a sneer upon his face until they had done, and then went on:

“He is not a bird, but he is something else. He is a wizard—a devil. I tell you I know this white man. He is no ordinary man. I have seen him escape where no one but a wizard could have done it; not once, but twice, three times. Now, are you sure he is dead? Will you leave it to chance?”

A murmur of mingled assent and incredulity rose from the listeners. Some shook their heads and smiled scornfully, but the majority evidently thought there was “something in it.”

“And even if he is dead,” continued the first speaker. “Even if he is dead, what a war-potion could be made out of the heart of such a man! Haow!”

This decided them, and, with a ferocious hum of anticipation, they started off to descend into the valley round the end of the cliff, and make sure of their prey; leaving a few behind to secure the missionary.

The unfortunate preacher was still lying where he had fallen in a faint, and the Kafirs had been too fully occupied with their principal foe to pay any attention to him. Now, however, they clustered round him, examining him curiously.

“Get up, white man!” cried one of the party, roughly, adding force to the injunction by a sharp prick with his assegai. The victim gave a groan and opened his eyes, but shut them again with a gasp of terror, and a prayer for mercy escaped his lips at the sight of the scowling dark faces and gleaming assegai points, some of them red with blood.

A muttered consultation took place. The captive must be taken to the chief, Sandili. He was the first white man captured alive during the war.

“Whaow! It is not a warrior, it is a miserable Umfundisi,” (Preacher) said the most important man of the group, with a contemptuous scowl on his fierce, wrinkled countenance. “We shall frighten him to death if we are not careful. Here, Umfundisi!” he continued in a persuasive tone. “Get up. We are not going to hurt you. Don’t be frightened.”

The poor missionary could hardly believe his ears.

“No, no. I am not frightened,” he replied, in a quavering voice, sitting up and looking around; while several of the younger Kafirs spluttered with laughter at his abject appearance. “No, no—you will not hurt me; I am your friend. I like the Kafirs. You know me—I am a man of peace—not a fighting man—a man of peace.”

The savage leader contemplated him with a sneer upon his face, then with a muttered injunction to the rest, he turned away with a grunt of contempt, whisking the tops off the grass-stalks with his knobkerrie as he strode off in the direction taken by the bulk of the party. A scream of terror arose from the unfortunate missionary. His hands had already been tied behind him; and just then one of the young Kafirs, in sheer devilment, jerked his head back and held the cold edge of an assegai against his throat. The unhappy prisoner thought his hour had come, and closed his eyes, shuddering. A roar of laughter arose from the spectators, and his tormentor let go of him, uttering a disdainful “click.”

“Take care,” warned one of the older men. “You’ll kill him with fear, among you. That won’t do. He must be taken to the Great Chief.”

Meanwhile the searching party had reached the base of the cliff and were working their way along with some difficulty through the bush, while two men remained above to designate the exact spot where the fugitive had fallen. So dense and tangled was the

profuse vegetation that it was some time before they could find it, and the rock above, half veiled by largish trees growing up against its surface, afforded no clue. Suddenly a shout announced that the object of their search was found. There, in a hollow formed by its own weight, lay the unfortunate horse. Its legs were doubled under its body, the bones in many places had started through the skin, and it was horribly mangled. The girths had given way and the saddle lay, bent and scratched, partly detached from the carcase. It was a horrid sight.

By twos and threes the Kafirs straggling up, clustered around with exclamations of astonishment. Then a shout arose:

“Where is the white man?”

They looked at one another in blank amazement. There was the horse, sure enough—but—where was the rider?

Where, indeed? The ground all round had been carefully searched, and, unless he was gifted with wings as some of them had derisively suggested, he could not have escaped, for at that point the cliff was sheer. Involuntarily they glanced upwards as if they half expected to see him soaring in the air, laughing at them. They turned over the carcase of the horse, with a kind of forlorn hope that he might be lying crushed beneath—but no—he was not there, nor had they even expected he would be. Fairly puzzled they shook their heads, and a volley of ejaculations expressing astonishment, dismay, even alarm, gave vent to their unbounded surprise.

“There is no trace. He has disappeared into air?” they said.

From all this discussion the tall barbarian who had first suggested the search, had stood aloof. Now he struck in with a kind of “I told you so” expression in his look and voice:

“Did I not say that the white man was a wizard? Who laughs now? Where is he? Where is the man who jumped from yon height?”

He might well ask. For of the fugitive, alive or dead, there was absolutely no trace. Had his body stuck in one of the trees, or rested on a ledge? No. Those above could see every projection in the rock, and the trees were free from any such burden. And around the spot where the horse lay and on to which it had fallen straight, there was no sign or shadow of a footmark to show whither the human performer of that fearful leap had betaken himself, even if he had reached the ground alive—which was impossible. He had melted into air, and it was nearly evening; to continue the search would be useless.

Chapter Nineteen.

The Darkest Hour.

When Lilian saw Payne return to the house alone, unaccompanied by her lover, it seemed that her cup of bitterness was full to the brim.

He had taken her at her word, then, even as she had besought him to do, and had left her, wearied of her weakness and vacillation; had left her in bitter anger that she should have made a plaything of his love, taking it up and casting it from her again as the humour seized her. Yes; it must be so, she told herself; and yet, if he only knew! But he never would know. Her martyrdom was complete. Not even would she have the consolation of knowing that if they parted in sorrow, at any rate they parted in love, as was the case that former time. No; this time anger and contempt for a weak creature who did not know her own mind would soon take the place of his former love—and then? Ah, what did it matter? She had sacrificed herself, and the sacrifice was complete; what mattered a mere triviality of detail? He was gone, and she would see his face no more, and she—she had saved him and ought to be only too glad that the opportunity of doing so had been allowed her—at least, so she told herself.

So she told herself, but ah! she could not feel glad. Her plan had succeeded, as she had been hoping, yet not daring to pray, that it would; but now that it had, she discovered that side by side with her heroic resolution had lurked a subtle hope that even yet she might look upon him again. That hope was now fulfilled, and lo! all was darker than it had been hitherto—so dark that it could never be light again.

Could it not? Even then, breaking in upon the outer gloom of her terrible despair, came her lover's last message—"A very few days will see me back here again. Everything will come right then"—bringing a gleam of hope to her crushed heart. He would come back—at any rate he would come back—and then, those confident words: "Everything will come right then." For the first time a strong doubt came over her as to the truth of Truscott's allegations. It might be that he was lying, according to his wont—lying in order to gain some private end, to revenge himself upon her—for she now no longer believed that he really loved her. Yet he had spoken so confidently, with such an exhaustive reliance in his facts. Still there might be some mystery about it, which her lover was able to solve. Ah! why had she not asked him when he was here just now? Why had she not begged him to clear up this horrid doubt; to tell her openly about his past life? She had been unnerved: had lost her head for the time being. Still it is probable that she would have asked him, but for the inopportune return of the Paynes. Well, it was too late now; she must wait patiently for his return, and then—if only the opportunity was

allowed her—a lifetime of tenderness and devotion could hardly atone for this dreadful doubt.

“Why, Lilian,” exclaimed her hostess, affectionately, “you are looking quite your old self again. Cheer up, darling. All will come right, I’m sure of that; and so are you, I can see it in your eyes.”

And, indeed, the revulsion of hope, setting in upon that black tide of despair, had brought a glow into Lilian’s cheek and a light into her eyes such as had not been seen there for many a day. Yet it would not do to be too elated yet.

“God grant it may,” she replied, with an attempt at a smile, and there was a good deal of hugging and kissing between the two women, and a few tears; and then Lilian went down to delight Rose’s heart by telling her she would go for a walk with her, after all; that part of the afternoon’s programme having fallen through in subservience to the more important events which had supervened, to the little girl’s intense disappointment.

And the walk did her good. Everything would come right, she kept telling herself, and, as they strolled homeward when the afterglow in the west was purpling into twilight gloom and the peaks of the Winterberg range stood out—cold, distant, and steely—Lilian’s heart was full of a prayerful hope that their future might, after all, be bright and cloudless as yon clear sky, when doubts and torturing fears had all been swept away; and though her little companion found her somewhat grave and disinclined to talk, yet the calm, sweet light of returning peace in her eyes, which the child stole many a wondering look at, more than made up for her silence.

If the Paynes were somewhat apprehensive as to the future—or rather as to the events of the next few days—they kept it to themselves, and that evening was quite a cheerful one. Hope had taken root and thriven in Lilian’s heart, and, as she kept on repeating to herself her lover’s message, she seemed to hear the confident ring of his own words: “Everything will come right then,” and wae comforted; at least, comparatively so. But whatever happened she would ask him to tell her all his past life, and somehow she did not look forward to the revelation with dread.

Payne, however, was by no means easy in his mind about the somewhat desperate plan which his friend had unfolded to him. To honest George’s straightforward reasoning it thoroughly recommended itself. The best way to settle an affair of this kind was by a downright “rough-and-tumble,” as he put it, but then there was the law, an uncommonly ticklish customer to deal with, once it took it into its head to vindicate its outraged dignity. As regarded that, however, the business might be managed away on the quiet somewhere, at the seat of hostilities, where law was very much in abeyance just then;

though at any other time, as he had told his friend, it would be impossible. But for all that, he heartily wished him safe through the business. Claverton was a splendid pistol-shot, of that he had, on more than one occasion, had ocular evidence, and if he winged his man, or even killed him, it was all in the fortune of war; for Payne had seen rough times himself at the Gold Fields and even on the Kaffrarian border, and did not hold human life as so momentous a thing as did, for instance, the clergyman of the parish wherein he at present resided. To the wife of his bosom, however, he did not impart any of these reflections; on the contrary, he made rather light of the affair.

“A row?” he said, in answer to her misgivings. “Oh, yes, there’s sure to be a row—the very devil of a row, in fact; but then Claverton’s thoroughly well able to take care of himself.”

“But they will be shooting each other,” she said, with a troubled shake of the head.

He turned quickly. “Eh? What? Not they! They’ll only get to punching each other’s heads—that’s all, take my word for it.” And honest George laughed light-heartedly at his wife’s fears, though he knew that there was ample justification for them.

The following day brought even further comfort to poor Lilian, for towards evening Sam arrived. With a start and a flush she saw the native rein up at the gate, and then she grew deathly pale. He was riding his master’s horse; she recognised the animal at a glance. Oh, what had happened? But then she noticed that Sam looked in no wise perturbed, as would have been the case were he the bearer of ill tidings. She noticed, further, that he was carefully extracting something from his pocket as he came up the garden path—something done up in paper. She flew to the door with a bright flush upon the sweet, sad face.

“Good evenin’, Missie Lilian. Master said I was give you dis,” exclaimed Sam, placing the note in her hand. It was a hastily-pencilled scrap—only a few words, but words expressing such a wealth of undying love, ever and in spite of anything which had occurred or which might occur, that she retired into the room, and, sinking into a chair, pressed the bit of crumpled paper to her lips, and her tears fell like rain upon it.

“Oh, Arthur, my own darling love! you do not think the worse of me! Ah, I can bear anything now?” she murmured.

Could she? Nevertheless, it was well that the merciful veil of distance was drawn between her eyes and the tragedy which at that very moment was being enacted on the brow of a certain cliff, that calm, fair, cloudless evening.

Meanwhile, Sam was busy putting up the horse. It had not needed the haggard features and harsh, strained tones to bring home to his quick perception the certainty that something had gone decidedly wrong with his beloved master, hence the more than ordinary display of loyalty he had exhibited when they parted; and now, with the ready tact of his race, he turned away directly he had delivered the note to Lilian, awaiting her own time to call him and question him about its writer. So, with his jacket off, and armed with a curry-comb and brush, Sam was making great play upon the matted and soiled coat of the tired horse when a sweet voice from the back-door called his name.

“Coming, Missie Lilian—coming,” cried the faithful fellow, as he flung down his stable implements and hurried across the intervening bit of garden, shuffling on his jacket as he went.

“Sam, you must be very hot and tired after your journey. Drink this, and then I want to talk to you.”

“This” being a large tumbler of cool, sparkling lemonade, which she held in her hand. Sam took it with a grateful, pleasing ejaculation of thanks. A dusky savage, born in a remote kraal beneath the towering cones of the Kwahlamba range, he appreciated her thoughtful kindness far more than many a white “Christian” would have done—the action more than the result.

“Dat good,” he said, after a long pull at the refreshing liquid, “but not so good as see Missie Lilian again.”

She smiled at the genuine though inaccurately-worded compliment, and began questioning him, a little shyly at first, but soon so fast that she found herself asking the same questions over again, and hardly giving time for answers. Sam, who, like all natives, dearly loved to hear himself talk, once on the congenial topic of his master and the war, lectured away ad libitum.

“Missie Lilian—master he say, I stop here till he come back. I do everyting you tell me. If you want tell master anyting, you send Sam, straight—so!” and, extending his arm, he cracked his fingers in the direction of Kafirland with an expressive gesture. “Sam he go in no time. Dat what Inkos say.”

“And, Sam—didn’t your master tell you how long he would be away?”

“No, Missie Lilian—yes, he did. He say, be away not long—come back very soon—in few days. Yes, he come back in very few days—dat what Inkos say, de last ting.”

“A very few days!” Just what he had told Mrs Payne. Things looked promising.

“Was he looking—looking well, Sam? He has to travel alone, too,” she added, half to herself.

“No, Missie Lilian, he not ride ’lone. One Dutchman going back to laager. Inkos and dat Dutchman ride together. Inkos he buy horse from dat Dutchman—big young horse—’cos Fleck go lame. Dey see Amaxosa nigger, dey shoot—shoot. Amaxosa not hurt. Inkos—Amaxosa nigga no good. Ha?”

“Why, Sam; you don’t mean they met any Kafirs?” exclaimed Lilian in alarm.

“No. Dey not see any nigga, Missie Lilian. Sam mean if dey see Amaxosa dey shoot—shoot ’em dead. Bang!”

He did not tell her of the warning as to the dangers of the road, which the two troopers had given his master the last thing before he started. It would only make her uneasy, and, besides, Sam had the most rooted faith in his chief’s invulnerability.

Then Sam, being once under weigh, launched out into much reminiscence, all tending towards one point, the glorification of his master and his master’s exploits; for which his said master would have been sorely tempted to kick him, could he have overheard; but which, to his present listener, was of all topics the most welcome.

“Hallo, Sam, you rascal! Where have you dropped from?”

“Evenin’, Baas Payne!” said Sam, jumping to his feet, for he had been squatting, tailor-fashion, while Lilian had been talking to him. “Sam, he come from Inkos. Inkos he say, Sam stay here till he come. Sam do all he told. Dat what Inkos say.”

“You’ve got fat, Sam, since we saw you last. Campaigning seems to agree with you,” said Payne.

The boy grinned, and, seeing that they had done with him, he returned to his work.

“I rather think I shall go to the front for a spell myself when Claverton comes back,” remarked Payne, as they went in.

“Oh, do you?” put in his wife, of whose presence he was unaware. “And since when have you come to that conclusion, Mr George?”

He started. "Hallo! I didn't know you there. But, seriously, it wouldn't do a fellow any harm. Needn't stay away long, you know. Shoot a few niggers and come back again."

"Yes, pa," cried Harry, delightedly. "Do go and shoot the Kafirs, and you'll be able to tell us such lots of stunning stories."

"Oh, ah! Anything else in a small way, Master Harry?" said his father, ironically.

The urchin laughed.

"I want an assegai," he replied. "A real Kafir assegai; like the one Johnny Timms has got. It's a beauty. He throws it at the fowls in the garden."

"And you want to do likewise, eh? Only as there are no fowls to practise at here, you'd be hurling it at old Cooke's next door. No, sonny; little boys mustn't play with edged tools, as the copy-books say."

It is the third day after Claverton's departure—a bright, beautiful morning, with the already tangible promise of great heat. Slowly Lilian strolls along the street, hardly heeding the throng of busy life on all sides; the rolling waggons, with their long, jaded spans, moving to the crack of the driver's whip, accompanied by a shrill, harsh yell; the sun-tanned horsemen ambling about; or the three or four pedestrians, who, booted and spurred, are striding among the crowd in all the glory of their spiked helmets, where an open-air sale is taking place, flattering themselves they present an intensely martial aspect, and putting on "side" accordingly. Here and there a storekeeper stands before his shop-door exchanging gossip with the passers-by; and black fellows of every nationality, clothed in ragged trousers and greasy shirts, with, it may be, a battered hat stuck on top of their dusty wool, stand in knots chattering in their deep bass, or trundle great packages in and out of the stores. All this Lilian hardly sees as she strolls along, a world of tender thought in the sweet eyes; and the beautiful figure in the cool summer dress forms a very bright and pleasing contrast in that busy workaday throng.

She has been to the library and changed her books, has done one or two little commissions, and now it is getting very hot, as she pauses for a moment to rest and look in at a shop-window. Three days have gone, three days out of the time she has to wait. Ah! how she longs for that time to come to an end! And the hum of traffic increases in the busy street, and from the cathedral spire the hour of ten chimes out. Suddenly the hand which has been gently twirling the sunshade on her shoulder, closes in rigid grasp round the knob; and lo! the beautiful, pensive face is white and bloodless—pale as the snowy ostrich feather adorning her hat—a peerless "prime white," which her lover had ransacked the country to procure in order to devote it to its present purpose. For as she

stands there Lilian catches that lover's name, and, before she has overheard many words of the conversation of a knot of men chattering behind her, she feels as if she must fall to the ground.

"How do they know he's killed?" one of them was saying, evidently in response to a preceding query. "They know it as well as they can know it short of finding the body, and the niggers don't leave much of that—butchering brutes. But, look here. If Claverton started on the line of country Jos Sanders said he did, and didn't turn up at the main camp yesterday by twelve o'clock at latest, he's a dead man. The whole of those locations that side o' the mountains have risen, and a flea couldn't have got through without their spottin' him."

"He may have gone round t'other way, though."

"Not likely. Jos said he was in a mighty cast-iron hurry, and laughed in his face when he just cautioned him to look out. There was a Dutchman with him, too."

"In a hurry? Claverton in a hurry? That'd be a sight worth seeing," struck in another. "Why, if all the niggers in Kafirland were on his spoor, he'd stop to fill his pipe before he'd move."

"Ah, he's a mighty cool hand," rejoined the first speaker, admiringly. "We want a few more like him. You should jes' have seen him that time when we were out under old Hughes. There was only eighteen of us all told, and the niggers were on us by hundreds. If it hadn't been for Brathwaite's fellers we should all have been cut up. We fought the whole afternoon; and Claverton, he seemed to care no more about the niggers than if there hadn't been one of 'em there."

"Yes, and the way he brought out poor Jack Armitage that time! It was a doosid plucky thing."

"I say, what's this about Claverton being killed?" exclaimed another voice, whose owner had evidently just joined the group. "I see the telegram says he may have been taken prisoner."

The first speaker shook his head ominously.

"Kafirs don't take prisoners," he said. "If they do, so much the worse for the prisoners. No, sir. Claverton would fight like the devil, but he'd never let those brutes take him alive, you may safely bet your bottom dollar on that. Poor chap! Hot, isn't it? Let's go and liquor."

They moved off, and Lilian stood there feeling as if the whole world had suddenly given way beneath her feet. Then she remembered that the newspaper office was but a few yards off. With swaying and uneven steps she made her way there. A boy was standing at the counter, rapidly folding copy after copy of the morning's edition.

"I want a paper, please. One with the very latest telegrams."

Lilian was surprised at her own calmness; but her ashy face and quivering lips might have told their own tale.

"Yes, mum," said the boy, handing her one of those lying on the counter, and with it a small, printed slip. "Latest from the front—an officer killed."

The words beat like a sledge-hammer in her brain, but she managed to stagger out of the shop. The whole street—vehicles, passengers, trees, everything—seemed to go round before her as she strained her eyes upon the printed words of that fatal slip.

An Officer Missing.

"Field-Captain Claverton, of Brathwaite's Horse, left Breakfast Vley two days ago for the main camp, and has not since been heard of. He was accompanied by a Dutchman named Oppermann. There is every reason to fear that they have been out off and killed, as the bushy defiles through which lay their road, are swarming with rebel Gaikas."

Later.

"A rumour is afloat in camp that the missing officer is alive, but a prisoner; and that a missionary, supposed to be Rev. Swaysland, of Mount Ararat Station, is also in the hands of the rebels. This seems probable, as the body of the Dutchman has been found, headless and terribly mutilated, near the brow of a high krantz; but there was no sign of the others. The rumour originated with a native, who has since disappeared. He says that the missing men will be taken to Sandili."

Hardly had Lilian left the shop when a young man, with a pen stuck behind his ear, emerged from an inner office. With three strides he gained the front door, and stood staring after her for a moment down the street. Then he turned back.

"Jones, what did that lady want?" he asked, in a tone of concern.

“S’mornin’s paper, and latest telegram,” replied the boy, laconically, and somewhat defiantly, as he went on folding his papers.

“And you gave it her?”

“Yes,” still more defiantly. “She asked for it.”

“You egregious jackass?”

“What for?” said the boy, indignantly. “If a party asks for the paper, ain’t I to sell it?” He evidently thought his superior was drunk.

“Look at that, Jones,” said the latter, tapping the telegraphic slip impressively with his pen. “What’s that about—eh?”

“I see it. It’s about an officer killed at the front. Why, that’s just the very thing the lady wanted to see,” replied the boy, brightening up.

“Yes. Quite so, you infernal young fool. She’s his sweetheart.”

“O Lord!” And the boy, dropping the paper he was folding, stood gazing at his superior the very picture of open-mouthed horror.

“Yes, it is ‘Lord,’” said the latter, with a gloomy shake of the head. “Well, the mischief’s done now, anyway;” and he retired into his den with a feeling of intense and real pity for the beautiful, sad-looking girl who had so often called at the office for telegrams from the seat of war. The boy was a new hand, and had not known who she was.

How Lilian got home was a mystery. She just remembered staggering in at the doorway, and then nothing more until she awoke to find herself upon her bed with Annie Payne bathing her forehead. No need had there been to ask what the matter was—the printed slip which she held clutched in her hand spoke for itself.

A shudder of returning consciousness, an inquiring look around, and then the dread remembrance burst upon her.

“Oh, Arthur!” she wailed forth, in a despairing, bitter moan, “you are dead, love, and I—why do I still live?” and the tears rushed forth as her frame shook beneath its weight of sobbing woe.

“Hush, dear!” whispered Annie. “It does not say that, you know; it says he is a prisoner, and he may have escaped by now, or been rescued. While there is life there is hope.”

Something in the idea seemed suddenly to strike her. Starting up, she pressed her hand against her brows.

“So there is! Hope, hope! He is not dead. We must rescue him;” and with a new-born determination, Lilian rose and walked towards the door. Her hostess stared at her with a vague misgiving. Had this shock turned her brain?

“Mr Payne,” said Lilian, quite calmly, as she entered the sitting-room, “what can we do?”

Payne, who was busy buckling on a pair of stout riding gaiters, looked up, no less astonished than his wife had been. A cartridge-belt, well stocked, lay on a chair, and just then Sam entered with a gun which he had been wiping out.

“Do? Well, I’m going to start off at once for Brathwaite’s camp and see what can be done. But cheer up, Miss Lilian. We may bring our friend out of his troubles all right enough. While there’s life there’s hope, you know.”

Just what his wife had said, and the twofold reiteration struck Lilian vaguely as a good omen.

“Mr Payne,” she said, suddenly, “I want to go with you.”

Payne stared, as well he might. “Go with me? Where? To Brathwaite’s camp?”

“No; as far as the front. After that to the chief, Sandili.”

If she had said “To his Satanic majesty,” Payne could not have been more thunderstruck. He began to think, as his wife had thought, that the shock had turned her brain.

“To the chief, Sandili!” he echoed. “Why, you would never get there; and if you did, what on earth would be the use of it?”

“I want to beg him to spare Arthur’s life. I have heard that these Kafirs respect women, even in time of war, and the chief might listen to me. I am not afraid of him. He was very friendly, and spoke quite kindly to us that day we saw him up in Kaffraria, and he will remember me. And I might succeed where nothing or nobody else would—if it is not too late,” she concluded, choking down a rising sob. She must keep firm now, and crush all mere womanly weakness, for she would need all her strength.

Payne stared at her, speechless with astonishment and admiration. The notion of this delicate, beautiful creature calmly stating her wish to go alone into the midst of these merciless savages; to beard the Gaika chief, at bay in his stronghold, far in the gloomy recesses of the Amatola forest; reached a height of sublimity bordering closely upon the ridiculous. But she was thoroughly in earnest—he could see that—and meant every word of it.

“Why, Lilian, it is not to be thought of,” he replied, seriously; “the thing is simply impossible to carry out, even if it were. Why, you would never reach the chief, to begin with; you would—hang it all—you would come to grief long before.”

“Nothing is impossible. Are you going to sacrifice his life because you will not use a means of saving it?” she asked.

“Now, do be reasonable,” replied Payne. “Listen. We have a better plan than that. Sam is going straight to the front; with a daub of red clay and a blanket he will pass perfectly for a Gaika. He will find out where Arthur is, and, depend upon it Sam will get him out if any one can; and you may be perfectly sure that I shall leave no stone unturned.”

“Ah, yes. He will. That is a good idea.”

“Yes,” went on Payne, who, meanwhile, was busy getting his things together. “And, another thing, Arthur understands the Kafirs thoroughly and can talk to them fluently. He isn’t the fellow to lose his head in any kind of fix, and he may manage to talk them over, or bribe them to let him go. So just keep your spirits up and don’t begin thinking the worst. Now, good-bye, we’ll do the best we can. Good-bye, Annie!” and with a grasp of the hand to Lilian, and a hurried embrace to his wife, Payne mounted his horse, which was being held for him at the gate, and rode off.

“Missie Lilian!” exclaimed Sam, “I go look for Inkos, now—straight—at once. Amaxosa not hurt him; I find him and bring him back. If Inkos alive, Sam bring him back or die by him. Dat what Sam do.”

“Wait. You are not armed. Go, quick, and buy a revolver before you start,” and with trembling hands Lilian began searching hurriedly for her purse.

“He won’t be able to get it without a permit from the magistrate,” said Annie Payne, “and if he could, it would be of no use to him. No, leave him alone for doing the best thing.”

“I not want revolve, Missie Lilian, I not want anything. Better jes as I am. Now I go quick. I bring back Inkos, or never come back. I bring him back, or I die by him,” and, without another word, away started the faithful fellow; and so serious did he consider the position that he forgot his usual formula, “Amaxosa nigga no good.”

Throughout that afternoon whatever hopes Lilian had allowed herself to cherish sank slowly and by degrees till they had almost totally disappeared. Suspense, terrible at any time, but doubly so during forced inactivity, weighed down her soul till it seemed that it must crush her to the very dust, and she could do nothing. Payne—even Sam—had the satisfaction of joining in search of her missing lover, while she, a weak, helpless woman, could only sit at home and wait, and weep, and pray. Ah, why did she not insist upon her plan of going straight to the Gaika chief to beg for her lover’s life? What to her were the terrors of so desperate an undertaking; the gloomy forest; the loneliness; the crowd of grim barbarians, their weapons, it might be, red with recently shed blood? And she was by nature timid, as we have already seen; yet her great overwhelming love had made this frail, delicate creature brave with a fearlessness taking no account of lesser horrors, all of which were swallowed up in this one dread issue. But it was too late now. Payne had gone, and the faithful native with him; and the two women were left alone, to wait, and weep, and pray.

Then as the afternoon wore on, and the messenger whom Annie Payne had stationed at the telegraph office to hasten up to them with every detail of news that might arrive, returned with the intelligence that a great storm was gathering in Kaffraria, and the electricity had interfered with the working of the wires, Lilian could bear no more. AH the direful stories which she had heard of the cruelties practised by the savages towards their helpless prisoners crowded upon her mind. He—her heart’s love! He—a captive in their ruthless hands! And it was by her act that this had come about. Her lips had doomed him. She had sent him to his death.

Chapter Twenty.

Through the Heart of the Earth.

When he felt his horse's feet slipping from beneath him over the brink, Claverton expected nothing less than instant death. Yet in that terrible moment the whole picture was imprinted on his brain—the fierce foes rushing on, assegai uplifted; the terrified, rolling eye of his trembling steed; the sunlit sward; the green, monotonous sweep of bush in the valley far below, into which he was being hurled; even a thin line of blue smoke, which might be from a friendly camp miles and miles away in the bush, did not escape him. And side by side with the picture spread before and around him, in every minutest detail, came the thought of Lilian—what she would say when she came to hear of his end, and whether, from the spirit-world, he would be allowed to look once more on that tenderly-loved face, and, above all, whether he would ever be able to carry out his vengeance upon the man who had brought him to this. All passed like a lightning gleam across his brain, and then he felt himself falling—falling—down into space. The air roared and shrieked in his ears, his breath failed him, then his hands seized something. The whole world was hanging in his grasp, rocking and swaying; he could not leave go; it was dragging him downward—downward—downward—it was tearing his arms out by the sockets. He must throw it off; and yet he could not. Then a crash, and—oblivion.

How long he lay he could not tell. Slowly and confusedly consciousness began to reassert itself. He half opened his eyes, and quickly closed them again. It was dark; there was a cold, earthy smell. Stars floated before his vision, and indefinite shapes, with dull, far-away echoes. He was dead, and they had buried him. He could hear the spadefuls of earth being thrown upon his coffin. The sound was growing fainter and fainter; they had nearly finished. And Lilian—she was standing weeping over his grave. Ah, Lilian, it is too late to weep now! Yes, she was weeping as if her heart would break, and the horrible weight of the earth, with its cold, damp, mouldy smell, kept him down; he could not reach her. Only seven feet of earth—oh, God! and it might as well be seven hundred! Then he heard Truscott's voice—as the voice of a smooth, insidious demon—whispering words of love to her, and claiming the fulfilment of her promise. Fiend, traitor, murderer! He would burst his grave now, and rend him limb from limb! Not the weight of a thousand worlds could hold him down! And, with a mighty effort he raised himself into a sitting posture and looked around.

A puff of cool air fanned his brow. It was dark—no, not quite. A beam of light, shooting through from the outer world like a dart of flame, dazzled his eyes; then another and another, losing themselves in the further gloom. Is he not dead after all? How can that be? Yes, he is dead, and this is the world of spirits.

Again he closes his eyes. A few moments more, and the suspended faculties become clearer. He looks forth again. He is alive, and in a cave, and the shafts of light are as much of that indispensable element as can penetrate a thick mass of creepers which falls over its entrance. But how came he there?

Instinctively, as he felt himself falling, Claverton had kicked his feet free of the stirrups; and instinctively again, and without being aware of it, he had clutched at the first substance which had come in his way—a trailing ladder of creepers hanging from the rock—and this it was which had made him feel as if he was supporting the whole weight of the globe in his hands. But the jerk had been too great. For a fraction of a second he thus hung, then fell—fell clean through a dense network of creepers which closed over him with a spring, thus shutting him into the cave, or rather hole, in which he awoke to find himself.

And now the spark of hope rekindled darts through his frame with an electric thrill. He is still alive and unhurt, in the more serious sense of the word, that is, for no bones are broken, though he is stiff and sore and shaken by his fall. He will yet live—live to destroy his enemy, and to possess himself once more of Lilian's love, free from the possibility of any further disturbing influence. He looks round his present quarters—truly an ark of refuge—but can make out nothing save the shadowy rock overhead. Then, cautiously approaching the entrance, he listens.

No; it will not do to look out just yet. The Kafirs are still beneath, and he can hear distinctly the deep bass hum of their voices, can even catch their exclamations of surprise at his unaccountable disappearance. He is unaware of the exact position of his hiding-place, and the faintest movement on his part might lead to his instant detection. So he restrains his anxiety to peep forth, and, as he lies perdu, even chuckles over the supernatural theories set forth by the Kafirs to account for his disappearance.

For upwards of an hour he remains perfectly still; long after he has heard the voices of his enemies grow fainter and fainter, and ultimately cease to be audible as they give up the search. Then, thrusting his head through the network of trailers, he peers cautiously out. The sun has set, and a peaceful evening stillness lies upon the forest beneath, and there is no sign of the enemy. Then Claverton begins seriously to take account of his position. He cannot see the brink of the precipice overhead, but he judges from its height further along, that he has fallen about forty feet, and that the network of creepers, yielding to his weight, alone had saved him from certain death. But, meanwhile, how is he to get down, or up? One way is about as practicable as the other. Beneath, the rock falls, with here and there a rugged pinnacle projecting from its face, but sheer; while above, its surface for long intervals is perfectly smooth. A terrible fear chills his heart.

He has only escaped from a sudden and swift death, to meet with a lingering one by starvation; here, in this hideous, lonely cave, beyond the possibility of human aid. A rope from the summit might reach him, but was it in the least likely that any friendly patrol would visit this wild fastness, haunted, as it was, by hostile bands? And even if it did, how improbable that its members would have a rope, or be able to improvise one long enough and strong enough to reach him; even were he not too weak from the effects of starvation to use it if they did. No. He must look for no succour that way.

Then his thoughts recur to the day that he and Lilian climbed up to that other cave during the fishing picnic four years ago. But for the inaccessibility of the place, some holiday party, in years to come, might make their way up here and find his crumbling bones, and recoil with loathing horror from his whitened skull, even as she had done from the grisly remains in that other cavern. And the grey rocks stand forth beneath and around, waxing greyer in the fading light; bright-eyed conies peep forth from their holes, and scamper along the ledges; a night-jar darts noiselessly on soft wing in pursuit of its prey; bats flit and circle in the gloaming; beneath, the green bush has changed to a sombre blackness; while floating upon the stillness of desolation, the weird voices of the forest begin their mysterious concert. And there, upon that narrow ledge, poised in mid-air, beyond the reach of all human aid—lost, forgotten and alone—stands this man, with death before him at last.

Carefully he looks over the ledge, narrowly scrutinising the rock beneath and around; but the first glance convinces him that it is useless. No creepers grow on the face of the cliff; even the tops of the highest trees are at a dizzy distance below. There is no foothold, even for a baboon. Ah! The cave itself! He has not explored that. Re-entering, he strikes a match—a knife, a box of matches, and a bit of reimpje being the proverbial contents of a frontiersman's pockets, even though they contain nothing else—and begins his exploration. There is no outlet that way. Overhead the rock slopes down to the back of the cave, and here and there it is wet with ooze. He can but dimly make out the outlines in the gloom by the flicker of his wax vesta. Suddenly the flame goes out, extinguished by a puff of cold air which blows up into the explorer's face. He lights another. Yawning at his very feet is a hole—a long, jagged hole, just wide enough to admit his body; one step more and he would have fallen in. Tearing a bit of paper from his pocket he lights it and throws it in. At first it will not fall: quite a strong current of air holds it up. This, in itself is a good sign, and Claverton begins to feel hopeful as he watches it sink, down, down, lighting up the chasm, and throwing a wet gleam on the slippery sides eloping down into unknown depths.

He sits down and begins to ponder over the situation. A strong current such as comes up this hole betokens an outlet somewhere, and the only way of finding that outlet is to go down the hole. He can get down, for the sides are near enough together for a man to

descend by using his hands and knees freely. But once down, can he get up again? A natural thrill of horror runs through him at the idea of burying himself away down in the very bowels of the earth. To remain where he is means death, but it is to die in the full, open light of day, with the air of heaven breathing around him. To descend into that dark, slimy pit, and perhaps find no outlet after all, and not even be able to retrace his steps; to die in that frightful oubliette, amid who can tell what noisome horrors! It is an alternative enough to appal the stoutest heart, and no wonder Claverton's brain sickens at the thought. But it is his only chance. He rises, goes out on the ledge once more, and stands for a few moments drinking in the fresh cool breaths of the fast-gathering night; then, returning to the chasm, begins his descent.

A lighted match in his hand, and with pieces of paper torn up in his pocket ready to kindle at intervals, he lets himself down, working his way cautiously with his knees against the opposite rock, but the task is a far more difficult one than it appears. Once or twice he slips several feet, and the skin is worn from his hands and knees in several places. At length he stops; panting violently and nearly exhausted; and as he holds himself wedged against the sides of the crevice to rest, it strikes him that those sides are getting wider. By the light of another match he looks down. Oh, horror! Two yards deeper—he has already descended ten—and the chasm widens out to a breadth of at least twenty feet. A cold perspiration breaks from every pore. Great beads stand upon his forehead and his brain is on the whirl. It is frightful; there, in the pitchy darkness. His blood curdles in every vein. His strength can hold out no longer; in a moment he will yield, and disappear for ever from the sight of humankind, immured, self-entombed in the rocky heart of the earth. Rushing noises are in his ears, hands touch him, wings sweep over him; then he slips, slides with the rapidity of lightning; he is being torn in pieces, flayed alive. Then, with a shock, his descent ceases. He is on his feet. But where?

During the fall he has retained consciousness, and now, as he opens his eyes in the pitchy darkness, it seems that he can hear the sound of running water. Is it, too, a delusion? No, there it is distinctly, a mere runnel, but echoing with a cavernous boom through that grim silence. And the sound is as the music of hope. The water must have an outlet somewhere. Again Claverton lights a match. He is on comparatively level ground, sloping away in the form of a conduit, down which the water is trickling, while above, the rocks lose themselves in gloomy distance. With a new-born joy at his heart, he follows the course of this subterranean stream, guided by the sound of the water, now falling headlong over a boulder, now knocking his head against the roof, for he must husband his matches, as they are drawing near the end. Oh, God! Will this awful, rayless night never cease—this thick blackness, this horrible silence? His heart dies again within him as the atmosphere becomes more and more heavy and oppressive.

Header, have you ever stood within a disused mine, or any other cavern, artificial or natural, far beneath the surface of the earth? Have you then extinguished your light and caused your companions to do the same, keeping perfect silence for a few minutes? If you have you will remember the intense longing that came over you for one spark of light, the sound of a voice to break the frightful stillness, for one breath of the upper air, so shut out do you seem from the rest of humankind even as in the nethermost shades. What must be the feelings, then, of one to whom it is probable that the light of day will never again be vouchsafed?

Claverton puts out his hand. It encounters something cold and writhing. With a thrill of shuddering horror he recoils, and his fingers shake—he can hardly strike a match. At length he does so, and lo, by the red, flickering light he can see two or three great, dark, hideous shapes, whose multitudinous legs cling to the rock as the shining, creeping things wind their lengths along. Oh, God—what is to be the end of this? Will he go mad? Entombed in that pitchy darkness, with these frightful creatures crawling around him—upon him. It happened that Claverton had an exaggerated horror of anything creeping, and now in this hell-pit, alone with those loathsome creatures, the man who has just faced death with perfect calmness in two of its most appalling forms—the spears of five hundred merciless foes in front, a giddy height behind—trembles and shudders like a woman. For a dozen yards he dashes forward as fast as his legs can carry him, and, coming violently against the wall of the cavern, sinks down panting and breathless upon a rock. Something falls into the water at his feet with a splash. Light! Air! This den of darkness seems swarming with noisome reptiles. The legs of some creeping thing pass swiftly across his cheek, and again he shudders, and his heart throbs as if it would burst.

A faint rustle just above his ear. He looks up with a start, prepared for fresh horrors. What does he see that causes the blood to course and bound through his veins with such a wild thrill? It is a star. Yes, a star—bright, beautiful, and twinkling—only one solitary star, piercing the blackness of this frightful hell-cave, telling of light and air—the free air of heaven—and—he dare not add—possible deliverance. A cool breeze fans his brow, wafted through a crevice in the rock, and through the crevice he can just see that one solitary star. Even if he must die now he can still keep his gaze fixed upon that one shining eye of heaven, looking in upon him from the outer air—the sweet, blessed outer air. But no. That star is there to cheer him, to encourage him—not to doom him. With hope rekindled he advances a few steps and lights a match. It will hardly burn, so strong is the draught which blows in. He continues his way. Every now and again he can see more stars through the holes which become more frequent and larger, and he can see that he is in a fissure which runs along beneath the face of the rock, and which now begins to slant rapidly downwards. Everything is forgotten now; deliverance is at hand; for a rush of wind, which can come through no smaller an aperture than one wide enough to admit the body of a man, blows up into the tunnel. Patience! Care! He can

hear the rustle of trees against the cliff on a level with his ear, and he guesses that he must be near the base of the precipice. A slide of a few feet—a dozen yards along a rocky ledge crawling on his hands and knees, the cavern widens, and, with such a feeling of relief as he has seldom, if ever, experienced before in the course of his life, Claverton steps forth from his subterranean prison-house and stands looking out into the moonlit valley, drinking in the fresh, cool night air in grateful draughts.

How delicious is that refreshing breeze after his terrible immurement! How beautiful the silvery hue of the sprays of the unending bush, sleeping beneath the stars, how soft their rustle as they quiver in the night wind! A pointed moon hangs in the sky nearly at half, and the Southern Cross rivals in its flashing brilliance the whole complement of the rolling planets. Then comes a reaction, and Claverton begins to feel stiff and battered, for he has been badly bruised in both his falls, and his nerves have been sorely shaken by the events of the last few hours; moreover, he has eaten next to nothing that day, and a faintness begins to creep over him. The prostration of body extends to his mind. What does it matter if he dies here alone in the wilderness? he thinks. Lilian has cast him off; she could never really have loved him. Better die and save all further trouble. In health such thoughts would never have occurred to him; now—bruised, shaken, and prostrate—a languorous feeling of fatality takes hold of his mind, and, shutting his eyes, he sits down at the foot of the great cliff, and the cool air plays upon his brow.

Ha! what is that? Cautiously he raises his head and listens. Is it a patrol? Aid—succour? No; the tread is of light feet—naked feet. It draws near, and Claverton has just time to step back within the gloom of his late prison-house as a large band of warriors glides swiftly past, and the moonlight gleams on the red, naked shoulders and on the gun-barrels and assegai blades, as the savages flit silently like spectres through the bush. They have not seen him, it is true, but can it be that they are still hunting for him? In the morning they will find his spoor, and then it will be the work of an hour or two to run him down—enfeebled, nearly exhausted, and quite unarmed as he is; for in his fall his belt broke and got lost, and with it his revolver and sheath-knife. An unarmed and half-starved man, alone in an unknown country, with bands of fierce savages quartering the forest like hounds in his pursuit. What chance had he?

But whatever chance he has must not be thrown away. He will start at once; yet not at once, for sound travels an enormous distance in the bush at night, and it is indispensable that the party which has just gone by shall be allowed sufficient time to get out of hearing. So he waits and waits, till at last he can wait no longer. Emerging from his shelter he glances at the stars, and, guided by those friendly lamps of heaven, steps boldly forth into the bush.

“Never say die,” he ejaculates, half aloud. “I shall live to talk over this fix yet.”

A low mocking laugh at his very elbow breaks the silence of the night. Starting, as if he had been shot, he turns, and, as he does so, he is violently seized from behind. With a spring he shakes himself free. A dozen Kafirs are upon him, and their uplifted assegais flash in the moonlight. A straight, neat hit from the shoulder, and the foremost goes down like a ninepin; but they see that he is unarmed, and fearlessly throw themselves upon him. A rapid struggle, a fall—and in a moment Claverton is lying on the ground, securely bound and helpless as a log.

“Ha—ha—ha!” laughed the tall barbarian who had set his face against the abandonment of the search. “The white man is a wizard. He can melt into air, and then rise up again out of the earth, but we have been too knowing for him this time. Ha—ha—ha!”

“Oh, damn you, do your worst, and the sooner the better,” retorted the prisoner, in a tone of weary, hopeless disgust.

“Ha!” jeered the savage. “Lenzimbi is a skilled wizard. He can disappear into the solid rock. He can light his magic candle and walk through the heart of the earth; but his God has quarrelled with him, and has deserted him at last. Yes, Lenzimbi is a great wizard, a valiant fighting man; but now the black goat lives and the white goat dies. Ha!”

Chapter Twenty One.

”...In Ever Climbing up the Climbing Wave.”

Claverton looked sharply at the speaker. The voice seemed familiar to him, but the features less so. And then, the other had addressed him by the name given him by the natives at the time he was living at Seringa Vale. Not only that. He had uttered words which sounded familiar. In a moment the floodgates of memory were opened; Claverton remembered the midnight meeting at Spoek Krantz, and the oracle with which its proceedings closed. Now his captor had repeated the words of that augury, but had reversed them with grim significance. Still, he thought he saw a glimmer of light.

“Stand up?” said the savage, peremptorily.

“Needs must where literally the devil drives,” was the prisoner’s reply, given with all his wonted coolness, as he obeyed. Resistance would be worse than useless, for it would only subject him to further indignity. He was absolutely in their power.

“Now walk,” was the next order.

“Which way?”

“Hamba-ké!” (“Walk, then,” or “Go on.”) repeated the tall Kafir—who seemed to be the chief of the gang—and the command, uttered in a fierce and threatening tone, was emphasised by a prod with his assegai.

Not by word or sign did the prisoner show that he even felt the sharp dig of the weapon, though the blood was running freely down his leg. Then they started in single file, with the prisoner in the middle, a reim fastened to his bound hands being held by the man immediately behind him. Thus they made their way out of that moonlit valley, and the strange procession wended on through the still, beautiful night. The Kafirs, for the most part, kept perfect silence as they walked, and now even Claverton was surprised by the readiness with which they got through the dense bush, picking out the most unlikely paths, and threading them with an ease and rapidity that savoured of the marvellous; but although they hit upon the smoothest paths, the prisoner’s powers were sorely tried, for he had undergone no slight strain within the last twenty-four hours, and his footsteps began to drag in spite of himself. The first sign of this, however, met with encouragement in the shape of a dig from the assegai of the man behind him, accompanied by a brutal laugh. There was no help for it—he was entirely in their hands.

“The white man is a very great warrior,” remarked the Kafir whom he had knocked down. “He can turn his hand into a club when he has no other weapon. He is made of iron; but even iron will bend and melt in the fire—in the fire. Whaow!” repeated the savage, with a dark, meaning look; and Claverton knew that the reference was to his probable fate. His probable?—nay, his certain fate.

“Look here, you fellows,” said the prisoner coolly. “You’re rather a skulking lot, when all’s said and done. Here you’ve got me in your power—me whom you’ve fought fairly and openly in the field—and you think it immense fun to give me a quiet dig now and then with your assegais, like a lot of old women’s spiteful pinches. That’s not the way in which warriors of the Amaxosa should behave, even to a prisoner.”

A laugh, not wholly an ill-natured one, greeted this remonstrance.

“If you intend to cut my throat, as no doubt you do, cut it and have done with it; but, hang it, until you do you might give a fellow a little peace,” he went on.

“Peace, peace? No, it’s war now, white man—war,” they replied. “Why should we give you any peace until the time comes to roast you? That’s what we are going to do with you.”

“Are you? Well, that’s for the Great Chief to decide. Meanwhile, if you were decent fellows, you’d fill me up a pipe and let me have a smoke as we go along.”

His coolness staggered them. But it stood him in good stead, for among these people a bold and fearless mien always commands respect. The tall chief stepped back to the prisoner’s side, and filling up a pipe from Claverton’s own tobacco pouch, lighted it and gave it to him, or rather stuck it into his mouth, with a grim laugh.

“There. You won’t smoke many more pipes in this world, Lenzimbi,” he said.

The Kafirs became quite good-humoured and began to sing, or rather hum, snatches of their war-songs as they stepped briskly out. They ceased to ill-treat their prisoner, and even showed a disposition to talk. They told him about the different engagements that had been fought between them and the colonists, and how they intended to go on fighting until every tribe had risen and joined them, and that then they would eat up the Fingo “dogs,” and ultimately, when they had fought enough, make peace with the whites. It was of no use for him to try and persuade them that in six months’ time they would be thoroughly beaten and broken up, and their chiefs either hanged or undergoing penal servitude as common convicts. They laughed him to scorn. The open

air, the unending bush and impenetrable fastnesses of the rocks and caves were around them now, the white man's warnings they treated as mere fables.

Suddenly Claverton was dragged to the earth, all the Kafirs sinking silently and like shadows. A blanket was thrown over his head, enveloping him in darkness and nearly suffocating him. It was impossible for him to utter so much as a sound. A few minutes of this silent darkness and the impromptu gag was removed. Something had alarmed the savages, and they had taken these precautions. They now resumed their way, and glad indeed was the prisoner to get rid of the horrible extinguisher that had been put upon him, and breathe the fresh air again; for a Kafir blanket, all nauseous with red ochre and grease and something more, diffuseth not a balmy perfume.

Towards dawn they halted for a short rest, and now the air became piercingly cold, for they were at a considerable elevation. Great clouds worked up from seaward, and the wind arose in dull, moaning gusts, driving the grey scud along the slopes beneath, and wrapping in a misty veil the brow of a lofty cliff which every now and then frowned down upon their way. Then, as it grew lighter, Claverton could just make out a town lying far away upon the plain, glimpsed between the slopes of the hills. It was King Williamstown, and at the sight he thought how happily he and Lilian had driven out of it and along that bit of road, the continuation of which he could see like a white thread winding along over the flat. He was roused by a voice at his elbow.

"Now, white man, we are going to start again."

Turning, he beheld the tall chief, and now, by the light of day, he recognised this man's features. It was the man whom, with two others, he had turned away from Umgiswe's out-station, on the morning of that never-to-be-forgotten ride over to Thirlestane, and whom Lilian had so much wished to see as a specimen of a real Kafir chief. He wondered if the other recognised him.

"Do you know me now, Lenzimbi?" was the quiet, but somewhat sneering question.

"Are you a rich man, Nxabahlana?" said Claverton, answering the query by another, in true native fashion.

The Kafir eyed him suspiciously. "It is war-time now," he replied, with a shrug of the shoulders; "no one can be said to be rich in war-time."

"True; but war does not last for ever. Some day there will be peace, and then, when the whites have taken all their cattle and the Gaikas are starving, and begging for food, supposing that Nxabahlana found he had plenty of cattle in his kraals. He would be a

rich man when all his people were poor; and a rich man is always the most powerful chief.”

A gleam in the other’s eyes, and the least movement of a glance in the direction of the rest, convinced the prisoner that he was understood, and he began to hope.

“Supposing, then,” he went on, “that when all of Nxabahlana’s wives had been captured and distributed among the Fingoes, or were half-starved and too weak to work, and worn out, and thin, and useless, Nxabahlana had plenty of cattle, he could buy more wives—young, and fresh, and healthy. And then, when all the chiefs of the Gaikas were deposed and in disgrace, supposing the Government were to say: ‘During the war a white man, an officer in the colonial forces, was captured by the Gaikas, and his life was saved by a chief who set him free, and provided him with a horse and a guide to lead him into the colonial camp. This, then, is the chief whom we must put in Sandili’s place, although he is of the house of the Great Chief, for he is our friend—and his name is Nxabahlana.’”

The eyes of the savage glistened at the prospect thus opened out before him. All Kafirs are by nature covetous, and this man’s greediest instincts were powerfully appealed to. Plenty amid scarcity—wives, cattle, power—for that last consideration thrown out by the prisoner had carried more weight than he thought. He, Nxabahlana, was now disliked and distrusted by Sandili. Here, then, would be a good opportunity of securing the favour of the Colonial Government, and benefiting himself at the expense of his kinsman and chief.

“How many cattle will Nxabahlana find in his kraal, after the war, if Lenzimbi goes free?” he asked.

“One hundred fat beasts,” replied Claverton. He knew his man, and that the other would take advantage of his necessity to the utmost, so he purposely began at a low figure.

“Aow! A chief cannot buy many wives with that,” was the reply, given with a dissatisfied head-shake.

“Say one hundred and fifty, then.”

But this, too, proved too little. At length, after much haggling, which evoked many a smile from the prisoner—so strongly was his sense of humour tickled by the notion of haggling over the price of his own life, as if he was merely buying a waggon or a farm—a bargain was struck. Two hundred head of cattle should be handed over to Nxabahlana at any time and place that worthy chose to name, and if at the close of the war Claverton’s

good offices should not avail to obtain for the chief a position of considerable wealth and influence, then he was to receive another hundred. In consideration whereof the Gaika agreed to release his prisoner, and, if not to conduct him within the colonial lines, at any rate to leave him in a place of safety. Not that all this was set forth in so many words—both of them knew better than that—the others might be listening. No, the negotiations were carried on in that dark undercurrent of half hints, half veiled references, which the Kafirs employ when anxious not to be readily understood by outsiders; and it will be remembered that Claverton spoke the native languages with ease and fluency, and, what in this instance stood him in almost better stead, thoroughly understood the native character.

“What if Lenzimbi should forget his word, when he found himself safe among his own people?” said the savage, suspiciously. “What if when Nxabahlana went to ask for his reward he received a bullet instead of the cattle, or was seized and thrown into the tronk as a rebel? Look. Here is a better plan. Lenzimbi shall give the money value of half the cattle now. He can turn paper into money by writing upon it.”

“Lenzimbi isn’t such a fool as he looks,” was the prompt reply. “No, my friend, you know perfectly well that you can trust me far better than I can trust you, and as for writing you a cheque now, which I suppose is what you mean, I couldn’t if I would, because I’ve no paper or ink or anything; and I wouldn’t if I could, because you know, as well as I do, that I shall keep to my side of the bargain. Besides, even if I did what you want me to, and gave you a cheque now, how the devil could you read it so as to make sure it was all right? Eh?”

This was conclusive.

“It will be difficult,” mused the Kafir, referring to the escape. “Very difficult. Look. Yonder is the camp of your people. We shall pass very near it presently. Then, if you should find yourself free, make for it as hard as you can. There is no other chance. But until after the war is over you must keep silent about the way in which you escaped. That is one of the conditions.”

Claverton agreed to this, and now hope ran very strong within him. He had every reason to believe that the Gaika would fulfil his word; indeed, two powerful considerations would ensure his doing so, cupidity and fear. For if he were denounced to Sandili as having even contemplated such an act of treason as the release of a prisoner, his life would not be worth a moment’s purchase. After some discussion as to the best way the order was given to start, and, with their prisoner in their midst as before, the Kafirs resumed their march. Once Claverton stole a side look at the chief’s face, but Nxabahlana was moody and taciturn, and when he did speak to the prisoner it was with

the rough brutality he had employed at first; but this might be only a blind. Which was it to be—life or doom? Every chance now was in favour of the former, and hope ran high.

Doubtless the reader will wonder at Claverton's marvellous ill-luck in three times escaping a terrible death only to fall straight into the hands of his enemies. When the Kafirs had abandoned their search as useless, thinking that the white man was a wizard indeed, as Nxabahlana had tauntingly said, that worthy, with a dozen followers, had remained behind. Of a cynical disposition, and a very sceptic as regarded the superstitions of his countrymen, that astute savage, although he had been the first to start the miraculous theory as accounting for the fugitive's disappearance, believed in it himself not one whit. He was puzzled, he admitted, but by natural causes. He would fathom the mystery yet; so he sneeringly watched the bulk of his countrymen move off, while, with a few chosen followers, he remained on the watch. Carefully they examined the ground, but, of course, found no trace of a footmark. They searched the cave whence the fugitive had emerged, but did not venture far into it, being influenced by two considerations. One was that not a shadow of spoor was seen to lead into it; another, a very natural repugnance to penetrating deep into that gloomy hole. It was nearly dark, and if the fugitive moved at all, it would be at night. So Nxabahlana and his warriors took up their position on the cliff a little way above the mouth of the cavern, in a spot commanding a considerable view of the moonlit valley, wherein nothing could move without at once attracting their attention, and waited and watched with the steady patience of their kind. This was at length rewarded when they saw the object of their quest emerge, weary and exhausted, from the cavern, walking, so to say, straight into their very jaws. The sequel we have seen.

During the march Claverton noticed with some uneasiness, that the man who had felt the weight of his fist was watching him very narrowly. Whichever way he looked, this man's shrewd, suspicious glance was upon him, and more than once it seemed to wander to the chief. Could he have overheard? If so, it would add seriously to the difficulties in the way of escape. But he consoled himself with the knowledge that if it was to be effected Nxabahlana would manage it somehow.

And now, as they drew nearer to the critical spot, the sound of voices was heard close by, causing, however, no alarm to the party, and a large body of Kafirs, emerging from the bush, joined them. Of course a halt was called while they exchanged news, and great was the exultation of the new arrivals over the capture of so formidable an enemy as this white man had proved—for his fame had spread among them. They crowded round to look at him as he sat on the ground, some jeering, some threatening, but all, in their heart of hearts, rather respecting the man who sat there absolutely in their power, and yet taking no more notice of them than if they were stones.

“Whaaow!” exclaimed a great mocking voice at his side. “Whaaow, Lenzimbi! I told you we should meet again. You knocked me down once—twice. It was your turn then—now it is mine,” and, looking up, he recognised at a glance his old enemy—Mopela.

“Ha—ha! I told you so, didn’t I? How do you like that, Lenzimbi—how do you like that?” continued the savage, striking him twice on the head with the shaft of his assegai. “Yesterday, you—to-day, I. Haow!”

“What has come over the warriors of the Amaxosa that they keep such a cur in their midst?” said Claverton, looking straight before him, and steadily ignoring his persecutor. “Only a cur bites and worries a helpless man, but if one even looks at a stone he runs away with his tail between his legs, as this cur called Mopela would do if my hands were for a moment free—even as he has done twice already.”

With a yell of rage, and foaming at the mouth, Mopela flourished his assegai within an inch of Claverton’s face, but the prisoner never flinched. It seemed that the savage was working himself up to such a pitch that in a moment he would plunge the weapon into the body of his helpless enemy, when his arm was seized in a firm grasp, and Nxabahlana said, coldly:

“Stop, Mopela. You must not kill the prisoner. He belongs to the Great Chief, Sandili.”

“Yes, yes,” chimed in the others, “he belongs to Sandili; he is not ours!” And favouring Claverton with a frightful glare of disappointed hate, Mopela fell back sullenly among the rest.

“Yes, the white man belongs to Sandili. He is not ours—he is not ours!” repeated the Kafir whose suspicions had been awakened, with a significant glance at his leader’s face.

The latter, who, by the way, was Mopela’s half-brother, ignored the hint, and gave orders to resume the march.

“Aow!” exclaimed one of the Kafirs, suddenly stopping. “This is not the way to Sandili.”

“No, no. It isn’t?” agreed several of the others.

“It takes us dangerously near the white man’s camp,” said the suspicious one, stopping short with a determined air.

“And we might be attacked by a strong patrol,” urged Mopela. “Senhlu is right.”

A great hubbub now arose. The Kafirs, to a man, objected to pursuing that road any further. It was not safe, they said; they might lose the prisoner, and perhaps all be shot themselves. No. The best plan would be to go straight to head-quarters, and as soon as possible.

Nxabahlana saw that they were determined to have their way. He was only a petty chief, and the great bulk of these men were not his own clansmen; moreover, he was greatly out of favour with Sandili and Matanzima, who would be glad of a pretext to get rid of him. He dared not persevere in his plan; to incur further suspicion would be to court death. So he gave way.

“I intended to have reconnoitred and carried back some news to the Great Chief,” he replied, coldly, and with a sneer. “But since you are all so afraid of the white men that you dare not venture within three hours’ run of their camp, you can have your way. I shall carry out my scheme alone, while you go back with the prisoner.”

To this plan they one and all objected. It might be that they detected defection in the tone of their leader’s voice. He, however, deemed it safer to fall in with their wishes.

“So be it, then,” he said. “We will all go straight to Sandili.” And the whole party, turning, struck off into the deep wooded fastnesses of the mountains; and the captive’s heart sank within him, for he knew that the plan for his deliverance had failed on the verge of its fulfilment, and now every step carried him nearer and nearer to his death. Half an hour ago the flame of life and hope glowed brightly; now the last spark was extinguished in the darkness of a certain and terrible doom.

On they went—on through the dark forest, where the crimson-winged louris flashed across the path, sounding their shrill, cheery whistle, and monkeys skipped away with a chattering noise among the long, tangled trailers and lichens which festooned the boughs of the massive yellow-wood trees. Now and then an ominous, stealthy rustle betokened the presence of some great reptile, quietly gliding away among the safe recesses of the thicket; and high above, the harsh, resounding cry of a huge bird of prey floated from a mighty cliff overhanging the line of march. All these things the prisoner noted as a dying man looks at the trivial sights and sounds of earth; for he knew he should never leave this place alive. The clouds had cleared off, and now the sun’s rays poured down upon his head like molten fire; fortunately for them the Kafirs had left him his hat, or their captive would have been snatched out of their merciless grasp by a sunstroke, long before he reached the place of torture and death.

At about noon they halted; and one of the Kafirs, advancing a little way ahead, uttered a loud, strange call. It was answered, and, being beckoned to come on, the whole party

moved forward and joined him. Then they formed up in a column, and, striking up a war-song, they stepped out, beating time with the handles of their sticks and assegais; those nearest to him, turning every now and then to brandish their weapons in the prisoner's face.

And now they entered an open space covered with huts—these, however, being of a very temporary order—and a swarm of human beings crowded out to meet them. A few starved-looking dogs rushed forward, yelping, but were promptly driven back with stones; and men, women, and children, stood eagerly watching the return of the warriors, and speculating loudly on the identity and probable fate of the captive.

Grasping instinctively the capabilities of the place, Claverton saw that he was on a kind of plateau, shut in on three sides by high, wooded slopes and rugged krantzes, while on the fourth, which was open, he could just make out a wide stretch of country far away beneath. The cunning old Gaika chieftain had well chosen his eyrie of a hiding-place. On every side, however, the bush grew thickly right up to the huts, which were built in a circle. Claverton noted, moreover, that, save for a few very indifferent cows, there was no cattle anywhere about, and that the people themselves were looking lean and starved, and drew his own conclusions accordingly.

With many a shrill laugh, and chattering like magpies, the women crowded round to look at the prisoner as he sat in the midst of his captors and guards, stoically indifferent to his fate. Hideous, toothless crones, whose wrinkled hides hung about them in a succession of disgusting flaps; crushed-looking middle-aged women and plump, well-made girls, all in different stages of undress. One of the latter slyly put out her hand and gave Claverton a sharp pinch on the arm, amid screams of laughter from her fellows as they watched its effect upon the countenance of the captive.

“Yaow!” they cried. “The white man cannot feel. See, he does not move!”

Then a frightful hag stepped in front of the prisoner, and, amid a torrent of invective, began brandishing a butcher-knife within an inch of his nose.

“Ah—wolf—white snake—vulture's spawn!” she yelled. “We will spoil your handsome face for you. Our young men are lying about the land in thousands, and the jackals are devouring their carcasses, and it is your work. For every one of their lives you shall undergo a pang that will make you pray for death. Do you hear, tiger-cat; do you hear?” screamed the hag in a frenzy of rage.

Again a grim smile was upon Claverton's face. The idea of him, who had made himself felt in sober earnest, who had escaped peril and death so narrowly and so often, coming to this—that it was in the power of such a thing as this to cut his throat like a fowl.

“He dares to laugh!” yelled the she-devil, brandishing her knife and clawing him by the hair. Just then one of the warriors took her by the shoulders and sent her spinning a dozen yards off, where she lay on the ground foaming with rage.

“Hamba-ké! Leave the prisoner alone. He belongs to the chief!”

At a sign from the speaker a girl came forward rather timidly and held a bowl to the captive's lips. It contained curdled milk, with some mealie-paste thrown in. It was cool and refreshing, and Claverton drank deeply.

“Thanks,” he said, with a nod and a pleasant smile. “That's good.”

The rest of the contents of the bowl were drained by his guards; and the girl, retiring amongst her companions with many a sidelong glance at the prisoner, remarked, in a half whisper, what a handsome fellow the white man was, and she was sure he must be a very great chief, and it was a shame to kill such a man as this.

And now a commotion arose on the other side of the kraal. All eyes were turned, and so grotesque was the sight that met his glance that Claverton could hardly keep from laughing outright. In the centre of a group of women and children, who were hustling him along, was a man—a white man. On his head was a tall black hat, the puggaree had been impounded by one of his captors. His arms were bound to his sides, while his long-tailed coat, now in a woeful and tattered condition, hung about his legs. Some brat, more mischievous than the rest, would every now and then swing on to its tails, or bestow a severe pinch underneath, while buffets of every description seemed the sufferer's momentary portion. His eyes were starting out of his head with fear, and his countenance was more abject than ever. In this miserable-looking specimen of British humanity Claverton recognised his companion in adversity—the missionary, Swaysland.

“Yaow—man of peace—get on!” yelled the rabble, hustling the poor wretch forward. One urchin leaped upon his back, and nearly made his teeth meet in the tip of his ear, while another playfully flicked him on the cheek with the lash of a toy-whip. Altogether the unfortunate missionary seemed to be having a bad time of it.

“Is there too much light, Umfundisi?” mocked a young woman, as he blinked his eyes, partly to dodge an expected blow, partly because the sudden glare of the sun tried them. “There, now it is dark. Is that better?” and she banged the tall hat down over the luckless

man's eyes, head and face, thereby performing the operation known to the uncivilised Briton as "bonneting." A scream of laughter from the barbarous mob greeted this performance, which increased as, with the "chimney-pot" sticking over his head and face, their victim stumbled forward, completely blinded. Scattering the women, two of the warriors roughly removed this visual obstruction, and marched him up to where Claverton was sitting.

"Hallo, Mr Swaysland, I never expected to see you again in this terrestrial orb!"

There was something almost cheerful in this greeting, and the poor missionary felt hopeful.

"How did you escape? I am so glad!" he began in a tone of breathless relief. "Now you will be able to interpret for me. I am sure they would not have ill-treated me if I could have made them understand who I am. And they have ill-treated me shockingly—shockingly."

"Why! Can't you talk their lingo?"

"No. I have only been in this country a few months. Ah, why did I leave Islington! I was President of the Young Men's Christian Association there, and I must needs come to convert the heathen in this benighted country. I was afternoon preacher at—"

"Yes, yes," interrupted his companion in adversity. "But I'm afraid that won't inspire John Kafir with either respect or compunction. What do you want me to tell them?"

"Tell them that I am the Rev. Josiah Swaysland, and that I belong to the Mount Ararat Mission Station. Tell them that I am the Kafir's friend, and that I gave up a comfortable place in a high-class drapery establi—er—ah—er—I mean in a—er—in easy circumstances at home, in order to come and be their friend. Tell them to let me go. I am not a fighting man. I am a man of peace, and never did them any harm. Tell them—"

"That's enough for one sitting," said Claverton, with a sneer of profound contempt for the other's egotism and cowardice. It was all "I—I," "Let me go." A brutal laugh was the only answer which the savages vouchsafed.

"Ha!" they mocked. "A man of peace! What are men of peace doing here in war-time? This is not the land for a man of peace!"

Nevertheless, Claverton did his best to obtain the other's release, and disinterestedly, too, for he knew that long before his own position could be made known he himself

would be a dead man. He represented to the Kafirs—very contemptuously, it must be admitted—that the missionary was a pitiful devil, not worth the trouble of killing; that they could gain no good by it; but might by releasing him, as he would be only too ready to trumpet their generosity far and wide. They only shook their heads in response to all his arguments. They had no voice in the matter; it was a question for the chief to decide.

“What do they say?” anxiously inquired Swaysland.

“They can do nothing. It all depends upon Sandili. He will be back this evening, and then our fate will be settled.”

The other shuddered.

“You seem to take things very calmly, Mr Claverton,” said he, at length.

“Well, yes. What on earth’s the good of kicking up a row? It won’t mend matters.”

“Oh! God help us!” wailed the missionary, in mortal fear.

“That’s about our only chance. But you don’t seem to calculate over much on the contingency,” rejoined his companion, with a very visible sneer.

“Don’t talk like that—don’t, I beg you. Remember our awful position.”

“The devil was ill, the devil a monk would be,” quoted the other, with a bitter laugh. “I’ve been in ‘awful positions’ before now, on more than one occasion, but this time I verily believe it’s all UP. My God has quarrelled with me, as that long devil over yonder graciously informed me last night.”

Swaysland stared at him in amazement. Here was a man with torture and death before him in a few hours, talking as calmly and as cynically as if he was having his evening pipe. He had never even heard of anything like this before, and, if he had, would not have believed it.

“Now, look here,” continued Claverton. “I don’t want to raise any false hopes, mind that; but I think it’s just possible that they may let you go. You see, the chiefs always like to stand well with the missionaries, not because they believe in them, but because Exeter Hall is a power in the land, worse luck. Now, you represent that you’re no end of a swell in that connection, and that you’ll do great things for them if they let you go. But, whatever you do, don’t promise to leave the country by way of an inducement.”

“But if they ask me?”

“They won’t. On the contrary. If you leave the country, you can be of no further service to them, and they know it. It is only by remaining here and saying what fine, generous fellows they are, that you can do them any good. In fact, I think you stand a very fair chance; but, as I say, I don’t want to raise any false hopes.”

“Really, I declare I am quite hopeful already. If I get away, never again will I set foot in these frightful wilds,” vehemently replied this preacher of the Gospel. “But, about yourself?” he added, ashamed of his egotism, a consciousness of which had just begun to dawn upon him.

“Oh, I? Well, I’m a gone coon. There isn’t a chance for me. They know me too well.” Then, as if moved by a sudden impulse, he added: “If you escape you might do me a service. It isn’t a very big thing.”

“I pledge you my word that I will. What is it?”

“Find out a man named Payne—George Payne. He’s from Kaffraria, but at present he’s living in Grahamstown, and—tell him—tell them—all—that you saw the last of me.”

“I will—I will. But—”

“Do you know this, Lenzimbi?” and Mopela stood confronting him, with a diabolical grin upon his face. As he spoke he removed an old rag from over something he carried, disclosing to view a hideous object. It was a human head, and in the swollen, distorted lineaments, the glazed eyes, and the sandy beard all matted with gore, Claverton recognised the features of the unhappy Boer, Cornelius Oppermann. At this ghastly sight Swaysland started back, his face livid with terror, and trembling in every limb.

“Look at it, Lenzimbi. Look at it. One of your countrymen,” went on the savage, thrusting the frightful object within an inch of the prisoner’s nose. It had begun to decompose, for the weather was hot, and it was all that Claverton could do to restrain his repugnance.

“I see it,” he replied, self-possessedly. “Any one but a fool would know that that article of furniture had belonged to a Dutchman, whom every one but a fool would know was not ‘one of my countrymen.’”

“Hey, Mopela, take it away!” cried the bystanders, disgustedly. “We don’t want to be killed by the carcase of a stinking Boer,” and, with a grin of malice, the barbarian

chucked the hideous trophy at a small boy who was passing, and who bolted with a panic-stricken yell.

“Here, Umfundisi, you have talked long enough; you must go back to your hut,” said Nxabahlana. The poor missionary’s heart sank within him. Claverton’s conversation, though sadly profane, had cheered him up, and now he was to be alone again.

“Good-bye, in case we do not meet again,” he said, with more feeling than he had hitherto displayed—on other account than his own, that is.

“Good-bye. Keep your spirits up, and don’t forget to make the most of yourself,” replied Claverton. “And remember Payne—George Payne.”

“Now then, Umfundisi,” impatiently exclaimed one of the Kafirs, dragging him by the shoulder. Swaysland walked dejectedly away, glad of the Kafir’s escort to protect him from the ill-treatment of the women and children; and Claverton, leaning back, wondered, dreamily, what the deuce would be his own fate. So the hours dragged their slow length; and it was with but scant hope that the captives awaited the arrival of the Gaika chief.

Chapter Twenty Two.

The “Word” of the Great Chief.

Tired of gazing at the prisoner, and realising, moreover, that there was not much fun to be got out of one who took matters so coolly, the women and children ceased to crowd round him, and he was left very much, to himself. It was broiling hot, and every now and then upon the sultry hushed air came the discharge of firearms in the far distance. Evidently the rival forces were making targets of each other; but it was probably only a slight skirmish with some patrol, and Claverton did not allow himself to hope anything from the circumstance. The Kafirs, too, seemed in no way to trouble themselves about it.

“Time passes slowly, doesn’t it, Lenzimbi?” said Mopela, mockingly. “It passed quicker sitting by the pool at midnight, you and the tall dark lily at Seringa Vale. How well you looked together! Why didn’t you bring her here with you, eh? It would have been much more comfortable for you, and for us, ha, ha!”

At that moment Claverton would have bartered his life to be free to spring upon the jibing savage and tear him in pieces with his bare hands. But it is safe to worry a chained mastiff, if only the chain is strong enough.

“Ha! ha! What will the dark lily say when you do not return to her?” went on Mopela. “When she hears how you were cut in pieces like a sheep, or roasted. Once we killed a man by putting red-hot stones upon him. At last they slid off, but we held them on again with sticks. He was two days dying. That was for witchcraft. Another was smeared over with honey, and a nest of black ants was broken over him. They stung him, they got into his ears, and nose, and eyes, and stung him everywhere. He died raving mad. Another was skinned alive, and then his skin was sewn round him again. Another was hung by the heels over a slow fire, and his eyes were put out with red-hot fire-sticks. Which of these things would you rather have happen to you, Lenzimbi?” concluded the Kafir with a hideous laugh.

“Nothing of the kind will happen to me,” was the imperturbable reply.

A low boom of thunder smote upon the air—long, very distant, but distinctly audible. On the farthest horizon a little cloud was just visible. The slightest suspicion of a superstitious misgiving was in the breasts of the bystanders. How could this man preserve such perfect imperturbability unless he were sure of some miraculous deliverance?

“Will it not?” jeered Mopela. “What will happen then?”

“Wait and see. If you have been telling me those interesting stories to try and frighten me—well, then, Mopela, you’re a bigger fool than even I took you for, and have been taking a vast deal of trouble about nothing. But now, if it’s all the same to you, I think I’ll go to sleep.”

They stared at him. Here was a marvellous thing. These white men, too, were so afraid of pain; and this one, whom in a few hours they intended to burn alive, announced his intention of going to sleep. But they offered no objection. He was in their eyes a natural curiosity, and to be studied as such.

And he actually did sleep, and slept soundly, too, so that two hours later when the whole kraal was astir and in a commotion, he awoke quite refreshed. The arbiters of his fate had arrived.

The chief, Sandili, a refugee with the remnant of his tribe in the fastnesses of the Amatola forest, was a very different personage to the sleek, well-fed, benevolent-looking old “sponge” who had asked for sixpences when sitting against the wall of the Kaffrarian trading-store. To begin with, he was sober, a state he could rarely plead guilty to during the piping times of peace. But there were no canteens in these rugged strongholds, and the very limited supply of liquor that could be smuggled in was but as a drop in the bucket to this habitual old toper. His temper, too, was peevish and uncertain, whether owing to the supplies of grog being cut off, or the reverses sustained by his arms, was open to debate. So when this prisoner stood before him as he sat in front of his hut surrounded by his amapakati (councillors) and attendants, the old chief’s countenance wore none of its former friendliness and geniality.

One swift glance at the rows of dark, impassive faces, whose eyes were fixed upon him, keenly noting every point of his demeanour, and Claverton saluted the chief—easily, naturally, and as between equals. A murmur ran through the group in acknowledgment, and every eye was bent upon the prisoner. For some moments they regarded each other in silence, and then Sandili spoke.

“Who are you, white man, and what are you doing here?”

“Who am I? The chief will recollect that we have met before. Does he not remember Thompson’s store and the man who talked with him there? That was myself.”

Again a hum of assent ran through the group, and the chief sat gazing at his prisoner as if in deep thought. And what an unaccountable turn of fate it seemed to Claverton! The last time he had talked with this man he had felt for him a good-humoured,

contemptuous kind of pity as he gave him the trifling gifts which the other had asked for; and Lilian's sweet eyes had looked upon the old savage with a delicious air of half-frightened interest, much as she might have regarded a tame old lion, and then they had ridden so light-heartedly away, without much thought of the evil to come. How vividly that day came back to him now—now, as he once more stood before the old chief, whose lightest word was sufficient to decide his fate! Verily, the turns in the wheel of Fortune are capricious.

Seeing that no one was in a hurry to break the silence, Claverton continued:

“As to what I am doing here, I was brought here, very much against my will, I admit. Our friends here drove me over a cliff higher than that one yonder,” pointing to one that overhung the hollow; “but I stopped half-way down and got inside. Then I walked down through the heart of the earth, and came out at the foot of the cliff, where your people found me.”

“What childishness is this?” said the chief, sternly. “Are we children and fools that you tell us such tales, white man?”

“Ask those who brought me here if it is not as I say,” was the cool reply.

A rapid conversation took place among the Kafirs, many of whom confirmed the prisoner's statement. It was an unaccountable thing, they said; but the white man seemed to be something of a sorcerer. Anyhow, all that he said about the cliff was true.

And now a fresh excitement took place in the shape of some new arrivals, some mounted, some on foot. Claverton noticed a stoutly-built man in European clothing, who seemed rather to shrink back as if anxious to avoid observation.

“Who is that?” he asked of his guards during the slight confusion that followed.

“Gonya—Sandili's son,” was the reply.

This Gonya, or Edmund Sandili, as he was known to the colonists, had received a civilised education, and, at the time of the outbreak, held a post as clerk and interpreter in the Civil Service of the colony. This post he had thrown up in order to cast in his lot with his own people—a course which, whether that of a traitorous rebel or self-sacrificing patriot, is a matter of opinion.

“And who is the Umfundisi?” he went on, in an ironical tone, glancing in the direction of a thoroughbred Kafir who was arrayed in a clerical suit of black, with which, and with

the white choker adorning his throat, the rifle he carried in his hand seemed startlingly out of keeping.

“Ha! that’s Dukwana. He’s a real Umfundisi at Emgwali. He can pray well, but he can shoot better,” replied the barbarian, with a sneering laugh. “Ha! there’s Matanzima—Sandili’s other son. He is a warrior?”

“Yes, I know him,” said Claverton, as he watched his former enemy join the group and seat himself near his father. The old chief looked not best pleased at the interruption as he turned frowningly towards his impetuous son.

“Where is the prisoner?” the latter was saying. “Aha! white man, we have caught you at last!” he went on, as Claverton again stood before the group.

“Why did you not ‘catch’ me that day in the thorns, when we met in real battle, Matanzima?” he retorted. “That was a good rough-and-tumble, wasn’t it?”

The other showed all his white teeth and laughed. He had a pleasing face—bold, daring, and reckless. Then they began questioning the prisoner about the colonial movements. To each query he replied with a readiness that astonished them.

“You are not misleading us?” said one of the amapakati, threateningly. “Why do you tell us all your countrymen’s moves so readily?”

“I am not misleading you, because not the slightest advantage would be gained by it; the result will be the same, anyhow. I tell you, Sandili, and all you amapakati, that you are going straight to destruction. You had much better make terms before it is too late. You can get better terms now than a month hence.”

A murmur of amazement ran round the assembly. Here was a prisoner—a bound, helpless prisoner—talking to them, the chiefs and councillors of the Gaika nation, like a victorious general dictating terms! It was a thing unheard of.

Suddenly a strange interruption occurred. A figure bounded into the midst—a frightful figure, with long, gaunt limbs and gleaming eyes. From neck, and shoulder, and wrist, and ankle, dangled beads, and cows’ tails, and feathers, and magic strings of birds’ beaks and claws, while the creature’s body wae hideously tattooed from head to foot. Of tall stature, a coif, consisting of a huge snake’s skin all entwined with the claws of scorpions, made him look even taller. With a long, wild beast-like howl, this hideous object stood poised on one foot before the group.

“Treason! Treason!” he mouthed.

All started; each man, by an involuntary movement, looking uneasily at his neighbour. In one glance Claverton recognised this diabolical-looking creature. It was the wizard, Nomadudwana.

“Treason! Treason?” he repeated, foaming at the mouth and gnashing his teeth.

“What does the sorcerer mean?” asked Sandili. “Who is the traitor?”

“There is a white prisoner here,” bellowed the wizard. “He belongs to us. He belongs to the nation—to the Great Chief—to me—to us all—for we shall all take of the war-medicine which I will make out of his heart. He is a brave man; his heart will make strong war-medicine. The Great Chief, Sandili, is our father; but there is treason in his house—in his own house!” And again the hideous wizard broke into a series of prolonged and diabolical howls. “There is one here who would have deprived us of our spoil,” he went on; “who would have released our prisoner and enriched himself; who would have gone over to the white men and betrayed us, his brethren—betrayed the Great Chief, his father, and the head of his father’s house!”

The councillors were visibly agitated. Though their consciences were clear, it might be in the purpose of Nomadudwana to denounce any one of them. A shout of wrath went up from the crowd beyond.

“Who is the traitor? What is his name? He must be killed!” exclaimed the Kafirs, gripping their sticks and assegais. “Name him! Name him!”

The wizard glared around, and many a bold spirit quailed before the glance of those dreaded eyes.

“The traitor is of the house of the Great Chief—of his own house. Where is Nxabahlana?”

A loud murmur of mingled amazement and relief arose, succeeded by ominous mutterings.

“Here!” roared the warrior named, springing into the circle and confronting his denouncer. “Here! What have you to say against Nxabahlana? Liar, fool, juggler! Out with it, before I cut out your lying tongue!”

“Stop!” cried Matanzima. “Stop! We must hear what all have to say. If Nxabahlana is true, he need fear nothing. Where is Senhlu?”

Then stepped forward the suspicious one, and narrated how his leader had been in close confabulation with the captive, whom he—Senhlu—had heard him agree to release, on condition of receiving five hundred head of cattle (exaggeration Number 1); further stipulating that, when the whites were victorious, Sandili and Matanzima should be slain, and he, Nxabahlana, put into their place (exaggeration Number 2). He told how anxious his leader had been to go dangerously near the white men's camp, and how he and Mopela had stirred up the others to resist this plan, feeling sure that their said leader intended to desert and betray them.

As he concluded, the ominous murmur had risen to angry shouts, and every eye was bent upon the accused with a glare of vengeful wrath. But the object of it never quailed. He stood cold, erect, and disdainful—his tall, herculean frame looking quite majestic, as with a sneer on his face he listened unmoved to the shouts of execration around him. And Claverton, for the time, forgot his own position in the vivid interest which this unlooked-for turn of affairs afforded him. He could see that the whole thing was a plot, and he felt quite sympathetic towards his captor and would-be deliverer, who he saw was doomed, otherwise no common fellow like Senhlu would dare raise his voice against a kinsman of the Great Chief.

“It is a lie!” shouted the accused, waving his hand in the air. “It is a lie. Give this lying sorcerer a weapon and let us meet hand to hand. I will kill him and then whip Senhlu like a dog—my dog that turns to bite me. Listen, Ama Nqgika. Who has been in the front rank whenever we fought the whites? Nxabahlana. Who has shot three of them with his own hand, and seven dogs of Fingoes besides? Nxabahlana. Who has lost the whole of his possessions—cattle, wives, even his very dogs—in the cause of his people? Nxabahlana. Even now,” he went on, working himself up into a pitch of fervid eloquence, “even now, look at me. Am I afraid? Am I afraid of any man living? Who remained on the watch all night and captured this white man, when all the rest were afraid of him and had given up the search? Nxabahlana. Well, then—is it likely I should wish to let him escape? Is it, I say? Surely none but a fool would do this. None but a child like Senhlu. None but a covetous, jackal-faced impostor like Nomadudwana. None but a wolf who devours his own flesh and blood, like Mopela. None but these. Certainly not a warrior. Certainly not Nxabahlana—a warrior, a man of the house of Nqgika. Is the Great Chief, Sandili, a child? Are the amapakati children that they should have their ears filled with such childish tales? It is absurd, I say—absurd.”

He ceased, and a hum of mingled doubt and anger greeted his words.

“Nxabahlana talks well,” said Matanzima, with a gleam of malice in his eyes. “But we know that the whites are very liberal towards traitors. We know that if we are conquered

the man who stood the white man's friend will be well rewarded. When a prisoner is in our hands we do not go and look in at the enemy's camp on our way home for nothing. Nxabahlana talks of children. Who but a child would do such a thing as this?" concluded he, in a tone of significant cunning.

"A traitor! A traitor!" howled the wizard. "How shall we hold our own with a traitor in our midst?"

And the crowd answered with yells of execration, even the women in the background screaming and brandishing sticks.

"Ha! Matanzima is a boy," replied the accused in scornful accents. "Let him be silent when he is by his father's side. Now listen. Here is the white prisoner himself. Let the Great Chief—let the amapakati ask him. Ask him whether I agreed to release him."

It was a bold stroke. A brief glance at Claverton's face had inspired the Gaika warrior that here might lie his chance of safety. It was, indeed, a bold stroke, thus throwing himself upon the mercy of the captive. As for Claverton, the unbounded courage of the man filled him with admiration, and on that account alone he would willingly have saved his life, apart from any other consideration.

"Ask him, I say," repeated Nxabahlana. "Ask the prisoner whether anything passed between us."

"Ewa! Ewa!" (Yes—yes) echoed the crowd, "ask him?"

"Is this true, white man?" asked Sandili. "Are the words of Nxabahlana true?"

All eyes were bent upon Claverton, and there was a hush that might have been felt. Every ear was strained to catch his answer. It came in a bold, clear voice.

"Yes. They are. The words of Nxabahlana are true."

"But what of the wizard and Senhlu? You heard what they said."

"They are liars."

The whole assembly was taken aback. Not a man present but expected the answer would be unfavourable to the accused, and it may be added, that not a man present believed it now that it was the reverse. Wherefore Claverton went up a hundredfold in their

estimation, for had he not just excelled in one of their most cherished virtues—the art of lying well when convenient; and he, himself, felt a glow of satisfaction over having saved this brave man’s life; but even he forgot that among the Kafirs it is not necessary to convict a subject obnoxious to his chief, to ensure that subject’s condemnation.

“There!” exclaimed Nxabahlana, triumphantly, drawing his gigantic figure up to its full height. “You hear what the prisoner has said! Now let my accusers stand forth. Where are they?” and he looked searchingly around. There was dead silence. No one moved; but the eyes of the councillors were bent upon him with an ominous glance, and, meeting that glance, Nxabahlana knew that he was a doomed man. Yet he was game to the very last.

“Where are they?” he repeated. “Ah, they have hidden themselves, and well they may. But I appeal to the Great Chief. Let him order my traducers to stand before my face. I claim my rights. The Great Chief cannot refuse,” and in his eagerness he made two steps towards where Sandili was sitting.

Now it happened that Nxabahlana held in his hand a kerrie—just such an ordinary stick as the Kafirs always carry. He had better have dropped it before approaching his chief; but at the moment he forgot everything in his excitement. Not that the difference would have been great either way, for they were determined to get rid of him.

“I claim my rights! The Great Chief cannot refuse!” he repeated, standing with outstretched arm, and looking Sandili straight in the eyes.

The old chief started slightly. A dark expression came into his countenance as he gazed upon his audacious subject for a few moments in silence.

“What!” he exclaimed, in tones of indignation, “What is this? Who is this that dares to command his chief? Who is this that approaches me with threats? Who is this that dares to threaten his chief? Have I no men?” and he looked around with a volume of meaning in his fierce eyes.

Like a spark applied to an explosive the glance told. There was a rash forward on the part of the crowd, a swift flash or two, and a gleam as of the sunlight upon steel. The throng separated, and upon the ground lay the huge frame of Nxabahlana, the hot life-blood welling from half-a-dozen assegai wounds in his chest and sides.

It was a dastardly act, and, although he knew that the victim had richly deserved his fate, yet Claverton felt that the weight of evidence was in his favour, and he should, at any rate, have been allowed to meet his accusers face to face. But little time had he to

indulge in regrets on another's behalf, for now all eyes were turned upon him with a bloodthirsty glare, and voices began to clamour that the white prisoner should be given over to them.

And as he looked upon the wild scene it seemed hardly credible to Claverton that scarcely forty-eight hours had gone since he had left Lilian and set his face eastward to carry out his plan of revenge. He glanced down the line of stern, relentless countenances, where sat the chief and his councillors, the late victim of their tyrannous vengeance bleeding at their very feet; but in the shrewd, rugged features he could detect no hope of mercy. Around, hemming him in, crowded the clamouring savages, their fierce eyes burning with a lust for blood. Behind them he caught a glimpse of a large fire, wherein a group of women and boys were heating bits of iron red-hot, and he had small doubt as to the use to which that fire would be put. The only man who might have befriended him was lying dead at his feet, and the weapons that had done the deed had slain his own hopes. His time had come.

"Give me a drink of water," said the prisoner.

They brought him some in a bowl. His arms were bound to his sides at the elbows, but his hands were free, and he took a long, deep drink. This attention conveyed to him no false hopes; he had no doubt as to his ultimate fate. He looked around. The sun, which was nearing its western bed, had sunk behind a heavy bank of cloud which loomed upon the horizon, and a roll of thunder stirred the still, hot afternoon. The storm which had been threatening all day was drawing near.

And now the wizard, decked in all his hideous paraphernalia, bounded into the midst.

"Hear, now, Sandili, Great Chief, of the house of Gaika! Hear, ye amapakati! Hear, all ye warriors of the race of Gaika!" he cried. "For two moons we have been fighting the English. For two moons we have shed our blood and given our best lives in the endeavour to drive the English into the sea. Have we been successful? We and our brethren, the Ama Gcaleka, who can show twenty warriors for every one of the English, have spent our strength in vain. Whenever we met them the English have driven us back. Even when we met them—a mere handful that we ought to have eaten up—we have been driven back before their charmed bullets. They have charmed bullets and charmed guns which they keep on firing without loading. Why can we do nothing against these English? Listen, and I will tell you. You see the man before you? He is their sorcerer. He it is who causes our bullets to fly off them without harming them. He is in every fight. Who can mention a battle that this man was not present in? Now we have this sorcerer in our midst. What shall we do with him, I say? Shall we let him go? My

magic is stronger than his; I have delivered him into your hands. Will you, then, suffer him to escape again? Cut his bonds and let him free, and you will all be destroyed.”

A roar of execration was the answer to this appeal. Weapons were brandished, and the crowd pressed closer around.

“Give him to us!” they yelled. “See, there is a fire; we will burn him, one limb at a time.”

“Old men, where are your sons?” went on the wizard. “Young men, where are your brothers? Where are they? Ask the vulture of the rocks, the wolf and the wild dog of the forest, even the skulking jackal who burrows in the earth. Ask the breezes of the air, which blow over their whitening bones where they lie by thousands, slain by the charmed bullets of the English. Hark; I hear their voices in the wind—the voices of their spirits crying for vengeance. I hear it in the trees, in the rocks, in yon thundercloud which is drawing nearer and nearer,” and at his words a heavy boom was heard, followed by a spasmodic rustling gust violently agitating the surrounding bush, and stirring up the air around. With awe-stricken looks, his superstitious listeners bent their heads. “Yes,” roared the ferocious demon, working himself into a state of frenzy. “Do you not hear them? They are crying—‘Vengeance! Vengeance! Vengeance!’ And we, who are left—are we not hunted like wild beasts? Are we not driven from bush to bush by these white men—who have not a tenth of our number—by them and our dogs the Fingoes? Soon shall we follow our brethren, and the name of Gaika will exist no more. Here is a white man! Here is the destroyer of our race. Shall we not make him weep out in tears of blood the woe which has come upon us? Shall we not make him writhe in torment for many days, to appease the spirits of our slaughtered sons? We await the word of the Great Chief!”

Every eye was fixed upon the semicircle of grey-bearded councillors seated round the chief—dark, stern, and immovable. With bodies bent forward, and a wolfish, bloodthirsty grin, the warriors stood scanning the expression of the impassive countenances before them, eagerly awaiting the word, which they doubted not would be given. Again reverberated that thunder-roll—nearer still—as half the sky was hidden beneath an inky shroud, and the dull red flash gleamed from its depths. One of those storms which, in the hot weather, break with such fearful violence over the wilds of Southern Africa, would shortly be upon them.

But “the word” remained still unspoken. Sandili—whose pliant, vacillating nature ever ready to yield to the pressure of circumstances or to the advice of whoever had his ear last, was so powerfully appealed to—would have spoken it, and ended the difficulty; but it was evident that the councillors were not unanimous on the point. On the one hand, the nation was clamouring for the captive’s life; on the other, some of the councillors

were clearly opposed to the expediency of sacrificing it, and even the Great Chief dared not fly dead in the teeth of their advice without some show of debate. So he gave orders that the prisoner should be removed out of hearing while they talked, but that he should not be harmed.

“We have heard what Nomadudwana, the seer, has told us,” said the chief, looking inquiringly around. “Shall we then allow the prisoner to go free?”

Now the wizard was hated and despised by the older men of the tribe, though among the younger he was in the zenith of his popularity as a fierce and unswerving preacher of a crusade among the whites. Consequently the mention of his name struck a chord calculated to tune the whole instrument in Claverton’s favour. The mutterings of Matanzima and a few of the younger men, to the effect that a prisoner ought to be treated in the accustomed way—i.e. handed over to the people without all this indaba—were stifled by the decided and dissenting head-shakes of many of their seniors.

Then one of the amapakati spoke. He was a very old man; and an expectant murmur greeted his appearance.

“It is Tyala!” murmured the group. “Hear Tyala—he is wise!”

“My chief, Sandili,” began the old man, in a low, earnest voice; “my brethren, the wise men and councillors of the house of Gaika; my children, its warriors—listen to my words, which have always been spoken for your welfare. Have they not?”

An emphatic hum of assent having testified to the veneration in which the speaker was held, he proceeded:

“I am an old man now, far older than most of you here, and, as I look back upon the past of the Gaika nation I look forward all the more gladly to the grave. There was a time when we possessed the land; a time when our chiefs were feared almost from sea to sea; a time when our people dwelt at ease, and their cattle lowed upon a thousand hills; when the hearts of our young men were glad, and the songs of our young women resounded among the rustling corn. All was then well with us. The fountains gushed from yon cool forests, and the pastures were green, and our eyes were glad, for we dwelt in the fairest land that eye could look upon. The whites, our neighbours, did not molest us, but traded with us many things which now we cannot do without. Why did we not keep what we had got? We could not. There came a demon among us, and we could not sit still. We made war.

“What was the result? We were beaten, driven back. We lost our warriors by hundreds, and our cattle were taken. We lost a portion even of our lands. Here was a lesson to us—to us who proudly thought we could eat up the whites because they were so few. But we would not learn. We made war again; and this time we fought well, but it was of no use, again we were beaten. And this time the white man gave us back the land which he had taken from us—gave it us back! Was ever such a thing heard of before? Did not this show that he desired to save us—to treat us as his friends? Yet we could not sit still. Evil counsels prevailed among us, false prophets sprang up, and lured the people to destruction. They went—poor blind sheep—they went straight to the slaughter. What could I do—I, Tyala? It was in vain that I warned and entreated; in vain that I lifted up my voice day and night against their besotted folly. They even threatened to take my life—my wretched life; that, they were quite welcome to if it would but save them from themselves. The counsels of the false prophets prevailed. The war-cry was raised again.

“Why should I go on? The rest you all know. We lost what we had retaken before, but even the third time the English forgave us poor deluded people, and then, when the famine came they fed us when we were starving and crept to their doors to beg for food. Why did they not kill us all then, when we were in their hands? And now look around; look at the fair lands which are about to be taken from us—rather which we ourselves have given up because we could not rest quiet upon them. Are they not large enough? Are they not fertile enough? Are our streams not abundant enough, and our pastures not rich enough? Yet we have thrown all this away because the chiefs of the house of Gaika have allowed themselves to be led astray by a parcel of youths, a parcel of boys, who had never seen war and must needs clamour for it as for a new plaything. And what is the result? Look at us now—hunted into our stronghold, tracked like criminals and wild beasts. And yet, I say, it is all our own doing.”

The old man’s voice had become strong and firm as he spoke, though it shook slightly with the halting tremor of age. As he paused, many a deep murmur from his auditors told that his words had struck home.

“Who warned you against all this?—Tyala. Who warned you against the words of the false prophets?—Tyala. Who warned you against the rifles of the English?—Tyala. Whose voice has ever been raised in your behalf, in council, in diplomacy, even in the battle?—That of Tyala. But it has never been heeded. Now listen, my chief Sandili; and you, amapakati, my brothers. Here is a chance to stand well with the English, our conquerors; for they are our conquerors, even now. Do not throw it away. This man, our prisoner, is a man of rank and standing among his own people. What, then, shall we gain by taking his life? Let us restore him to his own people and say: ‘The Gaika people are not wolves, when they make war they do not kill the prisoners. Take this man, whom we found among us unarmed.’ The English are generous as well as brave. They will

remember this act when they make terms with us. The man himself will speak well for us. It is an act that will gain us sympathy everywhere. Do I hear it said that Tyala is the white man's friend? That is true, he is. But he is still more the friend of his own people. Have we not seen enough blood? Has not blood been poured out until the whole of the land is red with it—blood, blood, everywhere, nothing but blood? We are weary of blood-shedding, we would fain rest. Now, my chief, do not listen to the clamour of the young men, or the boys. Do not allow them to shed the blood of this white man. Restore him to his own people alive and well. We shall be glad of it, when we have done so, and the English will treat us generously. This is the counsel of Tyala.”

The old man ceased, and drawing his blanket around him, sat silent and motionless. Every word of his speech, illustrated by many a graceful wave of the hand and inflection of the voice, with here and there an expressive native ejaculation, was listened to with profound attention. When the murmurs which greeted its conclusion had subsided, another councillor, scarcely the junior of the first either in age or appearance, gave his opinion. His advice, too, was in favour of mercy. Unlike his predecessor he did not recommend the unconditional release of the prisoner, but rather that terms should be made beforehand.

After him, no one seemed inclined to plead the prisoner's cause any further, when, just as the opposite opinion was going to speak, Claverton suddenly found an unexpected advocate. This was Usivulele, the man whom he had held as a hostage, after the fight with the Hottentot Levy, when he had allowed the Kafirs to look after their wounded. He was not a councillor, but being a warrior of considerable standing, and a man of great shrewdness and sagacity, he was allowed a seat and a voice among that august body. As he had only arrived when the prisoner had been removed, the latter had not seen him.

Beginning with the usual complimentary allusion to the wisdom of his hearers, the speaker followed the lead of Tyala, setting forth with considerable power the inexpediency of provoking the vengeance of the English by pushing matters to their bitterest end. He dwelt upon the bravery in the field of the white leader now in their hands—having witnessed it in battle himself—upon his humanity to the wounded shown on more than one occasion, as in giving them water with his own hand, and saving their lives from the merciless rage of his own followers. Such men were scarce, and if the Amaxosa rewarded them by torturing and killing them, others of a different order would be put into their place. Far better let this man go. Then Usivulele went on, with cunningly veiled sneers, to cast ridicule upon the wizard Nomadudwana, whom they all hated. These impostors, he said, were gaining more and more ascendancy, till at last it seemed that chiefs and people were to be led by the nose by this impudent quack, who made pretended war charms, whose efficiency he had not the courage to test himself. He concluded with a powerful appeal to the chiefs to spare the prisoner's life, if only to

show that they were still chiefs, and as such not to be dictated to by a shouting mob, or influenced by the wretched jugglery of a sham soothsayer.

But if men were to be found who had the courage of their convictions, the majority of those who sat there were wedded to the traditions of their order and of their race. They, indeed, regarded the wizard as a despicable sham, but then he was necessary to such a national institution as “smelling out,” (Note 1) whereby, for purposes of gain or policy, obnoxious individuals might from time to time be got rid of; and the common people believed in him. It would not do to shake the popular faith in national institutions; to do so would be to aim a blow at authority itself, especially at such a time as this, when the Colonial Government was strenuously exerting itself to do away with chieftainship and tribal independence, and to substitute white magistrates everywhere. So one after another spoke at considerable length, combating the opinions of those who advocated mercy. It was a mistake to suppose, they said, that the liberation of this one man would make any difference whatever. They had reddened their spears, and must take the consequences; it was of no use thinking to cleanse them in such simple and easy fashion. There was no reason why this man’s life should be spared. He had proved a formidable enemy in battle, and had slain dozens of their warriors; it was only fair, then, to hand him over to the vengeance of the people. The people were clamouring for him, and they ought to have him. That was the custom of the nation.

Thus spake the majority of the amapakati. One especially, a grim old war-wolf, whose toothless fangs could scarcely mumble out his bloodthirsty words, did his utmost to influence his hearers in the direction of vengeance. The English, he said, were not to be trusted. They would probably visit it upon them ten times more heavily for having taken the man prisoner at all. Did the English spare the Gaikas when they captured them? No, they handed them over to the Amafengu to be put to death by them. Free warriors of the house of Gaika to die at the hands of Fingo dogs! Let this white man be burnt.

The last consideration told, as the ferocious old ruffian intended that it should. The councillors were now all but unanimous against the prisoner, and Sandili, whose sympathies, moreover, were with them, yielded, as usual, to the voice of the majority. One or two urged Tyala again to speak, but the old man shook his head sadly.

“No,” he said, “I have advised my chief and my people all my life. They have ever rejected my councils, and they have repented of it. They reject them now, and they will repent of it. I will say no more,” and sinking his chin in his blanket, he sat motionless as a statue, and heedless of what went on around him.

Meanwhile, outside the notice of the august circle a livelier scene was being enacted.

When Claverton was ordered to be taken out of hearing, the crowd, seeing him brought towards them, took for granted that their prey was indeed theirs at last, and surged forward with a roar like a den of wild beasts let loose. Their longing for blood was about to be gratified.

“Bring him to the fire!” they yelled. “Bring him to the fire?”

Some fanned up the flames; others, bending down, drew out bits of red-hot iron and blew upon them. It was difficult for his guards, amid that deafening roar, to persuade the mob that the time had not yet come. They pressed forward, weighed on by those behind. They shook their assegais towards the prisoner, they glared and mouthed upon him, they howled and threatened, and all the while the red flames shot up with a dull, hungry roar, and the bright caverns glowed around the instruments of torture which lay in them. The women were among the most merciless of that fiendish crowd. Hideous hags brandished knives and skewers, explaining to the prisoner exactly how they meant to begin upon him, and their repulsive wrinkled skins, all shaking and perspiring in the heat, gave them the air of toad-like fiends from the nethermost hell. Boys held up assegai points which had been heated in the fire, and yelled shrilly that they were going to dig them into the white flesh. One imp, with a diabolical leer upon his face, took a bit of hot iron and glided between the guards, intending to apply it to the prisoner’s leg. Unfortunately for him, however, some one jostled him, and, instead of “touching up” the captive, the iron was brought into contact with the naked thigh of one of the guards, who, with a startled exclamation, turned sharply round, and, seizing the youthful fiend, administered to him such a thrashing that he slunk off, howling like a whipped dog, amid the jeers and laughter of his fellows. And the said guards had their work cut out for them. They dared not, on their peril, allow a finger to be laid on their charge before the chief’s “word” was given, and yet every moment the mob nearly tore him from their possession. So they laid about them lustily, whacking the women and children on the backs and shoulders with their assegai shafts, and even threatening some of the young men with the blades, and the crowd fell back a little. Then they were able to explain that the prisoner still belonged to the chief, and they must wait.

It was a frightful moment for Claverton; even though he knew that he was for the time being safe, yet the position was one calculated to try the strongest nerves. And it was but delaying the hour. He had small hopes that the councillors would decide to spare his life. It might be that they would elect to keep him prisoner a little longer; there was just this chance, and it was worth next to nothing at all.

“Aha, Lenzimbi! Did I not tell you it would come to this?” mocked Mopela, gloating over his helpless enemy. “In a few minutes I shall put one of those red-hot irons into your eye—slowly—slowly—like this,” and he illustrated his blood-curdling speech by taking

one of the hot nails from the fire and gently boring a hole in the ground. The crowd had fallen back now, leaving an open space around the prisoner and his guards.

“Ha! What is this?” he continued, as something bright was disclosed to view through the open breast of the prisoner’s shirt; and, inserting his fingers, he drew out a chain, at the end of which hung a large and curiously-wrought locket of steel. The chain was clasped so near to the wearer’s throat that there was no getting it off by any method short of decapitation, it being fastened by a secret spring. In vain the savage jerked and tugged at the loose end by which the locket hung down on Claverton’s chest. It was of strong steel, and showed no signs of giving.

“Haow! Lenzimbi’s charm!” he cried. “We must take it away, then Lenzimbi will be weak and full of fear. This is what makes him strong. We must take it away.”

But this was easier said than done, for the chain was made of stout metal. At last a pair of pincers was procured, and Mopela wrenched and twisted with all the strength of his muscular grip.

“Take care what you are about!” whispered Claverton, his face livid with deadly rage. “The man who succeeds in taking that off will die on the spot. It is magic. Take care!”

For answer the savage only laughed, and redoubled his efforts to break the chain. A snap—a wrench—another snap—and Mopela sprang to his feet, triumphantly holding up the locket, with three inches of chain dangling from his hand, and crying: “Lo! the white man’s charm?” Claverton’s face was pale as death, white to the very lips, but his eyes were glowing like coals of fire. The crowd was watching him curiously. Already the removal of the charm had begun to take effect, they thought.

How it happened he himself could not have told to save his life, but the locket, which seemed as close as an unbroken egg-shell as Mopela was turning it over and over in his hands, suddenly flew open, disclosing, to the astonished eyes of the savage, the face of Lilian Strange. Yes, there it was, beautiful and lifelike, an exquisitely-painted miniature—her own work. A tender smile played round the curves of the sweet mouth, and the lovely eyes, opening wide beneath their long lashes, looked out with a calm, glad, trustful air that was inexpressibly bewitching. Even the warm flush beneath the delicate olive skin, and the soft wealth of bronzed, dusky hair, was true to the very life. A bordering of forget-me-nots, beautifully painted, was wound round the portrait, and in the opposite compartment of the locket reposed a thick coil of hair, matching exactly that in the miniature, and half hidden beneath this was the letter “L,” painted in blue upon a white ground. And this token of the purest, holiest love wherewith man was ever blest, was now held in the rude hand and gazed upon by the bold eyes of a savage. The

firelight destined to wither up the limbs of her lover glowed upon the sweet, delicate features of Lilian, portrayed there, lifelike in her radiant beauty; and still Mopela stood gazing into the locket which lay in his hand, fairly lost in wondering amazement.

“Whaow!” he exclaimed. “Lenzimbi should have brought her here;” and then his voice was jammed in his throat. He was choking. For a marvellous thing had happened, and a shout arose from the crowd—a shout of awe, and consternation, and warning. The prisoner was free.

A madman, we know, is at times endowed with superhuman strength. Claverton was for the moment mad, and the stout raw-hide thongs fell from him like packthread, as with one tiger bound, he sprang upon Mopela and bore him to the earth. Then digging his knee into the shoulders of the barbarian, who had fallen face downwards, he grasped him by the hair and thrust his head into the blazing fire. It was all done in a twinkling, and a deathly hush was upon the bystanders, who seemed thunderstruck. He might even have escaped; but no thought had he of anything other than vengeance. He seemed transformed into a wild beast. His eyes started from their sockets, and he gnashed his teeth as he literally ground the glowing cinders with the face of the prostrate man, till the flesh crackled horribly and roasted in the heat, and even then his fury seemed but to increase.

With a loud shout the Kafirs, recovering from their momentary stupor, threw themselves upon him. He hardly saw them, he continued to beat his adversary’s head into the fierce fire without heeding them. They dragged him off and secured him, but with difficulty; he was mad. Then some of them raised Mopela. The huge barbarian presented an awful appearance. The whole of his face was peeled and blackened—burnt to a cinder—and the sight of both his eyes was for ever destroyed. He lay, half insensible, and moaning like an animal.

“There!” shouted Claverton, in ringing tones. “There! That is my vengeance. That dog lying yonder dared to profane with his filthy eyes what was sacred. Now he will never see with those eyes again. They are taken from him. He will be in darkness until he dies.”

A vengeful murmur rose among his listeners. Suddenly some one cried:

“The charm—where is the charm?”

Where, indeed? They looked around—on the ground—in the fire—everywhere. In vain. Of the steel locket there was no sign. It had completely disappeared.

But the wonder and speculation of the superstitions savages was nipped in the bud by a mandate from Sandili that the prisoner should again be brought before him.

And now, once more, Claverton stood before that semicircle of dark, stern countenances, but he read no hope. They were about to doom him to torture and to death. Around pressed the crowd, eager, expectant, the women and children jostling against the warriors in front, struggling to obtain a view of the proceedings. Every now and then a red flash of lightning played upon the half-naked figures of the barbarians, and upon assegai points, and rolling eyeballs, and necklaces of jackals' white teeth and all the savage paraphernalia wherewith the fierce, lithe forms were decked.

A silence was upon all as the wizard stood, looking like a figure conjured up from hell, haranguing the assembly. The burden of his speech was a mere repetition of the wrongs they had suffered at the hands of the white men in general, and this one in particular, whom he now claimed on behalf of the nation, in pursuance of unvarying custom. And at his words a shout of assent went up from the fierce crew standing around.

"Give him to us!" they cried. "Give him to us, Great Chief!"

Then Sandili was about to speak, to utter the words of doom, when, in a strong, ringing voice which echoed through that savage fastness like the notes of a clarion, the prisoner cried:

"Stop! I, too, have something to say; listen to it all of you. First of all, who is this Nomadudwana, that claims to direct your councils? I will tell you—"

But he could get no further.

The cunning wizard was too much for him. Raising a series of terrific howls and effectually drowning his voice, and the voices of Usivulele and others, who would fain have allowed him a hearing, Nomadudwana made his way among the people brandishing his "medicine charms," and crying out that there was a plot on foot to defraud them of their prey—of their lawful vengeance on the white captive—and stirring them up to clamour for him to be delivered over to them. The plan was successful. With one mighty roar every voice was raised besieging the chief with its bloodthirsty demands. Waiting until the tumult had subsided somewhat, Sandili raised his hand, and pointing his finger at the prisoner said, in slow but distinct tones:

"Do with him what you will."

Immediately the firm grasp of many hands was upon him, and Claverton felt that his time had now come.

“Wait!” he cried, in a ringing voice. “Wait—I have a message for the Great Chief.”

His guards paused awe-stricken. A red flash darted into their midst, and loud rolled the thunderpeal immediately overhead. With a swift glance upward the prisoner continued:

“Hear me now, Sandili. My magic is greater than that of your most redoubted wizards. Who stood unseen at Nomadudwana’s side in the spirit cave in Sefe’s cliff and laughed?—I did. Who was wafted safely down yonder tremendous height and walked forth unhurt?—Ask the spirit of Nxabahlana, and the men who saw me. This is your sentence. Your tribe shall soon be driven from this land, which the English shall enjoy in its place. Your sons, Matanzima and Gonya there, shall work in chains for the English for many long years—the best years of their lives—shall slave beneath the hot sun with common convicts, driven like oxen by their taskmasters. And you, yourself,” he went on, speaking slowly and solemnly, as with outstretched hand he pointed at the savage chieftain, “you, Sandili—the Great Chief of the House of Gaika—before six moons are dead, you shall meet a dog’s death at the hand of a Fingo ‘dog,’ and the chieftainship of the House of Gaika shall become in you a thing of the past. This is my ‘word’ to you, Sandili, and to all present.”

Nothing but the speaker’s reputation as a wizard, who had made his magic felt, would have obtained for him a hearing. His listeners were obviously impressed. There was a moment of silence.

“Whaow!” suddenly exclaimed the Kafirs standing around. “Listen to the white man! He dares to revile the Great Chief!”

The countenance of the old chief became gloomy and troubled as Claverton finished speaking. Then again he raised his hand in fatal gesture.

“Do with him what you will.”

What is that frightful crash as if the earth were split in twain, rent by an indescribably terrible blow? What is that dazzling, steely glare, all blue and plum-coloured and liquid in its blinding incandescence? There is a smell of burning in the air, in spite of the rush of deluging rain slanting down like waterspouts on to the earth. Chief, councillors, captive, populace, can hardly see each other as they raise their heads, which they have bent, appalled beneath the crashing thunder-note of heaven. The blinding flood pours down upon them, lashing up the ground into a very torrent of liquid mud, as again that

frightful peal shakes the earth, and the gleam of a fiery sea is in their eyes. No other thought have they for the moment than that of refuge from the fury of the storm. The prisoner is dragged into a hut, and, in a moment, not a single human form is to be seen in the open, while the terrific thunderclaps peal forth, and the lightning gleams blue upon the rush of water now flowing several inches deep over the soaked ashes of the fire which, but for this timely interference, would even now be devouring Claverton's limbs.

The hideous sport of these barbarians must even be deferred till morning, for not another stick or straw will be induced by any power on earth to light as the deluging rain still beats down upon the earth in unabated fury—nor can the people stand out in such weather to witness it, and this is of the very essence of the performance.

So there in the dark, stuffy Kafir hut, securely bound, jealously watched, and the last hope of deliverance fled, lies Arthur Claverton; beyond all reach of his friends; cast off by her of whose love he was more certain than of his own life; his hated rival triumphant and secure from his just vengeance; and he only awaiting the morrow to be dragged forth, in the prime of life, to suffer a slow and lingering death among unheard-of tortures in order to make sport for a crowd of brutal savages. Truly his lot is a hopeless one indeed.

Note 1. An institution similar to the good old custom of “witch finding,” among ourselves.

Chapter Twenty Three.

“A Life for a Life.”

When a man knows that the first light of dawn will see him led forth to a lingering death by torture, he is not likely to pass a very tranquil night, be he never so courageous or philosophical. Claverton exemplified both of these attributes to the full; yet as he lay there, thinking upon his position, even his fearless spirit sank within him.

To begin with, there was not the shadow of a chance of escape. He was firmly secured with strong and well-trying restraints—a detail to which his captors, warned by the Mopela episode, had given their extra attention—and two stalwart Kafirs, fully armed, mounted guard over him by relays, one lying across the door of the hut. Not a muscle could he move, not ever so slightly could he shift his wearisome position, but their eyes were upon him, as they sat chatting in their deep bass tones; but carefully avoiding any subject likely to interest their charge.

And he? He looked upon himself as dead already. His guards started and gazed at him watchfully, handling their weapons, as he ground his teeth audibly in the fury begotten of his reflections. Their task was not a congenial one, for in their superstitious souls, hatred of a powerful enemy was strongly dashed with a touch of secret awe. They had witnessed what had befallen Mopela, then the terrific storm breaking over them all at the very moment when they were about to sacrifice the prisoner, and now they were by no means easy in their minds, shut up at such close quarters with such a formidable foe, even though he was bound, and helpless as a log. The rain swept down in sheets outside, and the wind howled in furious gusts; within sat the prisoner and his savage sentinels, the latter huddled in their blankets and talking drowsily.

Yes. At last Claverton felt that he must yield to Fate. Fortune had befriended him for long, but now it had forsaken him. Many a trifling incident, little thought of at the time, now seemed fraught with direful omen. Lilian's forebodings of ill, followed by the reappearance of the hated rival; the unusually devoted leave-taking of his faithful follower; but what weighed him down most was the loss of the steel locket—the “charm,” to which scarcely less than the savages he attached a superstitious importance—as symbolising the constant protecting presence of his adored love with him in all danger. And now even this amulet had been taken from him, simultaneously with the love—the guiding star of his life—which it symbolised; well might the incident presage his doom, for life was of no further value to him.

Then an intense craving came over his soul once more to behold the tenderly-loved face, to hear the soothing tones of that voice; and with the grave yawning to receive him,

Claverton would have bartered his salvation a dozen times over for one momentary glance of her who represented his all—his world—his Heaven—his God. And ever upon the thatch beat the monotonous fall of the rain, and in the dead silent night floated a weird cry from the lonely bush, answered by the occasional yelp of a half-starved cur prowling among the silent huts—and the prisoner slept. Slept, but rested not, for his mind was wide awake. Now he was talking with Lilian, as of old at Seringa Vale, when all their future was wrapped in apprehensive uncertainty. Now he sat with her in the garden at Fountains Gap, and the birds sang around, and overhead the sky was one fair expanse of unclouded blue, even as the golden dawn of perfect and uninterrupted love opening its flowery pathway before them. Now it was that sweet sad parting in the grey, chill morning—and lo, he stood within a lonely valley, and his pistol was pointing at the heart of a man who stood before him—a man with an awful expression of rage, and terror, and despair upon his features—and the face was that of Ralph Truscott. Ah, so real! Then he awoke. It was morning, and his time had come. Other voices were mingled with those of his guards, and a chill blast of air came in at the open door of the hut, which was what had aroused him. But it was far from morning, for outside all was still dark and silent, save for the ceaseless patter of the rain.

“Good; we will go,” the sentinels were saying in response to one of the new arrivals. “We are tired of sitting here in the dark, watching this white wizard; but it will soon be day, and then we shall get some rare fun out of him,” and with a grunt of farewell the two Kafirs, huddling their blankets about them, crawled through the diminutive door and made off in search of more congenial quarters.

For some time after the sound of their retreating footsteps had ceased, the relief guards kept almost complete silence. The prisoner could hear them settling themselves down with a word or two of remark, and every now and then the rattle of their assegais on the ground beside them, but the circumstance mattered nothing to him. His guards had been changed—that was all. But after a while one of the said worthies, opening a little of the wicker-work door, bent his ear to the aperture, and appeared to be listening intently. Then he softly closed it and whispered:

“Lenzimbi!”

In spite of himself, Claverton could not restrain a start. He did not recognise the voice, but the whole action had been suspicious to a degree. Surely he was dreaming.

“Whaow!” exclaimed one of the Kafirs in a brutal tone. “This is poor work. Let’s amuse ourselves a little with the cursed white dog!” and the speaker struck a match and proceeded to light his pipe, and, with a start of amazement, Claverton recognised the rugged, massive features of Xuvani, the ex-cattle-herd of Seringa Vale.

Hardly able to believe his eyes, he stared again and again; but there the old man was, his face distinctly visible as he pressed down the tobacco with his middle finger, blowing out great clouds of smoke from his thick, bearded lips. The discovery, however, brought Claverton no hope. Yielding to the combination of circumstances, he had long pitched that article overboard, as he told himself, and watched it sink, and now the sooner the whole ship went after it the better. And then, like lightning, there flashed upon his recollection the words: "The future is uncertain, and we never know what turn events may take, and that if ever at any time he or Tambusa can render you a service they will do so, even should it be at the risk of their lives—a life for a life." How well he remembered Hicks translating the old cattle-herd's speech—that day long ago in the sunny garden at Seringa Vale—and how little importance he had attached to the Kafir's professions of gratitude! He had not believed in them then, nor did he now in the gloomy night of his abandonment and downfall. Gratitude! No. The word was not in the Kafir vocabulary, he thought, in bitter scorn, as again the brutal, mocking tones of the old savage fell upon his ear.

But along with them—covered by them, as it were—came that whisper again.

"It may be that Lenzimbi will watch the sun arise from among the tents of his people."

"Who speaks?" whispered Claverton, quickly.

"A friend. Tambusa."

"Ah!"

For a moment he could not speak—could scarcely think. His nerves had been terribly strained within the last forty-eight hours; and now the rush of blood to his head, the sudden overpowering revulsion of hope, succeeding the black, outer gloom of despair, would have been dangerous to the very reason of one less philosophically endowed. Life—liberty—revenge, and after that—love! He dared not think of it. Yet it was within his grasp once more. These two were about to redeem their promise. They would save him yet.

He had not seen them before, for the simple reason that they had only arrived at the kraal after he had been thrown into the hut; and then by the merest chance. And now, like the bright warming sunshine let into a cold dungeon which had never known daylight, came that friendly whisper through the darkness.

“I am ready,” he replied. “Just slip off these bits of reimpje, Tambusa; and give me an assegai and a stick or something, and start me outside, and then if ever these devils get hold of me again, why, they’re welcome to.”

“Not yet, ’Nkos, not yet,” whispered the young Kafir. “Too soon, too soon; there are still some of them awake. Leave it to us.”

What a lifetime now was every moment to the prisoner! Each rain-drop seemed to fall with a crash like thunder; every sound was to his fevered impatience as the beat of footsteps coming to rend from him for ever this one last chance. The old man still sat by the door, occasionally growling out curses upon the dog of a white wizard, and wishing it was morning that they might begin their horrid work; but this the captive knew now to be only a blind. Hours—weeks—years—seemed to roll by in that terrible suspense; in reality it was scarcely more than half an hour.

At length some one touched him in the darkness, and this time it was Xuvani who spoke.

“Don’t rise, Lenzimbi. Make the blood circulate, but do it quietly. Don’t move from your place until I tell you,” and, dexterously feeling his way, the old man, in a couple of slashes, cut through the prisoner’s bonds.

“Ah, that’s better,” whispered Claverton, stretching his limbs, which had been terribly cramped, so securely had they bound him. “But I say, Xuvani, there’s a poor devil of a preacher shut up here somewhere. Couldn’t we bring him out, too?”

“Do I owe the Umfundisi anything?” was the cold reply. “Lenzimbi shall go free, but I would not stir an arm to save a townfull of these black-coated preachers. If this white man is a real prophet, his God will save him; if not, the Gaikas may do what they please with him—I care not.”

Now, I am aware that by all the laws of romance Claverton should have absolutely refused to accept his own deliverance rather than desert a countryman, whoever he might be. But, even at the risk of his irretrievably losing the reader’s good opinion, the fact must be recorded that not only did no such wild idea enter his head for a moment, but that he there and then dismissed all thought of his companion in adversity from his mind. What was this cowardly, egotistical, “shoppy” preacher to him? He had never seen him before they had picked him up in the bush, and certainly had no great wish ever to see him again. If it had been Hicks or Armitage, or any of his old comrades, even Allen, the case would have been vastly different; but to sacrifice himself, Lilian, everything, for such as this—no, not he.

“Xuvani,” he suddenly exclaimed. “Where is the ‘charm’ that was taken from me to-day? I cannot leave that behind.”

“Whaow! It is lost,” replied the old Kafir, a little impatiently. “Stand up, now, and roll yourself in that blanket, for it is time to start.”

But Claverton did not move. A queer freak had taken possession of him. He might never see Lilian again; he was not going to leave her image here among the savages—that image which he had worn upon his heart throughout so many perils and trials. It was of no use accepting life. No wonder his would-be deliverer stood and muttered impatiently that he must be mad. Here was a man with a frightful death by torture awaiting him in a few hours, and who, instead of availing himself of the proffered deliverance without loss of time, refused to move because he had lost a trinket. The experience of the savage had never held anything so curious as this.

“We are losing time, we are losing time,” he muttered. “Are you so very tired of life, Lenzimbi?”

“Yes—almost,” and he made no sign of moving. “Ah!—”

Something had suddenly been thrust into his hand. He grasped it. It was the steel locket.

“Now I am ready,” he exclaimed, springing up. “Luck is ours again; my star has risen,” and, pressing the trinket to his lips, he put it away in its usual place next his heart.

“Ha! Lenzimbi is sane again,” remarked the old Kafir. “Now roll that blanket well round your neck and head, and keep your chin sunk into it or the hair will betray you. Don’t speak—not one word—but keep close behind me, without so much as looking up. We shall pass for two of the Gaikas going on a scouting expedition.”

With what a feeling of relief did Claverton draw in deep breaths of the cool night air, so grateful after the stuffy, ill-smelling atmosphere of the hut! What a thrill ran through him as he grasped the pair of heavy ironwood sticks which were put into his hand, and felt himself once more a free man and to a certain extent armed! It was past midnight, and still raining steadily, but the night was not a dark one, owing to the moon, which was completely veiled by the thick, unbroken curtain of cloud—indeed, not dark enough, as both of them thought, with a quick glance upward. The huts stood around, half seen through the dim light, and Claverton could make out a black patch on the ground where had been the fire, and the place where the chiefs and councillors had sat in judgment upon him. A cur, half aroused, began to bark as they made their way through the silent kraal, bringing Claverton’s heart into his mouth as he strode along, close behind his

guide. He had rolled the blanket well round his shoulders, and his head was adorned with an old battered felt hat, the brim being drawn down over his ears; and now imitating the long, elastic stride of the natives, and also their way of carrying their kerries, he would very well pass in the darkness for one of them, all muffled up as he was after the manner of a Kafir obliged to travel on a cold or wet night.

Soon the huts were left behind and they had gained the lonely bush. So dark was it beneath the overshadowing trees that Claverton could hardly keep up with his guide as they threaded the wet, slippery path, plunging deeper and deeper into the gloom; but not for worlds would he diminish the pace, every swift step bringing him nearer to liberty and all that it involved. Branches flying back swept his face, drenching him in an icy shower, wacht-am-bietje thorns seized his garments and tore his flesh, but not for a moment would he delay. On, on—ever on—on, through that wet, dank, jungly wilderness, whose lonely terrors were to this escaped captive as the fairest of surroundings. Once a great owl dropped down in their faces, gliding along on noiseless wing uttering its unearthly hoot. Strange, mysterious rustlings in the brake on either side, and the patter of feet, betrayed that the beasts of the forest were abroad; the weird, cat-like cry of a panther echoed from a gloomy pile of towering rocks overhanging their path, and, afar, the ravening howl of the great striped hyaena blended in dismal cadence with the chorus of nocturnal voices, which from time to time startled the deathly stillness of those wilds, meet abode of savage creatures, and men even yet more savage. And the rain fell with its ceaseless drip, drip, drip.

“Why, where is Tambusa?” suddenly exclaimed Claverton, looking behind. “I thought he was with us.”

“Silence!”

He obeyed, and subsided once more into his own thoughts. At length it began to lighten perceptibly. They had travelled for nearly four hours now, and travelled with marvellous directness, almost every inch of the ground being known to the experienced Kafir. Wooded heights, deep defiles, frowning krantzies, were all passed with a rapidity which astonished even Claverton, who would hardly have believed it possible to make such way on foot. Suddenly, and without turning his head, his guide breathed one single word, drowning it immediately in a slight cough.

“Caution.”

Not by word or look did Claverton betray that he had heard; but his grasp tightened round the handles of his kerries, and lo, starting out of the gloom so suddenly and so

noiselessly that they might have started out of air, five Kafirs, fully armed, stood in the path before them.

A hurried conversation took place, Claverton every now and then putting in a grunt of assent with the rest, in true native fashion. Xuvani did all the talking.

“We are carrying the ‘word’ of the Great Chief,” he said, making a step forward. “We must not delay.”

“What is the matter with your relation?” asked one of the five, Xuvani having thus categorised his charge for the time being.

“He has been shot through the cheeks, and the cold must be kept from the wound,” was the reply. By nature an intensely suspicious animal, the Kafir was peering distrustfully at Claverton, whose bronzed complexion, however, aided by the shade of the ragged hat, looked as dark as their own in the incipient dawn. But the very presence of Xuvani, whose valour and fidelity had been abundantly proved, disarmed further suspicion, and, without another word, the strangers disappeared as quickly as they had come, and the pair resumed their way.

“Do you think they will have discovered the joke, Xuvani?” asked Claverton at length, referring to his escape.

“The rain is good; it will have washed out our tracks,” replied the other. “It is unfortunate that we should have met with those men just now.”

“Did they suspect?”

Xuvani shrugged his shoulders. “In war-time every one suspects.”

“They’ll be roasting that poor devil of a preacher instead of me, I’m afraid, up yonder.”

But Xuvani was not of this opinion. The councillors always liked to stand well with the missionaries, he said, and this one would probably be released. Besides, there were plenty of mission-station men among the Gaikas—Dukwana, for instance, who was a real preacher himself, and several others—who would be sure to find an opportunity of letting the missionary go; which piece of information would have set at rest any misgivings Claverton might have had upon the subject, though, in truth, he had none, simply not having given it a thought until that moment. As for Xuvani, that unregenerate old heathen, though he understood and practised the virtue of gratitude so

well, yet it was patent that the sacrifice of a hecatomb of missionaries would have inspired him with no compunction whatever.

“Do you remember giving water to a wounded man after the burning of the Great Place in Gcaleka-land, and watching over him while the Fingo dogs went by?” suddenly inquired Xuvani.

“Yes.”

“That was Tambusa.”

Claverton whistled.

“What on earth was he doing up there?”

The other shrugged his shoulders.

“Yes, it was,” he said. “Whaow! Lenzimbi. You must be a wizard, indeed,” went on the old man, when he had listened to the recital of Claverton’s miraculous escape over the cliff, and his subsequent capture. “That storm must have been brought up on purpose for you, for nothing in the world else could have saved your life when the chief gave the word for them to burn you. And, even as it is, I could not have saved you—I and Tambusa—if you had not blinded the eyes of that dog Mopela. If he had known I was about he would have smelt the game and rendered it impossible. Now he is half-dead himself.”

It was indeed miraculous, thought Claverton. He had been brought through this with a purpose. The web of Fate was nearly woven.

“Xuvani?” he said. “You have saved my life, and a great deal more this day. Now, be advised by me. Leave this business, you and Tambusa, and go away quietly into the colony until it is all over. You are bound to come to grief if you remain in it. Then, when things are ship-shape again, you shall see what my gratitude is.”

“We have paid our debt,” replied the old Kafir. “Lenzimbi was always open-handed. Some day we will come and ask him for a few cows to give us milk, when all our cattle have been taken. If we come into the colony now, Government will hang us for having fought.”

“Not a bit of it. At most you would get a few months’ imprisonment, and, perhaps, I could obtain a free pardon for you. Then we will talk about this day, and you will be none the worse off for it. You know me—that is enough.”

The rain had ceased and the clouds were parting, and now, through the widening patch of blue firmament, the rising sun began to dart his warming beams upon the saturated earth, and all the joyous freshness of early morning was around. A few days earlier, and what exultation would have thrilled around this man’s heart, snatched as he had been from a horrible death, and restored to a world of light, and joy, and gladness; but now he had a task on hand which precluded any such thought—the accomplishment of his fell purpose of vengeance. After that—well, the future must take care of itself.

“Look!” exclaimed Xuvani, pointing to a column of smoke arising from a hollow about three miles off. “There are your people. Now go. You are safe.”

“Come with me, Xuvani,” urged Claverton, earnestly. “Not a soul shall harm you, I pledge you my life. I shall be better able to repay you, then—and—”

His words were cut short by an interruption as sudden as it was alarming. A volley of six or eight shots in rapid succession was poured into them, and several yellow faces simultaneously came into view, peering from behind the bushes to mark the effect. Fortunately the bullets whizzed harmlessly overhead and around, though perilously near.

“Cease firing, men,” thundered Claverton, throwing off his native disguise and standing erect and commanding. The well-known voice had a magic effect. With a shout of delight the astonished Hottentots, disregarding all dangers—past, present, and to come—leaped from their cover and crowded round their former leader; for it was into the midst of his old levy that Claverton had walked.

“Allamagtig, Kaptyn!” cried old Spielmann—his erewhile favourite sergeant. “Why, how did you manage to get away? We thought those devils of Kafirs must have roasted you,” and the old fellow’s wrinkled parchment face was puckered up like that of a monkey, as he grinned from ear to ear in his delight, and the others were none the less loud in their expressions of gratulation. Meanwhile, Claverton looked around for Xuvani, but he looked in vain. The Kafir had disappeared.

“Where’s the other nigger?” cried a loud, harsh voice behind them. “What the devil were you fellows about to let him escape? After him—directly. Bruintjes—Spielmann! Damn it—don’t stand staring at me! Do as I tell you—d’you hear?”

Claverton turned—and stood face to face with Ralph Truscott.

“At last!” he said, with a cool, sneering smile. “At last. Twice we have met before. The third time’s lucky.”

The other started and changed colour visibly.

“Who the hell are you, sir?” he exclaimed, in a loud, arrogant tone. “Better be a little more civil, I can tell you!”

“Oh, you know me well enough,” was the answer. “Well enough to estimate me at the value of about one hundred pounds. Not very much, is it?” Truscott turned ashy white.

“Bah?” he cried, insultingly. “I think I do, and I think I know where the shoe pinches. Now be advised, my good fellow, and cry off that bargain. It isn’t for you, I tell you. I was in the field long before you were; I’m in it now, and in it I intend to remain—by God!”

There was a quick, panther-like movement, a spring, and a half-smothered imprecation, and Truscott staggered back half-a-dozen paces, reeling beneath two straight-out hits from Claverton’s clenched fists. With an awful execration, something between a yell and the roar of a wild animal, he recovered himself, and, with his livid features working violently, dashed at his assailant. He was the taller and heavier man of the two, as well as the stronger, but he had lived hard, whereas the other was in splendid order—quick, supple, keen of eye, and dangerously cool, notwithstanding his deadly wrath. Half blinded by his own rage, like an infuriated bull, Truscott rushed upon his adversary, drawing, as he did so, his revolver from the holster hung upon his side. But before he could bring it to bear it was struck violently from his grasp, with a blow of the heavy Kafir stick, and, quick as lightning, that terrible “one—two,” straight from the shoulder, met him in his onward rush, and this time stretched him, half stunned, upon the ground.

“Coward, as well as liar, thief, and murderer!” exclaimed Claverton, his voice shaking with suppressed fury, as he thought of all the ruin wrought by his foe’s unscrupulous malice. “I suppose even you would like to settle this as soon as possible. You know where to find me. I’ll be ready at any time.”

“Shoot him. Do you hear? Shoot him down! Fifty pounds to the man who shoots him dead!” foamed Truscott, raising himself, half-dazed, upon his elbow. “Do you hear, men, God damn you, or are you all in a state of mutiny?”

Claverton laughed coldly.

“I don’t imagine any of them will lay themselves out to earn the money,” he said. “They are not quite such fools as their leader. But I repeat, Captain Truscott, that you will know where to find me, unless you prefer to let well alone, that is, and console yourself with thinking over the thrashing you’ve just had.”

“Wait, my fine fellow,” replied the other, between his set teeth. “I’ll riddle that carcase of yours for this morning’s business. I used to be able to shoot pretty straight, I can tell you.”

“Yes? Glad to hear it. We’ll have some tall practice presently. Till then—so long!” and, with a mocking nod, Claverton turned and walked away in the direction of the camp, while the Hottentots, who had stood aloof, awe-stricken witnesses of this unexpected and stirring incident, hastened to raise their discomfited chief. Their sympathies, however, were all with the enemy; for Truscott, since he had had the command of Claverton’s old corps, had rendered himself exceedingly unpopular—as much so, in fact, as its former leader had been the reverse; and now—though by reason of their ignorance of the English tongue they failed to understand what the row had been about—they mightily but secretly rejoiced over its issue.

Great and terrible was the hubbub which prevailed in the temporary kraal of the Gaika chief as soon as it became known that the white prisoner had disappeared. And the circumstances which led to this discovery were as follows.

Obedient to the instructions of his uncle, Tambusa had not stirred from the hut which had constituted Claverton’s prison-house, so as to allow the two to get clear off without running the risk of exciting alarm. At length, towards morning, the young Kafir began to think he might fairly take steps to ensure his own safety. Accordingly he stole forth from the hut—not quickly, and of set purpose, but with apparent reluctance and rubbing his eyes as if he had just woke up—this in case any prying glance should be watching his movements. All was still, though there was just a sign of the coming dawn discernible in the east, and with his blanket over his shoulder and his assegais in his hand, Tambusa walked swiftly through the group of huts in the direction of the bush, when, as ill-luck would have it, he was hailed, and by one of the men who had been mounting guard over the prisoner the night before.

“Where are you going to?” asked this man.

“Oh, I shall come back in a moment.”

“I’ll just go and look at the prisoner till you do, then,” was the reply. “He oughtn’t to be left in the charge of only one man.”

“No, don’t do that,” promptly rejoined Tambusa, whose heart sank within him. “Xuvani is there, and he’ll be very angry with me. He doesn’t know I’ve gone out.”

“Never mind. He won’t hurt you,” said the other. “I’ll tell him I met you,” and he walked straight towards the hut. Could it be that his suspicions were aroused? Was there something in Tambusa’s mien that betrayed him? Anyhow, the latter’s safety now would depend on the use he could make of the very brief start allowed him by the time his interlocutor would take to reach the hut—that, and no more.

Opening the door, the man bent down and looked in.

“Xuvani!” he called.

No answer. Perfect stillness. Not even the regular breathing of a sleeping man broke the silence. For a moment the savage shrunk from entering, his superstitious soul fearing the spells of this redoubted white sorcerer. Then his loud cry of alarm roused the sleeping kraal. Dark forms came hurrying out of their huts, half expecting to find themselves attacked by the enemy; but quickly grasping the cause of alarm they gathered round their countryman.

“The white man—the prisoner! Where is he?” was heard on all sides.

Quickly one of the Kafirs made his way through the crowd, a box of matches in his hand. Striking one, he peered into the gloomy interior of the hut. It was empty.

“Treachery, treachery!” he shouted. “The prisoner has disappeared!” and the cry was taken up by the crowd, which glared inquiringly around, as if in search of some trace by which to follow the fugitive.

“Where is Tambusa?” cried the man who had first raised the alarm. “He is the traitor—he has released the white man—he was here a moment ago—where is he now?”

He might well ask. Tambusa, it may be readily supposed, had lost no time in following the prisoner’s example. He, too, had disappeared.

Then again the wild, thrilling cry of alarm rang out through the forest. It fell upon the ear of the devoted young Kafir, straining every nerve to make the most of that brief start, and it seemed to peal forth his doom. There was no lack of spoor to guide them in their

pursuit of him, his fresh footmarks in the muddy soil were only too apparent to all; and away started two score of fierce warriors upon his track. The fugitive, husbanding his strength, dashes along at a swift, easy run, intending to gain the white man's camp. There at any rate he will be safe; but he knows full well the fate in store for him should he fall into the hands of his fierce countrymen, for has he not just been guilty of what in their eyes is an act of treason of the blackest dye? On, on; the young warrior is lithe and agile, and in splendid training, and it may be that he will distance his pursuers yet. But those horrid whoops are resounding from many a hill-top, and with fatal effect, for the attention of the five Kafirs whom Xuvani and his charge met not long since, is attracted thereby, and, with the quick suspicion of their race, they put two and two together. So, as poor Tambusa comes flying down the narrow bush-path, five dark forms spring up panther-like in front of him, effectually barring his progress. On either side is the thick tangled bush, almost impenetrable. He is lost; the pursuers are advancing rapidly upon his rear, and his road is barred. Disregarding the warning voices of those in front of him, the hapless youth bounds off the track and plunges into the tangled thorny brake. He is on a rock; below and in front of him lies a deep, stony ravine all overhung with trailers, a tiny stream trickling down its funnel-like depths. Ha! It is his last and only chance. But at that moment two reports ring out through the forest. With a groan poor Tambusa sways, and then topples heavily forward into the bed of the rivulet ten feet beneath; and his fierce pursuers rushing up, find only a corpse. He has escaped the most terrible side of their ruthless vengeance, to wit, hours of frightful torture; but he has lost his life—rather has he given it devotedly in exchange for that of the man who has twice already saved it.

So there he lies, this young hero—a naked savage, but a hero for all that—dead among the ferns and rocks beneath the mass of foliage and trailing creepers, which the sun's rays can scarcely penetrate, slain by his own countrymen. He has given his life in satisfaction of the debt incurred and the promise made long ago—given it in exchange for that of his benefactor—"a life for a life."

Chapter Twenty Four.

Vae Victis!

Great was the astonishment in camp when the man who had been given up as hopelessly missing, and whom everybody by this time had come to think of as dead, turned up safe and sound. Jaded and worn out, however, he sought his tent at once, excusing himself from receiving the hearty congratulations of his friends until after the sleep of which he stood so sorely in need.

Waking at last he opened his eyes, with a start, upon the genial countenance of the Irish doctor.

“Hallo, McShane!”

“An’ what the divil have ye been up to now, Claverton?” began that worthy, without any further ceremony. “Here ye’ve managed to get off bein’ made mincemeat of by the niggurs, and, not content with that, ye must get to punching a fellow’s head, and now he wants to have a shot at ye, av course.”

“Does he?” said Claverton, drily.

“He does.”

“H’m! Well, sit down and have a pipe, McShane, and we’ll talk it quietly over.”

“Ah! that sounds better,” said the good-natured Irishman, in a tone of relief, for he was hoping that the affair might admit of a settlement. “See here, now—what’s it all about? Truscott wants to parade you, and sent me to arrange matters, and that’s about the size of it. Now who acts for you?”

“No one.”

“No one? Well, then, I suppose you’ll shake hands together, and say you’re both made fools of yourselves,” said McShane, brightening up.

“You’re quite wrong, McShane. I’m going to give your friend the fullest satisfaction—when, where, and as soon as he pleases,” and the look in the speaker’s eyes caused the Irishman’s hopes to fall to the ground. “When I said no one acted for me, I meant it. I’m going to act for myself, or better still, you can act for both.”

“Och! an’ it’s balderdash ye’re talkin’,” rejoined the other, angrily. “How the divil can I be second to both? Bedad, an’ who ever heard of such a thing! I’D have nothing to say to it, I tell ye.”

“Well, then, you see, McShane, it’ll amount to this—that we shall go out without any seconds at all; which will probably mean that the first of us who catches sight of the other will blaze away; for I don’t trust our friend any more than I do Sandili himself. I’m quite ready, however; but I don’t intend to run any other fellow’s head into this business. Who is there, for instance? Brathwaite—family man; Hicks, ditto; and so on. Poor Jack might have done, but he’s passed on his cheque. No; as you have agreed to act for the other fellow, well and good; I’m quite satisfied. But, I tell you, there’s no one I can rely upon.” And lighting his pipe he passed the match to his companion, with a hand as steady as a rock.

For a long time McShane was firm. He would have nothing to do with so preposterous an arrangement—it wasn’t fair to him—and so on. But, eventually, seeing that they were determined to fight, and would probably do more mischief if left to themselves, he reluctantly agreed to act. They were a couple of fools, he thought; and would wing each other, perhaps; but on any graver contingency the light-hearted Irishman never reckoned.

“That’s all right, McShane,” said Claverton. “I shall leave everything to you, as far as your man is concerned, and if there’s any advantage to be had it shall be yours.”

Then they arranged that the affair should come off that same night towards ten o’clock, in a lonely glen at a safe distance from the camp, and known to both of them. But, to avoid suspicion, they agreed to leave the camp at different times, and to ride in different directions.

“I tell you what it is, Claverton, this fellow’s a damned good shot,” said McShane, as he got up to leave.

“Is he? All the better—for him. But how d’you know?”

“He says so.”

“Oh! I see. H’m! Brag’s a good dog. He shall have every advantage, as I said before. Well—till this evening.”

McShane went out, sorely puzzled, and heartily wishing he was out of it. In a moment of impulsive good-nature he had consented to act for Truscott when mad with rage. That

worthy had given his own version of what had occurred, and besought his good offices; and then, being a thorough Irishman, there was a subtle spell hanging about a row in any shape that was altogether too potent for him, and Truscott happened to be an old schoolfellow of his, though he, McShane, had never liked him much, nor did he now. And if he had cherished any hopes of talking Claverton over, they were scattered now. There was a deadly purpose in the latter's speech and manner, all the more so because so quiet. No; things must take their chance.

Left to himself, Claverton sat for a few minutes in silent rumination. Then he got up, and, opening a chest, took out a polished wooden case and unlocked it, disclosing a revolver. It was a beautifully-finished weapon, small, but carrying a bullet of the regulation calibre, and on a silver plate let into the ebony handle were graven the initials "H.S."

"Poor Spalding!" he murmured. "You were going to cut the knot of your difficulties with this little article once, and so am I, but in a different way."

He scrutinised the weapon narrowly, clicking the lock two or three times, and taking imaginary aim.

The poise was perfect.

How calm and peaceful rides the silver-wheeled chariot of night! How tranquil, in their mysterious distance, shine the golden stars, darting a twinkling glance down into this still, out-of-the-world hollow, where not even the chirp of an insect or the rustle of a disturbed leaf breaks the absolute hush of the night! On the one hand a wall of jagged rock rises to a serrated ridge, standing out sharp and clear; on the other, the sprays of the clustering foliage are photographed in shining distinctness. Above, in a towering background, a great mountain peak rears itself, dim and misty, enfolded in the slumbrous moonlight. A scene of eternal beauty—a holy calm as of another world!

But, lo! Standing within the shade of the thick foliage is the figure of a man—erect, motionless, as though petrified. For nearly an hour has he maintained his immovable attitude; and now a suspicion of a start runs through his frame. He is listening intently, for the ring of a bit and the tramp of hoofs becomes audible. It is one of those nights when the most distant of sounds would seem to be even at one's elbow; and now this sound draws nearer and nearer, and, in addition, a word or two in smothered tones. The listener's face wears a ruthless look as two horsemen enter the glade and, reining in, peer cautiously around.

"Perhaps our valiant friend is going to cry off," sneered one of them.

“Cry off? The devil a bit!” was the reply. “Claverton’s all there, I can tell ye. He’ll turn up in a minute.”

“Thank you, McShane,” struck in a voice, in the same low, cautious tone, as the watcher glided from his concealment.

“Och! there ye are! Now, we’d better get to business at once. First of all, we’d better lave the horses here close at hand in case we should want them.”

This was done, the three steeds being fastened securely to a small mimosa tree.

“I say, you fellows,” said the kindly Irish doctor, “is it determined to go through with it you are? Bedad, and hadn’t you better shake hands, and go straight home and have a brew o’ punch together? Faith, an’ it’s better than riddlin’ each other with lead.”

“My dear McShane, what on earth will you propose next?” said Claverton, while Truscott’s face, glowering with rage in the moonlight, was answer enough on his part.

“Ah, well I see it’s blood-lettin’ ye mane. Now ye’ll just both o’ ye sign this bit o’ paper. It’s meself that would rather be out of it. A duel with only one second! Why, it’s like an election with only one candidate—he gets kicked by both sides and thanked by neither, bedad.”

The “bit of paper” in question set forth that Dennis McShane acted in the matter at the joint request of both parties, and it was a precaution which he had deemed advisable to take in case the transaction should terminate disastrously, or at any future time be brought to light—or both. Without a word each affixed his signature, and then Dennis proceeded to pace out the ground. The duel was to be fought with six-shooters, the first three shots at twenty-five, and the rest at twenty paces.

“Now ye’d better look at each other’s pistols, as there’s no one to do it for ye,” he said.

What was it that made Truscott start and turn a shade whiter, and nearly let his adversary’s weapon fall as he took it into his hand to examine it? We have said that it was a beautifully-finished weapon, with a silver plate let into the handle, and on this, standing out distinctly in the moonlight, were the initials “H.S.” And Claverton, narrowly watching his enemy’s countenance, noted this effect and wondered not a little. These formalities over, the doctor proceeded to reload the weapons, which were both of the same calibre. Then he placed the combatants, twenty-five paces apart, taking

scrupulous care that each should enjoy an equal proportion of advantage from the moonlight.

Truscott, to do him justice, was no coward. He had come there fully determined to slay his adversary if he could; and as for his own share of the risk, why, that must be left to the fortune of war. But, when his eye fell upon those initials, something very like a shiver ran through him. There was something portentous in the sight of this relic of the past rising up as it were in judgment upon him, here in this lonely nook, away at the other side of the world. There was no mistaking the weapon, he knew it only too well, for he had handled it often. It was the identical one. He would have gone so far as to object to it; but what valid reason could he give, seeing that in size and calibre it was an exact facsimile of his own? No; things must take their chance. But he felt greatly unhinged, for all that.

Claverton, on the other hand, was untroubled by any misgiving whatever.

Stay. What is that black object crouching high up on the cliff? It is alive, for it might have been seen to move had the trio beneath been less intent upon their errand of blood. Only a stray baboon wandering among the ledges of the rocks.

“Now,” said McShane, withdrawing to a safe distance. “Be careful not to fire till I count three. Every shot must be signalled. Now, are you ready?”

No cloud veiled the unbroken calm of the starry heavens. The silver moon looked silently down, flooding hill and dale in her pale, clear light, shining like chastened noontide upon that sequestered hollow and the strip of open glade in the centre, where stood two men pointing their weapons at each other’s hearts. It will soon shine upon a ghastly stream of ebbing life-blood, crimsoning out upon the dewy turf. One of those two men must die here. Which will it be?

“One—Two—Three!”

A double report, but sounding like a single one, so simultaneous is the effect. A dull, thundrous echo rolls sullenly along the face of the overhanging cliff. The smoke lifts slowly, and there is a sickly, sulphurous smell mingling with the cool, fresh air. Both men are standing motionless, waiting for the second signal. As yet both are unhurt; Truscott heard his adversary’s ball whiz very close past his right ear, but his own shot was wider.

Again the signal is given. This time it is Truscott’s left ear which feels the close proximity of the lead; and but for the fact of his own bullet ploughing up the ground some forty

yards off, he might as well have fired with blank cartridge for all the apparent effect. His wrath is terrible, and blazes forth in his livid, distorted countenance and staring eyes. He can see that the other is a dead shot, and is, as yet, merely playing with him. And mingling with his wrath is a chilling misgiving; and as he stands fronting his opponent's pitiless eyes, he is almost unnerved. Fury, hate, and even despair, are stamped upon his features; the perspiration lies in beads upon his forehead, for he feels that opposite to him stands his executioner. Claverton, on the other hand, is dangerously cool, and his eyes gleam with a deadly purpose. It is a scene of horror, this drama being enacted in the moonlit glade.

The dark object overhead has disappeared from the cliff.

"Be jabbers, but ye'd better knock off now," exclaims the Irishman, in grave, serious tones. "The shots make the very divil of a row, echoing among the rocks. We shall have a patrol down on us directly, or a host of niggurs, an' I don't know which'd be the worst."

"Has he had enough?" asks Claverton, in a cold, contemptuous tone, turning his head slightly towards the speaker.

An imprecation is the only reply the other vouchsafes, and again they exchange shots. Truscott, who is quite off his head, blinded by his helpless rage, blazes away wildly. But he feels his adversary's ball graze his right ear, exactly as the first had done, and his adversary's face wears a cold, sinister smile.

Three shots have been fired. The next three will be at a shorter range.

"Haven't you two fellows peppered each other enough?" asks McShane. "Well, if ye will go on ye must," he adds, receiving no reply. "It's at twenty yards now."

The distance is measured, and again the two men stand facing each other. Claverton, watching his enemy's features, can see them working strangely in the moonlight, and knows that he would give all he has in the world to be safe out of it. In other words, he detects unmistakable signs of fear; but it does not move him, his determination is fixed. He will shoot his adversary dead. He has, as Truscott rightly conjectured, been playing with him hitherto, and also with the desire to allow him every chance, but the next shot shall tell. He will have no mercy on this double-dyed traitor, who has sneaked in treacherously in his absence, and placed a barrier between him and his love.

No, he will not spare him. This time he will shoot him dead; and Truscott reads his doom in the other's eyes, as once more, with the distance diminished between them, they stand awaiting the signal.

“One—T—!”

A terrific crash bursts from the brow of the overhanging height, and Truscott, with a spasmodic leap, falls backward, as the red jets of flame issue forth, to the number of a score, from the rifles of the concealed savages. Claverton feels a hard, numbing knock on the left shoulder, as he and the doctor rush to the side of the fallen man.

“Truscott, man, where are you hit?” is the letter’s hurried inquiry; but as he lifts the other’s head he is answered, for it lies a dead weight in his hand. A dark stain is oozing forth upon the moonlit sward, welling from a great jagged wound. The “pot-leg” has gone clean through Truscott’s heart; and now, as McShane lays down his head, the glazed eyes are turned upwards to the sky, and the swarthy face is livid with the dews of death.

“He’s dead as a door-nail, bedad,” said the doctor. “And it’s ourselves that’d better be lavin’, and that mighty quick, or we’ll get plugged, too.” Even while he spoke the leaden messengers were whizzing about them with a vicious “pit—pit!”

Truscott, as he had said, was dead as a door-nail, and it was clearly useless to remain. And now came in their foresight in keeping their horses close at hand. Loosening the terrified animals, which were snorting and tagging wildly at their bridles, they mounted and dashed off at a gallop just as a number of dark forms issued swiftly and stealthily from the bush to cut off their retreat, while the enemy on the cliff kept up a continuous fire. Two or three assegais were thrown at them; and then the Kafirs, who could now be descried pouring down the rocks in swarms, seeing that they were well mounted, and the ground ahead was fairly clear, relinquished the pursuit.

“An’ didn’t I tell ye that we should have the niggurs down upon us?” cried McShane, turning in his saddle to look back at the peril they had so narrowly escaped. “That poor divil’s lost his number anyhow, and it’s glory be to the blessed saints that we’re not lyin’ alongside of him.”

“I rather think I’m hit, too. My arm feels as if it was going to drop off,” said Claverton, quietly. But he was deadly pale.

“Hit! are ye?” rejoined McShane, with an anxious glance at him. “Well, hold up till we get back to camp. It may not be very bad after all. Is it in the shoulder?”

“Yes, I think it’s only a spent ball. The bone isn’t touched.”

“Faith, and ye’d better have knocked off and come away when I first spoke. That poor divil would be alive and well now.”

Claverton turned to him in amazement.

“My dear McShane, what do you suppose I came out here for to-night?” he said, with a sinister laugh. “Not to play, did you?”

“Well, it’s lucky Jack Kafir took the throuble off your hands, me boy, or it’s on your way to the Orange River ye’d have to be now, and meself, too, likely enough. As it is it’ll be murdherin’ awkward.”

“Why?”

“Well, what possesses three fellows to go riding off into the veldt at night—eh? An’ then when the row ye had this morning comes to lake out, sure won’t they be puttin’ two and two together, anyway?”

“Nothing can be proved, and if it could, I don’t care. Who’s to prove that there was any exchange of shots, at all; and there’s no mistake about that pot-leg that rid the earth of the greatest blackguard it ever held being not a revolver ballet,” replied Claverton, in a hard, pitiless tone.

“There’s a good deal in that,” assented the other.

It was nearly midnight when they reached the camp, and the news spread like wildfire that Truscott had been shot by the Kafirs, the other two barely escaping; and before long some one appended the rider that Claverton was mortally wounded in trying to rescue him, which report reaching that worthy’s ears, he received it with a sardonic grin, and said nothing. And by a curious piece of luck, the row between the two had not got wind, the spectators of it, terrible gossips by nature, fearing consequences to themselves should it become known that they had stood calmly looking on while their officer got a thrashing, deemed it wise to hold their peace.

“Half an inch more, me boy, and ye’d likely as not have lost an arm,” said McShane, as he bound up a jagged and furrowed wound just below Claverton’s shoulder. “It’s nothing to spake of now, as long as ye keep quiet; but if ye don’t thur’ll be the divil to pay.”

The operation finished the patient turned in, and slept a heavy, dreamless sleep for thirteen hours.

In the morning a party was despatched to bring in Truscott's body. It told its own tale; for in addition to being horribly cut about, after the time-honoured custom of the noble savage, the wound which had caused his death gaped wide and ghastly, bearing witness, as his late enemy had said, that it had been inflicted by no revolver bullet, even if the bit of pot-leg, which resembled the slug from an elephant gnu, had not been found. Everything belonging to the unfortunate man had been carried off—his horse, arms, and ammunition, even most of his clothing—indeed, when the expedition saw the spoors of the Kafirs all about the spot, the only wonder existing in their minds was that the other two had managed to escape. So far good; and it was not until long after that the faintest rumour of a duel having taken place began to leak out.

Meanwhile, we will return to another personage whom we have lost sight of for a space, our friend Sharkey, to wit, who, almost immediately upon Claverton's return to camp, had been reported missing, the general impression being that he had deserted, and, as men could not be spared just then, no search was made for him. But for once that interesting individual had been maligned. It happened that morning that the attention of a patrol returning to camp was attracted by the sight of a cloud of aasvogels hovering above the bush. More of the great carrion birds rose, flapping their huge white pinions and soaring leisurely away, and then the reason of the gathering was made plain. There, in the long grass, half devoured by these hideous scavengers, lay the remains of the missing man, Vargas Smith, alias Sharkey, soi-disant Cuban gentleman, late corporal in Truscott's Levy. Though the body was horribly torn, yet it was evident that the man had met his death from a couple of assegai wounds, one of which must have pierced his heart.

And this is how it came about. When Xuvani, having safely conducted his charge within the lines of the latter's own people—a service which the people aforesaid repaid by opening fire upon both of them, as we have seen—he disappeared; that is to say, he dodged down behind the bushes, and half running, half crawling, rapidly made good his retreat. And he would have made it good, but for the fact that one man had caught sight of his manoeuvres and was determined he should not. This was our friend Sharkey, who was on the extreme outskirts of the column, and who, anxious to have the fun all to himself, started off at a run to take up a position in a certain narrow place through which he judged—and judged rightly—that the Kafir would be almost certain to pass; when he could shoot him at his leisure.

But alas for the uncertainty of human calculations. The ex-cattle-herd of Seringa Vale was far too old a bird to be caught in any such trap as this—moreover, he had obtained just one glimpse of his enemy running through the bush to waylay him, and his eyes glared as he broke into a short, silent laugh of contempt. Meanwhile, Sharkey, having ensconced himself in a snug corner, waited and listened, gun in hand, ready to give his

quarry the contents of a heavy charge of buckshot in the back as he ran past. But somehow the said quarry didn't appear, and the watcher began to grow uneasy. Slowly and cautiously he put out his head. Then, immediately above him, sounded a fiendish chuckle which curdled his blood, and before he had time to turn, much less bring his gun to bear, the Kafir sprang upon him like a tiger-cat and, quick as lightning, with two strokes of his powerful arm stabbed him twice through the heart. The mulatto fell, stone dead, with scarce a groan, and Xuvani, wrenching off his ammunition-belt and picking up his gun, which lay in the grass, trotted away with a sardonic grin upon his rugged features. He had done a first-rate stroke of business; slain a foe, and possessed himself of a fairly good fire-arm and some ammunition—the acme of a Kafir's desire.

Thus by an unaccountable turn in the wheel of Fate, the two conspirators met their deaths on the same day; and both, moreover, through the indirect agency of the very man against whose life they had conspired.

When Claverton opened his eyes on awaking from his heavy sleep, they met those of George Payne, who was sitting opposite him, watching him intently.

“Hallo, George! What brings you up here? Oh-h!”

For he had forgotten his wounded shoulder, and, starting up suddenly on that elbow, an agonised groan was the result.

“To look after you—and you seem rather to want it,” replied the other, gravely.

Claverton lay back for a minute with closed eyes, and in racking pain; for he was more seriously hurt than the good-natured doctor would have had him believe. No compunction entered his mind as his thoughts recurred to the affair of last night. Why should it? he reasoned. They had met in fair fight, and he had certainly given the other every chance. If any one tried to rob him of his life, all the world would hold him justified in defending it to the uttermost. This man had tried to rob him of what he valued ten times more than his life, so he had been more than justified in defending that to the uttermost. And the agglomeration of frightful perils through which he had just passed, were indirectly owing to this man's agency. Moreover, when all was said and done, he had not shot him. He had intended to, certainly, but the Kafirs had saved him the trouble and the risk by shooting him instead, by shooting them both, in fact; for all the world like in the case of two small boys indulging in fisticuffs, and a fond parent or stern preceptor staying hostilities by impartially cuffing the pair of them. And, when viewed in this light, the affair struck him as so comical, that he burst into a laugh.

There was a queer look in Payne's eyes as he rose, and, going outside, intently studied the weather for a moment, apparently, that is, for, in reality, he wanted to make sure of not being heard—and then returned.

"How did the affair go off?" he asked, shortly.

"Haven't you heard?"

"Yes. That Irish fellow told me a yarn about your being attacked; but it won't wash, you know," and he winked.

"Fact—upon my oath!"

"And you didn't do for friend R.T.?"

"Devil a bit! I meant to; but the niggers were too sharp for us. They winged me into the bargain, as you see."

"Then he didn't pink you?"

"Confound it, no. The niggers did. It's about the queerest thing, I suppose, that ever happened."

"It is," assented Payne, lighting his pipe.

Claverton could see that the other only half believed him, but he didn't care.

Payne smoked on in silence for a few moments. He appeared to be intently contemplating a chip of wood which lay on the floor, and which he was poking at with a riding-crop. At length he said:

"Have you any idea what brought me here?"

"H'm. A horse, most probably."

"You're a sharp fellow, Arthur Claverton," said Payne, deliberately. "Now don't you go and act like a fool. Mark my words. Unless you want to be the death of a certain young lady—I mean it, mind," and his voice sank to a great seriousness, "for that cursed telegram was nearly the death of her—the sooner you get on a horse and go and exhibit your ornamental visage in my town establishment, the better. Now don't be a fool—d'you hear?"

The advice seemed needed, for at that moment Claverton gained at a bound the door of the tent, where he stood bellowing for Sam.

“Blazes! I’m forgetting. He isn’t here. What can we do?” he said, helplessly.

“But he is here,” was the imperturbable reply, and simultaneously that faithful servitor entered, grinning with delight at seeing his master again, and firing off a tremendous congratulation in the Zulu tongue. His master cut him ruthlessly short, however.

“Sam, take that bit of paper,” tossing him a fragment, on which he had hastily pencilled a few words, “and ride as if the devil were chevvying you, till you pull up at the telegraph office in ‘King.’ Now off you go. The road’s quite safe, isn’t it? Can’t help it if it isn’t. Take my horse and start at once, and wait there till I join you.”

“Yeh bo, ’Nkos!” said the obedient Sam. His heart was in his errand, for he well knew the destination of the message he was to send.

Chapter Twenty Five.

A Voice out of the Past.

“Safe.”

Only one little word of four letters, and yet to Lilian Strange it seems just all the difference between death and life; and the great spidery characters in which that one little word is scribbled across the slip of red-brown paper which she holds in her trembling hand, are fairer in her eyes than the most tasteful of gold-engrossed illumination. At times, during the last few days, she has marvelled at the bare possibility of existence under the circumstances; and now, this morning, as she gazes upon the contents of the telegram which has just been handed to her, and which she has hardly had strength enough to open, so awful the apprehension of what it might disclose—the relief is almost too great.

“Safe.”

Only one word, but it is from himself; his own hand penned that message, which in its brevity is worth to her a column of detail at second hand. The colour comes and goes in her ashy face, and she sinks into a chair, faint and giddy beneath the shock. He is safe, and she will see him again. But then flashes in the thought of that other barrier—Truscott and his fatal knowledge. Was it not in this man’s power to part them again? Ah, surely not. Whatever dreadful mystery there is, she feels sure somehow that it will be cleared up. She will see him again—her one heart’s love—whom she sent forth to a cruel death. She will explain all, and he will forgive her—though it is the second time she has driven him from her—yes, she knows that, even if that last hurried note, which he had sent back to her on the eve of his awful peril, and which is now all blurred from the tears which have rained upon it—that last precious relic—had not been what it was.

And Annie Payne, entering at this moment—having the while been at the back of the house, where she could neither see nor hear the telegraph boy—started and stared in amazement, for Lilian broke into a radiant smile as she held out the despatch, and then burst into a flood of happy, grateful tears.

“There, Lilian darling. Didn’t I tell you while there was life there was hope? And now you’ll see that everything will come right,” said her warm-hearted friend, going over to kiss her. And then out of sheer sympathy, she began to cry, too.

“Please, missis,” said the Hottentot servant-girl, bursting into the room in great trepidation, “there’s a lady at the gate who’s very ill. She seems hardly able to stand.”

“Goodness gracious!” cried kind-hearted Annie Payne. “Who can she be? We must get her in—Come, Lilian!”

The sun beat fiercely down into the wide dusty street, which was silent and deserted in the broiling forenoon. Not a soul was visible, save one. Leaning unsteadily against the garden railings, as if for support, stood a figure clothed in black conventual garb.

“Why, Lilian, it’s a nun,” whispered Annie Payne. Then aloud, as they reached the stranger’s side: “Now, do please come in at once and have a good long rest, and a glass of wine. The heat has been too much for you. Here, take my arm. No, don’t try and talk yet.”

The nun looked up with a faint smile, at the kindly, impulsive tones.

“You are very good,” she began, speaking with a foreign accent. “The sun is so hot, but I shall soon be better.”

“Of course you will,” was the cheery reply; and in a moment the sufferer found herself on a comfortable sofa in a cool, half-darkened room, so refreshing after the glare of the street, while her hostess and Lilian set to work to administer restoratives.

Their charge was a striking-looking woman, still quite young. Of foreign aspect, her face, though deathly pale, was very handsome, and lighted by a pair of large dark eyes. An uncommon face withal, and one which interested her entertainers keenly.

“Who is she, Lilian?” whispered Annie Payne, hurriedly beckoning the other from the room. “Roman Catholic, or one of your High Church Sisters? You know all about that sort of thing.”

“She must be from the convent. There are no Anglican Sisters here. Besides, she’s foreign, evidently.”

They returned to the nun, who, professing herself quite restored by her short rest, declared she must return home.

“Not to be thought of, for some hours at least,” replied her hostess, decisively. “You have narrowly escaped a sunstroke as it is. I’ll send round to the convent immediately, and let them know you’re here, and that I’m not going to allow you to move before the evening. At least, I’ll go myself, that’ll be better than sending. Lilian, take her to your room, it’s

quieter there, and away from the children's noise, and make her lie down for at least three hours. By the way, I was nearly forgetting. Who shall I say?"

"I am known as Sister Cecilia. God will bless you for your kindness to me, and—"

"There, there, you are not well enough to talk," interrupted Annie, with good-humoured brusqueness, as she hurried away to prepare for her errand.

Of a certainty the sufferer could have been left in no better hands, and just then such a work of mercy was doubly grateful to Lilian, whose own hopes had been so miraculously fulfilled. Her charge having sunk into a deep, refreshing sleep, Lilian moved noiselessly to a seat in the window, and there, with her eyes fixed upon the outside world, she let her busy thoughts have free scope. Something in the stillness of the day took her memory back to that fatal afternoon when Truscott had come in and dashed the cup of happiness from her lips. She remembered the terrible shock the discovery of his reappearance had been, and then the ruthless manner in which he had seared her heartstrings as with a red-hot iron, and a reaction overtook her. If there was anything in his knowledge, why, his terrible threats were all-powerful for evil still. Yet her lover's life was safe for the present. He had been snatched almost miraculously from the cruel hands of his savage enemies. Let her be thankful for that, at any rate. Perhaps Heaven might be even yet more merciful to her—to them both—and the other dark mystery might be cleared up. Ah, that only it would!

For a couple of hours her reverie had run on, when a sudden ejaculation and a few words, muttered hurriedly in a foreign language sounding like Spanish or Italian, recalled her.

"Are you feeling better, Sister?" she began, softly, rising at once, and going over to her charge.

The latter hardly seemed to hear. With gaze set and rigid, her attention was fixed on something opposite the bed, and Lilian noticed that her lips were livid and trembling.

"Who is that?" she gasped. "Am I dreaming? What is he—to you?"

Lilian's face flushed softly, as she followed the other's glance. It was riveted on two lifelike cabinet portraits of her lover, which stood framed upon the table.

"What is Lidwell to you?" went on the sufferer, half raising herself, while her burning eyes sought Lilian's with a feverish glow. "Ah, I see—I need not ask. But where is he? Here? No—not here!"

It was now Lilian's turn to grow deathly pale. She pressed her hand to her heart to still its beatings, and felt as if she must faint. Lidwell! Only once before had she heard that name—only from one other. Who was this woman, and what did she know? There must be truth in Truscott's sinister allegations, then. Better to know the whole truth, whatever it might be, than walk blindfold any longer. Her impulse found vent in a despairing cry.

“Oh, Sister, I am in sore trouble. For the love of the good God, whom you are vowed to serve, tell me all you know about him you call Lidwell.”

The nun lay back for a moment as if to recover her self-command. Then she said in a firmer tone, but hurriedly, and with a foreign accent:

“If I tell you all I know about him, I need only tell you that you are the happiest woman in the whole world.”

“But he is in great danger. He has an enemy; a ruthless, unscrupulous enemy who is determined on his ruin—to take his life even.”

“Who is this enemy? What is his name?” asked the nun, with awakening interest.

“Truscott—Ralph Truscott.”

“I never heard of him. He is an Englishman. I do not know any Englishman that knew Lidwell. But now tell me—how does this Truscott threaten him? Tell me all—then I can possibly help you. Do not fear, I shall keep your secret as closely as the grave. I am dead to the world, remember.”

Lilian needed no further persuasion. She poured forth the whole of her woeful and heart-breaking story into this stranger's ear; the first, in fact, to hear it. At one point in her narrative the listener's pale face flushed, and her eyes burned, but mastering herself, she preserved her impassibility to the end.

“You did well indeed to tell me all,” she said, when Lilian ceased. “It was indeed the finger of Heaven that directed me here to-day. The man, Truscott, has told you infamous lies, and his threats are powerless. He cannot harm your lover, about whom at that time no one knows more than I. But—guess. Who do you think I am—or was?”

A light seemed to dawn upon Lilian, but the other anticipated her.

“Before I entered religion my name was Anita de Castro.”

Lilian was too overcome to make any reply. The nun continued:

“As I said, I am dead to the world, and such matters can hurt me little now; but the man need not have slandered my poor name. It is perfectly above slander, thanks to Lidwell. I tell you he was the saving of me. I dare not think of what and where I should be now but for his influence and the remembrance of him. My father was taken prisoner, with three others, by a British vessel, and hanged, and I was adrift in Zanzibar without a friend. I need not have been an hour destitute of mere creature necessities; but that influence saved me. For you will understand me when I tell you how I loved him; yet he never cared for me. He liked me as a something to amuse him—a plaything—a child—but no more.”

She paused, and Lilian sat holding her hand, but did not interrupt.

“Your lover is safe,” went on Sister Cecilia. “All that was told you is untrue. He never fought against the English flag, or against any one but the tribes in the far interior. The affair with the Sea Foam took place a year before he came among us; I remember it well. And now tell me about this spy of Truscott’s. What was he like?”

Lilian remembered the man only too well, and described him minutely.

“I know him. He was shot by Lidwell in self-defence, and left as dead. He reappeared again, though, but after Lidwell had fled—to save his own life, for there was a plot to murder him. The man Truscott must have got the whole story from this other man, for neither of them have the slightest idea of my whereabouts. I only arrived here the day before yesterday, and to-morrow I am to leave with three others to join a mission in the Transvaal.”

Her quick Southern nature enabled her to master the whole plot at a glance. Truscott was a bold player at the game of intrigue, she thought; for to throw in her own name in the way he had done was a skilful stroke indeed.

“To think that I should be held as a sword over Lidwell,” she went on; “I, who would not harm a hair of his head, even if I had, as that slanderer said, anything to revenge, which I have not—quite the reverse. But show me the portrait. I shall never see him again; nor do I wish to—I have done with such desires. Yes, it is a splendid likeness; I can look at it calmly now. And, listen! He was as a demigod in that horrible slave settlement. I do not know why he came there, but many and many a time has he mitigated the sufferings of those poor tortured creatures, often at the risk of his life. At last, when he was obliged to fly, I helped him to get away. I, all unaided, delayed his murderers many hours, and

enabled him to get safely beyond their reach. I do not boast; it is only that the recollection is sweet to dwell on. And now listen," interrupting Lilian's fervent utterance of admiration and gratitude. "His last words to me were these: 'You are made for something better than this kind of life; leave it as soon as you are able.' Then I hurried him away, for I heard them coming. He left that horrible place for ever, and I—well, I only prayed that I might die. But I lived—lived that I might remember those last words, and obey them to the letter."

Lilian was crying. There was something inexpressibly touching in the narrative to which she listened; to her something grandly heroic in the way in which this girl—for the ageing effects of her Southern nationality and conventual dress notwithstanding, she was little more than a girl—had shunned the ease and luxury of evil to devote her whole life to the fulfilment of the last injunction of one whom she would never see again. This, too, was the daughter of a slave-dealer—reared among ruffians—whose father had met a felon's death. And this protecting influence which had hallowed another's pathway, was that of her own lover.

"You have, indeed, obeyed them," she said at length. "And you are happy now, Sister?"

"Perfectly. The Church has been a true mother to me. But—you are of the Faith, are you not?"

"I hope so, although there are slight differences between our Churches; slight, but rendered greater than they need be," answered Lilian, gently.

"Ah, I thought you belonged to us. Some day, perhaps, you may be vouchsafed more light—you and he. And now, you say he has another name—not Lidwell. What is it?"

"His real name is Arthur Claverton. I never heard of the other name until—the time I told you of."

"Whatever his real name is, its owner has always been in my prayers. Now I shall add yours. What is it?"

Lilian told her.

"It is a pretty name, and suits you well. And you—you are worthy of him, and will make him happy. God keep you both!"

“Ah, Sister, you have, indeed, come among us as an angel unawares!” exclaimed Lilian. “But a few days sooner, and so many days of frightful anguish might have been spared us.”

“I rejoice that I have been the poor means of restoring your happiness—his happiness. Still it may be that even those few days of suffering to which you refer, are for some wise purpose—for the good of you both. And now tell me something more about him; I can think of him with a clear conscience, for I have found my vocation. I could even meet him again, but it is better not; and by to-morrow at this time, I shall be far away. And you—you will tell him that I obeyed his last injunction, will you not? He will, perhaps, like to know that.”

Lilian fervently promised to do this. She would even have suggested a meeting between them; but, apart from the other’s vocation, she was in ignorance as to how the rule of her order bore upon a matter of the kind, and was shy to urge it. And the two women sat and talked long and earnestly of him whose presence should make the life of one, and whose memory had protected and hallowed that of the other, until the sound of Annie Payne’s voice in the next room, in converse with a stranger, reminded them that time was flying rather rapidly, for it was nearly evening.

The stranger was a nun from the convent, who had come to look after the invalid and to see her safe home—a cheery, bright-mannered Irishwoman, who was profuse in her appreciation of the care they had taken of her colleague. Then they took their leave.

“You have brought perfect peace to one in this house, at any rate, Sister,” said Lilian, as she bade her charge farewell.

“Peace be upon all within it—and especially upon you,” murmured the other, tenderly returning her embrace. And Lilian, too happy for words, stood watching them depart homewards. All was clear and bright before her now, and how unexpectedly it had all come about!

But surprises were not at an end for that day. While the two ladies were still talking over their late guest, the tri-weekly newspaper was left at the door, and in it a telegraphic slip containing the tidings of Truscott’s death. Just a bare statement of the fact that he had been shot by the Kafirs, and would be buried that day. No details of any kind.

Lilian was thunderstruck. All the agony which he had inflicted on her there in that very room; the cruel voice gloating over her fears while vowing vengeance on him she loved; the brutal words decreeing their separation, as fiend-like he mocked at her despair; all

rose up before her now. Then she shuddered, for was she not perilously near rejoicing over a fellow-creature's death?

"It's very shocking, isn't it?" she said, in awestruck tones.

"Yes, dear, it is. But in war-time, you know, we must expect these dreadful things to happen. Oh dear—oh dear—but I wish it was all over and we were at peace again. Shall we ever be? And now there's George must needs go racketing off to the front, and—" She stopped in dire confusion, remembering the cause of her spouse's speedy departure. But Lilian's arms were around her neck.

"Dear Annie. It was very good and noble of him to go, and I for one owe him a debt which I can never repay."

"Not a bit of it, Lilian," was the cheery reply, though the speaker did half turn away her head to conceal a tear. "Don't you think anything of the sort. The rascal would have gone anyhow, for he was tired of staying quietly at home. You remember what he said the other day when he didn't know I was by. He only made a pretext of poor Arthur's predicament, for you'll see that now he's got him out of it he won't come back—no, not for the next two months."

"Indeed!" said a third voice, making them both start as if they had been shot.

A man stood in the doorway, contemplating them with a satirical grin.

"Goodness gracious!" cried Annie, with a little shriek. "Why, it's George himself."

"Well, and what if it is?" retorted that worthy, quizzically, as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe against the door-post. "Mayn't a fellow walk into his own house, or rather into old Sievers'—infernal old skinflint that he is—hasn't had that chimney put right yet!" And thus, characteristically, George Payne effected his return to the bosom of his family as if he had never left that desirable ark.

"Oh, George, how I maligned you!" cried his wife, penitently. "I made sure you wouldn't be back for a couple of months at least. Once up there I thought you'd stay, and go getting yourself assegaied most likely."

"Sorry to disappoint you, my dear. But, the fact is, Johnny Kafir's beginning to have about enough, and is skulking away in the Perie; when he hasn't surrendered already, as is the case up Queenstown way. Brathwaite's men are all talking of coming back soon, and—"

“Pa, where’s my Kafir assegai?” cried Harry, bursting into the room.

“Eh, what—where’s your—? In the bush, sonny. Never mind, though. You shall have a stack of them soon, but not those that have been shied at me,” replied Payne, passing his hand over the curly head of his first-born. “That’s how the rising generation welcomes its paternal ancestor returning from the wars—asks for scalps the first thing. Well, Miss Lilian,” he continued, in his bantering way, “I told you to keep your spirits up, and that all would come right, didn’t I; and it about has. Come along, Annie; we’ll leave her to make it lively for that chap who sends me on to prepare the way before him, and then doesn’t give me half time to do it.” Lilian followed his glance. A man was dismounting at the gate, in hot haste. She needed no second glance to assure her of his identity.

Chapter Twenty Six.

In Peace.

Surely we have stood upon this spot before.

But the drooping boughs of the old pear-tree afford no shade now to those two persons seated on the rustic bench beneath—being leafless. For it is mid-winter; yet the sky is a glory of unclouded blue above the rolling landscape and dark forests, and the white and dazzling shroud upon the distant mountains.

Not only have we stood upon this spot before; but we have stood here—though unseen—in company with these two identical persons. One of them now wears one arm in a sling, and looks like a man lately recovered from a desperate illness. We will draw near—still unseen—and hear what they are talking about.

“Now, Arthur, I declare I saw you shiver,” exclaimed a bright, playful voice, which sounded very like that of Lilian Strange. “That won’t do, sir—Didn’t the doctor say you were to take enormous care of yourself for a long time to come—the English of which is that I am to do it for you—and I’m going to begin by buttoning up your overcoat, for it’s anything but warm to-day, although the sun is so bright. That’s done,” continued she, with a joyous laugh. “Now for the letters.”

“Bother the letters. They can slide.”

“Can they? Business can slide, eh? And I’m sure one of them looked like a regular ‘dun,’ or a lawyer’s letter at least, in its big, blue envelope. That won’t do, my dear. You’ve got a termagant to deal with, I can tell you. Besides, when all’s said and done, sir, they’re my letters, so out with them.”

She dived her hand into the pocket of his overcoat, and produced two missives. The post had just arrived as they were starting for their stroll; but Lilian, reluctant to let in thoughts of the outside world upon this their first visit to all the dear old places, had deferred investigating the contents.

“Yours, are they?” said Claverton, when he had recovered from the shout of laughter which her idea of a “termagant” had evoked. “Let me set you right on that head. They’re mine, now, at all events. What’s yours is mine—what’s mine’s my own. Eh?”

“But, look—they’re addressed to me. Look! ‘Miss Strange,’ ‘Miss Lilian Strange,’” cried she, triumphantly, with her bright, witching laugh. “What do you say to that?”

“That young party has ceased to exist, I tell you; so, in the logical sequence of events, we ought to return those to the Dead Letter Office. What do you say to that, Mrs Arthur Claverton?”

“This is from that dear Annie Payne,” she went on, not heeding him, as she extracted a closely-written and crossed sheet from its cover.

“Wants a microscope to read. We haven’t got one here—ergo, it can stand over,” he rejoined. “Why, Lilian; what on earth’s the matter?”

For she had opened the blue envelope last of all, and her face wore a very curious expression indeed, as she mastered its contents—a little surprise and a great deal of amusement. It was a lawyer’s letter, even as she had conjectured, and it informed her, in dry, concise phraseology, that she was entitled to the sum of nine thousand pounds under the will of her distant cousin, “my late esteemed client, Mr Herbert Spalding,” which bequest reverted to her, being forfeited by the present legatee, Mr Arthur Claverton, that gentleman having failed to observe the conditions under which he enjoyed the legacy, etcetera, etcetera. The writer begged to know her wishes in respect of this bequest, and remained her obedient servant, Robert Smythe.

Blank astonishment was the only feeling Claverton was sensible of as he sat staring at the bit of paper which she had put into his hand. He had written to the lawyer on the day of his marriage, as a matter of course, renouncing all further claim to the bequest, and sending in all the necessary papers; as nearly three years were wanting to the time when it should be his irrevocably; and had expected to hear nothing more about the matter, beyond a brief acknowledgment. It was a nuisance, of course, being docked of about half his means, but he had quite enough left to go on with; and weighed in the balance of recent events this one was a mere trifle. And, now, the legacy had simply reverted to his wife. But how the deuce had it come about—that was the question?

“Good God!” was all he could ejaculate.

“Don’t be profane, sir,” retorted Lilian, with such a merry peal of laughter. “Why don’t you congratulate me on my good fortune?”

“Eh—what? Hang it, this beats me. I don’t understand it at all!”

“Don’t you? Well, then, poor Herbert Spalding was my cousin—a very distant one—and I hardly knew much about him. He was very pleasant and kind, though, the little I did see of him at Dynevard Chase; but at the last he seems to have had the bad taste to prefer

you to me. Undue influence, sir, undue influence—isn't that what the lawyers call it?" concluded she, in a playfully reproachful tone.

"For Heaven's sake don't joke about it, Lilian," he interrupted, in a pained voice. "For it amounts to this, that I have simply been robbing you all these years—robbing you—you, whom I would have given the last drop of my heart's blood to shield from a single want. All this time, while you have been fighting a hard battle alone and unaided, I have been literally robbing you of your own. Good Heavens! the very idea is enough to make a fellow cut his throat."

"You were not robbing me of anything of the sort. Don't be absurd, you dear old goose! But, darling, you don't know how pleased I am that you should take this from me now, even though it is like giving you back what belongs to you," she added, lovingly.

"But, upon my soul, I don't understand it yet," he repeated, amazedly. "Who on earth was that old parson who came badgering me one morning? I thought he was the next in reversion."

"That old parson,' as you so disrespectfully term my dear old uncle, George Wainwright, went to you on my behalf, Arthur," she answered, with a smile. "I tried to prevent him, but he would go. He failed, for you stuck to it like a leech," she concluded, with a merry laugh.

"Heavens! Of course I thought he was speaking for himself. He never mentioned you."

"Didn't he? That's so like Uncle George! And when I asked him who you were, he had forgotten your name. Said it was Clinton, or something like that."

"But, Lilian, is this the first you've heard of the rights of the affair? Didn't you ever suspect anything?"

A soft smile stole over her face. "I did once," she replied, "long ago—here. Something Mrs Brathwaite was telling us about you gave me a sort of an inkling."

"Oh, but this is simply dreadful! How could I have any idea how things stood? I never saw the will, and never heard the name of the next in reversion. 'A distant relative' was all that old Smythe said. But I'll write to the parson, Mr—what's his name?—Wainwright, and get him to tell you all that passed between us. I'll—"

"I'm afraid not. Poor Uncle George died four years ago," she answered. "But, darling, don't take things to heart like this. I only see it in an amusing light. Isn't it a queer chapter of coincidences?"

"Good God!"

"Don't be profane," she repeated. "And if you don't want to make me quite unhappy, you will think no more of this odd little coincidence, Arthur dearest. I declare I mean it. And then, isn't it best, after all? Why, nothing now can rid me of the knowledge that it was entirely for myself, and myself alone, just as I stood, that you threw away that dear, foolish heart of yours." And she gave him such a look of tenderness, and love, and trust, that he caught her to him with all the passionate love of the old yearning, hopeless days.

"My Lilian, nothing can rid me of the knowledge that I have robbed you all this time; and how am I to pass it off so lightly?" he whispered, in a broken voice. "My darling, you see it was impossible that I could have known—do you not?"

"Why, of course. How should you have? But isn't it the most amusing of coincidences! Come now, you are to own that it is. We women are supposed to be deficient in a sense of humour; but, I declare, in this instance I am proving the rule by making an exception to it, while you are not keeping up the credit of your lordly sex. Do you hear that, sir?" she went on, in a tone of soft banter that was very bewitching. Her great happiness had completely changed Lilian. The longing sadness in the sweet, lustrous eyes had given way to a calm peace that was infinitely beautiful, and a sunny, gladsome smile had taken the place of that former tinge of melancholy which had always been upon her, even at the brightest of times. No cloud was in her sky now. The lurid curtain of war had lifted, and though still upon the horizon, daily receded—rolling back farther and farther. The Past might be put away, as the golden Future disclosed in bright, fair vista.

Yes. The war was at an end, now—or nearly so—for the wretched insurgents, broken-spirited, half-starving, and thoroughly sick of fighting, were flocking in daily to surrender themselves at the different frontier posts. The gaols were crowded with red-blanketed, forlorn-looking beings, squatting about in sullen apathy, their chief speculation—next to the interest of their daily rations—being whether Ihuvuménte (the Government) would be very hard on them, when they should be placed in the dock in batches, at the approaching special Circuit, and called upon to answer to the charge of having "wrongfully, unlawfully, and maliciously taken up arms and waged war against our Sovereign Lady, the Queen, etcetera, etcetera," of which exalted personage most of them had but a very hazy idea. The insurgent leaders had either been captured or slain, and in the latter category was the fate of Sandili, the Great Chief of the house of Gaika, who was shot by a party of Fingoes during his flight; and when his body was found some

days afterwards in the Perie Forest, behold, it was partially eaten by wild animals. So the fate which his captive had predicted, when condemned to the torture and to death, to the old chief, was fulfilled to the very letter. His two sons, Gonya and Matanzima, together with Gungubele, Umfanta, Tini Macomo, and other rebel leaders, were also in gaol, awaiting their trial for high treason (Note 1), and altogether the war had come to about as ignominious an end as was possible.

Jim Brathwaite was at home again; his corps, which had done such good service, having been disbanded. Indeed, nothing remained to be done. A few forlorn bands of insurgents were still under arms; but these clung so pertinaciously to the wildest and most inaccessible tracts of country—a region of holes, and caves, and dense tangled bush—that the work of hunting them out was left to the Police and native levies, aided by that powerful ally, starvation. So troop after troop of burghers and volunteers left the field, and soon there were signs of re-occupying the long-deserted farms in Kaffraria and upon the immediate line of hostilities; for the savage enemy had lain down his arms, and the prospect was that of a speedy return to the ways of peace.

Jim Brathwaite is at home again, and there is quite a gathering of our old friends at Seringa Vale on this first occasion of their meeting together since the war. And how they fight their battles all over again, for, needless to say, the conversation turns wholly upon the doings of the colonial forces in general, and upon the exploits of that doughty corps, Brathwaite's Horse, in particular. Some growling, too, is heard. Time has to be made up for. Things have gone more or less to the deuce during the period our friends have all been away at the front, which period, with the exception of a brief interval, covers the best part of a year. In fact, campaigning has been an undertaking of neither pleasure nor profit. Stay—as to the pleasure. The jolly, sunburnt visage of our friend Hicks, yonder, has lost none of its brimming contentment. Indeed, its owner has been heard to say, that he, for one, would be quite ready for another bout of Kafir-shooting as soon as convenient—a remark which obtains for him an angry scowl from his right-hand neighbour, Thorman, who growls resentfully that “the sooner fellows shut up talking that sort of damned bosh, the sooner the country will settle down to its legitimate business again.” A sentiment which, though ungraciously expressed, contains a strong element of truth; for, undoubtedly, the irregular, happy-go-lucky, jolly good fellowship of camp-life, and the glorious uncertainty of war, is not without a somewhat demoralising influence on the energies of the colonial youth in the more prosaic run of workaday life—to which it must now return. But Hicks is young yet, and brimful of animal spirits. His losses during the outbreak have been but slight; and now he is back among his old friends, after having seen some real good service. And opposite him sits his wife—quiet, gentle-looking as ever—for whom he has abated not one jot of his old adoration; for Laura, in spite of her reserve and apparent self-obliteration, has a shrewd, sensible little head of her own, and manages her lord completely, he being just the

fellow who requires management—and Hicks is as happy as a king. So, with a laugh, he tells Thorman to shut up, for a jolly old growler, as he is, “and always was, by Jove!” and to let a fellow have his say now that they are all festive together again, and to knock up a sort of grin himself, for once in his life, if he can.

Naylor, too, is there, quieter and staidier, but full of dry “chaff,” which he every now and then turns on one or other of the party. His hair and large beard are beginning to show streaks of grey; but, then, as he says, a fellow ceases to be a chicken at some time in his life, and he, for instance, is growing a fine crop of “prime whites.” Which ostrich-feather witticism so tickles his son and heir, Tom—a well-grown, sturdy boy of fifteen—that he bursts into a fit of immoderate mirth, necessitating his sudden retreat from the room.

As for Allen, he has not changed in any single particular, but, having shown that there was good stuff in him, underlying his external eccentricity, he has gone up several pegs in the estimation of his friends; and now that poor Jack Armitage is no longer at his side, he enjoys a kind of immunity from chaff, for even Naylor leaves him in peace, failing the more merciless wag to arouse the spirit of emulation, and to keep the ball rolling.

There sits Will Jeffreys, not much more happy-looking than of yore. He is doing by no means badly in the world, for he has five waggons on the road—transport-riding is paying well just now—and owns two flourishing and well-stocked farms left him by his father, who has gone the way of all flesh. But his saturnine temperament remains pretty much as it was, and Claverton has a bet on, of considerable magnitude, with Mrs Jim Brathwaite that, in a year hence, Jeffreys will have attained greater proficiency in the art of scowling than even Thorman.

But serious thoughts will intrude upon the mirth and great cordiality present in the gathering. The hand of Death has been laid upon the familiar circle since last we saw it here assembled, and well-loved faces have dropped out of it, never to be beheld again on earth. Jim Brathwaite—jovial, light-hearted, and popular in the best sense of the word—reigns at Seringa Vale now; but in two hearts especially to-day lingers a very warm and loving remembrance of the dear old couple whose kindly, genial presence ere while made sunshine in that room.

And the grisly war-god, too, had exacted his tribute even from that small circle, and poor Jack Armitage, that best of good comrades, would no more enliven them with his quizzical countenance and reckless, boyish love of fun. Even Allen sadly missed his erewhile tormentor, and thought his immunity from chaff and practical jokes dearly purchased. But the dead man lies in his lonely grave away in savage Kafirland, and his

young widow weeps for him, and his old comrades think of him with an affectionate, but shadowed regret. Poor Jack!

When the good fellowship and general cordiality is at its height, Hicks is suddenly inspired with an idea that some speech-making would very appropriately mark the occasion, which idea he communicates to Jim; but he is overruled, on the ground that “the women would be safe to turn on the hose” if anything of that kind were started, which would inevitably put a damper on the prevailing good spirits; while Thorman, who has overheard him on the other side, remarks, with a contemptuous growl, “that Hicks, of all people, on his legs, speechifying, would remind him of nothing so much as a damned bear jumping up at an apple tied to a string, because he’d be trying to catch at something that wouldn’t come—he would, by so and so, and so and so.” A statement, however, which in no wise disturbed the exuberant good-humour of the subject thereof.

Meanwhile, behind the cattle-kraal are seated, in close confab, two other personages who have played no unimportant part in this history. These are Sam and Xuvani. And how comes the latter here?

After he had so deftly turned the tables on the Cuban mulatto, Xuvani retraced his steps in the direction of Sandili’s kraal, keeping the while a careful lookout for Tambusa, whom he expected to join him. But, after a while, his nephew not appearing, the old man began to suspect that something had gone wrong. He redoubled his caution, but the lone, silent bush betrayed nothing of the tragedy of blood just enacted in its cruel depths. He was perplexed. If the plot had been discovered, and the lad was captured before he could make good his escape, he would be dead by this, and it was clearly useless for himself to rush on to the very points of his countrymen’s avenging assegaïs. While pondering over his plan of action a shadow passed between him and the sun. He looked up. It was a vulture; and another and another swept between the tree-tops and the blue sky. The mystery was explained now. A few steps more and the old man knelt beside the stiffening corpse, not long cold, of the luckless Tambusa. The murderers had gone down to him to ensure that he was dead, and had left him there in the rocky glen just where he had fallen, and the traces and footmarks supplied all the missing links in the bloody tale to the eye of the shrewd savage. Hastily piling a heap of stones on the dead body of his nephew, Xuvani left the spot, decided as to his future course of action. To return to Sandili would be to commit suicide. He regretted poor Tambusa’s fate, but accepted the event with true native philosophy—it was done, and it couldn’t be helped now. They had both been guilty of an act of treason towards their countrymen, albeit of one of chivalrous gratitude towards the white man; and the lad had fallen a victim. It was unfortunate, but could not be helped. So, acting upon Claverton’s advice, Xuvani then and there made his way quietly into the colony, where he engaged himself as a labourer on some railway works in the Western Province, and where a powerful, able-

bodied, well-conducted Kafir like himself was too good a workman for any questions to be asked. There he remained some months, till at length, the war over, and as soon as he could safely do so, he returned to the frontier, and obtained employment under Jim Brathwaite, in his former capacity.

So here he is at Seringa Vale again, looking a trifle chapfallen, perhaps, but on the whole, deeming himself marvellously lucky, when he thinks of the frightful grief to which have come so many of his old companions in arms. And he is, moreover, enjoying substantial advantage by reason of having saved Claverton's life; for he already owns more good cattle than ever he pictured to himself in his dreams, and will own even more when things are settled, and he knows where to bestow his possessions. And he professes great veneration for Lilian, and is enormously proud of a large, handsome and curiously-wrought armlet which she has given him, and, although to expect him to declare that he prefers this to the more material benefits would be to demand an effort of gallantry too great for Kafir human nature, yet there is no doubt that he looks upon the ornament as a very great distinction indeed, with which nothing would induce him to part.

Sam and the old Gaika have struck up a great alliance, and the only subject on which they fall out is that of the respective prowess of the Kafirs and the colonists in the field—for the war is an inexhaustible topic between them—on which occasion Sam would inevitably be tempted to fire off the Kafir equivalent of his pet ejaculation, "Amaxosa nigga no good," were it not that such a course would either draw down upon him the old man's anger, or contempt for him as a "boy," and the sly dog has a reason for standing well within the other's good books just now.

And this is the reason. It happens that Xuvani owns a couple of nieces—half-sisters of poor Tambusa—whom he has brought to keep house for him, their father having been slain in the war. Both are fine, well-made, bright-eyed wenches, with a merry laugh and a wealth of cheerful spirits, and Master Sam has developed very decided intentions in that direction. Even now, as he sits there, he is warily trying to ascertain the smallest number of cattle old Xuvani is likely to accept for one of them, and turning over in his mind whether his savings will be sufficient to enable him to lay in the stock needed for the requisite lobola (the price in cattle paid to the father or lawful guardian, for a wife), and if not, whether his master will help him. And yet another difficulty besets Sam's path. He cannot quite make up his mind which of the brown Venuses he shall propose for. Mnawnma is decidedly the best-looking, and he has a sneaking partiality for her; but, then, she is flighty, whereas Ngcesile is a good worker, steadier and rather better-tempered. So poor Sam is in a cleft stick.

On the afternoon of the day which witnesses this gathering of so many of our old friends at Seringa Vale, a girl is sitting at the window of a pretty house in one of the leafy suburbs of Cape Town. A beautiful girl of four-and-twenty, with exquisitely-chiselled features, and a great mass of golden hair in a shining halo above her face; but there is a hard look in the deep blue eyes, and the full, laughing lips are set and grave as she sits absently gazing out upon the broad surface of the bay, upon whose waters, curled into ripples by the afternoon breeze, the white sails of a few sailing-boats are skimming to and fro. She rouses herself from her reverie, and her glance falls upon something she holds in her hand. It is a newspaper, two months old; and it needs not the pencil mark against one of the notices in the marriage column to attract her eye, for she has gazed upon it many times already. Then she rises, and unlocking a desk takes out something. Only a few faded blossoms, originally distributed over half-a-dozen rank and sorry-looking stalks, but long since fallen off. Yet how tenderly, almost reverently, she handles them! There is something else—a sketch in a few bold pencil strokes, roughly executed on the inside of an envelope. It represents a large full-grown ostrich standing in menacing contemplation of the draughtsman, who, sitting under a bush, has included himself in the sketch as a foreground. Beyond the truculent biped, are the indistinct faces of several persons looking over a wall, and underneath the whole is pencilled the legend: “Cornered—or Brute Force versus Intellect.” For a few moments the girl stands gazing upon these relics, and the hard look in her eyes gives place to a softened and wistful expression that is unutterably sad as she murmurs something to herself, and a tear falls upon the faded and withered blossoms; then, as with an effort, she walks to the fireplace, and, crumpling up the newspaper, places the flowers and the pencil drawing upon it, strikes a match, and watches the whole consume to ashes. That done, she returns to the window and gazes out for a few minutes upon the blue bay and the distant mountains. Footsteps on the gravel beneath, and a ring at the front door, recall her to herself with a start. She tarts from the window, looks in the glass for a moment, and then Ethel Brathwaite goes downstairs to say the word which shall render Gerald Hanbury, Major in H.M.’s 999th Foot, quartered at Blazerabad, India—but now on leave at the Cape—the “happiest dog on earth”—as he thinks.

Note 1. These and other chiefs of the insurgent Gaikas and Tembus, were subsequently sentenced, some to death, others to long terms of penal servitude. The capital sentences, however, were commuted, and it should be mentioned that the Governor was largely memorialised in favour of this merciful course, by the very colonists whom these men had so wantonly and unprovokedly attacked.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Curtain.

Six years!

Who are these two men seated together in the verandah, as the afterglow fades on the distant head of the Great Winterberg, at the close of this radiant spring day? One has evidently just arrived, the other, equally evidently is at home here, and it is six years since we saw either of them. The house, a newly-built one, is situated with an eye to scenic and climatic advantages, for it stands high up on the hillside, so as to command a magnificent and sweeping panorama. Below, in the valley, a silver thread winds in and out among the green bush, and on still evenings the murmur of the plashing stream is audible up here. Opposite the house, but its brow a little below the level of the same, rises a majestic cliff, whose aspect somehow seems familiar; and well it may, for it is no other than the classic and redoubted Spoek Krantz.

He who is now speaking looks remarkably like our old friend Arthur Claverton. And he it is. Outwardly his hard and stirring experiences have aged him beyond his years, leaving more than one grey intruder among the gold-brown hair, although he is not quite forty; but his face wears a look of great contentment, though the cool resolute firmness stamped upon the clear-cut features is unchanged.

“I dare say it does strike you as rather queer, George,” he was saying, “that we should elect to cast our lot here in this land of niggers, and drought, and bush-ticks, instead of taking it easy in old England. Old England? Old Humbug! Well, the rural and squirearchic life didn’t suit me—didn’t suit either of us, in fact. We tried it for five years, which is time enough to test the advantages of anything of the kind. Dynevard Chase is an uncommonly snug place; but, somehow, when one has got accustomed to this country and its life, one doesn’t take kindly to England. Then, the climate is vile—gruesome winter eight months in the year—sleet, and fog, and east wind only varied by rain. As for the summer, it’s a farce; about three weeks of fine weather throughout, and even then the air is thin. Our neighbourhood could furnish no kindred spirits; heavy parsons and their domineering and heavier spouses, and upholsterers who have made their pile. The British rustic, too, is a quite detestable animal and vastly inferior to Johnny Kafir, than whom he lies harder and thieves more persistently, but does both with infinitely greater clumsiness. So taking every drawback into consideration, we decided to let the Chase for a term of years, and pitch our tent out here again among all our old friends—and by Jove, here we are.”

“And a thundering good decision it wan, too, old chap,” says Payne, puffing out a great cloud of smoke.

“I think so. And now we are going to make ourselves thoroughly snug here. We have got the house in a first-rate situation—plenty of air, and a grand view. Poor old Jack Armitage! His shanty does duty as an out-station now. You can almost see it from where we sit. And the queer part of it is that, whereas formerly you couldn’t get a Kafir to stop on the place, now they don’t seem to mind a hang. Whether it is that we are farther away from the haunted cliff, or that I’ve set up a reputation as an opposition wizard, I don’t know; but, anyhow, they don’t funk it now, and I can get as many as ever I want.”

“Well, you seem to have impressed them a bit, anyhow. Possibly the way in which you predicted old Sandili’s end and that of the rest of them may have had something to with it. By Jove, though, that was a narrow share for you.”

The other looks grave.

“It was. Look, from where we are sitting you can almost see the place, right away over there, where that wily dog Nxabahlana ran me to earth.”

And now in case the above conversation does not sufficiently explain matters, it may briefly be stated that soon after we last saw her, Lilian had inherited Dynevard Chase, and the whole of her stepfather’s personal property besides. Her stepsister, to whom passing reference has been made, had died suddenly, having for long been delicate and ailing, and Lilian under the provisions of Mr Dynevard’s will found herself sole heiress. But her delight on re-entering her old home was not destined to last. In the first place the circumstances were altered, and all the remembrances which had endeared it to her before, were things of the past; and, more practical consideration still, her health suffered from the rigours of the English winter so severely that her removal to more genial climes became an absolute necessity. So they had returned to South Africa to make their home among their old friends; and being now in extremely good circumstances, not to say wealthy, that home is surrounded with all the resources that taste and comfort can devise. It is a lovely spot, and the bold and romantic scenery is thoroughly congenial to Lilian’s love of the beautiful, and she takes great pride in being the possessor of a site famous in savage legend. For they have bought Spoek Krantz, poor Jack Armitage’s old farm, and in the building of the handsome and commodious dwelling in which we see them, and in the laying out of grounds, and otherwise improving the place, both of them take an unwearied delight.

And if further explanation of the renewal of Ralph Truscott’s suit be needed, the above paragraph may afford it; for those who have mastered that worthy’s character will have

learned, ere this, that it was not for love alone that he had sought out Lilian. A word or two before we leave Truscott. About a year after the war was over a Kafir brought to a certain trading-post two curious rings, exactly alike, though of different sizes. The design was two ropes of plain gold intertwined. The native told a strange story, to the effect that these were taken from the white man who had been shot at night. One of the rings the man was wearing, the other was found lying beside him. The trinkets disposed of—to the advantage of the trader—somehow or other the facts of the duel began to be darkly hinted at. But that the dead man had met his fate by the hand of the Queen's enemies and not by that of a compatriot there was abundant proof. And, by a curious coincidence, just at the same time it came to the knowledge of the other principal in that midnight meeting that the man to whom poor Herbert Spalding owed his blighted life and premature death was no other than Ralph Truscott, whom thus, by a startling combination of events Nemesis overtook in a twofold capacity and brought to signal grief, as we have seen.

The two old friends are not destined, however, to pursue their conversation in peace, for now draws near a sound of childish voices, then the patter of small feet scurrying round the corner of the verandah, and, with a rush and a spring, a fine little fellow of five years old flings himself into Claverton's arms.

"Hallo! Hallo, sir! What's this?" cries the latter, catching hold of the youngster and perching him on his knee. "Well, now, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"Father, I want to go with Sam and hunt a porcupine to-night. He says we are sure to find two or three, and—"

"Does he? Well, we'll think about it. Isn't this chap a true Briton, George? Bent on killing something, even from his very cradle." Payne laughed.

But the boy is not to enjoy a monopoly of his father's attentions, for, lo! a small toddler comes pattering up to put in her claim to the same, and, finding that her brother has forestalled her, stands with one tiny fist crammed into her eye, looking inclined to cry, while with the other she makes a feeble attempt to dislodge the more fortunate one from his vantage-ground.

"Hallo, Dots! And have you given the authorities the slip, too? Come along, then. There, there, don't turn on the hose! Arcturus secundus, get down, sir! Always give way to the ladies, because, if you don't, they'll move heaven and earth till they find a way of making you. That's right. Come along, Dottums." And he picks up the child, who clings about his neck, and laughs and prattles away in her delight. She is a lovely little thing, with Lilian's eyes and hair, and promises to be an exact reproduction of Lilian herself.

“You chatterbox! Now you must be off to by-by. Cut along!”

But the little one is not at all inclined to fall in with this suggestion, for she clings to his neck harder than ever.

“N-no. Fader, take Dots for ride—far as de ‘big points,’” she pleads.

“Off we go then,” and mounting the little thing on his shoulder, where she sits half timorously, half exulting in the unwonted altitude, Claverton makes his way to the entrance hall. The said hall is a perfect museum, being hung all over with trophies of war and of the chase collected by its master during his wanderings. Here, the huge frontlet of a buffalo scowls down upon the grinning jaws of a leopard, whose crafty eyes in their turn glare thirstily towards the heads of various antelopes, tastefully arranged opposite. Then there is a brave show of armoury. Great savage-looking ox-hide shields, flanked by circles of grim assegais, formidable knobkerries, and grotesque war costumes of flowing hair and swinging cow-tails, combine to render this trophy barbarous and picturesque in aspect. To the children, the adornments of this hall are an unfailing subject of interest, not unmixed with awe.

And now Claverton halts in front of the war-trophy for Dots to look at “the big points,” as she calls the assegais, and even gingerly to touch them, for it is one of her little pleasures in life to be hoisted up on her father’s shoulder, as in the present instance, to inspect them closely, when they look even more awful than from the far distance of the floor. So, with a thrill of awe, little Dots’ hand is put tentatively forth, and the baby fingers play upon the cruel blades of the grisly weapons and pass wonderingly down their dark, spidery hafts. But nothing on earth will induce her to touch the ox-hide shields, which she is convinced must be alive.

“There. Now then, Dots. By-by’s the next thing.”

So, reluctantly, and with a final hug, the little one resigns herself to be carried off, en route for the land of Nod, and Claverton, relighting his pipe, rejoins his friend on the verandah, just as his wife approaches from the garden at the same moment.

Time has dealt very kindly with Lilian. The soft, serene beauty of that sweet face has not one whit abated its charm; and the attractiveness and winning grace of her manner is just the same as it was in the Lilian Strange of former days. Payne, as he responds to her greeting of cordial surprise, thinks that, lucky dog as his friend always was, the day he went to Seringa Vale was the very beginning of his real luck.

“Unexpected pleasure?” he answers. “Oh, yes, I like astonishing people. But this, as a surprise, don’t come near the day I picked up our friend, there, wandering about the veldt, and ran him in to Fountains Gap, just before the war. Eh?”

“Picked me up! Well, I like that,” is Claverton’s reply, cutting short the other’s satirical chuckle. “It strikes me, friend George, that if there was any ‘picking up’ in the case, you were the party who underwent the operation, and that considerably damaged by a Kafir knobkerrie, too.”

Payne, of course, was ready with a bantering rejoinder, and much chaff followed. A soft blush had come over Lilian’s face at the recollection. She stood for a moment, gazing at the purple peaks of the distant mountains, standing steely against the sky from which all the afterglow had now faded. Then, with a bright laugh, she turned to enter the house, saying:

“Well, I shall leave you to fight out the question between you.”

Reader, we will follow her example, even as we have followed her through her joys and sorrows. We must now part company with all our friends whose fortunes and reverses have entertained us throughout this narrative, but with none more reluctantly than with these two. Yet what better moment can we choose than this, when we leave them surrounded by every happiness the world can afford, here in their beautiful home, in that bright and sunny land which to them has been the scene of so many marvellous and stirring experiences?

The End.